

Help scheme fails our farmers

THE government has a scheme to aid farmers who have had land inundated by months of flooding.

You might think this should apply to all affected farmers.

However, those who have been long-term flooded but are not close enough to a major designated river are being told they do not meet the criteria for aid to get flooded land back into production when the waters recede.

This is typical of this government. They pretend to be helping and actually are not helping many farmers with flood problems. It's the same problem regardless of the location. Farmers are being refused help if their local flood comes from a minor river rather than a major one.

Many of these problems arise from this government's failure to fix the flood defences when the sun was shining.

The NFU has an ambitious target of 80 per cent self-sufficiency in food for the UK which deserves to be supported on grounds of national strategic resilience. Like with the Scouts, 'Be Prepared'!

Instead, the Tory government is reinstating empire preference trading terms for an empire that is long gone, to the detriment of our UK producers.

AD Gill
Ashford, Barnstaple

Action on housing remains elusive

HOUSING stands as a central issue in the ongoing election discourse, reflecting economic uncertainties and historical trends linking housing dynamics with broader economic shifts.

While recent upticks in house prices and mortgage approvals hint at recovery, the current trajectory won't suffice to lift the UK out of recession.

A critical shortage of homes for sale and rent fuels affordability crises, dampening GDP growth. Despite longstanding social pressures, meaningful action remains elusive, with successive governments failing to address core issues.

Key challenges include over-reliance on major developers, a politicized planning system hampering development, loss of social housing, and labour shortages post-Brexit.

To tackle these, proposals emphasise revitalising SME housebuilders, enhancing skilled labour in construction, reforming the planning system for efficiency, prioritising social housing, and incentivising brownfield site development.

Critical to success is enabling smaller developers with financing and easing planning restrictions while prioritising sustainable practices. Acknowledging the complex nature of the issue, sustained commitment and proactive measures are urged, despite potential short-term unpopularity.

It must be spring



Spring lambs at Westward Ho Burrows pose for photographer Paula Braund

Embracing a growth-oriented approach and communicating the repercussions of housing imbalances are essential for fostering a balanced, sustainable housing market essential for the nation's future prosperity.

Daniel Austin
Chief executive, ASK Partners

Nonsense to try to restore rail link

READING Oliver Harding-Fleet's letter (*North Devon Gazette*, April 24) I thought how it chimed with my views but became concerned when, towards the end, he wrote "...and maybe talk to more than just Tim and his very small band of railway enthusiasts". I have no idea which Tim he was referring to but it certainly couldn't have been this one!

I have been quite vocal for some time in pointing out the nonsense of trying to restore the Barnstaple to Bideford rail connection as evidenced by my letters - *North Devon Journal* April 1, 2022, *North Devon Gazette* November 29, 2023, *North Devon Journal* December 21, 2023, *North Devon Journal* January 4, 2024 and *North Devon Gazette* January 17, 2024. I think these make this Tim's position on the subject unequivocal!

However, on the basis of only fighting the battles you stand a reasonable chance of winning, I would certainly advocate campaigning for a

half-hourly Barnstaple to Exeter service with a journey time of less than 50 minutes.

Unlike Barnstaple to Bideford, that would not be wasted effort and would represent an important infrastructure upgrade for this part of North Devon and would surely represent much better value for money than the millions of pounds being spent on the North Devon Link Road's so called "upgrade".

Tim Gibbs

Modern monoral link is only viable option

I HAVE been interested in renewing the Barnstaple-Bideford rail link for some time.

I have met with mayor Jamie Mackenzie on the subject and exchanged emails with Sir Geoffrey Cox MP.

The current debate seems to be developing lots of smoke but little light, heat or action.

To renew the connection via the original trackway is hardly a practical proposition. The route is now an established cycle and footpath. Even the suggestion that it might be lost invites an emotional reaction.

When the old tracks were removed sewer pipes were laid by South West Water beneath the bed. Although they need no great maintenance at the moment, who can say what faults may develop due to vibrations set up by trains.

Such a line would need to be fenced off from the public on safety grounds and to prevent sabotage and pointless vandalism.

To suggest that the line would be able to carry freight in any quantity is also a non starter. Any significant loads would need to be decanted and sent on by road transport, with all the infrastructure that would involve; depots, fork-lift trucks, etc, the cost of which would have to be offset against the saving of a mere ten miles' worth of road transport.

There is no concentrated industry in either town and I have never seen goods wagons run into Barnstaple from Exeter or elsewhere.

An alternative route, inland from the old trackway, is also not without controversy. If anyone has not noticed, the land away from a river by its very nature rises up and a new route would need to be leveled, hills removed or tunneled through, disturbing everything in its path. As Brunel expressed it, railways work best on a very low gradient such as found beside oceans.

Such large civil engineering works can only be justified if traffic can be taken from elsewhere (ie the roads) or from what is known as generative flow. Almost impossible to guess at.

A third option and I believe the only viable one, would be a monorail link running on elevated stanchions in the tidal waters. This could be designed to run on the level and for the

most part in a straight line. Terminating at the Bideford end at Brunswick Wharf, East the Water and at any number of locations in Barnstaple. The line needs only touch land to skirt around Instow and the boat park. Silent, pollution free and rapid. A trip on the monorail with its views over the estuary would be a tourist attraction in itself.

Whatever the economic, environmental and social advantage I would propose that joining the two towns via a state of the art railway would have considerable social benefits and put North Devon firmly on the map, not only as a place proud of its history but also one with a very firm focus on the future.

I would also like to spotlight this conjunction.

At the Barnstaple end, a large modern library, a museum and an archive, Petroc College, the North Devon District Hospital, the refurbished pannier market, a theatre, a cinema and a busy high street.

At the Bideford end, the star in its crown has to be the Burton art gallery, Kingsley College and a plethora of empty high street shops which need only an infusion of pedestrian traffic to enable it to bloom as a place to do business. The rail link could provide this.

Lastly but by no means least I would like to drop into the matrix the Old Bideford Library. Gifted to Bideford by the Carnegie Trust back in 1900 as a library. He was so aware of the value of such institutions to the life of a town. That the books have been moved to a new location is all well and good but the splendid old building must not be allowed to decay.

Some bright spark on TDC wishes to turn it into a fitness centre, a gym or amusement arcade or whatever. The cultural profile of a town, any town is never determined by the number of rowing machines.

At the same time there exists in London a fine collection of books (some 20,000 volumes) collected over a lifetime, on art related subjects now looking for a new home. I have spoken with just about every educational establishment of any size in the South who would love to home these but do not have sufficient room.

We have the building.

If this could be facilitated along with the new railway North Devon might by degrees raise itself out of the begging bowl of despond to become a binary cultural hub of national importance.

Ambitious certainly but achievable if we want it badly enough, all pull together and apply a little optimistic imagination. Sadly, unless these projects find a champion with some real get up and go I can see both projects being kicked into the weeds and forgotten.

Jim Jackson
Appledore