

## Exeter trains overcrowded as ‘line can’t run longer trains’

**Passengers face cramped carriages as infrastructure limits prevent longer or additional services on Exeter to Barnstaple line**



Barnstaple railway station overcrowding - Credit: Tim Steer

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Exeter commuters are facing severe overcrowding on the evening rush-hour service to Barnstaple, as the region’s rail infrastructure struggles to cope with rising demand.

Passengers report packed trains, jostling, and minor injuries as they try to board the three- and four-carriage services currently operating.

Great Western Railway (GWR) says the overcrowding is largely due to the line’s limitations: “Unfortunately, we can’t run more trains because the branch line is at capacity, and we can’t run longer trains at the moment because the platforms are not long enough, which is a really expensive solution we would need funding for,” a GWR spokesperson explained.

The operator added that the issue is exacerbated by high student numbers, particularly from Exeter College.

“Ultimately, we and the college are victims of our own success in terms of the number of students wishing to attend courses at the college, and the number of those who are choosing our services to be able to travel to and from Exeter,” GWR said.

If all students wanted to travel on the same day, GWR estimates a nine-car Intercity Express Train would be needed to seat them all, not including other commuters who rely on the service during peak hours.

GWR plans to introduce Class 175 trains, which can be configured in four, five, or six-car formations, to provide additional capacity and improve reliability.

The 26 new trains, comprising ten two-car and sixteen three-car units, are expected to start entering service across Devon and Cornwall later this year, with full deployment by the end of 2026.

While the new trains are expected to provide some relief, infrastructure constraints, including platform lengths and branch line capacity, mean that long-term solutions will require investment in the North Devon Line.

GWR says it is supportive of plans to upgrade the line with more passing loops and improved signalling to allow more frequent and reliable services.

Tim Steer, the Devon and Cornwall Regional Branch Chair of Railfuture, said the overcrowding issue reflects both the popularity and the pressure facing the Tarka Line: “The North Devon line - also known as the Tarka Line - has become a victim of its own record-breaking success in attracting passengers.”

“Usage figures compiled by the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership suggest there will be over 900,000 journeys this year, showing 8 per cent growth year on year.”

He added that long-term solutions are being developed through the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which is campaigning for upgrades to allow two trains per hour, higher capacity services and eventually an extension to Bideford.

“I know how much work is going on behind the scenes by GWR and Network Rail to address the manifest inadequacies of the current service,” Tim said.

“It’s better for the operator to run a limited service than none at all - but the overcrowding is severe, and reports of personal injuries from crowd surges show public safety is being compromised.”

Tim added the introduction of the Class 175 trains will help, but only once they can be coupled into five- or six-carriage sets to meet growing demand.

For now, commuters must continue using the existing services, while GWR and Network Rail explore infrastructure upgrades and the rollout of the Class 175 fleet.