

Branch line merits investment

THE letters in your December 3 edition from Tim Gibbs and Rog Laker deserve a proper response.

Mr Laker's complaint is well-justified and perhaps as we approach a New Year we should be looking forward to the much newer type of train which by this time next year should be well-established as a regular sight at Barnstaple station and all along the North Devon Line into Exeter.

Both Great Western Railway and their current owners First Group issued press releases with an image as far back as March and it was repeated in August when Alstom signed a maintenance agreement for the fleet. At least one press office would be content to see that image re-used, with appropriate crediting!

Tim Gibbs is right to want something done about the all-too-common poor performance of the train service, whether due to lack of resilience against the results of severe weather or failures of GWR's old rolling stock and failures of Network Rail's points, level crossings and antiquated signalling. He mentions various groups (note that the Tarka Rail Association no longer exists) but omits to mention the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which was formed in late 2023 and brings together those he mentions, with the exception of North Devon District Council, who have yet to decide to join.

The Alliance includes around two dozen partners and other stakeholders, including GWR and Network Rail, all collaborating on developing the essential and unavoidable business cases to make the case to funders for capital investment to transform probably the South West's most successful branch line for growth into a quicker, higher-frequency and more dependable service.

The shortage of visible evidence of improvement should not be taken as a sign of inactivity behind the scenes, far from it. We remain grateful to the *Gazette* for its continuing coverage to keep passengers' plight in the public's and politicians' eyes.

Tim Steer, chair, Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch; Roger Blake, acting convener, Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

Missing links

TIM Gibbs' letter encapsulates the problem with the various pressure groups advocating for rail transport in North Devon.

They ignore the hard reality that hundreds of the region's, car-free rural residents don't have access to any of the Tarka Line's stations (*North Devon Gazette*, December 3).

Ian Roome's otherwise-excellent upgrading campaign on behalf of Barnstaple-Exeter train travellers suffers from the same tunnel vision (pun intended) — it fails to recognise the enforced isolation of his

Let it snow



A dusting of snow rests on the kiln in Victoria Park in Bideford in this archive picture taken by Graham Hobbs in 2010

many constituents out of reach not only of the railway but any form of public transport.

Barnstaple is north and west Devon's regional economic, retail and hospitality hub yet shamefully — this is the 21st century, not the 19th or even 20th — there's only one bus a week linking many village residents with the town. Anyone wanting to take the weekly bus must also schedule their visit carefully as a two-hour turnaround dictates the time of their return trip.

For his part, Torridge and Tavistock (previously Torridge and West Devon) MP Sir Geoffrey Cox seems to have no regard for the disenfranchisement of those of his constituents without private motorised transport.

A recent national event, however,

gives some ground for bus optimism: the Bus Services Act which became law in October, empowers "local authorities...to set up their own bus companies, allowing them to run their own services to ensure that passengers, not profit, come first".

So will the newly-configured Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority Board, which becomes responsible for transport from April 2026, have this in mind when deciding how to spend the £49million Local Authority Bus Grant it was awarded earlier this month?

The Department of Transport allocation is intended to give councils flexibility to respond to local needs, "for example by adding routes".

No new route is needed to enhance the lives of many of Mr Roome's iso-

lated constituents. A daily bus, mirroring the current weekly service between Barnstaple and Torrington, would make a seismic change to many lives — and boost the economic health of the regional hub.

The millions that have been spent on Barnstaple since my young family moved to North Devon a couple of years ago (*Gazette Letters* 2022) have failed to reduce the numbers of empty shops along High Street. No surprise, therefore, that free pre-application planning advice is now available for such properties, in an attempt to "encourage investment and development...as well as reduce the number of vacant units".

A healthy high street requires maximising footfall and for this public transport accessibility is fundamental. Devon county councillor Cheryl

Cottle-Hunkin, cabinet member for rural affairs, declared recently that "a minimum level of public-transport connectivity to stop residents from becoming increasingly isolated" is required, with Stagecoach South West boss Peter Knight adding: "We are determined to explore every avenue to keep travel affordable and accessible for all."

Boosting Barnstaple's economic/hospitality activity and ending social isolation aren't two separate matters. For either to be successful, they must go hand in hand.

While "specific schemes and proposals, with prioritisation" are yet to be published, to date buses are barely mentioned in the CCAB15-year plan, with Barnstaple mentioned only twice. Will the authority spend its bus grant more wisely than Devon's previous transport-funding body which, without a hint of irony, granted more than £850,000 for a scheme, currently being implemented, enabling already-existing "public-transport passengers [to] more easily use the town's buses and train station".

No thought, clearly, for those who have access to neither (echoes here of the £750,000 spent on linking together two Barnstaple car parks).

Ian Roome has a positive record regarding buses — he campaigned successfully to get Stagecoach to make changes to under-16 fares following significant price increases — so it's a pity he's failed to link his Tarka Line campaign with the need for improved public-transport connectivity to Barnstaple, while also not forgetting the need to end the use of diesel trains along the railway.

Footnote: travelling from London to Umlerleigh return last month, like so many others I was forced to use the coach-replacement service in both directions due to the flooding. Missing my pre-booked return — the coach took the back route rather than the main road — I arrived back in the big city after the underground had closed for the day. But at least there were night buses which took me almost home.

**Meg Howarth
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Rich pickings

THERE has been a lot said about the Budget proposals, which affect about 165,000 property owners mainly in London and the South East in £2 million properties that they must pay a £2500 tax, probably when the houses are sold.

Former chancellor Philip Hammond has said (shock-horror?) this tax represents a very clear transfer of spending power from the south to the north! In which case it should be said to be long overdue given that millions of our people are paying dear to live in poor conditions.

They need a hand up from those that have the wealth.

**AD Gill
Ashford**