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Tarka Line issues are key priority for campaigners

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

Tim Steer, the new branch chairman of Railfuture in Devon and Cornwall, says it has 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

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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 8% increase year on year," he said.

To improve the line, the amount of carriages needed to double, along with better resilience to prevent trains being cancelled due to flooding, and 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," Mr Steer added.

As far as restoring a rail link to Bideford is concerned, 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.

However, Mr Steer said: "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."