

Petition calls for improved Tarka Line after week-long closure hits passengers

North Devon MP Ian Roome has called for more reliable services and upgrades on the Barnstaple to Exeter Tarka Line after it was closed for a week due to flooding



The Tarka Line between Barnstaple and Exeter should be 'future proofed' to avoid closures, says North Devon's MP
Credit: David Smith

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A call for reliable train travel for passengers between North Devon and Exeter is set to be made directly to rail ministers after students and commuters faced more than a week of cancellations due to flooding.

North Devon MP Ian Roome has launched a petition to take the fight to Westminster after ongoing problems on the Tarka Line which were 'totally unacceptable' he said, claiming that residents had been left with 'a second class service'.

The Tarka Line, which is used by hundreds of people each week to get to college and work as well as shoppers and tourists, has been out of action since Network Rail detected water exceeding the threshold for closure at three bridges and viaducts enroute, triggering an automatic closure 'for the safety of customers.'

Network Rail says full service is being resumed today (Wednesday, November 19).

Limited replacement buses and taxis have been laid on over the past week with journey times often taking longer.

People who regularly use the hugely popular service, which sees around 800,000 passenger journeys a year, say they frequently experience delays or cancellations on the line and are calling for it to be made more resilient.

Mr Roome said this was “far from a sleepy little train line but was bursting with passengers and vital to the economy.”

And he added: “If we had an effective reliable service people will no longer have to drive to Tiverton Parkway to catch the train onto London.

“I am pushing for structural improvements, additional train carriages to deal with persistent overcrowding, additional drainage work, longer platforms at some stations enroute and more passing places along the single track line so the train timetable can be improved.

“This is one of the most successful train lines in the country in terms of passenger numbers and we will be lobbying the rail minister to put it at the top of his agenda. It’s time to future proof the Tarka Line.”

Frustrated residents have shared their views on the MP’s Facebook page with one saying: “We’re encouraged to use public transport and the one railway line to the north of Devon is out of action far too often. The bridges are old and need a lot of work, anyone can see that, and better drainage is needed to prevent the line from flooding too.

“Stop putting money into pointless upgrades like the WiFi and the £800k ridiculous crossing or whatever is going to happen at Barnstaple station and use the money to fix the actual railway line!”

Another said: “Flooding of the Barnstaple to Exeter line has been a regular problem since it was constructed. Building proper resilience to a worsening problem is long overdue.

“Money spent creating three lane death traps on the A361 link road would have been better spent on the Tarka rail link. Furthermore, government and local authorities should be looking to provide double track from Exeter to Barnstaple. The original builders had vision and installed bridges and tunnels big enough for double track. Vision is sadly missing in modern politics.”

One resident said the coach replacement was ‘an incredible long journey’ with no toilet facilities on board which was ‘totally out of the question for some people.’

David Northey, chair of the North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group, said changing the line status to ‘critical infrastructure’ would help in future developments and give Network Rail the impetus to focus and help secure funding for further monitoring and bridge protection on the most vulnerable sections of the line.

He said: “The North Devon line is the lifeline for the community and we have been campaigning for four decades and saved the line from closure threats in 1980s.

“The closure threat from failing numbers was averted and volume has grown to the numbers we see today (just shy of 900k) although the challenge has now changed to short line closures, six days with flooding, and then many part day closures due to other weather related issues or infrastructure problems. This means that the ability to have confidence in the rail network is jeopardised.

“The importance of this line, the community and business that it serves, the ability to reach education, health and jobs is vital and we have to continue to raise the profile of the line.”

Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture in Devon and Cornwall, said the various issues on the line in recent weeks were due to its ‘Victorian infrastructure’ but overcrowding was also an issue.

GWR, which is responsible for the trains, said it was aware that some trains immediately before and after the start of the college day were in demand and with non-Exeter College travellers using the route it was over capacity on some services during peak times.

It was looking at providing more trains and carriages with selective door opening to cater for shorter platforms and was supportive of the campaigns to upgrade the infrastructure.

The line is the responsibility of Network Rail, which said on Tuesday: “Water levels have receded below the closure mark on all three bridges along the Barnstaple line, which allowed specialist divers to carry out an inspection of each structure earlier today.

“The divers found that there was no damage to any of the bridges.

“We now need to run an inspection train along the entire length of the railway line to make sure there are no issues with the track before it can be reopened to passenger trains.

“Our teams are currently preparing to run that train later this afternoon as a final safety check. Subject to the successful completion of this track inspection, GWR will look to reintroduce some services today. A full service will resume from tomorrow.

“Passengers are advised to continue checking for the latest information before travelling.”

Network Rail didn’t say whether any improvements to the line were planned.

Exeter College said it had been in regular contact with students and their next of kin since the disruption began last week and was providing updates until the situation was resolved.

“We hope the line will reopen as soon as possible and are working closely with GWR to ensure students and their families remain informed about alternative travel and learning arrangements,” said a spokesperson.

“We look forward to the planned improvements to provide additional capacity on that line and we will continue to work positively and proactively with GWR.”

North Devon councillor for Barnstaple, Cllr Peter Leaver, said although the authority had no responsibility or ability to do anything about the railway it was pushing for improvements as the problems had been ‘massively inconvenient’ for passengers.

He said when new strategic mayoral authorities came into play in a few years with devolved powers from Whitehall including transport, he hoped that rail improvements would be top of the agenda as the railway’s importance to the economic growth, education and cultural activity of North Devon needed to be recognised.

Ian Roome’s petition can be found at: Future-Proof the Tarka Line – Ian Roome MP