

Traffic jams renew focus on rail link campaign

● Roadworks gridlock prompts fresh call for transport infrastructure rethink

Ella Sampson

DAYS of severe congestion that left Barnstaple drivers and bus passengers stuck for hours last week were entirely predictable, according to local transport campaigner Tim Steer, who says the town's problems will keep recurring until it has an alternative to the road network.

Mr Steer, who campaigns for a rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford, said the gas works causing this week's disruption were unavoidable, but pointed to what he sees as a much deeper, structural problem plaguing the town's roads.

"The Wales and West Utilities gas works are essential and unavoidable," he said. "However, they have gridlocked Barnstaple. Those who support a rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford have always known that the B3233 from Sticklepath all the way to Instow has a cable and ductile network for electric, clean and waste water, communications and gas buried under the surface of the road."

He argued that because utility companies will always need to dig up the road to repair, improve or connect new housing to their networks, congestion of this kind is likely to recur.

"There are no road-based solutions and the issue will remain perpetual as all utility companies require the road to be dug up to repair, improve or connect new housing to their existing networks," he said. "A new solution must be addressed."

Mr Steer pointed to recent transport policy developments as a potential way forward. The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority has adopted the Devon County Council Local Transport Plan 2025-2040, which he said formally recognises Barnstaple as a key hub for local services, with residents in the area particularly reliant on private vehicles amid ongoing congestion issues.

He also highlighted that the Devon Metro 2 scheme now includes a Bideford to Barnstaple rail link and that the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, backed by £10,000 from Railfuture's Fighting Fund, is helping statutory transport authorities commission a Strategic Outline Business Case for developing Devon Metro 2. That scheme would also include modernisation of the Barnstaple to Exeter line, aiming for two faster services per hour.

"When working correctly, railways

will offer the best mass transport solution to any area, reduce gridlock congestion and environmental impact," Mr Steer said.

The congestion stemmed from a one-way traffic system introduced to allow Wales and West Utilities to replace a gas main in the Sticklepath Hill and Bickington Road area of Barnstaple.

The system led to considerable congestion late on Tuesday afternoon, August 25, with drivers and bus passengers left stuck in traffic for long periods.

Wales and West Utilities teams are replacing gas mains along Sticklepath Hill and Bickington Road, work that requires a lane closure and a one-way traffic system. The works are scheduled to finish by mid-November, in time to clear the network before the Christmas shopping period.

Devon County Council said it met with Wales and West Utilities and bus operator Stagecoach to urgently review the traffic management in place, and agreed with the utility company to reverse the one-way system with immediate effect.

Under the new arrangement, traffic can now travel from Barnstaple along Sticklepath Hill and Bickington Road to Cedars roundabout. Bickington Road is open between Cedars and Fremington, and there is improved access for buses along with two-way use of Sticklepath Hill. Road users are being asked to make use of filter lanes, avoid blocking roundabouts, follow diversion signage, and allow extra time for their journeys.

Wales and West Utilities apologised for the disruption in a social media statement last Wednesday afternoon.

"We sincerely apologise for the impact on the local community and thank the public, road users and the local bus services for their patience whilst we work to find a solution," the company said. "We will continue to monitor the works as they progress."

Councillor Dan Thomas, the council's cabinet member with responsibility for roads, said the decision to reverse the system was a direct response to the problems reported last Tuesday.

"We want to avoid as much as possible the reports we heard yesterday of people stuck for too long in their vehicles, or on public transport," he said. "Our officers are also reviewing whether additional mitigations can be made to further improve access around Barnstaple."

Council officers are reviewing further changes while the gas works continue through to mid-November.



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Tim Steer, left, part of the Railfuture group and who campaigns for a rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford, said the gas works causing this week's disruption were unavoidable, but pointed to what he sees as a much deeper, structural problem plaguing the town's roads. Councillor Dan Thomas, right, Devon County Council's cabinet member with responsibility for roads, said the decision to reverse the traffic management system in Barnstaple was a direct response to the problems reported last Tuesday



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