

Our ref: CEO-21-019

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26 July 2021

Dear Deborah,

Thank you for your fifteenth report as our Independent Residents' Commissioner and your ongoing work to help ensure that we deliver on our commitments to those communities impacted by the construction of the new railway. I continue to value your advice and guidance in helping to ensure that we respect the residents we impact and the environment in which they live.

As you highlight in your report, there has been considerable progress on the project over the last six months. Following the start of main works construction last year, the construction of Phase One of the new railway, between London and the West Midlands, is now well underway. We have recently marked some significant construction milestones on the project. In May, we launched the first of our tunnel boring machines (TBM) from our South Portal site next to the M25 in Hertfordshire. Last month we started work to install the first permanent station structure on the project at Old Oak Common in West London. Across the project, the construction of the railway is already supporting over 16,000 jobs, including 650 apprenticeships, and over the next decade will provide around 400,000 supply chain opportunities.

On Phase 2a, the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Act 2021 received Royal Assent in February this year. This was another major milestone for the project, enabling us to progress the next phase of the HS2 network, by extending the high speed rail line to Crewe in Cheshire and accelerating the benefits of HS2 to the Midlands, North West of England, Wales and Scotland.

These milestones demonstrate significant progress for the project but I recognise that, as work progresses, concerns will remain in local communities that are impacted by the construction of the railway. We are committed to continuing our engagement with residents to keep them informed, providing opportunities to hear their views, and responding quickly to their queries and concerns. We are also working to identify opportunities to involve communities in the

project. For example, the name of our first TBM, 'Florence', was suggested by local school children in Hillingdon and then selected in a public vote. We were delighted to host the school pupils at our South Portal site last month to learn about the TBMs and see Florence from the viewing platform before she disappeared underground fully.

As you are aware, we are also busy preparing for the deposit of the hybrid Bill for the western leg of Phase 2b between Crewe and Manchester, with a connection to the West Coast Main Line to serve stations en route to Scotland. The Government intend to deposit the Bill in Parliament in early 2022 or sooner if possible, subject to their Integrated Rail Plan (IRP), which is due to be published this year.

Last month we shared an update on the western leg to help communities understand the proposals in their area, the steps that will lead up to the publication of the hybrid Bill, and how the Bill process will work once it is introduced in Parliament. We have also shared information about groundwork investigations starting to take place and the jobs, skills and education opportunities offered by HS2 in areas along and surrounding the route.

We have reached out to 142,000 properties along the western leg route and also offered one-to-one appointments to those directly affected by the proposals. We are currently holding a programme of public events for communities to find out more information and discuss any questions with our teams. These events are being held both online and in-person, as we start to be able to gradually reintroduce face-to-face engagement, which we have previously had to postpone during the Covid-19 pandemic. The safety of communities, stakeholders and staff remains our priority and we will ensure all events and engagement activities across the route follow all government guidance, with strict safety measures and requirements in place. Thank you for your guidance and ongoing work with communities throughout this difficult period.

I also wanted to thank you again for your contribution to the Land and Property Review commissioned by the HS2 Minister, which reported in November 2020, as well as your role in the implementation of the review's recommendations over the last six months. As the HS2 Minister set out in his second written update to Parliament on the progress of HS2 in March 2021, the recommendations vary in scale and context, but all seek to improve the experience of property owners most immediately and directly affected by HS2, by improving existing processes and interaction with the public.

We have been working closely with the Department for Transport to make progress on the review's recommendations and, as you note in your report, a number of these have now been completed. In his update to Parliament in March, the Minister reported that a quarter of the proposals are now in place, with work underway to take the other proposals forward. This included the Government's public consultation on aspects of the proposals that required further engagement. This ran from 19 May to 30 June 2021 and the Department are now analysing the feedback they have received.

I am pleased to update you that the "track my property" online portal, one of the review's recommendations, is now live on the [HS2 website](#). Invitations to use the portal are being sent to all those applying for the Statutory Blight, Rural Support Zone, Homeowner Payments and

Need to Sell schemes, as well as for Compulsory Purchase Orders along the Phase 2a route. Once applications are received, applicants will be able to track the progress of their live case through the portal from acknowledgement to completion. As this is a new system, we will monitor usage and add more functionality in line with the HS2 Minister's recommendations and feedback from users. We will continue to keep you updated as this project develops.

In your report you highlight comments that you have received about the difficulties that some vendors have experienced in obtaining copies of surveys carried out on their properties at the request of HS2 Ltd. Where we are relying on surveys to support the compensation, we will share copies with the claimant.

We have always endeavoured to treat those affected by the railway with courtesy and respect and operate in a clear and transparent manner. We will continue to work with you, the Minister, and the Department to improve the experience for property owners, using the lessons learned on Phase One as we move towards acquisitions on Phase Two of the project. For example, where a blight application has been accepted, to help claimants and their agents understand the process, we now offer an introductory meeting with members of our team. At the meeting we cover the process, timescales, what to expect and additional help available. Although still in early stages of introduction, the initial meetings held have been well-received.

In your report you also outline a number of observations and recommendations on our engagement with communities and keeping them informed. As the project has progressed into the main construction phase, we have been working even more closely with our contractors to build integrated project teams (IPTs), bringing together HS2 and supply chain resources to deliver a joined-up approach to engagement in local communities. One of the key challenges we face is ensuring the behaviours we set out in our Community Engagement Strategy are consistently reflected across the various teams, at all levels of the business and our supply chain. I was pleased that you have seen some examples of excellent engagement by the IPTs, but I agree that there is more work to be done to ensure that the experience for local communities is consistent, both in terms of the IPTs' approach, and the information that they provide.

As you are aware, our approach to engagement is set out in the HS2 Community Engagement Strategy. This strategy was published in 2017 and, reflecting the progression of the project, is being refreshed this year. Alongside this, as the HS2 Minister set out in his update to Parliament in March, we are also deploying a number of measures to strengthen our approach. We have introduced a unified single management system for community engagement and complaints handling across HS2 Ltd and our supply chain, so that there is a single consistent record for all organisations operating in a single location. We have also introduced shortened Helpdesk response times, for urgent construction issues, to ensure that these can be picked up, assessed and mitigated quickly. We are also continuing our programme of proactive local communications to provide notice and raise awareness of HS2 activity in impacted communities.

Our Community Engagement Strategy also sets out our Community Commitments. We publish regular reports on our progress in delivering against these commitments. I agree with your recommendation that it would be useful to also feature lessons learned case studies within these reports and we will reflect this in our forthcoming progress report. We will also continue to ensure that learning and best practice is shared amongst HS2 Ltd and our contractors on a regular basis.

Finally, your report also raised concerns about notifications that were issued to the community ahead of a planned closure of the A413 in Buckinghamshire over two weekends in April. As you have noted, we are committed to providing at least two weeks' notice to those affected by our works, as set out in the Code of Construction Practice. Although we met this commitment, to do so, we had to issue the notifications ahead of the decision from the local authority on whether they would approve the road closures. In this instance our aim was to give residents as much notice as possible, but we appreciate that the community would have preferred we had received approval for these closures before sending out notices. We will continue to work closely with our contractors and the relevant local authorities to ensure greater collaboration so that we minimise any disruption that such road closures can cause.

Thank you once again for your latest comments and recommendations. Your feedback and scrutiny play an important role in holding us to account and ensuring we keep communities at the heart of this project.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Thurston', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mark Thurston

Chief Executive Officer

High Speed Two (HS2) Ltd