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Reopening rural rail lines would provide big advantages

I read with interest Rebecca McQuillan's article on the cuts imposed on our rural railways following Dr Beeching's now infamous report in 1963 (The Herald, September 26). I agree with Professor Farrington who is quoted as saying the demand for access to the railways is increasing - especially in the rural areas to where the population has increasingly moved over the past 20 years.

The strength of support for our Campaign to Open Blackford Railway-station Again (Cobra) from local residents, politicians and businesses alike is evidence of this. People do want to reduce their car journeys but they need real, reliable and flexible alternatives. The reopening of local rural railway stations provides this.

The article highlights the very successful reopening of the Stirling to Alloa line which has surpassed all expectations in passenger numbers and the rebuilding of the Waverley line. Both of these required new lines, stations, signals etc which come at considerable cost. It is possible, quicker, easier and cheaper to increase access to the railways by reopening rural stations along existing lines. Blackford is a prime example. The station sits on the Perth to Stirling line. The station infrastructure, rail sidings etc are still there; there is a signal box at the station and the land for car parking is still in Network Rail ownership. In 2006, it was quoted by ScotRail that it would cost in the region of £1.75m to reopen the station at Blackford, a significantly less cost than that incurred by the Waverley line and Stirling to Alloa line.

Dr Beeching's primary criterion to determine whether a station should remain open was economic. Our campaign from the outset has been stressing the need for business case criteria to be socially and environmentally based as well as economic. How refreshing to see Professor Farrington quoted saying the same thing. All we need now is Transport Scotland to adopt this approach and put its support (and money) behind quick win schemes such as Blackford.

The campaign currently has a petition open with the Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee.

Neil Gaunt, Chairman, Cobra, Blackford.