

NORTH DEVON JOURNAL

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Oarsome duo beat world record in Atlantic challenge



The Wave Project

» North Devon Atlantic Highway crew conquer world's toughest row in aid of Wave Project. **See Page 5**

Growing calls made to upgrade rail line

» 'Desperately needed improvements' to Tarka Line called for amid more flooding chaos and congestion fears. **See Page 6**

'Make rail line fit for purpose' says campaigner as flooding chaos back

by ALISON STEPHENSON

Local Democracy Reporter

alison.stephenson@reachplc.com

ACAMPAIGN 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.

It comes after the line was closed between Barnstaple and Exeter again this week due to flooding caused by Storm Chandra.

The 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.

Overcrowding on the trains and the need for extra capacity was raised last week in parliament by North Devon Liberal Democrat MP Ian Roome as his party introduced a Rail Passengers' Charter Bill.

He has also been campaigning locally to future-proof the North Devon Line, calling for investment to improve reliability, resilience in bad weather and capacity, backed by a petition supported by almost 2,500 people.

Mr Roome said: "Rail users in North Devon have been paying more for less for far too long. We have seen continual disruption to the North Devon Line over Christmas and into the new year, and it is unacceptable that while fares climb, the quality of our trains remains stuck in the past.

"Britain's broken railways are failing our community. In 2026, the last thing any of us want is even more cars forced onto already busy roads because people have lost faith in the railway."

Demand for the train service continues to grow, and statistics from the Office of Rail and Road showed that footfall at Barnstaple station surged by 63% since 2019, which is the biggest increase at any station in Devon and Cornwall.

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 can-



» Chair of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall Tim Steer at Bideford Station

Alison Stephenson

celled becoming ever more frequent 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 the numbers using the line 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, better resilience to prevent trains being cancelled due to flooding, shorter journey times of under an hour and two services per hour, he said.

As it stands there would be no chance of anyone getting on at Barnstaple if the line started at Bideford

Tim Steer

"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 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

"If the railway is reconnected, companies like Navantia, which owns Appledore Shipyard, can get bigger contracts from national government," he 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."

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," he said. "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.