

**Honours
for RNLI
lifeguard
trio after
rescue**

PAGE 8



**Police in
tribute
to new
member
of team**

PAGE 14



**Maritime
industry
vital to
health of
economy**

CENTRE PAGES



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 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

MP tells rail ministers: don't forget Tarka Line



North Devon MP Ian Roome has again called for Tarka Line resilience funding

Resilience projects are 'essential'

NORTH DEVON MP Ian Roome has expressed his hope that funding can be secured for the Tarka Line, following confirmation from the Department for Transport that £36.2 million has been made available for rail projects in the region, writes Ella Sampson.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has allocated the multi-million-pound sum during the Spending Review period to build new stations at Culmpton in Mid Devon and Wellington in Somerset.

Last summer, the Secretary of State confirmed that four schemes from the Restoring Your Railway Fund would progress: the station reopenings at Culmpton, Wellington and Haxby, as well as the delivery of the Portishead line re-opening.

In a statement to the *North Devon Gazette*, Mr Roome stressed the necessity of similar investment for the Barnstaple-to-Exeter line.

Mr Roome said: "Whilst I welcome the investment in the new Culmpton station, I very much hope we can also secure funding for the Tarka Line. Improving its resilience to severe weather and supporting its growing passenger numbers is essential to ensure reliable transport links for our North Devon communities."

While the £36.2 million total has been made available for the current period, the DfT has indicated that the individual cost of each station will not be known until design work is completed later this year.

SPECIAL REPORT: PAGES 2&3

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	28-29
MOTORING	30-32
CLASSIFIED	33-36
SPORT	37-40

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,
Walton Cross, EN8 8DYW

NORTH DEVON HOSPICE LOTTERY
This week's £1,000 jackpot winner:

**Mrs MP from
South Molton**

Join for £1, support your hospice:

PLAYNORTHDEVON.ORG.UK

Exhausted passengers

The Tarka Line runs for 39 miles through some of Devon's most beautiful countryside.

But behind the scenery lies a railway that critics say has been cut to the bone, with outdated infrastructure, overcrowded carriages and a single track that belongs to another era.

North Devon Gazette reporter **Ella Sampson** rode the line to find out whether a growing campaign for modernisation and an ambitious plan to extend the railway to Bideford can rescue a route that rural communities depend on...

THE 11.19 service from Exeter St David's to Barnstaple does not announce itself with any great fanfare.

The departures board at St David's lists it alongside the Paddington express trains and the Plymouth fast services, intercity trains that will travel on partly electrified, double-tracked main lines.

The Tarka Line service offers something rather different.

There is simply a three-carriage diesel unit, known as a Class 158 — clean enough, and functional enough, except for what it represents to the tens of thousands of people across North Devon who rely on it.

On a bright April morning, with the sun catching the streams and hedgerows that flank much of the route, the Tarka Line is undeniably beautiful.

Villages slip past. The river Taw winds alongside the track. Eggesford, Lapford, Orchard Road — stations that feel as though time has treated them gently, and in some cases, perhaps too gently.

The journey from Exeter to Barnstaple takes 66 minutes from St David's to Barnstaple and 71 mins from Exeter Central.

For passengers travelling it daily, for work, for education, for medical appointments, it is a lifeline.

But speak to those passengers, and a picture emerges of a railway that is, in the words of one traveller, simply exhausting.

"Will anything actually be done?" That question, a regular question asked by commuters, captures the mood of a community that has been campaigning for change for years.

The journey ends at Barnstaple and the station itself is worth pausing on. It has the feel of a place that has been carefully preserved rather than modernised, its signage rendered in the kind of classic lettering that recalls the golden age of British railways: green, elegant, unhurried.

Where much of the line's infrastructure speaks of managed decline, Barnstaple station speaks of something else, a quiet pride in what this railway once was and perhaps a quiet insistence on what it could be again.

It is here, on the platform and in the station concourse, that the human story of the line's underinvestment becomes most apparent.



The Tarka Line service waits at Exeter St David's — one of the last stops on the modern network before passengers enter a very different railway

The Gazette spoke to passengers, business owners and travellers who had come from across the country. Their accounts painted a consistent picture.

For some the anger has largely gone. For others, there is huge concern for their businesses based at the station.

For years, communities along the line have lobbied for better services, more trains, improved rolling stock and modern infrastructure. Progress has been slow. Patience is wearing thin.

To travel the Tarka Line is to experience, in striking physical form, the gap between rural and urban rail provision in England.

Board a train at Exeter St David's heading towards Plymouth or London Paddington, and you step onto a modern, double-tracked railway. Turn north towards Barnstaple and you enter a different world. The line is single track for almost its entire length. Where two trains need

to pass, they must wait at passing loops; bottlenecks that define the frequency and reliability of the entire timetable.

There are roughly 17 trains each day from Barnstaple to Exeter, leaving around every hour.

For a rural area with limited alternative transport options, that is simply not enough.

Nowhere illustrates the line's Victorian heritage more vividly than Eggesford station.

It is here that one of the more extraordinary operational rituals of the modern British railway still takes place: when two trains need to cross, the driver must pull a rope to lower the level crossing barriers and then physically pass a token — a baton — between drivers.

The token system, a method of ensuring only one train occupies a section of single track at a time, is a relic of nineteenth century railway working. It is not a common sight on today's network.

Eggesford station is clearly well-used, passengers visibly boarding and alighting as the train pauses, yet it has no proper car park.

A small forecourt at the front can take a handful of cars but spaces are gone quickly. Commuters have been left to improvise, abandoning their vehicles on surrounding country lanes just to reach the platform.

The infrastructure problems are not limited to the operational.

At King's Nympton station, campaigners want to see more stops to the station as their community is faced with limitations other than to drive to Eggesford to catch the train.

At Yeoford station, there is no footpath or station car park and a second platform sits abandoned and overgrown. The Dartmoor line service whizzes by without any chance of ever stopping.

These are not isolated examples. They are symptoms, say those behind the campaign for the line's transformation, of a railway that has been systematically underfunded for decades.

Tim Steer, chair of the Devon and Cornwall branch of Railfuture, has been at the centre of the campaign to modernise the Tarka Line. He does not mince his words about the current state of the route or the forces that brought it here.

"In a nutshell, Great British Railways are not going to change anything in a hurry," he told the Gazette. "At the moment, we know that the service operators are going back in-house through central government's Department for Transport Operator but realistically, GWR, who are, for the better word of it, part of the North Devon line, they are basically trying to give as best service as they can."

"In recent years, they have been trying their best, but lack of pre central government funding, they have been cut back to the bare bones, and this is why the old class of trains are on the line, they've been struggling to meet passenger demand."

Mr Steer says that what is needed now is a clear, strategic commitment from the newly created Great British Railways, the government body taking over the railways, to deliver better resources to operators and plan properly for the region's future.

"What we do want going forward is Great British Railways to make sure that they deliver a better strategy to give more trains to the operators," he said.

He also raised the issue of housing development in the area, and the risk that new homes built away from the rail network will simply add to road congestion rather than boosting passenger numbers.

"One of the things we have around here is a new local plan that both Torridge and North Devon are working on," he said. "We need to make sure that if those houses are going in, that it goes into an area where they can join the rail network, so that it can become a sustainable type of development, rather than an area that clogs up the congestion on the local road network."

The case for urgent improvement is perhaps best made not by campaigners and officials, but by the passengers themselves.

Elle Bailey had travelled from Essex to visit a friend in North Devon for the Easter break. She had made the same journey the previous September, taking the train via Paddington before changing at Exeter.

On that occasion, she told the Gazette, the service to Barnstaple was running with only two carriages.

"It was like sardines," she said. "It



Barnstaple station retains much of its original character; its classic signage and heritage feel a reminder of the railway's history

deserve much better service

was uncomfortable and I had to stand all the way from Exeter to Barnstaple."

This time, she was fortunate: three carriages, and a seat.

But her experience from the previous year is far from unusual. The *Gazette* has spoken to many passengers who describe overcrowding on the line as a recurring problem, particularly during peak travel periods and holiday seasons, when visitor numbers to North Devon surge.

Joe, a student who studies in Bristol, uses the Tarka Line to travel between his university city and his family home in Ilfracombe. He was waiting at Barnstaple station for his parents to collect him because, as he explained, the railway does not reach Ilfracombe.

His parents, he said, had to drive to pick him up. He found the state of the rail infrastructure in North Devon "annoying".

It is a sentiment that resonates across the region. North Devon is one of the most sparsely populated parts of England, with bus services limited and road congestion a persistent problem.

The railway, for all its limitations, is often the most practical option for those who cannot or choose not to drive, and yet it offers a level of service that many feel falls far short of what a rural community really deserves.

The consequences of an inadequate rail service are felt not just by commuters and visitors, but by the businesses that serve them.

Robert Winrow manages Tarka Trail Cycle Hire, a bike rental business based at Barnstaple station. His company is directly dependent on visitors arriving by train, cyclists who take the service from Exeter or further afield to explore the famous Tarka Trail, one of the longest off-road cycling routes in England.

Asked by the *Gazette* whether any future reduction in rail services, or a potential closure, would affect his business, he was direct.

"Really, realistically, I think yeah," he said. "Probably 10 to 15 per cent will come in on the train from possibly Exeter or further afield, from South Devon down here. That will have an effect on my trade, absolutely."

For a rural tourism economy that depends on visitors being able to reach it easily, the state of the line is not simply a matter of convenience. It is an economic issue, and one that becomes more pressing with every year that meaningful improvement is delayed.

Political momentum... and the question of funding

There are signs, at least, that the political will to act may be gathering.

The campaign for the Tarka Line's modernisation is backed by the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which has secured support from a number of local councils. The alliance has been instrumental in bringing together political voices across the region.

Ian Roome, the MP for North Devon, has publicly expressed his sup-



Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall branch, on board the Tarka Line — calling on Great British Railways to deliver more trains for rural communities

port for the urgent modernisation of the line. And in March 2026, Sir Geoffrey Cox, MP for Torridge and Tavistock, publicly declared his backing for an extension of the railway to Bideford, a significant development that campaigners say reflects the growing weight of political opinion behind the project.

Tim Steer also pointed to a significant structural change in local governance that could accelerate progress.

"Devon County Council has finally moved its transport authority responsibilities to the Devon and Torbay Combined County," he said.

"They are now the statutory transport authority for the region and they will be taking forward the local transport plan."

"Within that is the Bideford Rail Link extension, that needs to be for-

mally looked at through the business case programme set up by the Department for Transport under its transport appraisal."

In short: the machinery for change is, at last, beginning to move. But whether it will move quickly enough, and with sufficient funding, remains the central question.

The Bideford extension: ambition or pipe dream?

Of all the ambitions attached to the campaign, none is more striking than the proposal to extend the Tarka Line beyond Barnstaple to Bideford, a town of around 20,000 (near-doubled when neighbouring Appledore, Northam and Westward Ho! are included) people that lost its railway in the Beeching cuts of the 1960s.

The logic of such an extension is

hard to dispute. Bideford is the largest settlement in Torridge district and in the South West that is cut off. Its residents currently have no direct rail connection, relying instead on a bus network that, while improved in recent years, cannot match the convenience or speed of rail.

Bideford's growth, and that of the wider Torridge area, makes some form of improved transport link not just desirable, but arguably essential.

Tim Steer is cautiously optimistic that the extension can happen.

But he is also candid about the scale of the challenge. Any extension would need to run through part of what is currently Barnstaple station's main car park, and at present, no decision has been made about where that car park would be relocated.

It is a logistical and political problem that will need to be resolved before any serious construction planning can begin.

Mr Steer believes the extension is at least ten years away, and that it will require substantial central government funding to become a reality. The Department for Transport's transport appraisal process, now formally required as part of the Combined Authority's transport plan, will be the first major test of whether the business case stacks up.

From the window of the Tarka Line, watching the fields and rivers of North Devon pass by, the distance between Barnstaple and Bideford looks short.

In political and financial terms, it may still be very long indeed.

But for communities that have been waiting decades for a railway that works for them, the fact that the conversation is happening at all feels, to some at least, like progress.

What happens next?

The immediate priority for campaigners is not the Bideford extension, but the modernisation of the existing line: more trains, longer carriages, updated rolling stock, and investment in the infrastructure, the passing loops, the signalling, the stations, that would allow services to increase.

Great British Railways, the government body that will ultimately control the strategic direction of the network, is yet to publish detailed plans for rural lines like the Tarka. Its formation has been the subject of political delays, and campaigners are watching closely to see whether its priorities will extend meaningfully beyond the main intercity routes.

At Crediton station, the passengers are greeted to a visual display from Victorian times. The train driver slows down the train to halt the service by a salmon pink signal box where a signalman comes out to hand a metal token to the driver so they can carry on the service into the station — a system that is no different now than when Tim's great grandfather William Steer was the signalman in the same signal box in the early 1900s.

For the passengers, businesses and communities of North Devon, the waiting is the hardest part. They have made the arguments. They have secured political backing. They have seen the evidence, in overcrowded carriages, in witnessing a signal box from Victorian times still in operation, in a driver pulling a rope at Eggesford to lower a level crossing, of what decades of underinvestment looks like.

The Tarka Line has waited long enough. So have the people who depend on it.

Share your views with us: email newsdesk@northdevongazette.co.uk



The Tarka Line service arrives at Barnstaple — the end of the line, and for many communities further west, the nearest rail connection they have

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 £742

Sunday 17th May

Loch Awe Hotel, Argyll

Scenic Scotland 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

