

BIDEFORD BIG RACE DRAMA IN PICTURES

PAGE 15



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2026

NORTH DEVON GAZETTE



Outstanding news for North Devon

£1.50 where sold

WANTED!!

All Ford Transits • Mercedes Cars & Vans
All 4x4s • All Scrap Metal • All Vehicles Wanted
Rusty or Good, we will Buy it all.

Weekend collection available

Contact John 07882 732033

United in mission to transform Tarka Line

Summit of powerful rail
figureheads puts action
on agenda for fragile
railway infrastructure

A MAJOR gathering of railway development campaigners, industry experts and passenger advocates has galvanised support for ending the 'patch and mend' era on the weather-beaten Tarka Line rail link between Barnstaple and Exeter.

REPORTS: PAGES 2&3



Delegates at a summit staged to focus attention on the urgent need for improvements to the Tarka Line



WESTCOUNTRY LTD
STUNNING BATHROOMS & WET ROOMS

WET ROOM SPECIALISTS
FREE SURVEY, DESIGN & QUOTATION SERVICE
LEVEL ACCESS SHOWERS SUPPLIED AND INSTALLED

MONDAY TO FRIDAY 9AM - 4PM

01237 473746 | www.westcountrybathrooms.co.uk | Unit 1, Clovelly Rd, Industrial Est, EX39 3HN



MEET THE TEAM

NORTH DEVON
GAZETTE

HOW TO CONTACT US

5 Cross Street, Barnstaple EX31 1BA
Telephone: 01271 414192

EDITORIAL

Email: newsdesk@northdevongazette.co.uk

Email: Letters@northdevongazette.co.uk

Reporter - Ella Sampson

ella.sampson@clearskypublishing.co.uk

Sport - Tim Herbert

tim.herbert@clearskypublishing.co.uk

ADVERTISING

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER

Julie Williams

01271 414192

julie.williams@clearskypublishing.co.uk

TELESALES

Kane Worsnop

07918 747641

kane.worsnop@clearskypublishing.co.uk

EXETER LIVING/EXETER TOMORROW

Paula Miller

07599 801022

paula.miller@clearskypublishing.co.uk

PUBLISHER

Chris Coward

chris.coward@clearskypublishing.co.uk

Distribution Enquiries
and Recruitment

01582 476666

news@thedistributionbusiness.co.uk

INSIDE

NEWS	2-15
LETTERS/COLUMNISTS	16-18
LEISURE	22-23
BUSINESS	19
MOTORING	28-30
CLASSIFIED	31-37
SPORT	38-40

Emergency chemists

Barnstaple

Boots, High Street, 10.30am-4.30pm

Bideford

Asda, Clovelly Road
Sundays and Bank Holidays 10am-4pm

South Molton

N L Wade, Medical Hall, Tuesday and
alternate Wednesday 5.30-6.30pm.
Thursday 5.30-6pm. Boots, Broad Street,
Monday, Friday and alternate Wednesday
5.30-6.30pm.

Woolacombe

Barton Pharmacy Mon-Fri 9am-6pm,
(closed 1-2pm). Sat, 9am-4pm.
Sunday 10am-4pm bank holiday
weekends



Published in Barnstaple by Clear Sky Publishing,
5 Cross Street, Barnstaple EX31 1BA and printed by
Newsprinters (Brixbourne) Ltd, Great Cambridge Road,
Walham Cross, EN8 8DYW

NORTH DEVON HOSPICE LOTTERY
This week's £1,000 jackpot winner:
Mr DC
from **Holsworthy**

Join for £1, support your hospice:
PLAYNORTHDEVON.ORG.UK

Summit hears Tarka Line 'patch and mend' is over

ELLA SAMPSON

ella.sampson@clearskypublishing.co.uk



FOR the commuters and students of North Devon, the railway is a lifeline. But as record passenger numbers collide with increasingly violent winters, that lifeline is fraying.

At the third annual convention of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance on Friday, March 6, the message from the function room of the Fox and Hounds Hotel at Eggesford was stark: the 'patch and mend' era is over.

The summit, facilitated by Railfuture and attended by local press including the *North Devon Gazette*, brought together the giants of the industry, Great Western Railway and Network Rail, to confront the growing fear that the region is increasingly cut off from the national network.

While not in attendance, Mark Hopwood, managing director of GWR, provided a message to the convention that acknowledged the mounting frustration among passengers. He said that GWR is aware of the line's current limitations and the need for a long-term strategy.

"We recognise the need for greater resilience and reduced journey times," Mr Hopwood's message stated. He emphasised that GWR is "working closely with Network Rail to build a robust railway for the future".

Addressing the campaigners and local stakeholders, he added: "We always welcome third-party advocacy."

North Devon MP Ian Roome, the only MP in attendance, did not mince his words regarding the line's fragility. Addressing the room of stakeholders, he highlighted how the vulnerability of the Barnstaple-to-Exeter route now impacts half the county.

"Daily lives have been turned upside down from the sudden halt in train services," Mr Roome told the audience, referencing a petition of 3,000 signatures he recently presented to Parliament.

"Students have missed days or weeks of education; commuters cannot get to work. The road network in Devon was not built with this size in mind for replacement buses."

Mr Roome confirmed he has already pushed the government on the lack of infrastructure funding for the South West, specifically following the Chancellor Rachel Reeves' Spring Statement. "The business case has never

been clearer," he warned. "The next bad winter is never more than one year away."

While unable to attend the convention in person, Exeter MP Steve Race provided a written statement that was read out to the delegates.

He warned that the severity and regularity of storms were now turning into an "annual occurrence", creating a "tangible impact" on the local economy and the lives of those who rely on the service.

"Recent events have highlighted these vulnerabilities," Mr Race's statement noted. "People are unable to travel and businesses feel a real impact on trading."

He confirmed he had written to stakeholders to highlight the economic consequences of recent closures and said he would be meeting the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that investment in the North Devon line is treated as a "top priority".

The meeting heard how the ground beneath the tracks is moving. Network Rail engineers detailed the "invisible" threat of scour, where fast-flowing river water moves the riverbed, undermining the foundations of Victorian bridges.

There are currently six structures on the North Devon line identified as being at risk due to this.

In response, the region is hosting a trial that could be a global first.

Working with Cornwall-based firm Ultrabeam, engineers are using sonar technology to scan bridge foundations when water levels are too high or dangerous for human divers.

"We are putting closure marks at



Major disruption to services on the Tarka Line following severe weather has prompted united calls for substantial upgrade work on the link between Exeter and Barnstaple



Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall branch, said that few would have believed in recent years that the Tarka Line would become a "victim of its own success"

scientific positions," a spokesperson explained. "If the water increases to a certain point, we know there is a physical issue."

However, the technology is a diagnostic tool, not a cure.

Network Rail admitted that while sonar will help them reopen lines faster, closures "will occur again" this year. The convention provided a rare "behind-the-scenes" look at the logistics failure during Storm Chandra.

GWR representatives admitted that when the weather reaches a "black stage", the highest level of disruption, the current system for rail replacement buses breaks down.

The room heard how GWR does not maintain a "bank of buses".

During the recent storms, 24 buses were needed at once to maintain an hourly service.

Driver shortages meant some coaches had to be sourced from as far away as Hampshire and Wales, and due to EU driving laws, drivers required mandatory 24-hour breaks, rendering some replacement services impossible to run.

"We learnt a lot of lessons," a GWR spokesperson said, noting that fixed "bus replacement" signs are now being installed at all stations to prevent passenger confusion.

Furthermore, the company is looking to deploy "bus co-ordinators" on the ground to guide passengers during future disruptions.

Speaking after the convention,

Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall branch, noted that few would have believed in recent years that the Tarka Line would become a "victim of its own success".

He described the line as one "viewed in the latter half of the 20th century for managed decline" and added that the summit was a "tremendous opportunity" to progress towards a formal business case for service enhancement.

If the weather is the external threat, capacity is the internal one.

The line has seen massive growth in passenger numbers since 2020, a "Devon Metro" success story that has left the current fleet of 30-to-40-year-old trains struggling to cope.

The proposed solution is the introduction of Class 175 trains, built at the turn of the millennium and brought out of storage in Wales.

The rollout has faced challenges; the units were in a "more degraded" state than expected, requiring extensive overhauls at Wolverton Works. Despite the delay, nine units are now "in the business", with driver training, a rigorous two-week process, under way at Laira depot in Plymouth.

The goal is to have these higher-capacity trains reaching North Devon by the end of the year, finally addressing the 7.22am departure where as many as 400 students often cram into just a few carriages.

REACTION: PAGE 3

Call for Tarka Line to be a 'reliable, modern and well-connected service'

ELLA SAMPSON

ella.sampson@clearskypublishing.co.uk



THE case for urgent improvements to the resilience of the Tarka Line rail link was emphasised over and over again at Railfuture's special summit in Eggesford last Friday.

Reflecting on the wider needs of the region, county councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin, cabinet member for rural affairs, told the gathering of rail operators, users, campaigners and politicians that communities north of Exeter need a "reliable, modern, and well-connected rail service" for students, workers, and "patients and NHS staff".

Beyond the trains themselves, she emphasised the need for rural access through "better bus links, parking and increased capacity", arguing that infrastructure investment is "long overdue".

Despite the immediate hurdles, the long-term vision remains ambitious.

Peter West OBE, a rail industry expert and former commercial manager for the Great Western franchise at the Department for Transport, argued that Barnstaple could eventually see passenger levels similar to Taunton.

"Nothing in the vision has not already been achieved somewhere else in the country," he said, pushing for a 54-minute journey time between Barnstaple and Exeter.

Reflecting on the discussion, councillor Graham Bell, representing Braunton Rural, told the *Gazette*: "As we learnt today, North Devon is comparable with stations like Taunton in terms of passenger numbers. But, we are a major rail service served by single platforms, hourly trains, and antiquated infrastructure. A packed room of industry professionals, councillors, MPs and passenger groups all recognise how transformational these changes would be for our economy and education. It's time we made this happen."

"Presently, the hourly service dissuades Ilfracombe, Bideford and Braunton people from using the train. A twice-hourly service would improve confidence as well as comfort. Making cycle/bus/rail a viable option for tens of thousands more northern Devon residents."

This vision will be supported by the new Devon and Torbay Combined Transport Authority, which launches on April 1.

Sean Anstee, representing the new authority, noted that with a 10-year corporate plan (2025-2035), the focus will shift toward a half-hourly service and major station improvements.

When questioned on the future of "green" rail and freight, the convention remained pragmatic:

Decarbonisation: hydrogen was



Delegates gather at the Fox and Hounds Hotel at Eggesford for the third annual convention of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance on Friday, March 6 to discuss the future of the Tarka Line railway link

dismissed by stakeholders as too expensive and inefficient, with the industry shifting focus toward battery-powered trains, which are expected in a phased rollout by the 2030s.

Freight: A strategy is being developed to move more goods by rail to reduce the number of lorries on Devon's highways, though this remains "private-sector led" and historically difficult to coordinate.

As the convention at the Fox and Hounds Hotel concluded, the message was clear.

The challenges facing the North Devon line, from the crumbling Victorian-era bridge foundations plagued by "scour," to the logistical strain of coordinating national bus fleets during extreme weather, are no longer viewed as isolated inconveniences.

The consensus among the stakeholders was clear: the Tarka Line has outgrown its own infrastructure.

Mr Steer summed up the mood of the stakeholders, stating that Railfuture "looks forward eagerly" to GWR providing the "sorely-needed extra capacity" for passengers. He added that with an MP "campaigning hard in Parliament", the region is now closer than ever to seeing a local railway that is truly "transformational".

North Devon MP Ian Roome said later: "At last week's annual convention of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), a particularly

timely meeting after the 24-day closure of the North Devon line and the severe disruption we've seen this winter. I spoke alongside local partners as we built on the case for long-term investment in the Tarka Line.

"As many emphasised, passenger numbers have been significantly rising year-on-year, and with new housing developments and a growing population, that pressure is projected to grow even further.



There were calls at last Friday's summit for more frequent rail services from Exeter to Barnstaple station. Picture: Shaun Ferguson

"Services are already frequently overcrowded, and for many students and commuters travelling between Barnstaple and Exeter there simply aren't realistic alternatives to the train other than getting in the car. The cost of disruption to our rail services this winter has not just been inconvenience, it's been missed college days (weeks even), cancelled hospital appointments and lost opportunities for our local economy."

Mr Roome added: "Network Rail have published their document setting out potential upgrades needed to modernise the North Devon (Tarka) line and support a move to two trains per hour between Exeter and Barnstaple, which lays out the barriers in the way, including the mostly single-track layout and limited passing places.

"The document proposes things we have known we need for a long time now, like new passing loops, twin-tracking work at various places, and signalling modernisation. Our North Devon Line still relies on the token system, and that is simply not compatible with modernisation in the 21st century.

"I've been campaigning on this in Parliament, raising the issue directly with ministers and recently handing in a petition with more than 3,500 signatures, and I will keep pressing the case with central government. Network Rail and GWR can refine what's deliverable but without committed funding these plans will stay on paper. North Devon deserves a railway we can rely on, and we need action to make that happen."

CF
Changing Faces Dentures Clinic

CHANGING smiles.

GREAT NEWS FOR DENTURE WEARERS

I went to Changing Faces for my dentures. I left with a huge smile on my face.

Anita

Call now for a FREE consultation!
01271 603 023

www.changingfacesdentures.co.uk

Show your smile, not your dentures!

Andrew Taylor, Clinical Dental Technician GDC No: 133974

COACH TOUR TO SCOTLAND | 7 DAYS £635

ARDGARTAN HOTEL
LOCH LOMOND NATIONAL PARK

SATURDAY 18TH APRIL

SPRING BREAK TOUR INCLUDES:

- 6 nights half board
- Excursions
- Nightly entertainment
- Luxury coach travel

PICK UP FROM: Bideford, Barnstaple, South Molton, Tiverton, Junction 27

LOCHS.COM 01389 713713