

Are we ready for winter?

Rail bosses face resilience question

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All the fun of the fair returns

...and Barnstaple is having a ball

CENTRE PAGES



Write man in the right place

Michael Morpurgo: 50 years in Devon

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NORTH DEVON GAZETTE

Wednesday, September 23, 2026

BARNSTAPLE CARNIVAL FUNTIME: SEE PAGE 35



All change as town bids fond farewell to treasured lifeboat



Ilfracombe's boat has an escort of vessels from four other stations. Picture: RNLI/Paul Bateman

● All-weather vessel makes way for new fast 'RiB'

Tony Gussin

ILFRACOMBE'S all-weather lifeboat has left her home for the last time, watched by a crowd of well-wishers and escorted by lifeboats from four other stations.

People gathered in their droves on Saturday, September 19, to see The Barry and Peggy High Foundation, the Ilfracombe RNLI Shannon class lifeboat of 11, set off for her new home. She was escorted from the harbour by lifeboats from Tamar, Mumbles, Minehead and Appledore.

It brings to an end a long tradition of all-weather lifeboats at

Ilfracombe, with a new Atlantic 85 fast RiB (rigid inflatable boat) replacing the larger Shannon and complementing the town's existing inshore lifeboat. The change has been known for some time after the RNLI said it was restructuring its fleet, which included a new Shannon all-weather going to Appledore.

Ilfracombe RNLI said its volunteer crews have been training hard on the new Atlantic 85, the Patrick and Dianne O'Connor. This lifeboat can be launched in minutes and is able to reach speeds of 35 knots, which the charity said is going to be far better suited to the sorts of in-shore rescues – kayakers, paddle boarder, swimmers, as well as people and dogs who have

fallen from the cliffs – than the Shannon. Last week the crew finally passed out after weeks of intense practice exercises and the Atlantic 85 is now on service at Ilfracombe.

Richard Legg, Ilfracombe's lifeboat operations manager said: "Change is never easy, particularly after such a long history of all-weather lifeboats here at Ilfracombe, but the way we save lives at sea has always had to adapt to what is going on around us.

"This is the start of the next chapter for the Ilfracombe lifeboat service: a different class of boat and a different way of working, but the same commitment and the same purpose – saving lives at sea."



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Fears huge data centre will 'threaten biosphere status'

Bradley Gerrard, LDRS

NORTH Devon's cherished biosphere status could be under threat if plans for a huge 850-acre AI data centre and battery storage facility near Torrington are approved, it has been claimed.

The area is one of only seven biospheres in the UK and UNESCO, the global environmental organisation that oversees them has said if the proposals by Xlinks are approved, that would have to be factored into any decision to allow the area to maintain its status.

A spokesperson for the organisation said: "A development of this scale, in the Transition Zone set aside for sustainable activity, is the kind of change that the UK MAB National Committee, UNESCO's national counterpart, would factor into its ongoing reporting to the MAB Secretariat.

"While UNESCO won't be submitting a formal comment on this proposal, the question of whether a data centre's compatibility with the site's sustainable-development mandate is one that will feed directly into how North Devon's continued designation is assessed."

The spokesperson added that biosphere reserves such as North Devon undergo a periodic review every 10 years against the 'Man and Biosphere' programme's internationally-agreed criteria.

While UNESCO said it does not rule on planning applications and that the Biosphere designation did not carry the legal power to approve or block a development, this "does not mean UNESCO has no stake in



The North Devon Biosphere covers an area from the Exmoor coast down to the edge of Dartmoor and includes the location of the proposed data centre. Below: councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin has launched a petition linked to AI data centres and battery energy storage systems.
Main picture: Viral PR

it. Biosphere Reserve status isn't a one-off badge," the spokesperson added. "Sites are expected to keep demonstrating, in practice, that they deliver on the conservation, sustainable-development and support functions the designation is built on."

The potential threat to was raised this month at a full meeting of Devon County Council. Braunton councillor Graham Bell asked whether UNESCO would be "thinking carefully" about renewing the status if the data centre went ahead.

Councillor Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin for Torrington Rural, the cabinet member for rural affairs and whose ward is where the potential data centre would be, agreed.

She said: "I'm not very confident we would retain [the status] as [the data centre] is on a scale like nothing that we have in the South West and it would

be one of the largest complexes in the whole world, so I think it is a good question to raise."

Councillor Cottle-Hunkin has launched a petition on the government website linked to AI data centres and battery energy storage systems (BESS).

The petition calls for an urgent moratorium on AI data centres and BESS sites outside AI growth zones, mandatory rural impact assessments conducted at local level, and mandatory comprehensive investigations into financing of all proposals.

At the time of writing, it had secured 27,588 signatures. Governments respond to petitions that secure more than 10,000 signatures, while at 100,000 signatures it will be considered for debate in Parliament. The petition can be signed until February 17 next year.

Proposals first emerged about the 850-acre AI 'data campus',

together with associated battery storage, on farmland between Great Torrington, Huntshaw and Weare Giffard in June.

The Devon Data & BESS Action Group has been working with countryside charity Devon CPRE to fight the plans, claiming the development will ruin valuable farmland and have a massive visual impact on the town and surrounding countryside.

A spokesperson for Xlinks said the project team was working on the design for the campus which was "still at a relatively early stage."

They said: "It will be shared with residents and councils as soon as possible. We will also take into account feedback we receive as part of an extensive consultation before submitting planning applications. The plans referred to by Devon CPRE and the Devon Data Centre and BESS Action Group are out of date. They were preliminary site layouts intended to help explain the proposals at an earlier stage in the process. Therefore they will not form part of Xlinks' planning applications for the Devon Data Campus."

They added that the proposals represented "a major investment in the regional economy and will create between 650 and 1,200 high quality, permanent jobs, as well as allowing the South West to benefit from the expansion of AI".

Xlinks said it would only build on a third of the 850 acres with much of the remaining space open to the public and used for measures to support nature and wildlife by creating habitats, improving biodiversity by "at least 10 per cent".

Plans for 160 new homes

Alison Stephenson, LDRS

DEVELOPERS have submitted plans for 160 homes on the edge of Yelland.

Pearce Construction (Barnstaple) Ltd has proposed 48 affordable homes as part of its detailed application to North Devon Council for land adjacent to Lagoon View.

The scheme also includes a community building and community orchard.

The development will predominantly comprise two-storey houses with a number of single storey bungalows incorporated, ranging from one to four bedroomed properties.

Access through the existing orchard has been a controversial element of the scheme and highlighted in feedback following a public consultation event in November to which 80 people attended.

Pearce Construction aims to mitigate impacts through replacement planting, enhanced green infrastructure and improved community facilities.

Planning documents say the proposed community building and associated community orchard have evolved through the consultation process and subsequent discussions with the parish ward member.

"During these discussions it was identified that West Yelland does not currently benefit from a dedicated community building for local residents," said planning agents.

"On completion, the community building, orchard and associated land will be transferred to the parish council."

North Devon Council will decide on the plans at a future date.

GWR runs buses to cope with surge

RAIL operators say they are having to run buses as well as trains to cater for a surge in student passengers on the Tarka Line after term started at Exeter College, writes Ella Sampson.

GWR bosses have responded to claims that some students forced to use buses were arriving late for lessons, with some were left behind entirely.

A spokesperson for GWR said last week: "With Exeter College's popularity and many students travelling at the same time just for the start of term, demand on this service exceeds capacity. To help, we've got additional coaches on standby for the first few weeks of September, providing students with more space and a direct journey timed to get them to college, while also

freeing up capacity for customers travelling further along the route where we can't offer a direct, quick bus route."

The spokesperson added: "We're sorry if this wasn't the experience for some pupils on Tuesday. Customers looking for more space and comfort can also use services before or after this train, where there is plenty of space for those able to travel more flexibly."

The Gazette understands GWR disputes any suggestion that passengers have been left behind, or that trains or supporting buses have run late, beyond what it described as one unverified complaint on the first day, which it put down to customers still getting used to how busy the service has become.



Great Western Railway has had to run buses after trains serving Exeter College reached capacity

It is understood the issue stems from the start-of-term timetable, with Exeter College requiring all students to be in by 9am for the first few weeks for enrolment and to receive their timetables for the year, meaning large numbers are trying to travel on a single train at the same time.

According to GWR, carrying all Exeter College students on that single service would require a nine-carriage train, a capacity the branch line cannot support. The operator explained that adding extra train services is impossible because the line is at full capacity, while longer trains cannot be used due to short platform lengths. Trains that run on main lines cannot serve these short-platform rural stops.

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Station wins gold again but weather resilience funding is real fight ahead

Tim Steer

BARNSTAPLE railway station has once again received a Stations in Bloom 2025 gold award for a tremendous effort by a hard-working and dedicated team who make a difference all year round for residents and visitors to this incredible gateway to North Devon.

What a great achievement it is for the Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station (that I also chair) to win these awards year on year.

There has been lots to celebrate with the work that you have seen at Barnstaple station, including the successful bid to GWR's Customer and Community Improvement Fund that saw a new bug house signal box and new wagon-style station planters. In the car park, we now have two new station and line history

boards that were designed by the Barnstaple Town Council heritage team. We must thank GWR and Network Rail for giving us the permissions and funds to achieve this work.

Stations in Bloom looks at community-led station work around the whole of the South West, and they are based along the Blackmore Vale line. When the Stations in Bloom judge Derek Beer came down to see the station, we joked about how many attempts we had at meeting up. It was either the North Devon line services were cancelled until further notice due to storms, flooding, bridge diving inspections and a line blockade, or the Blackmore Vale line had soil moisture deficit.

Soil moisture deficit is a term to describe how the earth behaves once it is heated up in the summer, dries out and starts to

crack open – this can cause the railway sleepers and other infrastructure to lose their structural integrity, and there have been reports up-country of this having devastating consequences.

It became apparent that while the North Devon line had its share of weather-related issues mainly in the winter periods, other lines are experiencing heat-related challenges in the summer – one size does not fit all!

Anyone who reads this newspaper will know that the North Devon Railway Development Alliance is working on a plan to modernise the existing line for a much more weather-resilient and dependable journey, and that the local MP Ian Roome is doing all he can in Parliament to address the fact that the line needs improvements.

Weather-related rail resilience



Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station receive their 2026 gold award

isn't just a challenge for Northern Devon. For South Devon, their main line that links Exeter to Plymouth and the whole of Cornwall was hit by heavy storms in 2014, and many of us saw the pictures of a rail line suspended in mid-air along the Dawlish coast.

Thankfully, Network Rail managed to work on a funding package to make the Dawlish sea wall much more robust against storms, and their team have managed to complete phases 1-4 out of 5 to deliver the South West

Rail Resilience Programme.

Some may debate that a new inland route through Heathfield or across Okehampton to Tavistock could be a secondary route; however, Network Rail are insistent that their work along the South Devon Main Line has proved to be weather-resilient. They now require central government to supply the funds to complete phase 5.

Down in Looe, Cornwall, their line was ironically a canal over a century ago, and after the December storms, that line was un-

derwater for months. What this is telling us is that the whole of Devon and Cornwall's rail network's weather resilience needs to have a central government funding package to future-proof our vital rail services—this includes having trains that can handle the extreme heat.

Extreme weather is not going away, and it is causing a variety of challenges to Network Rail and the operators. Will the railways of the South West one day get the same investment that we are now seeing going to the North?



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Storm shut Tarka Line for 24 days. Are rail firms ready for this winter?

● Gazette asks Network Rail and GWR bosses what they have done to improve resilience

Ella Sampson

RAIL bosses say they are better prepared for storms this winter, eight months after Storm Chandra cut North Devon off from Exeter by train for 24 days, and as forecasters warn of an increased risk of the wet, stormy weather that caused the chaos in the first place.

The North Devon Gazette put questions to Network Rail and Great Western Railway about what was being done to prevent a repeat of January's closure, after the Met Office warned that an unprecedented El Niño event could raise the likelihood of wetter, stormier weather across the UK this autumn and winter. Both organisations responded with details of drainage repairs, new flood monitoring technology and vegetation clearance under way ahead of the new season. Neither, however, named the worst affected stretch of the Tarka Line among the locations receiving that work.

Storm Chandra, named by the Met Office, brought strong winds and prolonged heavy rain to the south west in late January, on ground already saturated by weeks of unsettled weather. Floodwater washed away stone ballast supporting the track between Exeter and Crediton and left bridges and viaducts submerged, triggering an automatic closure of the line between Exeter St David's and Barnstaple on January 27.

Specialist inspections could not proceed until water levels fell enough for divers to safely enter the water, extending a closure that had initially been expected to last days into one that stretched to 24. The line did not fully reopen until Friday, February 20.

The impact fell hardest on the Taw Valley communities between Crediton and Barnstaple, who were left without rail access to Exeter for more than three weeks while a limited replacement bus and coach service ran in its place, taking passengers significantly longer to reach the city.

A spokesperson for the Exeter and North Devon Colleges Group told the Gazette earlier this year that the line had been out of service for close to ten per cent of the college year.

"We share the frustrations of our learners," they said. "More must be done to ensure transport infrastructure in the South West is protected."

Independent traders counted the cost too. Mike, owner of Station Masters Café, also told the Gazette in the year that trade collapsed during the closure.

"We tried to open initially, and I think one day we took about £18," he said. "That is how much of a hit we take. We could not, after the second day, afford to carry on, so we had to close for a period of time."

He said the disruption to trade lasted five and a half weeks in total, with a further three to four weeks of reduced trust from customers unsure whether services would run.

The prospect of a repeat has already been flagged by forecasters. In an assessment published in August 2026, the Met Office said the El Niño event, building towards its winter peak, was expected to raise the chances of wetter, stormier conditions across North West Europe, including the UK, through autumn and into early winter.

Met Office scientist Dr Nick Dunstone said 2027 is on course to overtake 2024 as the warmest year on record.

A government analysis published on September 17 offered a more cautious picture. It said the impacts of El Niño on UK weather are less certain and cannot be confidently predicted, and that because this could be the largest El Niño event to date, it may bring unforeseen effects on UK weather that differ from smaller past events.

Based on historical patterns and current computer models, it said there was a slightly increased chance of the UK experiencing stronger westerly winds and low-pressure systems between October and December, associated with increased storminess and a heightened risk of heavy rainfall and flooding, followed by a slightly increased risk of easterly and northerly winds and cold snaps in early 2027.

The analysis also cautioned that long term global warming has a bigger effect on UK temperatures than any single El Niño event, and that public communication on El Niño can sometimes mislead by conflating its effects with those of climate change more broadly.

Asked what was being done to prevent a repeat of the Chandra disruption, a spokesperson for Network Rail and GWR said: "With severe weather events becoming more frequent, our focus is on anticipating risks and improving mitigation measures so that we can keep trains running safely and minimise weather-related disruption where possible."

It was understood preparations under way ahead of winter included vegetation management, drainage improvements,

enhanced weather monitoring and the rollout of new technology to assess flooding impacts more quickly, alongside continued resilience work at Dawlish and, for the first time, specialist 'leaf busting' trains running to Barnstaple and Honiton to help keep services reliable during leaf fall.

These 'rail head treatment trains' help to keep the rails clean of leaf fall contamination, which can create a slippery layer on the surface of the rail, much like black ice on the road. The RHTTs also apply a treatment that improves grip, helping to reduce delays and keep services running reliably during periods of leaf fall.

It is also understood that when weather does disrupt services, passengers can travel on the train immediately before or after a cancelled one, with extra flexibility offered for connecting journeys, and that contingency plans are in place to keep passengers moving where trains cannot run.

Network Rail says its preparation for extreme weather runs all year round. Forecasts are monitored continually with support from specialist meteorologists at MetDesk, and when severe weather is expected, its extreme weather action team meets regularly to assess the likely impact on the railway and plan its response.

Ahead of this winter, the organisation says it is carrying out vegetation management on the Barnstaple and Okehampton branch lines specifically, to reduce the risk of trees and branches coming down in storms. It has also repaired drainage systems at locations previously vulnerable to flooding, though the two examples it named, at Roche on the Newquay line and through Wiveliscombe Tunnel between Saltaish and St Germans, sit outside the Tarka Line corridor rather than on the Crediton to Barnstaple stretch that bore the brunt of Chandra's damage.

On new technology, Network Rail will be extending flood monitoring equipment, already trialled at one Devon location, to a number of unnamed higher-risk sites across the South West.

The sensors measure water movement at the river surface and riverbed to assess the risk of scour, where fast-flowing water erodes material around bridge foundations, feeding into computer modelling that can indicate whether a bridge has been affected without always requiring a diver to check in person. This is a direct response to what extended the Chandra closure in the first place, since divers could only enter the water once river levels and velocity had

dropped to a safe level, a wait that pushed the closure well past its initial estimate.

It is understood that Network Rail is doing everything it can to have the new equipment in place before the worst of winter arrives, though it is not currently clear whether any of the new sensor sites cover the Tarka Line itself.

Sonar mapping technology was also used earlier this year to help inform the safe reopening of the Barnstaple line following flooding, and is being explored further as a scour monitoring tool. Separately, Network Rail highlighted resilience works already completed at Dawlish, including a new sea wall, rockfall shelter and cliff stabilisation, though these sit on the mainline rather than the Tarka Line and do not address the specific vulnerabilities exposed by Chandra.

Chandra was not an isolated event. In November 2025, the line was closed for six days after Network Rail detected water exceeding the safety threshold at three bridges and viaducts, prompting

North Devon MP Ian Roome to launch a petition calling for the line to be made more resilient.

"Far from a sleepy little train line," he said at the time, the Tarka Line was "bursting with passengers and vital to the economy", carrying around 800,000 passenger journeys a year.

The petition, backed by more than 3,000 signatures, was formally presented to Parliament in February, with Mr Roome calling for structural improvements, additional carriages to tackle overcrowding, extra drainage work, longer platforms and more passing places to allow a better timetable on the single track line.

North Devon Council's deputy leader, Peter Leaver, told the BBC at the time the council was working closely with operators to improve reliability, but that it was "increasingly clear" major investment was needed to keep pace with demand and make the line more resilient to extreme weather and climate change.

The issue was raised again in the House of Lords in March,

where Rail Minister Lord Hendy pointed to Network Rail's weather resilience and climate change adaptation plans. These regional plans identify priority sites for maintenance and renewal over the current five-year control period to 2029, with further work to be funded beyond that.

However, peers pressed the government for a stronger commitment to funding, with Lord Berkeley (Lab) warning that extreme weather represents "our new reality" after the Tarka Line between Barnstaple and Exeter suffered a 24-day closure earlier this year due to storm damage.

Taken together, the response to the Gazette's questions shows a rail industry actively working to reduce the risk of another prolonged closure.

What it does not yet show is firm, dated commitment to the specific stretch of line that failed worst during Chandra, or confirmation that the new scour sensors will be in place on the Tarka Line before winter sets in in earnest.



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