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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2026

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Network Rail's blueprint to transform Tarka Line



The Tarka Line, which connects Barnstaple to Exeter, has become a victim of its own success

Plan includes two trains an hour

ELLA SAMPSON
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NETWORK Rail has unveiled a major blueprint to transform the Tarka Line, proposing an uplift to two trains per hour to tackle chronic overcrowding and “unacceptable” passenger delays.

It says this would also release demand suppressed during peak times through lack of capacity.

The Tarka Line, which connects Barnstaple to Exeter, has become a victim of its own success. According to a newly released engineering report, passenger numbers have surged by 600,000 in just five years, with growth now exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

However, the infrastructure, much of which remains a single track following

1970s “rationalisation”, has reached a breaking point.

The report paints a stark picture of the daily commute for North Devon residents. Morning services heading into Exeter are now frequently observed to be operating as “full and standing from Barnstaple,” with the report noting that passengers are increasingly being “left behind” on platforms at intermediate stations.

With significant housing developments committed in Barnstaple and the greater Exeter area, the rail body warns that the current hourly service is a bottleneck for the region’s economy.

“This situation is therefore limiting connectivity growth in North Devon and the Exeter city area,” the report states,

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NORTH DEVON HOSPICE LOTTERY
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The Brend Collection has launched a charitable partnership with Children's Hospice South West. Picture: The Brend Collection

£50,000 pledge for hospice

A WELL-KNOWN local hotel group has pledged to raise £50,000 in two years for Children's Hospice South West, writes *Tony Gussin*.

The Brend Collection has announced the new charitable partnership with CHSW, which provides vital care to children and young people with life-limiting conditions and their families through its three South West hospices.

The hotel group, which has nine hotels including five in North Devon, plans to put together a programme of fundraising initiatives, team-led events, guest engagement

activities and awareness campaigns across its hotels and venues.

Director Matthew Brend, said: "CHSW is one of the charities we have proudly supported for many years, so to now formalise our partnership feels like a natural and meaningful evolution.

"Having experienced first-hand the extraordinary care and compassion their teams provide to children and families at the most difficult of times, I am delighted that we can strengthen our commitment even further.

"As a family business rooted in the

South West, we understand the importance of supporting local families and communities and I very much look forward to what we can achieve together."

Phil Morris, chief executive of Children's Hospice South West, added: "A huge thank-you to The Brend Collection for choosing to partner with Children's Hospice South West over the next two years.

"Their commitment will make an incredible difference to the children and families we support, helping to make the most of short and precious lives in our region."

Full fibre broadband
to more rural homes

TONY GUSSIN

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MORE homes in some of North Devon's most remote communities are set to get full fibre broadband as work continues under the government's Project Gigabit programme.

Engineers from Openreach are now working on upgrades to reach more properties in and around Chulmleigh, Winkleigh, Harracott, Kentisbury, Combe Martin, Berryarbor, Umlerleigh, High Bickington, Chapelton, Atherington and Burrington.

The government has also launched a new address checker for those in England and Wales to instantly see if their home or business is covered by existing rollout plans, whether through the Project Gigabit rollout targeting hard-to-reach areas or the telecoms industry's own plans.

UK telecoms minister Liz Lloyd said: "Whether it's families streaming together, farmers being able to use new technology, or businesses reaching more customers online, this upgrade creates real opportunities for communities across Devon.

"Through our Project Gigabit rollout, we're making sure people across the UK can benefit from the digital world, no matter where they live, and now through our new gov.uk address checker people can quickly see when seamless full fibre broadband will reach their area."

To date the Government has signed contracts worth £745million with Openreach as part of Project Gigabit. It said the investment is set to benefit more than 297,000 premises across the UK, with another £455m investment available to further help bridge the digital divide.

Martin Williams, Openreach

partnership director for Wales and the South West, said: "We're bringing faster, more reliable broadband to some of the most rural properties in the region and letting local people know what to expect.

"This is a major infrastructure upgrade, so there will be more engineering teams, equipment and vans around town and we're working hard to keep disruption to a minimum.

"Wherever possible, we'll use our existing network of ducts and poles to avoid roadworks, new street furniture and disturbance. But there may be places where we need to install new poles, underground ducts and fibre cables because it's the only way to make sure households get included in the upgrade."

You can check whether gigabit full fibre broadband is available or coming to your area via the online checker at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-your-gigabit-broadband-availability>

Tarka Line
action plan

FROM PAGE 1

adding that the lack of flexibility is a major deterrent to "modal shift" from cars to rail.

The document highlights the human cost of the current set-up: congested roads and limited bus alternatives contributed to an average of 46 work hours being lost per person over the last year.

A central pillar of the plan is the removal of the line's "outdated" signalling system.

Currently, much of the route relies on "token working," a traditional method where drivers must physically carry a baton to prove they have permission to enter a section of single track.

Engineers have branded this "impractical" for a modern high-frequency service because it adds significant time and inefficiency to every journey. The proposal recommends a "tokenless block" enhancement, using digital axle counters and modern colour-light signals. This would allow trains to follow each other more closely and safely.

While the report mentions the potential for the high-tech European Train Control System (ETCS), it suggests that more immediate benefits could come from modernising the existing control point at Crediton signal box, potentially upgrading it to a new digital workstation.

To achieve the goal of two trains per hour throughout the day, the report identifies three critical infrastructure projects:

1 — *Reinstating the double track.* A key part of this involves reinstating Coleford junction with a high-speed crossover designed for 70mph, ensuring that Barnstaple-bound trains do not have to slow down significantly when diverging. Engineers also propose re-laying a second track between Newton St Cyres and Crediton. This would effectively "un-bottle" the start of the line, allowing Barnstaple and Okehampton services to pass each other without one having to wait for the other to clear the single-line section.

2 — *Strategic passing loops.* To avoid the massive cost of doubling the entire 39-mile line, the report identifies three strategic "passing loops", short sections of double track where oncoming trains can pass each other at speed:

3 — *The Speed Challenge.* While current journey times to Exeter can exceed an hour, engineers believe that increasing line speeds to 75mph or 85mph is possible between Yeoford and Barnstaple.

The report notes that an increase in frequency naturally increases the risk at crossings. It recommends a £6.5 million investment to upgrade "user-worked" crossings.

The report explicitly references "significant disruption to services on the line resulting from flood-related scour damage in 2026", highlighting the need for robust drainage and earthwork improvements as part of any upgrade package.

Transport failures hit students

ELLA SAMPSON

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A NEW campaign group has warned that young people in North Devon are being failed by an expensive and unreliable transport system that is forcing some students to miss more than 15 days of college a year.

The group, Routes to Post-16 Opportunities Devon, claims that a lack of adequate bus and rail provision is exacerbating rural inequalities and leaving families to foot bills reaching nearly £1,000 a year.

Recent data from the group has highlighted what it calls a significant “transport gap” between Devon’s rural towns and its educational hubs, leading to accusations that the local authority is failing in its statutory duties.

The Tarka Line, which connects North Devon to Exeter, is a vital artery for the 690 students who travel from the Barnstaple area to Exeter College daily.

However, campaigners say the service has become a source of “constant disruption”.

According to a study conducted by the campaign group, 36 per cent of students surveyed have missed more than 15 days of in-person teaching since September due to cancellations, 21 per cent have missed between 10 and 15 days and 22 per cent have missed between 5 and 10 days.

When the line was recently closed for engineering works due to recent adverse weather, the situation reportedly descended into chaos.

Parents reported that replacement bus services were slow to be established, and once operational, were often full by the time they reached intermediate stops like Eggesford and Kings Nympton.

“Students were standing at stops with no information on when buses would arrive or even where they were supposed to wait,” a spokesperson for Routes to Post-16 Opportunities Devon said.

“It resulted in a total loss of education for many who simply couldn’t get to their campus.”

For hard-pressed families in areas like Torrington, the financial burden is proving as significant as the logistical one.

The campaign was founded after a local parent discovered a startling disparity in travel costs.

While a train pass with a college discount costs approximately £743, the equivalent bus fare for those without rail access can soar to £960, the group has found.

“I was shocked by the fact there were no route-specific fares for students using the buses,” the campaigner stated.

“The price difference is huge, and for many families in rural Devon, this isn’t a choice, it’s a barrier to social mobility.”

The group has now met with Devon County Council to challenge the current Post-16 Transport Policy.

They argue that the council is not meeting its statutory duties because it has failed to undertake a comprehensive study of the needs of the



A spokesperson for Stagecoach South West said the company was “committed to providing reliable, affordable transport across its rural network”



16-18 population.

Under government guidance, local authorities are expected to consider:

- 1 — The impact of costs on low-income families.
- 2 — The journey times and complexity of routes.
- 3 — The specific needs of students in remote rural areas.

“The council hasn’t looked at the actual routes taken or the disruption being caused,” the group claimed.

“We have presented them with our own evidence showing the real-world impact on students’ lives, and we are calling for an immediate review of how these young people are supported.”

The situation has sparked a wider conversation about “rural proofing” education. Without reliable transport, there are fears that young people in North and West Devon will be restricted in their choice of courses, or forced to drop out of education entirely.

A spokesperson for the campaign concluded: “This is about more than just a late bus. It’s about whether a child’s geography should dictate their right to an education.”

A spokesperson for Stagecoach South West said the company was “committed to providing reliable, affordable transport across its rural network”, adding: “Delivering services over such a widespread geography presents unique challenges, and the fares reflect the true cost of running these routes, while the £3 single fare cap continues to offer excellent value for regular travellers.”

The spokesperson added that de-

spite “extreme winter weather and operational hurdles”, the company had successfully run more than 98 per cent of scheduled services.

“While Stagecoach regrets any isolated disruptions, factors such as congestion, road closures, and diversions are often beyond our control,” they said.

Regarding rail replacement services, Stagecoach noted these are operated by multiple providers under the train companies’ co-ordination, and that any concerns should be raised directly with the railway operators.

A county council spokesperson told the *North Devon Gazette*: “We will be looking at what support is available for young people who are currently not in education, employment or training and how transport and travel options can be used to help them access opportunities.

“Each year we carry out an annual review of our Post 16 provision and our Post 16 transport policy, and we take into account factors such as transport disruption due to severe weather over the winter, ongoing changes in Post 16 provision across Devon and the changes in commercial bus fares.

“We will carry out a detailed assessment of Post 16 transport provision over the next few months.

“We have met with parents and we appreciate the work that they have already carried out as this contributes to our upcoming audit.”

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Future-proof this crucial rail link

FURTHER to your article in the *North Devon Gazette* I would like to add my concerns regarding the Tarka Line, which I regularly use to commute from and to either Kings Nympton station or Eggesford to and from Barnstaple, where I work three days a week at the North Devon District Hospital.

Due to medical reasons I have not been driving. Indeed, we only run one car, which my wife requires for her work as we live in a rural setting. As a result I rely on being dropped and collected at one of the stations above and rely on the train service to access Barnstaple as there is no adequate bus service.

During the most recent closure of the Barnstaple to Exeter railway from the end of January to the 20th of February, the supply of information to rail users was inadequate, as was the replacement bus service. For example:

1 — The GWR site stated that there was no service and gave no clear information about replacement buses.

2 — Signs at the stations only appeared later on during the disruption, with limited information.

3 — When returning from Barnstaple in the evening it was unclear as to whether a bus was an 'express' bus going straight through to Exeter or one that would stop at intermediate stations.

As a result of the above it proved hard to plan and I was only able to physically get to work for four out of a possible 12 days. On one of these days, due to a group I needed to attend with clients, my wife drove me in and drove back to collect me in the evening, a round trip in all of 80 miles.

The remaining working days I had to adapt and work remotely, with the help of colleagues. This was not easy or ideal given the client-facing nature of my work.

I am not the only user of the Barnstaple to Exeter railway. In this regard I refer to other commuters, like myself, but particularly students from both Barnstaple College and Exeter College who have had their education disrupted.

I now understand that there are due to be further disruptions to the service later this month. While I appreciate that the unprecedented weather conditions we have had, which seem to be becoming regular, I have written to Lord Henty, Rail Minister, and our local MP Ian Roome to clarify:

1 — That there will be investment to future-proof the infrastructure of the Barnstaple to Exeter Line which serves the rural area of North Devon.

2 — That inadequate rolling stock will be replaced.

3 — That the GWR app is updated to give live time detailed information to passengers including rail replacement bus services.

4 — In the case of rail replacement services being needed there is a reg-

Magnificent



Magnolia flowers begin to bloom in all their glory earlier this month, captured by Bideford photographer Graham Hobbs

ular, clearly detailed service for the rural stations.

I would be interested in other people's experiences regarding the shortcomings of Barnstaple to Exeter railway which serves our rural part of the country.

**Paul Butler
Chulmleigh**

Protest with caution

DEVON prides itself on values of inclusion, collaboration and a strong sense of local pride and belonging.

Our county has long been known for its independent spirit and its willingness to stand up for what it

believes in, while also welcoming visitors with warmth and openness.

For that reason, I as a local resident, I have felt increasingly uneasy about some of the demonstrations we have recently seen on Britain's streets.

Iran is a country where people can face imprisonment or even execu-

tion simply for being homosexual; where women risk punishment over clothing choices, hairstyles or for publicly protesting against the government; and where freedom of speech is tightly restricted. It is therefore deeply troubling to see public gatherings in Britain mourning or expressing sympathy for figures associated with such a regime.

What has also struck me is the apparent overlap between some of those attending these gatherings and those participating in the pro-Palestinian marches that have been taking place across the country. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, given that it is widely known that the Iranian regime has supported Palestinian groups for many years.

I find it deeply concerning when movements that claim to stand for justice appear alongside expressions of sympathy for a regime whose human rights record stands in such stark contrast to the freedoms and protections we value here in Devon.

Rory Wolf

Bird brained

THE Greek philosopher (and perhaps humourist) Aristophanes introduced us to the expression "cloud cuckoo land", a fantasy land in the sky built by birds where mere mortals might see what the gods were up to, their pranks, strategies and whims.

I think old Aristophanes would recognise the habitees of Riverbank House here, seeing how they can chuck taxpayers' money about with such abandon. It is no excuse, when questioned, to say that it is not entirely ratepayers' money that is being spent but a grant from some government department or the other. It is still our hard-earned money.

Firstly we had to shell out several hundred thousand pounds to build the skateboard park on land which might have accommodated numerous new homes. Secondly we had to pay for the installation and major overhaul of the Quayside Squirter. I won't dignify the useless pointless artifact by calling it a fountain.

Lastly, at least for the moment, we learn that £210,000 has been allocated to upgrade the slides, swings and roundabouts in play areas in the district. How many of our young people might have had their university tuition fees paid for if they were to study subjects of benefit to the community. Medicine, engineering, agriculture or science. Skateboard parks and the like benefit neither them nor us.

TDC claims to have no funds to reinstate the Instow and Appledore harbourmaster nor the funds to remove abandoned vessels in the river Torridge. They do, of course, but consider that swings, slides and roundabouts have a higher priority.

I rest my case. God help all of us.
**James W Jackson
Appledore**