

Rail link revival 'excellent idea' but it 'remains complicated'

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A DEVON county councillor has backed calls to revive a rail link to Bideford but says delivering it would be far more complicated than simply extending the Tarka Line — and is calling for a temporary arrangement at Barnstaple station in the meantime.

Campaigns to reconnect Bideford to the national rail network have been gathering pace, with the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance actively pushing for an extension of the Tarka Line from Barnstaple.

The scheme features in the Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 2025-2040 and supporters point out that Bideford is the largest conurbation in the South West without a rail connection, a situation that has existed since passenger services were removed in 1965.

But councillor Graham Bell, county councillor for Braunton Rural, who spoke to the *Gazette* as part of this newspaper's coverage of the Tarka Line, has urged campaigners to be clear-eyed about the scale of the challenge.

While he described bringing a service back to Bideford as "an excellent idea", he said that in the 60 years since the route was "foolishly de-commissioned", the Tarka Trail had become something very different, a walking and cycling route that now served as a commuter path between

Bideford and Barnstaple, a route that had "become home to many".

Rather than a straightforward extension from Barnstaple, councillor Bell said he would prefer to see a line linking Bideford to Torrington and then on to Eggesford, giving the town "its own express line to Exeter and beyond rather than acting as a satellite to Barnstaple".

But he was direct about the difficulty: while the Barnstaple to Exeter line "remains complicated", any Bideford reconnection, which would likely require an entirely new station, was, he said, "magnitudes more complicated".

With the longer-term extension still a distant prospect, councillor Bell said his immediate focus was on improving connections for communities north of the River Taw.

He welcomed work by councillors Caroline Leaver and Andrea Davis on a new bus, bike and train interchange at Barnstaple station, describing it as a way to help travellers from Braunton, Ilfracombe and Bideford reach the station more easily and connect to onward destinations.

The £850,000 scheme, approved by Devon County Council's cabinet in November 2025, will reconfigure bus stops to increase capacity and remove the need for some buses to use the roundabout near Tesco.

A new mini-roundabout at the junction with Station Road will give buses and traffic from the town centre priority, while the station forecourt will be expanded to include



Councillor Graham Bell has urged campaigners to be clear-eyed about the scale of the challenge reviving a rail link to Bideford. Picture: Graham Bell



improved shelters, real-time information screens and cycle parking.

New pedestrian and cycle crossings at the station entrance will also make it easier and safer to access both the station and bus stops.

Councillor Bell said he hoped the interchange would make travel to and from North Devon "far more effective," adding: "When we finally have our second service we will have an effective and environmentally clean travel solution, fit for the 2030s."

You can read more of our reporting on Tarka Line proposals and the wider case for improving rail links across North Devon online at www.northdevongazette.co.uk

Hub boost for mental health help

A BARNSTAPLE woman has launched a new mental health support service to help people feel heard, supported and less alone, writes Alex Haynes.

Sarah-Jayne, 37, founder of Time to Talk Hub, created the service after noticing how many people in North Devon were quietly struggling with stress, loneliness and feeling overwhelmed.

Based in Barnstaple, the newly launched hub offers telephone-based support sessions, allowing people to book a time to talk and receive a call in the comfort and privacy of their own home.

Sarah-Jayne said the idea came from a desire to provide something simple but meaningful.

She said: "I could see how many people were carrying things quietly. Sometimes people just need to be heard without judgement."

"Time to Talk is built on the belief that being listened to with kindness and understanding can make a real difference."

The service is designed to be accessible to anyone, with a focus

Alexa Knight, director of policy and influencing at the Mental Health Foundation



on removing barriers that often prevent people from seeking help. By offering sessions over the phone, the hub allows users to speak openly in a way that feels safe and manageable.

Sarah-Jayne said supporting the local community is at the heart of the project.

"North Devon is full of people who look after others, work hard, and often put themselves last. Being able to offer a calm and compassionate space for them feels incredibly meaningful," she said.

The launch came ahead of Mental Health Awareness Week 2026 (May 11 to 17), organised by the Mental Health Foundation, which this year is focusing on the theme of "action".

The campaign encourages people to take simple steps to improve their mental wellbeing, whether that's asking for support, checking in on others, or making time for positive habits.

Alexa Knight, director of policy and influencing at the Mental Health Foundation, said: "When we each take small steps, we build a sense of hope, connection and momentum. Together, we can help create communities where everyone feels supported."

Sarah-Jayne said: "My aim is to make emotional support feel warm, simple, and stigma-free. Sometimes, having someone listen can change everything."



MAY STARS Northam Mayor Queen and King, Blossom Shepherd and Oliver Slade, both aged five, pictured right, were stars of the show at Northam Fair earlier this month. In our coverage of the event in last week's *Gazette*, we spelled Blossom's surname incorrectly and are happy to set the record straight this week. Picture: Graham Hobbs

TUCK IN Christian Aid supporters from Barnstaple, left, have organised a Big Brekkie as part of Christian Aid Week 2026. The event takes place at Christ Church, in Bear Street, on Saturday, May 16 from 9.30-11.30am. Organiser Janet Marshall said: "Every year since 1957 people across Britain and Ireland have come together for these seven days to make a difference and raise funds. We're really looking forward to welcoming people to our Big Brekkie, including the mayor, councillor Coates and her consort Gwen Thomas. We'll be serving hot breakfast rolls as well as juice, tea, coffee, toast and preserves." Janet is pictured with co-organiser Paula Littlewood and Ian Roome MP for North Devon



Builders revisit foundations of their successful 80-year business

TONY GUSSIN

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PEARCE Construction has celebrated its 80th anniversary, looking back on its humble beginnings and the completion of some of North Devon's most well-known buildings.

The birthday celebrations were held at one of the company's most recently completed projects, 36-37 Boutport Street in Barnstaple, which has turned a derelict building into a creative hub with commercial and residential use.

Other instantly recognisable local projects include the Landmark Theatre in Ilfracombe, North Devon College and Ilfracombe Watersports Centre.

The company was founded in 1946 as R Harris & Sons Builders Limited and soon established itself as a local leader in private housing and commercial construction.

The business changed hands and names several times, before becoming Pearce Construction (Barnstaple) Ltd in 1987.

In 2003, a management buyout restored it to local ownership, allowing a bigger expansion into the local housing market. Most recently in 2024, the company's ownership was transferred into an employee ownership trust (EOT).

Chairman David Parsons joined the business in 1982 and led the management buyout.

He said: "From Mr Harris's humble beginnings in 1946, Pearce Con-

struction has grown brick by brick, with iconic and notable builds including Ilfracombe's Landmark Theatre, Clovelly Visitor Centre, the regeneration of Forches Estate, Pottington Industrial Estate, North Devon College and more recently, Taw Wharf in Barnstaple and Ilfracombe's Watersports Centre.

"Pearce Construction has left an indelible mark on the region's built environment, a legacy built not just on bricks and mortar but on the commitment, loyalty and passion of our people.

"Many who began as apprentices now lead in senior roles, including at board level. Our success has always been rooted on quality workmanship and dedication to staff development, values that continue to guide us and have earned our team national recognition."

Managing director Paul Knox added: "We are delighted to celebrate our 80th anniversary with clients, partners and employees, past and present. This project showcases everything Pearce Construction stands for, commercial expertise, residential quality, bespoke joinery and heritage renovation.

"The care and craftsmanship we've poured into Boutport Street Studios to meticulously restore original features while integrating modern services and accessibility improvements speak volumes about what we do. We're incredibly proud of what the company has achieved over the past 80 years and the positive impact we deliver on every project."



Chairman David Parsons talking to partners, clients and MP Ian Roome, top, at the Pearce Construction 80th birthday celebrations. Middle: managing director Paul Knox reminiscing on builds from the last 80 years. Above: employees past and present joining in at the company's 80th celebrations. Pictures: Seth Conway Media

Whitbread restaurants face closure

TWO Premier Inn restaurants in Barnstaple and Bideford look set to shut down after owner Whitbread announced major restructuring plans, writes Tony Gussin.

Brewers Fayre at Clovelly Road in Bideford and Table Table at Barum Gate in Barnstaple are in the firing line after the hospitality giant revealed its plans to close all 197 of its remaining stand alone branded restaurants.

The company said the process was still under consultation but admitted it would lead to around 3,800 job losses at Brewers Fayre, Beefeater and Table Table restaurants around the country.

However it said it would expect to retain 'a significant proportion' of staff and would seek to reassign as many people as possible.

In a statement on April 30, Whitbread said as part of its five year plan it intended to: "Become a pure-play hotel business focused on Premier Inn, the UK's number one hotel brand, which is synonymous with quality and value. This change will involve exiting all of our remaining branded restaurants, which trade under brands including Beefeater and Brewers Fayre, a number of which will be converted into approximately 600 additional Premier Inn rooms, with the remainder expected to be sold as going concerns."

The closures follow Whitbread's Accelerating growth Plan announced in 2024 which saw more than 200 branded restaurants at Premier Inn sites converted to additional hotel rooms and the creation of a restaurant inside each hotel.

The statement added: "This format has proved highly popular with guests and under the proposal, it would be rolled out to all hotels where there is currently a branded restaurant."

A Whitbread spokesperson told the North Devon Gazette as the proposals were still under consultation they could not provide further detail on specific locations at this stage, but said the company appreciated it must be unsettling for those who may be affected.

The original statement added: "We recognise the impact of this proposal on colleagues who work at the affected sites. As a business which recruits around 15,000 people every year, we expect to be able to retain a significant proportion of those affected and will be looking to redeploy as many of our impacted colleagues as possible. However, we do anticipate that the proposed changes, which are subject to consultation, would result in a reduction of around 3,800 roles of a total UK and Ireland workforce of around 30,000. We will do all we can to support colleagues affected."

No timeline has been given for when affected restaurants might close.

Rail minister hints at Tarka Line help

NORTH Devon MP Ian Roome hopes to meet the government's Rail Minister to press for action on the Tarka Line, after the North Devon Gazette uncovered a parliamentary exchange in which Lord Hendy pledged new technology to prevent the kind of disruption that shut the line for 24 days in January.

Hansard, the publicly available official record of all parliamentary proceedings, shows that the Tarka Line was raised directly with Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, Minister of State for Rail, on March 19, writes Ella Sampson.

His response revealed that Network Rail is actively investigating advanced sensor technology that would allow engineers to inspect bridge foundations during flooding without waiting for water levels to drop, removing one of the key causes of lengthy closures on the route between Barnstaple and Exeter.

Lord Hendy, a veteran transport executive appointed to his role by



Hansard shows that the Tarka Line was raised directly with Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, Minister of State for Rail

Prime Minister Keir Starmer in July 2024, referenced a fatal Welsh bridge collapse around 40 years ago, caused by storm erosion, as the reason post-storm inspections cannot be skipped.

He described the sensor invest-

ment as "fairly modest expenditure" that he believes would benefit lines serving both Barnstaple and Okehampton.

Mr Roome has said on social media that he will "keep campaigning for North Devon's all-important public transport links."

It is understood that he intends to discuss the key issues raised at the recent Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) annual convention in March of this year.

His meeting with the minister is expected to cover long-term resilience, future investment, and the specific infrastructure plans needed for the Tarka Line.

With climate experts warning that extreme weather is becoming the new normal, the January closures are unlikely to be the last test of the Tarka Line's resilience, making the outcome of that meeting all the more significant for passengers across North Devon.

Energy questions still to answer

It is disappointing that Love Braunton's legal challenge of the decision by North Devon Council to approve the White Cross cable route wasn't allowed by the judge, and while we don't agree with it, we respect it.

However, given the government's stated ambition to exploit the Celtic Sea and generate potentially over 50GW of energy through floating offshore wind farms in the region by 2050, it's understandable.

In that context, the importance of this test and demonstration site for the whole of the area of the North Devon and Cornwall coastline is not reflected in the quality of White Cross application nor is it an example of best practice, and so risks bringing the industry into disrepute.

Our community is generally supportive of renewable schemes, but not those done at any price, or with poor consideration. There are still 39 post consent conditions which need to be met by the developer — not least a very important bat survey, currently being reviewed due to its inadequacy. These should be open to public consultation.

Updated cable burial risk assessments are needed due to the onshore and offshore applications having the cable/s buried at different depths (1.5m apart).

Additionally there's nothing to prevent the developer from 'matrassing' the cable/s to hold them down in the intertidal zone — something which we believe would negatively impact Saunton's world famous longboard wave, and by extension its thriving surf and tourism industry.

It's encouraging that our campaign has been included in Exeter University's policy research study for the MMO which is due to be published later this year.

Our inclusion in their Sustainable Futures Conference on how we can disagree about green energy projects was also very welcome.

Academics attention reflects the importance of the debate on how we strike a balance between green energy production and positive community engagement. This is vitally important if promises of a 'just transition' away from fossil fuels are to be more than just empty words.

Hopefully the efforts we have made to protect our area and community from unfair exploitation will benefit other communities from having to endure a similar experience.

Thanks to everyone who continues to support our campaign and who've contributed to the legal challenge fundraiser. Our efforts to protect this internationally important and highly designated area will continue through the public consultations on all the post consent conditions, including the three very important ones outlined above.

This area is too important to simply stand by and watch its degradation in the name of profit and progress.

Fair maidens



Very pretty in pink... one of Graham Hobbs's pictures from Northam Fair we weren't able to bring you last week

www.saveoursands.co.uk
<https://governingsustainablefutures.co.uk/flashpoints/renewable-energy-projects-and-associated-infrastructure/>
Helen Cooper

Kind rescuers

MAY I use your columns to express my heartfelt thanks to those kindly members of the public who late last Friday evening near the White

House at Abbotsham hauled me out of the road where I had landed immobilised by what transpired to be a dislocated shoulder, and then attended to me and stayed with me until the ambulance finally arrived. Without their assistance, I dread to think what might have happened.

I should also take this opportunity to praise the efficiency of Barnstaple A and E. My treatment there in the early hours of Saturday morning

went like clockwork, and I was discharged with my shoulder relocated after just two hours.

Neither the health system or Britain is 'broken' despite what some people would have you believe!

**Peter Sims
Bideford**

Month for new life

JUNE is an adventurous month when many young creatures take

their first look at the great world: youthful blackbirds are everywhere and young robins in the speckled, almost thrush-like, plumage peculiar to juveniles of their species.

Little, great tits, packed closer than sardines in a tin, are about to escape the nest-box. When five or six young thrushes, or, young blackbirds, fly from the nest and scatter in all directions, one or more of the little ones may get lost. When early summer arrives, I pick up young birds and give them bread and milk.

Owls figure prominently on the list of waifs. The brown or tawny owl, whose hootings ring through the night, likes to make its nest in a hole in an old tree. Its owlets are adventurous youngsters and make a practice of leaving the hole, in which they have been reared, before they can really fly. They hop about on the branches and stare down at the world below, blinking their weak-looking, red-rimmed eyes at man, beast and bird. Sometimes, a super-adventurous owlet finds itself fluttering to Earth. The best thing to do for it — watch it doesn't drive its sharp talons into your hand! — and put it in some nearby tree. The probability is that the parent will hear its calls and come for it, in the night.

The kindest thing with all foundlings is to put them under the shelter of bushes where the old birds are likely to find them.

About young hedgerow birds; the natural food of nestling blackbirds and thrushes is worms. If you supply your foundling with never-ending worms, you won't have any difficulty in rearing it. Never be afraid of over-feeding it: so long as it opens its beak in readiness for more, you cannot do that!

And there are young things abroad by night as well as day. Snuffling, snorting sounds can be heard from dusk deepening into darkness. Urchins, to use her country name: hedgehogs. A seriously threatened species. What enchanting and strange animals they are with their spiny jackets and quaint, sharp faces. Little urchins always absolutely fascinate me with their funny ways and taking expressions.

The end.

Actually, I have broken my ankle so have had and continue to have plenty of time for observations...

Olivia Corrie

Rail line action

THE Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance seem to get a lot of press coverage, but I think most of us are fed up with that. We don't want their words; we want some real action on the Tarka Line upgrade.

Their equivalent in Cornwall has obtained £58million to upgrade the Par to Newquay service — a line that carries only about a quarter of the passengers that our line does. That's the way to do it, NDRDA!

**Tim Gibbs
Bideford**