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Photo: Graham Hobbs

» Elves, Santa, fayres and magical light displays herald unique Christmas time. [Page 2 and yourlifestyle](#)

Call for action now after rail link upset

» As flooding causes travel disruptions for second week, plea made for urgent work to future-proof Tarka Line. [See Page 4](#)

Overcrowded, prone to flooding, yet neglected line is transport success story

Plea to fix our vital rail link

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ACALL 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 cancellations due to flooding over the past two weeks.

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 residents had been left with "a second class service".

The Tarka Line, which is used by thousands 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 en route, triggering an automatic closure "for the safety of customers".

Full service resumed late last week only for the line to be closed again on Monday between Crediton and Barnstaple. In the interim limited replacement buses and taxis were laid on, with journey times taking longer. Regular users of the 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 not have to drive [40 miles] to Tiverton Parkway to catch a train to London."

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

"Stop putting money into pointless upgrades like the Wi-Fi 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 con-



» The Tarka Line is mainly single track, with a few passing places, yet is used by some 800,000 people annually. Left, a crush of commuters wait to board a train comprising just three carriages at peak time at Exeter Central for the hour-long trip to Barnstaple

structed. 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.

"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

"If we had an effective reliable service people will not have to drive [40 miles] to Tiverton Parkway to catch a train to London"

Ian Roome, MP

and volume has grown to the numbers we see today 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 said it was aware 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 last week:

"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. 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."

"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 parents 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.

North Devon councillor for Barnstaple 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 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.