

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance



Statements read to 2nd annual Convention on Friday 7th March 2025

Councillor Andrea Davis, Deputy Leader Devon County Council and Cabinet member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, also Chair of Peninsula Rail Task Force:

"I am so sorry I cannot be with you today, however please be assured that the ambition to reopen the rail link to Bideford is as strong as ever within Devon County Council and Peninsula Transport.

We are all agreed that the current priority is to improve capacity and resilience on the North Devon line and to this end I have continued to lobby for the improvements required.

Only last month I met with the rail Minister Lord Peter Hendy to discuss this and was very reassured that he also shares this ambition. I will see him again next week.

Devon County Council continues to be one of the most pro active local authorities regarding rail and many today will know that following the success of the reopening of the Dartmoor line work has started on the new station; Okehampton Interchange. This commitment to rail and indeed public transport in all forms in Devon is something we should all be proud of. I have every intention of continuing to promote and lobby for improvements and enhancements to the network. The success we see in Devon is very much down to the way we work in partnership and the support we enjoy from organisations who share our ambitions.

While I and the Devon County Council and Peninsula Transport officers are unable to attend today, we are all very much with you and thank you for your work, we hope the day is a success."

Ian Roome, Member of Parliament for North Devon (pages 2-3):



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance
FAO: Roger Blake

Our Ref: IR03254

3rd March 2025

Dear Roger,

Please accept my apologies for not being able to attend the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance's latest meeting in person.

My congratulations on your group's one year anniversary – these are important times for rail in Devon, and the formation of the NDRDA could hardly have come at a better moment.

The passenger numbers we're now seeing on the Tarka line between Barnstaple and Exeter are now staggering – being driven partly by increasing numbers of students from North Devon travelling to Exeter College – and the case for the enhancement of our cherished branch line has not been stronger in my lifetime.

As I said in the Westminster Hall debate on Devon's railways shortly before Christmas, looking at major rail investments being made in other parts of the county, residents here in North Devon are right to feel that increased capacity and improvements basic infrastructure is not too much to ask for. Even a small fraction of the money spent in other regions would make a transformative difference to some everyday challenges in North Devon.

The rolling stock is one side of the coin, and I have had promising discussions with GWR in Parliament about this. They are receptive, but make no mistake - it is the cold, hard data of passenger numbers that will drive their decision-making, so we must keep highlighting North Devon's needs in the rooms where decisions about funding are being made.

In February I also received Network Rail's latest annual report (two copies, one in London and one to my Constituency Office in Barnstaple, very nice paper). It is full of glossy photographs, and impressive statistics regarding the £8bn annually that Network Rail spends maintaining 20,000 miles of track, its 40,000 employees, slashed carbon output and £1bn of efficiency savings. They have made impressive strides and in some ways, we really do live in the future: service-affecting infrastructure delays on the railways have halved in the last 25 years.

It is all positive, but my job is also to bring those discussions back down to earth: the reality of getting on a train in Chapelton, at Portsmouth Arms or Kings Nympton is quite different.

There are not enough passing places to be more creative with the timetable, and the shorter platforms prevent GWR adding the additional carriages that are needed. Trees may only be cleared once they have fallen, and every year we seem to revisit the same conversation about winter flooding, as if it were unpredictable.

This month in Parliament, I am hosting a meeting with South West and South Wales MPs, in partnership with Peninsula Transport, to try to coordinate our response to very real effects of the Old Oak Common Development.

The Department for Transport appear to be utterly asleep at the wheel when it comes to the knock-on impact the works may have on rail passengers across the entire South West region.

We've already seen the rescheduling of Sunday services, but can expect more long-term closures en route to Paddington, and an additional 15 minutes on every journey time thorough a construction site being billed as Europe's biggest construction project, where astonishingly the track itself is due to be repositioned several times as work continues around it.

Even valuing those passengers' time at minimum wage, we're talking about hundreds of millions of pounds in at-risk productivity, every year.

We need to ensure that burden does not fall on the economy of the South West or its rail passengers. That could be through fare structures and other incentives to make this easier, more flexible timetables or concessions on other line improvements to our region.

The South West is not some minor offshoot - Paddington Station is the second biggest in London, and there are a staggering 20 million visitors to the South West every year.

For our region to have a bright future, and make the most of the massive contribution the Great South West can make to UK prosperity, we must keep developing infrastructure and transport links – and make it easier to reach our part of the World. It is now 2025, and the last thing we should want to do is further increase car use.

I know that many of my rural colleagues in Parliament look at North Devon with great jealousy, wishing they had branch lines in their own constituencies. The Tarka Line is one of North Devon's great assets - it must be protected, supported, and developed as far as possible. We would be mad to waste the opportunity that is on offer.

This year is also the 200th anniversary of Britain's railways. Victorian railway engineers would have told the Government the same home truths that active-travel campaigners and environmental groups continue to espouse today: that public transport is a public good, and worth far more than the sum of its parts.

My thanks once again for everything the NDRDA are trying to do in support of that worthy cause, and I hope to be able to speak with you again very soon.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ian Roome". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Ian Roome

Member of Parliament for North Devon