

Rail chaos in Devon revives push for Tavistock route - 'Mother nature will always win'

Repeated weather damage on Devon's coastal line is prompting MPs, rail groups and residents to revisit plans for a Tavistock and north Dartmoor railway



Damage to the sea wall* at Dawlish on Saturday morning (*Image credit- Tom Shiner-McGinley*)

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Local rail campaigners have renewed calls to reinstate an inland rail route through Tavistock after Storm Ingrid caused further disruption to services along the Dawlish coastal line.

The TavyRail group, which campaigns for the full restoration of rail services to Tavistock and the re-establishment of the Northern Rail Route from Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton, says repeated storm damage highlights the vulnerability of the single mainline linking much of Devon and Cornwall to the rest of the country.

"Storms and tidal forces will continue to batter the coastal line," TavyRail said.

"We need two lines. Strengthen the coastal route, but also reinstate the moorland route north of Dartmoor."

The Dawlish section of the line is the only mainline connection for many communities in Devon and Cornwall. The line was closed over the weekend, 24–25 January, due to Storm Ingrid, with services suspended or running a limited timetable.



ABOVE: Damage near the Dawlish sea wall has reopened debate over reopening inland rail links
(Image credit: Tom Shiner-McGinley)

Luke Pollard, MP for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, said the latest incident highlights the need to look again at Devon's future rail infrastructure.

“I’ve just passed Dawlish on my journey to Parliament and you can see the damage to the walls by the track.

“I have been arguing for some time that we now need a long-term plan for rail in our region that addresses resilience, improves journey times and creates new routes including to Tavistock,” he said.

“I’m going to keep pressing for this work to be done so we can get the railway we deserve in the south west.”

TavyRail argues that reopening the route would improve resilience, connect smaller communities, support commuters, and provide a transport option for people who cannot drive.

“The success of the Exeter to Okehampton reopening shows what is possible,” the group said.

“A Tavistock connection would build on that success and help ensure the South West is not cut off during extreme weather.”

The former London and South Western Railway line between Okehampton and Bere Alston closed to through passenger services in the 1960s.

Parts of the route are now used as walking and cycling trails, including the Granite Way.

Several viaducts and tunnels remain in place, though the condition of Meldon Viaduct is a key issue in any reinstatement plans.



ABOVE: The end of the line by Meldon Viaduct on the Dartmoor Railway (© Copyright Chris Allen)

Some rail commentators and local residents have urged caution, pointing to high costs and engineering challenges.

One member of the public Railways of Devon & Cornwall Facebook group said: “Even if they wanted to keep the route, it’s the cost of Meldon Viaduct’s upkeep. A new viaduct would have to be built for any reinstated railway.”

Others have questioned whether there is enough population along the route to justify the investment, while some argue that strengthening the Dawlish sea wall remains the most realistic option.

However, supporters of the inland route say continued disruption makes the case unavoidable.

“Fixing this twice a year or more will force a rethink,” another group member wrote. “Mother nature will always win.”

The Exeter to Okehampton line reopened to passengers in 2021 and has seen strong demand.

Plans to extend services from Bere Alston to Tavistock have previously received funding support, though progress has stalled.

No formal decision has yet been made on reopening the full Tavistock-Okehampton section.

* Note for caption to first photo – there was no damage to the sea wall itself; the damage pictured is to the boundary wall between the railway and the promenade on top of the sea wall which is clearly visible behind the fallen masonry.