

further their proposal that should have been included in the Integrated Rail Plan. The project is to reopen the missing 14 miles of railway between Matlock and Millers Dale, and to upgrade the existing connecting links between that section and Ambergate and Chinley. That project deserves much wider recognition, because it would form the direct strategic rail link between the East Midlands (2.5 million residents in the three big cities) and the Manchester conurbation (population 3 million-plus).

COLIN BOOOCK
Derby

Your editorial on the Integrated Rail Plan ('Railtalk', last month) wonders why the proposed new Northern Powerhouse Rail line running east from Manchester should end at Marsden 'of all places'.

Between Manchester and Diggle, the existing and rather tortuous route was never four-tracked, but they built a diversionary line from Stalybridge instead, much of which is undeveloped and potentially available for a relatively high-speed line, though it does run quite close to some housing. There are then two unused tunnel bores at Standedge which might be cheaper to upgrade rather than a totally new tunnel. East from Marsden, much of the route was laid out for four tracks, through Huddersfield and beyond. That looks like a very good set of reasons why totally new build, if not going via Bradford, might end at Marsden.

DAVID BEACH
Minehead, Somerset

LESSONS FROM THE CONTINENT

I enjoyed reading John Fleming's letter about the proliferation of through stations rather than terminals in Europe ('Forum', last month).

However, I think Mr Fleming might not be fully aware of the current situation with regard to the plans for Florence Belfiore, which is the new station designed to avoid the need for trains such as the Italo and Frecciarossa from having to reverse at Florence Santa Maria Novella. In fact, construction appears to be well under way, as noted by my personal observation! Interestingly the architect is Foster + Partners and engineering is provided by Arup. It is ironic that UK-based companies are providing services for something the UK is not planning on implementing.

On a related note, it was interesting to observe that, arriving at Bologna from Florence (a journey



Backing the reopening: campaigners at Bideford.

which takes place mostly under the Apennines), Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane had built a sub-surface station under the existing through station, simply to effectively separate high-speed traffic from everything else – another example of what the UK should be planning to do.

Maybe the time has come to look at how much the UK as a country spends on rail development. In Austria, a country which is building not one but three base tunnels under the Alps, the ÖBB Rahmenplan commits to spending €3 billion annually for at least the next six years. If the UK were to commit a similar amount relative to GDP, this would equate to around £15 billion annually, as opposed to the £8 billion that is proposed in the Integrated Rail Plan. Judging by Austria's plans, many projects are undertaken with a view to the future. Examples include building a railway with one track but providing the capability for it to be easily widened to two and electrified when demand justifies it.

I am sure many of us are hopeful that further reviews can be undertaken and rail infrastructure given the priority it needs to ensure that future projects can provide the UK with a railway system that will support the country's needs for at least another century.

MARK HAZLITT
Headley Down, Hampshire

BACK THE BIDEFORD BID

'South West seeks more re-openings' – so said 'News Front' in your January issue, citing Okehampton as a possible precursor and referencing Tavistock – a recent winner of Restoring your Railway Ideas Fund support – as a Devon County Council hope 'within the next decade'.

The outstanding and largest single concentration of people in the whole

of Devon not on the passenger rail network – for over 55 years – lies further north, however, around the Torridge estuary. 'Greater Bideford' comprises Northam with Appledore and Westward Ho! as well as Bideford itself, and altogether makes up a population of at least 31,000, growing recently by around 3,000 per decade.

Hinterland catchment areas notwithstanding, Tavistock's population of around 13,000 is about half as much again that of Okehampton's 9,000, whereas 'Greater Bideford' is about half as much again of those two towns combined! As any main line rail connection with Bideford would be a route extension from Barnstaple – population 33,000 and growing by about 2,000 per decade – there's a critical mass of already some 65,000 people looking for quality connections with the county's capital city and beyond.

Aligning the new transport infrastructure with the location of significant new development has to be an integral part of the proposition. North Devon and Torridge districts are both projected to experience significant growth in population, and by implication in housing and other development, over the next couple of decades. In reality that is also the sort of timescale within which any new Bideford – Barnstaple rail link will be delivered.

Kevin Ball (OkeRail Executive) says the railway is vital for economic regeneration and connectivity, especially for rural communities. He goes on to say that with the relatively short distance, the reconnection of Bideford to Barnstaple seems eminently sensible and relatively straightforward. As the reconnection of the Okehampton line is already demonstrating, there is an appetite for good rail services from rural communities. I hope that local

people, including politicians of all levels, businesses and community groups get behind this campaign.

Dubbed 'ACE Rail', echoes of the 'Atlantic Coast Express' now translate to Atlantic Coast to Exeter. Assembling an alliance of like-minded stakeholders speaking as one is a golden thread common to so many such endeavours, seen most recently with OkeRail's success on the Dartmoor line.

COUNCILLOR TIM STEER
Director, Bideford Railway Heritage Centre
ROGER BLAKE
Railfuture Director for Infrastructure & Networks
KEVIN BALL
OkeRail Executive

PASSENGER SERVICE CONTRACTS MUST BE FLEXIBLE

'Informed Sources' (December issue) seems to indicate that Passenger Service Contracts won't be much more than a cut and paste of parts of existing train operator contracts. Could I suggest two issues with the PSC idea as it stands?

One is connections. If we are to get more passengers travelling, we must make it easier and more reliable for people to make connections between trains operated by different train operating companies (TOCs). A contract that just focused on the TOC running its trains on time to the exclusion of all else would not improve the present situation. As things stand, I learned recently that station staff have to obtain permission from Control to hold a train for even a minute to make an inter-TOC connection. Not surprisingly, this happens rarely – it's more than someone's job's worth! The problem becomes more severe if multiple small PSCs are created out of a previous larger TOC.