

A vision for transport in the South West

A quiet revolution is taking place in the two counties at the end of England's South West peninsula.

Both Cornwall and Devon have particular challenges when it comes to transport and to the economic and social requirements it needs to meet. They also share several characteristics: both have two coastlines, a large rural population, and economies historically dominated by the seasonal fluctuations of tourism, and food and agriculture.

These two industries have been staples in Cornwall since railways worked their way as far west as Penzance. Mining once generated great wealth and railway traffic for the county, but its dormant structures (excluding China clay) are now tourist attractions as part of the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site - although there are hopes that the demand for lithium in batteries and higher prices for tin may encourage a revival of mining.

Devon's economy may be more broadly based, but like Cornwall it is still disadvantaged compared with other counties of southern England.

With 44% of the population served by the shadow sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport (which also includes Somerset) living in rural areas, the two counties have approached their role in the provision of transport in innovative ways that other counties with large rural populations might take as a model.

Gone is the century-old (almost exclusive) emphasis on the needs of tourists.

Sitting beside the sea wall at Teignmouth in 1956, you would have witnessed the zenith of the West Country holiday express, with a constant stream of trains from all over the country.

But like all seasonal train workings, these and the flagship Cornish Riviera Express and Atlantic Coast Express were costly to provide during a much more condensed holiday season than exists today. By the end of the 1960s, even the lines over which some trains ran had become silent corridors.

Very different criteria for transport investment and services are now applied. Councillor Andrea Davis is the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport on Devon County Council, and she cites five priorities: unlocking economic development, connecting communities, providing choice, resilience, and reducing emissions.

At Cornwall Council, Lesley Barlow, Strategic Service Specialist in Connectivity &

Improving the resilience of Devon's Sea Wall is a multi-decade project. IETs 802022 and 802020 pass the newly rebuilt section at Dawlish with a Paddington to Truro train on February 18 2020. MARK V PIKE.

When the big picture for the rail industry is a cause for anxiety, it's easy to overlook the impressive work being done at a local and regional level. ANTHONY LAMBERT examines initiatives in Devon and Cornwall

Environment, has welcomed the wider perspective of the railway industry, citing economic, social and community benefits in building business cases and aligning the goals of partners.

"The powers given to Cornwall by the 2015 devolution deal were the foundation for the county's vision for transport," prompting the formation of Transport for Cornwall (TfC) - a single brand for public transport. Cornwall

was the first county to be given these devolved powers.

The value of Network Rail's Industry Programme Directors (IPDs) in fulfilling projects devised by wider stakeholders in the railway was highlighted in RAIL 954, focusing on the outstanding achievements of the reopening to Okehampton under the then IPD for the South West, Christian Irwin.

Today, the role is filled by Bogdan Lupu.

Currently he is creating a new platform at Exeter to improve operational flexibility, building a step-free footbridge at St Erth, and installing three new sidings at Penzance's Long Rock depot (to reduce empty stock working by allowing train cleaning and preparation to be done there, rather than at Plymouth).

One firmly tourism-inspired project is designed to relieve overcrowding at St Ives station, where Great Western Railway staff have sometimes had to hold people in the adjacent car park while an arriving train unloads.

Platforms at Lelant and St Erth were lengthened in 2022, to allow five-car trains and create a 25% increase in capacity. And the plan is to build a new six-metre-wide platform

at St Ives opposite the existing one, with a potential £2.3 million contribution from St Ives District Council. Resignalling of the branch is due in Control Period 8 (2029-34), and a new loop would allow three, (possibly four) services an hour.

Lupu stresses that these enhancements benefit local people getting to work and education, as well as tourists enjoying one of the country's loveliest train journeys.

Alongside such projects, he is working with those wider stakeholders on various plans to realise their vision for better public transport in the South West.

Reopenings and new services

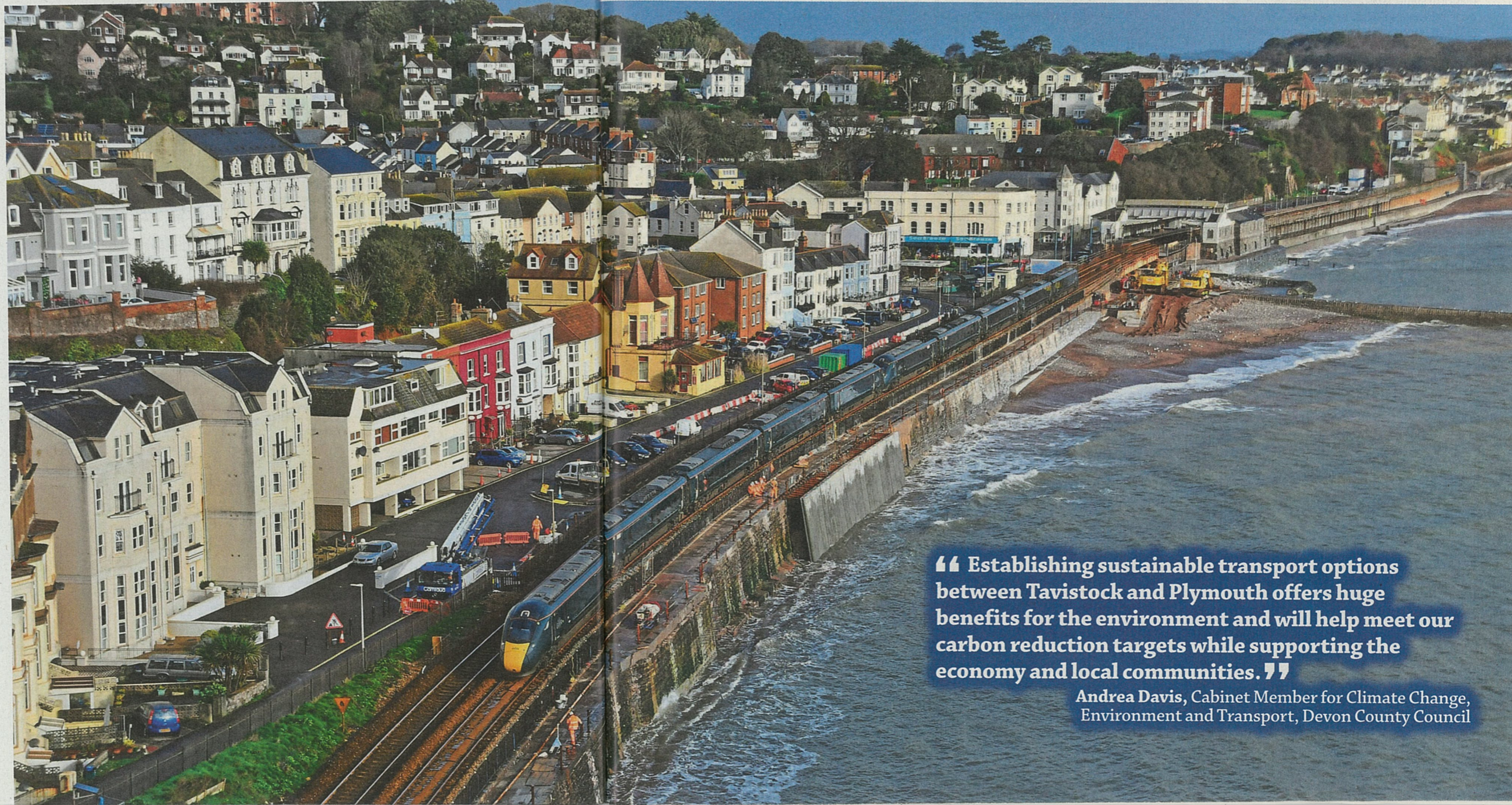
Both Devon and Cornwall implicitly recognise that some line closures and service cutbacks

need to be reversed to meet today's economic and social needs.

Service frequency is a key element in attracting passengers, and the target in both counties has been a half-hourly service wherever sufficient latent demand is evident.

This was convincingly proved on the Falmouth branch, when a 30-minute frequency was made possible by restoration of the passing loop at Penryn in 2009. The new service doubled passenger numbers within four years, and underpinned the case for the Cornwall Rail Improvement Programme to provide extra signals on the main line for a half-hourly service.

In Devon, galvanised by Andrea Davis's determination and 'can-do' approach to addressing challenges, a wide range of



“ Establishing sustainable transport options between Tavistock and Plymouth offers huge benefits for the environment and will help meet our carbon reduction targets while supporting the economy and local communities. ”

Andrea Davis, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, Devon County Council

“ Rail is part of the solution to the threat of bus cutbacks. By tweaking routes and providing good connections and interchange right outside the station, we benefit both modes. ”

Luke Farley, Transport Integration Manager, Great Western Railway

► stakeholders and funders has achieved a remarkable series of new stations and reopenings. New stations opened in 2015 were Newcourt (on the Avocet Line linking Exeter with Exmouth) and Cranbrook (to serve the new town between Whimble and Pinhoe stations on the Exeter-Salisbury line).

This summer, the £16m new station at Marsh Barton will open, serving Exeter's largest trading estate and the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital in an area of chronic traffic congestion. Located between Exeter St Thomas and Starcross stations, the twin-platform station has a new pedestrian and cycle bridge, and offers e-bike hire.

Two new stations are also planned on the main line between Exeter and Taunton at Cullompton and Wellington, just over the border in Somerset. Cullompton will be on the site of the old station closed in 1964, and will require minor signalling changes.

Final business cases for both stations will be ready by January and presented to the Department for Transport for delivery funding authorisation. The case for Wellington will include developer funding from a large housing estate, which would benefit from the new station.

In November 2021, the reopening of the line from Coleford Junction (west of Crediton) to Okehampton made national headlines for many reasons.

Not only was this the first line to reopen to regular passenger services under the Government's Restoring Your Railway

programme, and at 13½ miles one of the longest reopenings in England, it was also finished ahead of schedule and more than £10m below budget, even after costs of £30m had been stripped out.

By the end of the first year, 258,479 passengers had been carried - more than double the predictions. And passenger numbers at Crediton have increased by 39%, thanks to the more frequent service, shared with trains to Barnstaple.

Bike hire from the goods shed for rides along the Granite Way cycle route to Lydford has tripled. Those arriving by train receive a discount.

These numbers should be swelled by the line's next development - the West Devon Transport Hub, for which Levelling Up funds of £13.4m were awarded last January. The application was made by West Devon Borough Council in partnership with Devon CC, GWR and Network Rail.

The station's original planned name of Okehampton Parkway was discarded, to get away from the idea that it is a station to be reached only by car. Although it will be conveniently sited for the A30, the station will have cycle facilities as well as EV (electric vehicle) charging points. Opening is planned for late 2024/early 2025.

Forecasts of 394,000 passengers a year are made for the next line reopening in Devon's sights: a 5½-mile extension of the Plymouth-Bere Alston line to Tavistock.

Cornwall Council has submitted the Outline Business Case and is looking for funding of



£3m for the next stage under the Restoring Your Railway initiative.

“There is a strong case for this rail link to be reinstated. It will provide value for money and will be key in tackling congestion on the A386,” says Davis.

“Establishing sustainable transport options between Tavistock and Plymouth offers huge benefits for the environment and will help meet our carbon reduction targets while supporting the economy and local communities.”

About 80% of the trackbed has been secured. But development on the site of Tavistock station precludes its use, so the new site would be just south of the A390 on the western edge of Tavistock.

Once this is achieved, it is almost certainly only a matter of time before the missing 17½ miles between Okehampton and Tavistock are reopened, to reinstate the second rail link between Exeter and Plymouth.

Davis also wants to see improved services on the South Western Railway (SWR) route to Exeter.

“We have produced a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for a new passing loop, and we would like to see more double track restored for a route heavily used to access work and education.

“One train a week goes from Barnstaple to Axminster to develop route knowledge for a future regular service. North Devon needs access to better paid jobs in East Devon around Cranbrook, and North Devon is short of carers.”

In Cornwall, a major service improvement received funding of £50m in January from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

The Mid Cornwall Metro (MCM) will provide an hourly service between Newquay and Falmouth via St Austell and Truro, serving

the county's four largest population centres. Currently, the summer timetable of trains coming off the main line at Par to Cornwall's top tourist destination precludes a local stopping service altogether.

Tony Roche, transport consultant to Cornwall Council, praises the contribution made by Network Rail and GWR to development of the separate Restoring Your Railway bids for Newquay and Falmouth.

He says reviewing the GWR capital, maintenance and renewals programme opened up options for service improvements at marginal cost: “The Newquay case was helped by the town's educational needs, its surfing status, and the growing aerospace facilities at the airport, while Falmouth University is having to look further afield for student accommodation as well as developing training facilities in Truro and an apprenticeship scheme with Eden Project.”

Lupu notes: “We will need to reinstate Platform 1 at Newquay, improve the station there, install a new passing loop at Goss Moor, and modify track circuits, block signalling and telecoms. Some level crossings will be downgraded or closed to allow higher speeds, and at Par a new step-free footbridge will be built.

“If time can be saved by an agreement for the DfT to pay Network Rail directly, rather than through Devon CC, it is hoped that the scheme can be completed by May 2024.”

The project will also create better walking and cycling access to stations.

Reopening to Bideford, which lost its passenger service in 1965 despite having a

larger population than Barnstaple, would entail a nine-mile extension of the Barnstaple line. GWR has contributed to a feasibility study into reopening the line and improvements to speed up the service between Barnstaple and Exeter.

Also on the horizon is Torquay Gateway/Edginswell, between Newton Abbot and Torre stations. Costed in 2020 at £13.4m, it would serve Torbay Hospital, a retail park, and the Torquay Gateway Development Area.

There are also campaigns, some led by local MPs, to reopen stations at Brent, Churston and Goodington.

Emulating the Swiss

A Swiss transport planner sees integration between modes as a given. Yet for decades it has been the exception rather the rule in

Class 166 unit 166211, which retains its First Great Western blue, became the first member of its class to work passenger services on the Barnstaple branch on September 27 2020. The unit completed one of the two branch diagrams during the day before returning to Bristol by way of an evening Exeter to Taunton, and then Taunton-Bristol Temple Meads service. The ‘Thames Turbo’ works the 1339 Barnstaple-St James’ Park (Exeter) service as it slows for the token exchange at Crediton signal box. RUSSELL AYRE.

Britain, hampered by the deregulation of buses outside London in 1986.

The importance of bus connections is fully realised in Devon and Cornwall, and both have maintained their rural bus networks. Universities and colleges as well as schools across the counties are major factors behind the support given to the bus networks and to student transport by train - as Davis puts it: “Using public money to help support the train services.”

The counties are supported by GWR, which has appointed a full-time Transport Integration Manager in Luke Farley, who works “to promote the spirit and practice of partnership working between GWR, county and local authorities, and bus operators”.

He adds: “Rail is part of the solution to the threat of bus cutbacks. By tweaking routes and providing good connections and interchange right outside the station, we benefit both modes.”

“Devon CC re-tendered the Totnes-Salcombe bus route so that co-ordinated connections were provided, and numbers have grown by 36% since 2019. The number of journeys to and from Totnes station has almost quadrupled.

“Frequency is not always everything - it's more about having a through journey and promoting it. The Bude link from Okehampton is every three hours, but it works.”

Such evidence becomes a lever to unlock funding and do the right thing politically. For Cornwall, Lesley Barlow says the 2015 devolution deal “allowed us to work more ►



Now to be withdrawn early (albeit a small number will continue in service into 2024) GWR's 'Castle' Class 255 HST sets were brought in to add regional capacity after their withdrawal from long-distance services. On June 9 2022, 43092 Cromwell's Castle and 43088 enter St Erth with the 1401 Cardiff Central to Penzance. The junction station's platforms were lengthened in 2022, while re-signalling of the branch from here to St Ives is planned for Control Period 8. PAUL BIGGS.



Okehampton is a modern success story, having reopened in November 2021. Then Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps, and NR Chairman Sir (now Lord) Peter Hendy took part in the formal reopening proceedings. JACK BOSKETT.



Devon and Cornwall is the destination for one of only two surviving Sleeper services in the UK – the Paddington-Penzance ‘Night Riviera’. On February 8, 57603 Tintagel Castle pauses at Exeter St Davids. TONY WINWARD.

➔ closely with bus operators because it gave us the powers, prior to the 2017 Bus Services Act, to pursue franchising if we could make a case for it.

“This process gave us the opportunity to work with our operators on the delivery of a customer-centric network, bringing in higher-quality vehicles and working towards an integrated network.

“Information was brought together and consolidated in one place with a single brand for transport in Cornwall, irrespective of the bus operator.”

GWR’s Farley applauds this approach. “We avoid making everything ‘GWR’. Wayfinding stickers for lamp-posts where the bus stop is not outside the station are in the red and white colours of Transport for Cornwall, not branded GWR.

“We do have a bus in GWR colours (with yellow warning panel!) for disabled access at St Erth, which we use for community events and road shows to promote scenic lines.”

This complements the thinking at Cornwall Council, where Barlow explains: “We didn’t want a two-tier network with different levels of quality for trains and buses.

“To win new customers as well as old, we looked at every touch point of the network – digital and printed information, street infrastructure, and the overall customer experience – to provide a seamless service between and on trains and buses that was reliable and frequent.

“Funding of £13.3m for our bus service improvement plan and £23.5m for our four-year low bus fares pilot came from the DfT. It’s the only low fares pilot of its kind in the country, and we were keen to build on the good growth we had before the pandemic.

“When we launched the low-fares initiative in 2022, we brought in additional tap and cap technology, initially for £5 daily and £20 weekly tickets rather than each journey – that’s a future aspiration. The vision is to have Oyster-style tap on, tap off on all public transport.

“We are working on a Cornwall station

digitisation project with GWR, to piggyback on a smartcard pay-as-you-go (PAYG) scheme from Bristol. We’re currently delivering the scheme to the west of Par, and the Mid-Cornwall Metro funding covers the eastern half of Cornwall.

“The DfT sees Cornwall as ripe for a future multi-modal bus/rail ticketing pilot because we don’t have many neighbours and only one cross-border rail line.

“We’re still in a deregulated market, so operators identify routes that they deem commercial. Cornwall Council fills in the gaps and provides socially necessary services, contracting those as part of whole network planning.

“We work with operators to identify key connections at railway stations and/or specify them through our contracts. The largest contract was let in March 2020 with Go Cornwall Bus – it was a big step forward, with rail connections all the more important after the introduction of the two trains per hour on the main line.”

Barlow continues: “Cornwall doesn’t have a large critical mass, but we integrate much of our local bus services with our school bus network to improve the viability of the local bus network, making it more robust.

“The initiatives that Cornwall is delivering – and, importantly, how these are being promoted – are crucial to attracting more people to public transport and securing the network for the future.

“The positioning of Transport for Cornwall and the multimedia promotional campaigns for the low bus fares pilot and, more recently, the Government’s Help for Households national £2 Fares Cap initiative are targeting new users to public transport, with the aim of growing the patronage base to support the network.”

Three rail link buses have achieved encouraging increases in passenger numbers from pre-COVID numbers: 68% on the 118 between Okehampton and Tavistock; 36% on the 164 between Totnes and Salcombe; and 37.5% on the 310 between Barnstaple and Lymouth.

Rail travel is made cheaper by the Devon & Cornwall Railcard, which costs £12 a year and gives residents a third off all Standard Class Anytime or Off-Peak tickets for journeys wholly within Devon and Cornwall starting after 0845 on weekdays or any time at weekends.

The railcard also gives a third off the Devon Day Ranger and Cornwall Ranger. Another adult travelling with the card holder also gets a third off, plus up to four accompanying children (aged 5-15) travel for £1 each (£2 for Day Rangers).

The combination of integrated bus and rail services and the range of outstanding value fares makes public transport in the two counties uniquely appealing.

And while buses have been the focus of multi-modal initiatives, access by bike has also been encouraged. SWR and multiple stakeholders have invested £200,000 in docking stations and 30 e-bikes at Cranbrook and Honiton stations.

In Exeter, the station’s rack of electric Co-bikes has been a victim of its own success, with demand outstripping supply.

Selling slow travel

Last February, the *Guardian* published an article extolling the pleasures of travelling by bus in Cornwall.

Even from a single-decker bus you transcend the county’s famous earth-encased stone walls, topped by hedges or windswept trees. But from the double-decker of the circular Land’s End Coaster from Penzance, you have a vastly superior experience.

The writer reached Penzance by GWR’s Night Riviera Sleeper – its stock transformed by the 2018 makeover, and its staff providing a warm introduction to West Country hospitality.

By day, the journey west of Slough is never less than pleasant, and often spectacular. But the challenge for GWR and meeting sustainable objectives is: how do you best inform and convince people that they can explore Cornwall and Devon without a car, and that being stuck in a traffic jam or a single-lane road to a beach is no way to enjoy the counties’ scenic delights?

£40 buys a week’s unlimited bus travel for a family, and a daily Cornwall Ranger rail pass for unlimited travel costs just £14 (less with a railcard).

Barlow acknowledges it’s a difficult message: “We try to reach people early, but even if they come by car, we offer great options for local travel.

“GWR has helped with promotion of integration, improving bus information screens and signage at stations, making on-train announcements about bus connections at the next station, and rolling out the TfC brand.”

Helping to get the messages across is the country’s oldest Community Rail Partnership

(CRP). Established in 1991, the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership has four full-time staff based at the University of Plymouth.

As well as social media and printed material such as door-to-door leaflets targeted at rail-served towns, the Partnership produces videos about the beauty of the counties’ rail and bus journeys. It has also made practical videos with Exeter College, illustrating how easy it is to use Exeter Central station – partly aimed at new students.

The CRP has also worked with Devon CC and GWR on welcome packs and travel vouchers for new house-owners in Exeter, and then rolled out a similar scheme in Quintrell Downs in Cornwall.

Mike Parker-Bray, the Partnership’s Marketing & Communications Officer, has worked with GWR to promote travel to Salcombe via the bus link from Totnes station.

Meanwhile, a GPS-activated app about the Looe Valley complements interpretation panels in the heritage centre on Platform 3 at Liskeard, and “we’ve devised a pirate trail, working with Looe retailers to create a treasure hunt, with pirates on window stickers.

It ends at the RNLI shop which is open daily and gives children who’ve completed the hunt a sticker of their favourite pirate and a bag of chocolate coins.”

Resilience

It was severe storms disrupting services between Exeter and Newton Abbot that prompted the formation in 2013 of the Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTF), to make recommendations on rail priorities for the peninsula through its own work with

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Lesley Barlow, Strategic Service Specialist in Connectivity & Environment, Cornwall Council

the rail industry.

It has enabled local authorities across Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay to speak with one voice to make the case for investment in the rail network, to improve resilience and deliver better services for rail customers.

In 2018, Peninsula Transport was formed to make strategic transport decisions across the peninsula, and PRTF became the strategic rail sub-group of Peninsula Transport.

The major work to improve resilience in the face of climate change has been the construction of the larger sea wall at Dawlish, costing £80m as part of Network Rail’s South West Rail Resilience Programme. A new accessible footbridge with lifts at Dawlish station is part of the works. Andrea Davis also wants to see the landslips on SWR’s route addressed.

On Cornwall’s northern coastline, Bude has been described as the UK’s Maldives, for its vulnerability to sea-level rise. The town lost its train service in 1966, and now most of the million visitors rely on car access.

Last January, the town was awarded £2m from the National Lottery’s climate action fund to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of

climate change (£34m will be targeted at making tourism more sustainable).

Part of the Bude Climate Partnership is Connect Bude, which campaigns to reconnect the town and Holsworthy to the railway network.

“Key to success is partnership working,” stresses Davis.

“Without the Lukes, Christians and Bogdans of this world, we wouldn’t be doing what we’re doing. We all stick to the same goals. Relationships are so important – I have a huge amount of trust in them, and if they have a problem I would back them to the hilt.”

These numerous initiatives, big and small, have had a significant impact. As GWR Regional Growth Manager David Whiteway reported recently: “The railways are making a comeback, and it’s thriving post-pandemic. We’re up to 130% of passengers from pre-pandemic levels in this area [Devon], and communities are using the railway line, so why wouldn’t you invest in it?”

■ The writer would like to thank Lesley Barlow, John Carter, Councillor Andrea Davis, Luke Farley, Bogdan Lupu, Mike Parker-Bray and Tony Roche for their help with this article. **B**

Heading west... GWR Class 158 158959 has just passed over Brunel’s Royal Albert Bridge at Saltash, and from Devon into Cornwall, as it crosses Coombe Viaduct on May 3 2022 with the 0752 Bristol Temple Meads to Penzance service. PAUL BIGGS.

