

'Utopian vision' for new Devon link akin to Exeter/Exmouth

A campaign for better rail services is gathering pace - but desperately needed improvements remain the top priority

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Chair of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall Tim Steer at Bideford Station. (Image courtesy: Alison Stephenson)

A campaign to see passenger rail services return to Bideford is gathering pace but desperately needed improvements to the Barnstaple to Exeter (Tarka Line) line remains the top priority in North Devon.

New branch chairman of Railfuture in Devon and Cornwall Tim Steer says it's been a long term desire to reconnect Bideford to Barnstaple but there would be no point until problems on the Tarka Line are resolved.

Figures on the cost of making the line "fit-for-purpose" will be published in March in a business case document.

Overcrowding on the trains and the need for extra capacity has been raised in parliament by North Devon Liberal Democrat MP Ian Roome. Reports of people being pushed, shoved and injured made the headlines last year and the issues on the line were exacerbated with flooding causing trains to be delayed and cancelled during periods of heavy rain.

Mr Steer, who has been an ardent campaigner for rail improvements in North Devon for many years and now supports campaigners across the two counties as the Railfuture lead, said it was fast becoming a very serious “health and safety nightmare” and hundreds of people were having to be held back from boarding the trains at peak times.

People waiting at some of the 12 stations between Barnstaple and Exeter were just watching trains go past as there was no room on get on board, he said.

“If national government wants to invest in this area, the line between Barnstaple and Exeter needs to be at better capacity straight away as more and more people are using it, we are approaching a million passengers a year and an eight per cent increase year on year,” he said.

To improve the line the amount of carriages needed to double, better resilience to prevent trains being cancelled due to flooding, shorter journey times of under an hour and two services per hour, he said.

“This has to come first before rail returns to Bideford because as it stands there would be no chance of anyone getting on at Barnstaple if the line started at Bideford,” said Mr Steer.

With Barnstaple now the third most congested area in the South West, outside of Plymouth and Exeter, according to INRIX traffic data, getting cars off the road is seen as key.

As far as Bideford is concerned the case for rail is gathering momentum but the funds needed to progress a business case to address all the issues and go forward for government consideration could cost up to £1 million.

Getting stakeholders, interest groups and local authorities on board has been Mr Steer’s focus in recent months.

He said since the 1960s when Dr Beeching ordered cuts to the railway network, leaving North Devon’s only train line link in Barnstaple, Bideford had begun to suffer.

“There has been a gradual deterioration, deprivation has been noticed and businesses have dried up. People believe money is coming in from the Tarka Trail but it’s not. It’s a place where people cycle past, not where people visit so we need to bring investment to the town.

“If the railway is reconnected, companies like Navantia who own Appledore Shipyard can get bigger contracts from national government.

“You only have to look at Okehampton to see that businesses are thriving and shops are opening and that is because the railway has returned, it brings prosperity.”

The Railfuture leader said that by continuing to build houses without the infrastructure, Bideford would continue to struggle.

“My utopian vision would be to see something from Bideford to Barnstaple like Exmouth to Exeter where you have a rail line next to a walking and cycling trail. That is a sustainable transport system, a multi-modal system, where the user can decide how they want to travel from town to city.”

Torridge District Council made a financial contribution to the preliminary strategic business case for the Bideford to Barnstaple line which has now been produced and will be discussing it in detail at a future meeting.