

Rejoice! Our rail link will always be there to help us lead our lives

WELL done to all the organisations who made Barnstaple Railfest 2024 such a massive success!

The opening ceremony for the 170th anniversary of the North Devon line was well attended by dignitaries, the GWR regional growth manager, the Network Rail community manager and their industry programme director.

What a historic moment it was to hear the original 170-year-old speech made by the Barnstaple town clerk being read out by the current town clerk as well as speeches by the town reverend and the town mayor. Thousands of visitors turned up to walk the rail trail, view the exhibitions, see the model railway layouts and learn about the regional campaigns at the Railfuture Devon and Cornwall branch stall – it was nice to meet and listen to the chair of Okerail Dr Ireland about what a tremendous success the Dartmoor line to Okehampton has been and continues to grow with the line's users – in fact a brand new Okehampton Interchange (parkway) station is about to be developed to

Tim Steer

Tarka Rail Association vice chair



take more users, which will make Mid Devon a much more sustainable district.

We all know by now that the new government has set out a mandate to build 1.5 million homes by 2030. North Devon Council and Torridge District Council are Northern Devon's planning authorities – they will now have a mandate to plan and approve large-scale housing every year.

Housing is needed and we must tackle the local housing crises by building affordable homes and social housing as well. What would these large-scale housing developments look like without supporting infrastructure? No water treatment, schools, GPs, dentists, hospital, connecting and adopted roads, shops



The 170th anniversary of the opening ceremony of Barnstaple railway station. Picture: Simon Ellery

and (of course), sustainable transport would create a town that resembled a slum: it would create a very deprived area.

Any views you have that the new government is not going to provide any supporting infrastructure to go with the housing are actually false: the truth is you cannot have one without the other and that is why central government has now reset the infrastructure delivery system with the 'National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority'. We already know how deprived Bideford in the Torridge district is and more housing is only going to continue the deprivation unless the supporting infrastructure is constructed.

Some infrastructure such as hospi-

tals, GPs and dentists require skilled employment/labour to come to North Devon on a daily/weekly basis or to locate here however, Torridge is lacking from poor transport and this has been highlighted as one of the reasons that district is suffering in comparison to the neighbouring district.

It is not to say that North Devon is without challenges – Ilfracombe has data to confirm it as another area of deprivation.

Many readers would wonder if the line from Bideford to Barnstaple is now going to be scrapped? The Bideford line was never part of the old government's Restoring your Railways programme and nothing will stop the study work that has already commenced thanks to the Northern

Devon Railway Development Alliance. The upgrading of the current North Devon (Tarka) line for two faster services per hour to Exeter – it is needed to bring in more skilled employment to the North Devon area, sees local residents gain from the employment market of Exeter (and beyond) and of course for local students to study in higher education facilities.

So you see, any railway is two way – it takes the employed off to bring back wages, it takes students off to bring back newly-learned certified skills and it takes visitors to Devon to holiday and back home. The North Devon line takes you to matches, events, festivals, airports and towns so rejoice, for it will always be here!

Our ageing population presents challenges

It was Benjamin Franklin who said the only certainties in life are death and taxes.

None of us can escape our mortality. But what we all hope for is to age well and keep as free of serious illness as possible.

Inevitably some of that is down to our genes. But a lot can be affected by our lifestyles – what we eat and how much we exercise – as well as our income. And don't think I'm just indulging in mind games. All these factors are key influences on how we all live – whether our economy is thriving, if our employers can recruit staff, whether we have enough cars and, of course, the pressures put on our health service.

Public health is one of the major services that the county council provides and the annual report is full of fascinating facts.

The latest census puts the population of Devon at 826,319, of whom 214,594 are over the age of 65 – well over a quarter. This compares with the national figures for England which show just over one sixth of the population are over 65.

And our residents are ageing at a faster rate than nationally too. If we look at the over 75s, then the proportion of the population in Devon is set to rise from 13.7 per cent today to 18.4 per cent in 20 years time. That, of course, presents all sorts of chal-

James McInnes

Leader of Devon County Council and councillor for Hatherleigh and Chagford



lenges for our health and adult care services.

We've always judged life expectancy as an indicator of whether we're getting healthier as a nation. How many times have you heard someone say "they lived to a ripe old age"?

Well, health experts are moving away from that broad definition to one in which we judge whether people are ageing well.

And the ambition should be for us all to live as long as possible in good health and compress the number of years we live in poor health.

The annual report has a number of suggestions as to how we do this.

Obviously one of these is to increase our promotion of healthy lifestyles by encouraging people to stay active – from just a walk around the neighbourhood every day to joining a ramblers' group or the village bowling or keep-fit club.

We must also encourage people to stay mentally and socially active as well by supporting the wealth of vol-



People should be encouraged to stay active – from just a walk around the neighbourhood every day. Picture: Chul Min/Pixabay

untary and community groups we have in this county who organise local activities.

At a systemic level, we've got to maintain and improve on the high attendance we already have for national screening and immunisation programmes. We need to work together with our partners to increase the early identification and treatment of key health conditions such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and dementia as prevention is

better than cure. We're also going to develop a clear, agreed strategy to tackle dementia to build on the pioneering work we've already done with experts at Plymouth University and we're going to explore the adoption of Devon as a World Health Organisation Age-Friendly community.

These are just some of the actions we need to take as our younger people increasingly leave the county to find work and "affordable" housing

and the birth rate continues to fall. So the ratio of younger people to older people will reduce which will inevitably have an impact on our frontline workforce including carers, both paid and unpaid.

Currently across Devon, there are just over two working-age people to one older person. By 2043, we expect this to reduce to 1.7 working-age people.

So there are some real challenges ahead.