

Devon's integrated vision

Devon is turning integrated transport from a buzz phrase to a reality. **ANDY RODEN** talks to Devon County Council transport head and Peninsula Transport Chair **CLLR ANDREA DAVIS** about the area's ambition, concerns and achievements

When regular passenger services resumed on the Dartmoor line between Exeter and Okehampton in November 2021, observers from further afield might well have concluded that it was mission accomplished. After all, the first of the vaunted Restoring your Railway (RyR) projects was completed; Network Rail's Project Speed initiative proved. With resilience works ongoing at Dawlish, the county is receiving investment in its railways.

But for Devon, this isn't enough. For many years, Devon County Council (DCC) has been amongst the most active in England in its promotion of rail use in rural areas, and a highly involved member of the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership, which has done so much to boost usage of the region's branch lines.

Leading the charge for the last few years has been Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport Cllr Andrea Davis, who has garnered a deserved reputation for her deep transport knowledge and passion for, to coin a phrase, getting things done.

Cllr Davis has been a county and district councillor in North Devon, where she lives, for 17 years, and is well aware of the challenges people in the area face in getting around. 'I represent a very rural area with a huge influx of visitors every year, but a population that isn't generally very wealthy. It's really expensive to live here, just in terms of travel costs.'

This, and the fact children often have to use dedicated buses to access education, has given Cllr Davis a longstanding and personal interest in public transport,

and years of experience of its positives and pitfalls in the area.

She became lead member for rail at DCC in 2017, a role which in 2021 expanded to include all public transport, and she chairs sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport (PT), which covers Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay.

Those who know and work with Cllr Davis praise her attention to detail and enthusiasm – perhaps effervescence is a more accurate description – in her role, but there's a steeliness reinforcing this which makes decision-makers at all levels of government and in the transport industry take notice. For years she has been making the case that in transport terms Devon and the wider South West are underfunded compared to other regions and that their remoteness



Passionate: Cllr Andrea Davis poses at Tiverton Parkway. New stations either side at Cullompton and Wellington are planned to accommodate growing populations in the area.

and significant tourism sectors mean the region has unique needs.

As with many areas of policy, Devon has re-examined its transport strategy in the light of the Covid pandemic, which, as Cllr Davis points out, has changed longstanding travel patterns. What hasn't changed,

though, is that Devon County Council remains strongly pro-rail and bus, with an integrated transport unit running since the 1980s when the term had far less significance than today. It is also putting its money where its mouth is, largely maintaining its public transport budgets despite swingeing cuts from central government over the years.

As an example of this, Devon has eschewed the cost-cutting trend of relying on the internet to host promotional material about public transport by maintaining its printed promotions. After all, while you may not see an advertisement on social media, if it's on a bus stop near your house, it's going to be difficult to miss.

Cllr Davis is particularly proud of the impact of a new bus service linking the end of the Tarka line at Barnstaple, North Devon with Lynton and Lynmouth (and of course the famous cliff railway), and of links from Totnes and Okehampton. 'We want people to think about using bus and rail, and these DCC-funded links are being used and are growing in popularity,' she says. Anecdotaly, the connecting bus to Lynton and Lynmouth is generating a good amount of business – helped by the fact that it is often cheaper than driving to and then parking at Barnstaple.



Exceeding expectations: the Dartmoor line to Okehampton has proved a big success, with more than 120,000 passengers using the service so far. On 10 January 2022, GWR's No 166203 awaits departure with the 15.24 to Exeter Central. D.W.V. Hunt

RAIL PRIORITIES

It will be no surprise that when it comes to Devon's rail network resilience of the coastal section of the main line between Exeter and Newton Abbot is Cllr Davis's overwhelming priority. The umbilical cord linking the region's biggest city Plymouth (and its associated naval facilities at Devonport) and Cornwall with the rest of the world is vulnerable, as events in 2014 showed. 'Without a



Opening up the south of Exeter: a new station at Marsh Barton promises to transform access to a huge area for work and education. This view shows recent progress, with the platforms approaching completion. Devon County Council

Big priority: Cllr Andrea Davis believes upgrades to the West of England main line are vital. On 16 February 2019, South Western Railway's Nos 159103/017 call at Axminster with the 14.25 Exeter St David's to London Waterloo. M. John Stretton



resilient railway, we have nothing,' Cllr Davis says. The section between Parsons Tunnel, west of Dawlish, and Teignmouth has long been a source of concern due to the unstable sandstone cliffs. While waves overtopping the railway is disruptive, a collapse of the cliffs could be catastrophic. Plans for a deviation at Holcombe beach have been paused for further design work and consultation, and many in the region are anxious for a solution to be found as early as possible.

Beyond resilience, there is a desire to refresh the Devon Metro (which could incorporate the five-mile extension of the Gunnislake branch from Bere Alston to Tavistock, the subject of a successful RyR bid), while the South West Rail Mobile Connectivity Programme could also make a huge difference, says Cllr Davis.

'That would make rail more enjoyable for users by providing a better mobile signal on the rail network, and enhancing the mobile network along the rail network would also eliminate

some "hotspots" and provide communities nearby with better communications too.'

The other big aspiration though is on the often-overlooked West of England main line from Waterloo to Exeter. Long something of a Cinderella compared to the drama of Dawlish and the Great Western main line, this route could and arguably should be playing a much greater role in the South West's transport network.

Cllr Davis agrees, pointing out that DCC has funded a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) to examine a package of measures to increase capacity and improve performance. This includes a new loop in the Whimble/Cranbrook area and extension of the Honiton loop. This would allow two trains per hour to serve most stations between Exeter St David's and Axminster, while also offering some journey time improvements. 'We could run a half-hourly service from North Devon to Axminster, which would improve access to large developments east of Exeter for jobs and education,' Cllr Davis explains.

Some enhancements are already under way. Marsh Barton station south of Exeter is taking shape and promises to transform access to a large business area that at present has relatively poor public transport links. Cllr Davis firmly believes this station will give the transport network in the area the capacity it really needs.

Further up the line, designs for stations at Cullompton and Wellington are nearing completion. These two towns either side of Tiverton Parkway are seeing huge growth, and the stations are viewed as vital in enabling the significant numbers of additional people soon to live in them to travel easily.

A sparkling example of Devon's ambitions can be seen on the former London & South Western Railway route from Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton and Tavistock. Reopening to Okehampton is viewed as phase one of a three-stage project which would ultimately provide a second route between Devon's two main cities. Phase two is from Tavistock to Plymouth, running on the Tamar Valley line from Bere Alston to Plymouth. 'We

want to do it,' says Cllr Davis. 'The road congestion between Tavistock and Plymouth is bad and getting worse, so a rail link would almost certainly prove extremely popular.'

'National funding is the big consideration. I think it will happen – but I don't know when.' There are grounds to be optimistic about the prospects of Tavistock being restored to the national rail network, as Cllr Davis explains: 'Okehampton has surpassed expectations, with passenger numbers way higher than even the most optimistic forecasts. Everyone who has tried it has loved it, and it is already providing a huge boost to West Devon and North Cornwall as well as Okehampton itself.'

'We have a bid for a new station in Okehampton just off the A30 which would help hugely in getting people to use rail from rural West Devon, Torridge and North Cornwall. It would be a multi-modal transport hub, also better serving new development on the eastern side of the town with strong bus and cycle connections to maximise its use.'

Okehampton suffers from congestion and driving to the

current station adds to that problem. Although there are concerns the town may not be big enough to justify two stations, the parkway-style station could potentially take a lot of traffic off the A30 in to Exeter and beyond: a prize for residents and visitors alike.

A new bus link between Okehampton and Tavistock (reopening of which is phase three of full Dartmoor line reopening) is proving popular, and not just with tourists and hikers. Commuters from Tavistock who hitherto drove to Exeter are using it to connect with the rail service, and college students around Okehampton will also have the option of using the train in addition to DCC-funded bus services to access education.

REGIONAL PRIORITIES

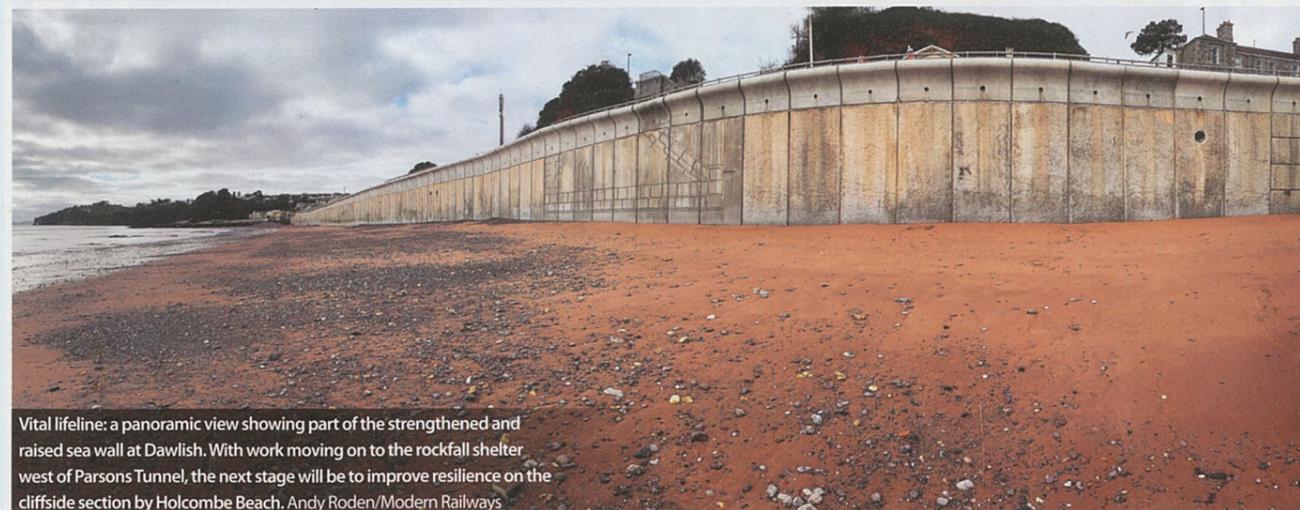
With her Peninsula Transport hat on, Cllr Davis is keenly aware that it isn't just Devon which has issues with resilience and the impact of climate change. 'The Somerset levels are a concern with rising sea levels, and it's something you need to have an eye on. We must ensure there's no slippage in

routine maintenance and ensure that we don't see again the scenes of flooding we have seen before.'

'As well as that, we need to keep the pressure on for Parsons Tunnel to Teignmouth – that mustn't be shelved, and we need the whole resilience programme completed.'

'PT must speak with one voice and making ourselves heard is vital. We cannot give decision-makers the sight of division. There's more pressure than ever to ensure all schemes get to a minimum viable cost. We don't want to compromise schemes, but extra structures, for example, can kill a project at the moment.'

Freight has shrunk significantly in the South West, although it still has a foothold in china clay country. PT's freight strategy wants a feasibility study to examine options for more intermodal freight, gauge clearance to W12 standards for all current W10 cleared routes and to encourage the establishment of rail freight terminals with a catchment area of an hour's lorry drive. Locations in the wider South West that could be considered include Bristol, Westbury, Poole, Bridgwater, Exeter, Plymouth



Vital lifeline: a panoramic view showing part of the strengthened and raised sea wall at Dawlish. With work moving on to the rockfall shelter west of Parsons Tunnel, the next stage will be to improve resilience on the cliffside section by Holcombe Beach. Andy Roden/Modern Railways

and Bodmin (the latter is within reach of all but the westernmost extremities of Cornwall within an hour by lorry). Other important policies are to safeguard rail freight sites and ensure there are sufficient freight paths in the timetable.

Express logistics using repurposed passenger units to carry parcels is another area being actively considered, says Cllr Davis. 'I'd like to see it happen

and make it as easy a choice as possible for companies to switch from road to rail for that traffic.'

VICTIM OF SUCCESS?

While many areas of the country have struggled to rebuild passenger numbers, that hasn't been such an issue for the South West – helped, perhaps, by the boom in domestic holidays. Passenger numbers in many areas are approaching and



Integrated transport: Devon County Council is a keen advocate of bus/rail links, with a new service linking Barnstaple and Lynton proving popular. At the launch of the service at the Lynton Cliff Railway, Cllr Davis was joined by members of the Peninsula Transport team, bus operator Filers, Great Western Railway and the Cliff Railway.

even exceeding pre-pandemic levels, which in turn is putting pressure on the capacity of the South West's rail network. 'We need to ensure we're not being lumped in with the rest of the country on this' says Cllr Davis. 'We need extra capacity, and this is where the investment should be focused given where passenger numbers are.'

By contrast, bus passenger numbers are at between 70% and 80% of pre-pandemic levels, with bus pass holders and commuters not travelling as much. Given the increased focus on integrating bus services with rail, and of funding bus in the wider sense, this is a concern, because more bus passengers travelling to Barnstaple or Totnes or Okehampton can increase rail passenger numbers too. 'We have a climate emergency, and we want to improve our living environment... that's why we need bus improvements too.'

Cllr Davis spoke to *Modern Railways* on a strike day, and there is concern some passengers – particularly leisure travellers – may be deterred from using rail again. 'Rail has got to be good enough for people to use it

again,' she says. 'In many areas the standard of service is good, but in others they have to improve to get those passengers back.'

Although Cllr Davis is careful not to name and shame, it is hard to imagine that those operating the services she has in mind will not be fully aware of her thoughts. As our time runs out, Cllr Davis is quick to praise Devon County Council's transport team for their expertise and initiative, but she deserves some credit herself. She has been a strident advocate of better bus and rail links for many years and has been instrumental in lobbying for improvements and getting bodies around the table to make things happen. It is telling that nobody *Modern Railways* has spoken to mentioned her party politics (she represents the Combe Martin Rural division): she is respected near universally as an extremely effective transport head, regardless of political affiliation.

Given the achievements of the past few years and the clear vision Devon has for an expanded and improved rail network, it is hard to argue with that assessment. ■



Sea wall: on 30 October 2021 a GWR Class 150 passes Coryton cove, Dawlish with the 09.27 Exeter St David's to Penzance. Tom McAtee