

LETTERS

Mainline mission for rail future

WE thank Jim Jackson of Appledore, (*Mono-rail could be missing link, Gazette Letters — August 13*), for helping to maintain the necessary public conversation about a Bideford-Barnstaple rail link.

It gives us the opportunity to respond with a couple of important clarifications.

First, the conversations which we are having with representatives of the two dozen partner and stakeholder organisations in the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, initiated by Railfuture in late-2023, are not solely about a link, of any form, just between Bideford and Barnstaple. It is in our experience extremely unlikely that a credible business case could ever be established on that basis; neither Okehampton-Crediton nor Tavistock-Bere Alston would ever have had any hope of surviving such an analysis.

Our conversations with elected representatives of county, district, town and parish councils, and other official and voluntary bodies, are all about through mainline rail services between Bideford and Exeter, via Barnstaple — for which there is steadily-growing confidence that credible business cases can be and indeed are already being developed, both for the modernisation of the existing GWR services between Barnstaple and Exeter and for their extension to Bideford.

The second important clarification is that a continuous walking, wheeling, jogging and cycling route between the two towns, the Tarka Trail, must without any doubt be maintained. The alignment which it follows was first built for a railway after legal powers for the Bideford Extension Railway were granted 172 years ago, and the trail has preserved it free from encroachment for the past 40 of those years. It is less disruptive in every respect, as well as less demanding on always-limited public funds, to adapt an active travel route to a revived rail route than vice versa. That said, there are without question engineering challenges, to pass under the A361 and A3125 after Barnstaple station, and it does seem at this still-early stage in developing a viable scheme that a short length of new rail route will have to be created in order to avoid disturbing Fremington Quay.

Further information is available on the website for Railfuture, Devon & Cornwall, Campaigns and 'Bideford and Barnstaple to Exeter.'

Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch

Roger Blake, acting convener of Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

How free are we?

BACK in the day, if someone over-indulged in something or other they might quip amusingly, "It's a free country!" by way of mock justification for their actions.

Head boy



One young carnival fan gets a grip on things during Ilfracombe Carnival. Picture: Tim Lamerton Photography

I don't know whether people still use that expression in quite the same way. But seriously, are we still a free country?

The Prime Minister appears to think so, but evidence is mounting to the contrary.

A recent US state department-sponsored report has noted that human rights have worsened in Britain over the last year, with free speech suffering as a result of things like the targeting of anti-abortion campaigners and a clamping down on some views of social media users following the Southport atrocity last summer. Censorship of political views is thus effectively on the increase.

Earlier this year, US Vice-Presi-

dent JD Vance gave a speech in Munich criticising the control of free speech in much of Europe as a whole, which sadly rang true.

In Britain, preaching the Christian Gospel has become more difficult as some people will say they take offence at aspects of it, and the authorities too easily side with them.

We now have so-called 'hate crime' laws and the recording of 'non-crime hate incidents', which have a chilling effect on the expressing of opinions and are applied in disturbingly arbitrary ways. It is often said that it would be better if the police concentrated on tackling real crimes, which are running rife.

Our freedoms suffer when there are repressive laws and also the ex-

ercising of no-platforming or violence. All of these are at play in our country today.

In recent years, organisations such as the Free Speech Union have had thousands of cases on their books. That is because the situation is becoming serious, and we should be very concerned about it.

**John Collins
West Yelland**

Net zero

SELAINE Saxby makes some valid points (*Gazette Letters — August 20*) but by berating Labour for 'rushing blindly to net zero' she exhibits complacency about the urgency of meeting climate change.

Although she criticises Labour for

allowing solar developments which can't connect to the National Grid and she calls for solar on roofs of industrial buildings she ignores the fact that the previous Conservative government, of which she was part, failed to invest in grid infrastructure and didn't bring in powers to allow solar on large roof areas.

The Conservatives also restricted onshore wind development and decided not to make solar panels mandatory for all new-build homes.

As to Ms Saxby's claim that solar farms are displacing agricultural land, this doesn't recognise that the climate crisis is threatening our food security and that therefore clean, renewable energy should be a priority.

**P Hames
Torridge Green Party**

NHS privatisation

I'm writing today to raise awareness of a threat to our local NHS services as a result of proposed changes by the board at Royal Devon University Healthcare to transfer estates and facilities staff over to a subsidiary company (sub-co), removing them from direct NHS employment.

This move threatens pay, pensions, and the unity of the NHS team.

We believe this proposal would fragment the NHS team, weaken protections for some of the lowest paid staff, and risk the future of NHS pay, terms, and conditions.

Experience from other trusts shows that while current staff may initially transfer with their existing contracts, these are not guaranteed in the long term — and new staff would be employed on inferior, non-NHS terms without access to the NHS pension scheme.

This is not just about jobs — it is about values. Estates and facilities staff are an integral part of the NHS, the often unseen cogs that keep the NHS running, and removing them from direct NHS employment undermines the principle of a publicly funded, publicly provided health service.

We are also concerned that the financial case for the sub-co, particularly around VAT savings, is short-sighted and may lead to unintended costs to services, staff morale, and retention in the long run.

We urge the Trust Board to reconsider these plans and instead invest in and value the existing NHS workforce.

Other local trusts have taken a clear stance against sub-cos, recognising the damage they do to staff cohesion and long-term stability. We ask Royal Devon to do the same.

This backdoor privatisation is a threat to our local services and we would appreciate any help and support from the public in protecting NHS staff and our local NHS services.

Name and address supplied

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