

**New cox
Natalie
making
lifeboat
history**

PAGE 4



**Help us
comfort
young
broken
hearts**

PAGE 17



**Hospice
support
from all
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PAGE 7



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Tarka Line action plea

Rail campaigners and politicians want urgent upgrade as fragile Barnstaple-to-Exeter link reopens after taking winter storm battering

ELLA SAMPSON

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SERIOUS concerns have been raised that the weather-battered Tarka Line is no longer fit for the 21st century, following a gruelling 24-day closure that severed the primary transport link between North Devon and Exeter.

While the line finally reopened in full on Friday, February 20, the nearly month-long shutdown has left a trail of economic and social disruption. From students missing critical classroom time to football fans stranded and hospital appointments missed, the message from local stakeholders is clear: the Victorian-era “patch-and-mend” approach to rail maintenance has

reached its breaking point.

The disruption, triggered by the relentless rain of Storm Chandra in late January, was not felt equally across the line. While the stretch from Exeter St David’s to Crediton reopened relatively quickly, the communities of the Taw Valley, from Crediton through to Barn-

TURN TO PAGE 2



The Tarka Line has been undermined by heavy rain and flooding this winter



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INSIDE

NEWS	2-15
LETTERS/COLUMNISTS	16-17
LEISURE	23
BUSINESS	28
MOTORING	29-31
CLASSIFIED	32-37
SPORT	38-40

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Family salute to
man lost in fire

THE family of a man who died following a fire at a property in Bideford have paid tribute to a "loyal and generous friend" who lived life on his own terms.

Angus Clyde, 55, died following the incident in Honestone Street.

Emergency services were called to the scene at around 8.30pm on Tuesday, October 28.

A body was recovered on Sunday, November 2, after structural engineers and emergency services worked for several days to ensure the building was safe to enter.

In a statement released through Devon and Cornwall Police, Mr Clyde's family said they were struggling to come to terms with an "unimaginable loss".

They described him as a son, brother and a "loving father to his only child".

"He lived life in his own unconventional way, guided by his values and his curiosity about the world," the family said. "Angus never felt the need to conform, he followed his own path and that individuality was part of what made him so special to so many."

The tribute also highlighted his love for the outdoors and his "deep love for music," noting that he was a familiar face on the Tarka Trail.

Police have confirmed the status of several individuals arrested in connection with the incident.

Three male teenagers, aged 13, 14, and 15, have been re-bailed until



Tribute have been paid to Angus Clyde

mid-April. Three other people, a girl, aged 14, a boy aged 13 and a man in his 30s, will face no further police action.

Mr Clyde's family praised the "swift response" of the fire service and police, and thanked the local community for their support.

They have requested privacy and asked that the public refrain from speculating online, noting that such comments "may hinder the investigation".

Debbie and Bella to
make Crufts debut

MATT WRIGHT

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A MUSICIAN from Torrington who has done so much to improve the wellbeing of others is looking forward to her first ever trip to Crufts with the dog who helped improve her own mental health.

Debbie Kent, 49, is the founder of music school Teachers Rock, which provides singing experiences for educators and young people and is a self-confessed perfectionist.

Having 16-month-old miniature smooth haired dachshund Bella in her life has brought 'laughter to even the dullest days' and an unexpected opportunity to compete at the world's biggest dog show.

Bella is also Debbie's first ever dog and prestigious national dog show Crufts was only ever something she had watched on the TV, but after six months of showing Bella, she qualified twice over by coming second and third in her breed at two separate dog shows in Exeter.

Now the pair are off to the bright lights of the show ring when the calendar event of the dog world takes place at NEC Birmingham from Thursday, March 5 to Sunday, March 8.

It was the suggestion of Debbie's brother - after she'd recommended a friend's litter - that a dog of her own would also do her the world of good.

She said: "My brother turned round and said: 'Deb, you ought to consider that, she'd be really good for your mental health'."

"I thought that was an interesting comment, so I then talked to my mum about it, she said exactly the same and then I spoke to my partner about it and he said I should go and have a look.

"So, I went to my friend and picked out Bella and I knew the first



Debbie Kent from Torrington and 16-month dachshund Bella will both be taking part in Crufts for the very first time

time I saw her that she was exactly the kind of puppy I would like.

"I love the breed and I never thought I'd be in the position to have a dog because I'm very much of the opinion that if you have something, you have to invest and I'm a perfectionist in everything I do.

"She's worked out to be the most affectionate, most trainable, most amazing little dog and she's absolutely transformed my life, in terms of emotional and mental wellbeing."

Debbie added: "I'm really looking forward to it, it was totally unexpected.

"Obviously, she's a small dog and we live in quite a rural area in north

Devon and she sees quite a lot of big dogs.

"I just wanted to take her to a show where she could meet other dogs who were her own size, where she doesn't feel anxious.

"I just couldn't believe it when we qualified, but how exciting because I've watched it from afar from a very early age."

Crufts, run by the Royal Kennel Club, is a celebration of happy, healthy dogs and of the loving relationship that they enjoy with their owners.

Viewers can follow all the action and highlights on Channel 4 and More4, and for further information and tickets visit the official website <https://crufts.org.uk>

Tarka Line

FROM PAGE 1

staple, remained in a state of transport limbo for over three weeks.

A spokesperson for the Exeter and North Devon Colleges Group revealed that the Tarka Line has been out of service for nearly 10 per cent of the current college year.

"We share the frustrations of our learners," the spokesperson told the *Gazette*. "More must be done to ensure transport infrastructure in the South West is protected. To have the line down for 10 per cent of the year is simply unacceptable."

Richard Knight, supporter liaison officer at Exeter City FC, highlighted the plight of the North Devon Grecians, a dedicated supporters' group with over 200 members who rely on the train to reach St James Park.

"Our club draws in support from a large part of the South West," Mr Knight said. "These members have been significantly impacted, and the club supports any calls for urgent investment to increase the resilience of the Tarka Line."

A petition set up by North Devon's MP, Ian Roome, with over 3,000 signatures has already reached Parliament, calling for a dedicated Rail Passengers' Charter and future-proofing investment.

Mr Roome said: "The damage from Storm Chandra has left North Devon with a third halt to all rail travel since November, causing chaos for thousands of local passengers. Local councils across Devon, rail experts and more than 3,500 people who signed our petition all agree: we need improvements to the Tarka Line's resilience.

"Meeting with me, Network Rail put a brave face on the obvious, even as their crews scrambled for urgent repairs. A plan of work for the Tarka Line is an expensive project, they admit, needing seed funding in the millions. A gold-plated modernisation of the line would demand tens of millions. And so we must also push the case beyond North Devon, including to central government. Because the damage has already been felt beyond North Devon, in lost opportunity for our region.

"The next winter is never more than a year away. I cannot force a rail minister to suffer a replacement bus service in the rain, but some days, I wish I could."

Network Rail said: "We recognise the vital role the Tarka Line play. Significant investment has already been made to improve the line's reliability and resilience, including track renewals, bridge replacements, drainage upgrades and major flood mitigation works near Exeter. With severe weather events becoming more frequent, further improvements are planned. Network Rail is introducing new technology to better detect flood damage and additional maintenance and track renewal works are scheduled for this spring."

Campaigners warn: fragile Tarka Line is now risk to local economy

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CAMPAIGNERS and politicians are calling for urgent modernisation of the rail link between Barnstaple and Exeter, warning that the line's poor resilience is now a "strategic risk" to the North Devon economy.

Devon County Council was set to debate a motion put forward by a local councillor during its pivotal budget meeting on Tuesday this week, February 24, as the *North Devon Gazette* was going to press.

The move comes as local leaders warn that a failure to invest in infrastructure is leaving the region "structurally disadvantaged" in labour markets, further education participation, and housing delivery.

The call for action follows a winter of extreme disruption.

The route has been closed three times during the 2025/26 season due to "predictable weather events".

Following the impact of Storm Chandra in late January, the line was shut for over three weeks, with the section between Crediton and Barnstaple remaining impassable due to severe flooding.

The motion is being brought by councillor Graham Bell, who represents Braunton.

He notes that while travel times from Exeter to the North Devon coast were around 15 hours in 1826, the journey in 2026 has "not vastly improved" given the frequent infrastructure failures.

Despite a tripling in passenger numbers since 2006, much of the route remains restricted by single-track sections and "obsolete operating practices" more commonly associated with heritage railways than a modern commuter route.

The line serves around 900,000 passenger journeys a year, with growth outstripping almost all comparable routes in the South West.



Engineers pictured working to fix washouts on the Tarka Line between Crediton and Cowley



Braunton councillor Graham Bell is calling on the county council to push for Tarka Line modernisation work

"The Tarka Line is the only rail connection serving North Devon and Torridge," the motion states. "It remains constrained by single-track sections, limited passing places, and Victorian structures."

The council agenda for the budget meeting highlights that rail reliability is no longer just a "transport inconvenience" but a "material economic issue".

Repeated closures triggered by flooding risks to multiple bridges and waterlogged trackbed sections have demonstrated that the line cannot withstand current weather patterns.

These disruptions impose direct economic costs: lost working hours, missed education, and reduced visitor numbers.

The motion notes that these factors lead to higher emissions and increased car dependency, disproportionately affecting a rural economy with lower average incomes and fewer transport alternatives.

Furthermore, Barnstaple continues to feature in international congestion rankings, which has a "severe knock-on effect" for bus reliability and productivity.

While the council recently backed a connectivity improvement program at Barnstaple station to ensure public transport and cycles can effectively connect to the rail network, leaders say these benefits are undermined if the core rail service remains unreliable.

The impact of the "fragile" link is felt across the county, specifically affecting:

Education: Students traveling to North Devon College and Exeter frequently face missed classes, impacting their long-term prospects.

Workforce retention: Business-

es in the economic centres of Barnstaple, Crediton, and Exeter struggle to retain staff who cannot rely on the commute.

Isolated communities: Young people and those without vehicles are "solely reliant" on the rail service for social and employment connections.

Campaigners point to the Dartmoor Line's successful reopening as a blueprint, with Tim Steer, chair of the rail lobby group Railfuture Devon and Cornwall, among those calling for a similar approach for the Tarka Line. They argue that targeted investment delivers "rapid economic and social return" and strengthens town centres.

North Devon MP Ian Roome recently presented a petition to Parliament with more than 3,000 signatures, calling for the line to be "future-proofed".

During a Westminster Hall debate, Exeter MP Steve Race argued that a "step change" in frequency, moving from one train per hour to two, would enable major growth.

Currently, the hourly service is cited as a factor that "dissuades" residents in Ilfracombe, Bideford, Torrington, and South Molton from choosing the train.

With climate change projections indicating that flood-related disruption will increase, the motion warns that continued inaction is now a "known and escalating risk."

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) now provides a "mature, cross-sector vehicle" for the project.

The alliance includes Torridge and Mid-Devon Councils, with a motion to include North Devon Council expected to be brought this month.

If the motion was passed at the budget meeting on Tuesday earlier this week, the county council will formally:

1— Declare the line's state a "strategic economic risk" requiring urgent intervention.

2— Commit to driving a modernisation programme to achieve a half-hourly service at peak times.

3— Request that the council leader and senior officers make the Tarka Line a "standing priority" in all engagements with Network Rail and the government.

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall is a regional branch of the national UK voluntary organisation, Railfuture, which campaigns for improved rail services, new lines, and better infrastructure across Devon, Cornwall, Plymouth, and Torbay. It promotes greener, sustainable transport to boost the local economy and connectivity.



Night shift working to fix washouts between Crediton and Cowley

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