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Great Scott!

Three marathons in three months: emotional tribute to friend he lost



Dan Logan-Thomas and Scott Molumby

A DETERMINED man from North Devon is set to embark on a three-month extreme endurance challenge to raise money for cancer research following the death of his best friend, writes *Ella Sampson*.

Scott Molumby, 37, will complete three marathons in as many months in memory of Dan Logan-Thomas, who died in December last year after living with brain cancer for eight months.

REPORT: CENTRE PAGES



Scott Molumby training for a gruelling test of endurance: three marathons in three months





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'Dear rail minister, we could be forgiven for losing hope'

ELLA SAMPSON

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BARNSTAPLE Town Council has written to the rail minister, Lord Hendy of Richmond, warning that North Devon is being "severely disrupted" by a lack of rail resilience.

The formal intervention, signed by town clerk Robert Ward, comes as the Barnstaple-to-Exeter line prepares for its third total closure of 2026.

The route, which only resumed services on February 20 after a month of weather-related disruption, is scheduled to shut again from March 21 to March 29.

In the letter, the council describes a sense of growing despair among residents, stating that North Devon could be "forgiven for losing hope" in a service that relies on "occasional patch-and-mend" rather than sustainable investment.

The letter from the council calls on Lord Hendy to:

■ *Work closely with partners to identify and release funds for investment*

■ *Enable a dependable public service to be delivered*

■ *Ensure future investment and growth in the North Devon economy*

Despite the infrastructure challenges, the line has seen record-breaking growth, recently surpassing one million journeys in a 12-month period.

The council argues that this popularity is being stifled by a network that fails during "significant, but not extreme" weather events.

"There are a large proportion of the local population who have to rely on public transport to get to education, employment and to travel further afield... this has been severely disrupted over the last few weeks," said Mr Ward.

Network Rail has confirmed the closure dates to the *North Devon Gazette*, though the operator has not yet issued a specific statement on the nature of the work. However, it is understood the upcoming nine-day closure in March is for essential track renewal and maintenance to ensure long-term safety.

The letter has also been copied to Ian Roome, MP for North Devon, as the council seeks a permanent solution to the ongoing disruptions.

The council argues that the line has "long needed comprehensive modernisation" and that investment is now "well overdue".

With North Devon already described as "very remote" with a "less than adequate road network", the council concludes that a dependable rail service is vital to give confidence to the population and ensure future investment and growth in the local economy.

Stressing the strategic importance of the route is also a priority for North Devon Council. Ken Miles, chief executive, told the *Gazette*: "Although North Devon Council has now formally resolved to join the



Barnstaple station, which recently passed the milestone of one million journeys in a year, has seen services halted recently due to weather damage. Picture: Shaun Ferguson



Barnstaple Town Council's letter to rail minister Lord Hendy

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, officers and councillors have been actively working, with the Alliance and other partners, to raise the understanding of the vulnerability of the Barnstaple to Exeter line, and to push for improvements, for some time. The council recognises the importance of the line to our

North Devon businesses and also to our communities that use the line to access health, education and other vital services located to the south of the county. North Devon is isolated and the railway line is a vital link to the rest of Devon and then to other areas of the country.

"We will continue to encourage im-



Concerned Barnstaple town councillors have written to the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy of Richmond

provements to be made to the line, not just to improve resilience but also to improve journey times and customer experience."

One of the leading campaigners for Tarka Line improvements, county councillor Graham Bell, said: "Both Devon County Council and North Devon Council have once again highlighted the urgency of getting this line upgraded."

"Without this work we run the risk that one of the UK's most isolated communities will be even more cut off. I really pray that we will soon see real commitment in the people of northern Devon."

A group created to improve transport for young people to access education and training has also raised concerns about the reliability of the Tarka Line.

Routes to Post 16 Opportunities Devon was set up by Hazel Percival, who told the *Gazette*: "The current provision by Stagecoach and the Tarka Line is expensive and unreliable and this is having a considerable impact on young people in the county and is exacerbating rural inequalities. I had a meeting with Devon County Council regarding this. I also presented them with a study I had undertaken looking at the cost, journey and disruption to education that young people are currently experiencing."

"FOI information from Exeter College shows 690 students travel between Barnstaple and Exeter to Exeter College. When the line was closed recently I had numerous parents reporting problems with the bus replacement taking time to get established, then when it was up and running these buses were full from Barnstaple, meaning that people from stops such as Eggesford and Kings Nympton were unable to get on these buses, there was no information about when the buses would arrive and no information as to where to wait for them. This led to many students missing days of education."

"From my questionnaire data for train users since September, 22% of students have missed five to 10 days of in-person teaching, 21% 10 to 15 days and 36% more than 15 days of in-person teaching due to cancellations/poor reliability."

Dismay of Tarka Line passengers

DISGRUNTLED rail users are asking that something be done to bolster the infrastructure of the Tarka Line.

Storms and adverse weather throughout January caused the line to Barnstaple to be closed for a total of 24 days, meaning no trains from Barnstaple to Exeter, writes Ella Sampson.

The month-long disruption left a trail of academic and personal chaos in its wake.

For Jack Watts, a first-year student at Exeter College who commutes daily from Barnstaple, the timing could not have been worse. The disruptions began just before mock exams, eating into valuable revision time.

"Following our mock exams, the lines became shut for an extended point of time," Jack told the *Gazette*. "Getting to college became impossible and all work was set online."

"I feel like I'm still catching up now, meaning workload has increased for me personally now. I feel like it will affect me for future weeks but I'm managing. I'm glad now that lines have reopened although this will undoubtedly affect me in the future as catch up work has begun and further delays are expected in the coming months due to increased rainfall, fingers crossed disruption is limited though."

However, the resilience of the track is not the only issue locals are raising. For many, the rolling stock itself is a relic of a bygone era.

John Emms told the *Gazette*: "In January I used my three-minute right at Bideford Town Council's full meeting to air my frustration and anger with the above failed railway service. On 12th January I had major heart surgery in Exeter. I stayed at my sister's in Bristol after surgery to recover and convalesce. I booked a rail ticket home from Bristol Parkway to Barnstaple via Exeter when I felt able to travel, so I could return to my home in Bideford."

Mr Emms found himself stranded at Exeter when an announcement stated his train had "gone tech".

"A member of the platform staff confirmed I would have to wait for the next service. 16.25 ish. Knowing this later service would be packed with students I asked if there would be more carriages. The answer was no, just the two. I understand the Tarka Line trains are all very old, second hand from 'up country', I stated.

"The helpful platform employee apologised and confirmed 'they're all clapped out. Second hand and often go tech'. His words!"