



Petition of 3,000 names calling for rail line resilience presented to Parliament

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By Alison Stephenson, Local Democracy Reporter

A petition has been presented to parliament calling for action and investment to future-proof the Tarka Line and improve reliability for passengers across the area who rely on the train service.



The petition, signed by over 3,000 residents, follows months of disruption on the line, including repeated flooding and cancellations that have left commuters, students, families struggling to rely on the rail link between Barnstaple, Exeter and beyond.

Lib Dem MP Mr Roome says the scale of support demonstrates the strength of local feeling and the need for a clear plan and investment to make the line more resilient to extreme weather and growing demand.

During his speech in parliament on Thursday he said rail passengers had “suffered overcrowding and repeated service disruption due to flooding despite a record-breaking one million rail journeys per year between Barnstaple and Exeter.”

“Following Storm Chandra all trains have been cancelled. North Devon’s rail link has been shut for over a week and will not resume for several more days.

“The petitioners request that the House of Commons urge the government to ask Network Rail and Great Western Railway to prioritise the Tarka Line for improvements and to work together to make rail travel in North Devon more resilient.”

Mr Roome is urging residents who have been affected by disruption to continue sharing their experiences to strengthen the case for investment.

“Demand for the service has continually grown and it’s one of the busiest branch lines anywhere in the South West – it’s a lifeline for commuters getting to work, students travelling to college, people attending appointments,” he said.

Mr Roome said he would be meeting with Network Rail to press for a clear plan for the Tarka Line, with proper investment to strengthen the route against flooding and extreme weather and “ensure North Devon isn’t left behind”.

North Devon Council’s deputy leader Peter Leaver (Lib Dem, Barnstaple with Westacott) said the council was working closely with operators and partners to improve reliability, but was “increasingly clear” that major investment is needed to keep up with demand and make the line more resilient, especially in the face of extreme weather and climate change.

“That’s why this petition really matters, and we hope it builds on the case we’ve been making for investment.”

Tim Steer, Railfuture’s regional Devon and Cornwall chair, said: “Getting to and from work, education, health and other appointments such as job interviews, public events and even social activities, all are being thrown into chaos because our rail line is not a fit-for-purpose lifeline, something which can be depended on as it must be,” he said.

“It’s also deeply disappointing that this prolonged disruption is thwarting the continued success of the line, despite all its unreliability, in breaking almost all records for post-pandemic growth in passenger numbers at local, regional and even national levels.

“The silver lining from this cloud is that the case to end forever the patch-and-mend of the past, and secure transformational investment to completely modernise the line, has never been stronger and more clear-cut.”

Mr Steer recently said that the trains serving Barnstaple desperately needed more capacity as the service was fast becoming “a health and safety nightmare” with hundreds of people wanting to board the trains at peak times.

There were reports last year of people on the trains being pushed, shoved and injured.

A business case is being worked up to present to the government to secure long-term investment.

Mr Steer said: “We shall continue to collaborate with anyone who shares our aspirations for a bigger, better railway for northern Devon.”