



Representing users of the Barnstaple to Exeter rail line

Press release

Rail Strategy from Peninsula Transport welcomed by Tarka Rail Association

Devon's Tarka Rail Association welcomes the first Rail Strategy from Peninsula Transport, one of England's seven sub-national transport bodies which includes Cornwall, Plymouth, Torbay, and Somerset. The strategy is a vital and timely milestone in developing the transport policy framework for the South West region, and will act as a signpost towards greater certainty for central government and other strategic stakeholders in identifying the region's needs and articulating its shared ambitions for sustainable growth.

In embracing the Rail Strategy's recommendations, and the valuable information and analysis supporting them, the Association looks forward to collaborating with strategic partners in developing a fresh post-pandemic narrative about smart responses to changing patterns of economic activity and the associated demand, including potentially suppressed demand, for rail travel. This is based on our own current experience of continuously record-breaking line usage, including above-trend percentage increases even over relatively short periods, with present volumes running at 10% above the best-ever pre-pandemic levels and all despite the entrenched peripherality of the line's present terminus at Barnstaple and an inconsistent train service.

President: Cllr Andrea Davis

Vice Presidents:

Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP,
Julian Crow MBE, Peter Heaton-Jones,
Dr Ian Harrison, Cllr Andrew Leadbetter,
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With 45 minutes as an often-used benchmark of a widely-acceptable journey time for daily travel, our regional economic hub – Exeter – can be reached comfortably within that time from Castle Cary (64 miles), Highbridge & Burnham (48 miles), Totnes (29 miles), and Axminster (28 miles). By that measure, only from Eggesford, which is barely half-way along the 40-mile North Devon Main Line, can the county capital be accessed within the same time. In the time that it usually takes to reach central Exeter from Barnstaple – c.70-75 minutes – people can arrive from Westbury (84 miles), Bristol Temple Meads (75 miles), Plymouth (52 miles), and Yeovil Junction (50 miles). Those are the lived realities of peripherality, and poor economic connectivity, away from the region's principal through routes.

As we approach the second quarter of the 21st century and the 200th anniversary of the dawn of passenger railways, the Tarka Rail Association anticipates playing a full part in translating the new Rail Strategy into sponsored and funded interventions for the benefit of existing and potential rail users from both within and beyond our immediate catchment, spreading the benefits of enhanced economic connectivity and productivity enabled by a better-performing and growing railway. This ambition extends to seeing use of a 21st-century North Devon Main Line for freight and logistics as much as it applies to growing passenger rail traffic, and the Association looks forward to collaboration with Peninsula Transport in pursuit of that goal.

Association Vice Chairs David Northey and Tim Steer said “Peninsula Transport’s Rail Strategy supports our contention that, even with our current booming ridership levels, low per capita usage of our line which lags behind the county average indicates huge potential for growth which sustained infrastructure investment will unlock. It will also provide the basis for extending rail’s reach just 9 miles into Torridge at Bideford as a coastal community about the same size as Barnstaple but with a ‘place profile’ which has been sorely disadvantaged ever since the loss of its rail link almost 60 years ago.”

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