

# Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

Third annual Convention, Friday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2026 – Eggesford, Mid-Devon



Ian Roome MP for North Devon

“Obviously very busy times for us MPs and I’m on the Defence Select Committee so you can just imagine what we’re going through at the moment, with so many briefings in the MoD.

Thank you for inviting me along here today, it’s a pleasure to be able to be here in person this year and to see so many important organisations that care about the future of the Tarka line represented in one room.

When Roger and Tim first spoke to me about today’s meeting last year, I don’t think any of us would have fully realised what a hard winter would turn out to be for rail travel in Devon. But I’ll start by letting you all know a trade secret of being a Member of Parliament.

When a public body has some positive news to publicise they often make a point of involving their MP to spread the good news about them in the papers and on social media. I’m expecting a call

from South West Water any day now to say the reservoir levels are looking really really great this year and to ask if I could please let the public know. Doing this job, you develop a good instinct for what is going to be unpopular. I'm guessing there won't be any hosepipe ban this summer and I'm not sure the public would be too happy to be reminded why. We've experienced three closures on the North Devon line since November. Two, due to flooding and the most serious from late January with the arrival of Storm Chandra.

I'm sure many of you will have been as shocked as I was to see a video of flood water washing away the trackbed and Network Rail teams rushing to make emergency repairs – by the way, I think you've done a really good job, the workers have really worked hard on trying to get those repairs done. Since then, my inbox has been full of stories from people from North Devon whose daily lives have been turned upside down by a sudden halt in the train services. Everyone in this room will know just how many students use the line. Many of them have missed days or weeks of education and training in Exeter. Commuters could not get to work. Patients could not reach the Royal Devon and Exeter for more specialist treatment and neither can NHS staff.

My thanks go out to the replacement bus services and the providers keeping the show on the road. I used to drive one myself many years ago but the North Devon line consistently covers over eight hundred thousand journeys a year which you'll have seen in the reports that you've all received.

Our road network in Devon was not built with this kind of extra capacity in mind. Here in North Devon – talking about my constituency which is just the other side of the river, represented by Ed here – here in North Devon our petition which many of you might have seen this petition that I started and I handed into Parliament in support of upgrading the Tarka line brought three thousand signatures. But of course this isn't just a Liberal Democrat campaign or even a North Devon campaign, this effort has widespread support from local councils across the area of all political stripes and none. That's not surprising because the effect of our line's vulnerability is being felt across at least half of our county which is why the community that supports this Alliance keeps growing bigger and bigger as evidenced here today. And the Devon MPs from all parties often have to make a point in reminding ministers and civil servants when we say an issue is affecting our county we're talking an area more than twice the size of Luxembourg.

Network Rail put a brave face on it – I know they are here today – even when in crises times and things were upside down and shake out their pockets. GWR promise newer rolling stock is coming to help with capacity. Several of us in this room get the job of relating this tale of woe to the Rail Minister Lord Hendy and I also told the Chancellor in the Spring statement just this week about we need the investment in the rail line and she has promised me a visit with a relevant minister to sort that out.

Getting the thing moving is our responsibility but we also need the infrastructure funding the South West desperately needs and that means hammering on the front door of central government at every chance we get. As you can see, I have been trying to do this and hopefully we'll get some answers very soon. The full package is tens of millions of pounds so we must unite as a region. We can see what's coming down the track. A local government reorganisation looms in the distance. Exeter College and North Devon College have now merged. North Devon District Hospital and the Royal Devon and Exeter are part of the same NHS Trust. The next bad winter is never more than one year away. If you go to Barnstaple and visit the site where the North Devon old leisure centre used to be, you'll see another two hundred new homes being built virtually opposite Barnstaple railway station. I've got both good news and bad news for Network Rail and GWR. Those record passenger numbers on this line are going to keep climbing, they're not going to deteriorate.

So, we can be a quaint regional branch line with a shaky reputation or build a real engine for growth for our half of Devon. The Business Case for upgrading the Tarka line has never been clearer but somebody must make that case.

That somebody is us so all aboard. Thank you.”