

Sir Mark Worthington

HS2 Independent Construction Commissioner

Sent by email:

complaints@hs2-cc.org.uk

November 2020

Dear Sir Mark,

Thank you for your report as the HS2 Independent Construction Commissioner covering the second quarter of 2020. I would also like to thank you for your continued engagement with HS2 colleagues, contractors and those communities impacted by the construction of the new railway.

As you will be aware, in September we announced the formal start of construction of the railway between West Midlands and London. This announcement followed the Department for Transport's approval earlier this year for HS2 Ltd to issue Notice to Proceed to our four Main Works Civils Contractors (MWCCs) working on Phase One of the Project. The formal start of construction signals that our MWCCs are moving from enabling works, scheme design and preparatory work, to full construction of the railway.

This will also unlock thousands of jobs and supply chain opportunities across the Project. HS2 Ltd and our main works contractors expect to recruit around 22,000 roles in the coming months and years to build the first phase of the railway. This is especially pertinent as we look to open up opportunities for employment following the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. We also estimate around 400,000 supply chain contract opportunities will be available for UK businesses, supporting thousands more jobs around the country.

While the start of construction marks an exciting milestone in the HS2 Programme, we recognise that concerns will remain in local communities impacted by the construction of the railway. We welcome your ongoing support and guidance in helping us to deliver on our commitments to be a good neighbour to those living and working along the route.

We also recognise that as construction activities increase, we are likely to see an increase in the volume of enquiries and complaints we receive. Our teams are working hard to ensure that they are equipped to handle the changing nature and volume of enquiries and complaints. Throughout the pandemic, our HS2 Helpdesk has continued to offer a fully operational service all day, every day, while working remotely. Over the course of 2020, we have so far dealt with almost 30,000 enquiries and 1,200 complaints, of which 99% were concluded at the first stage of our complaints process.

In your report, you highlight concerns about the roll out of noise insulation and ventilation units to those properties which have been identified as qualifying for support. Although we have been able to continue with the HS2 Programme during this Covid-19 period, some specific elements of our works have had to be slowed, or paused, to ensure we comply with Public Health England advice regarding working in people's homes. We remain committed to installing noise insulation before the relevant works begin. I understand my team are in touch to provide weekly briefings on the progress of these works.

Alongside the mitigation measures we are putting in place around construction noise, we know that construction traffic will also be a significant area of concern for impacted communities. Contractors across the route are obligated to ensure roads and vehicles are kept clean and free of dirt and debris. Our Project Managers receive reports from our monitoring and compliance team who identify where improvements are required with regard to road cleansing. Our community teams are also frequently out on site and work with residents, local stakeholders and our HS2 Helpdesk to identify specific issues and work with our contractors to resolve these. As we progress into main works construction, we recognise that there will be increasing local concerns about the impacts of construction traffic, road closures and access. We know that we haven't always got it right on communicating relevant road and traffic information, but we are working across the business and with our contractors to improve how we provide communities with timely information about impacts in their area.

We have previously corresponded about woodland and vegetation clearance – which, as you highlight, remains a sensitive topic for communities. As you are aware, we take our obligations around environmental impact very seriously. We have committed to removing the minimum amount of vegetation to build the railway and we have rigorous processes in place to ensure this happens. Our Ecologists, Design team and Project Managers work together to carry out surveys and assessments to decide the minimum amount of vegetation that can be removed and identify the environmental mitigations that need to be put in place.

We continue to use our local HS2 websites to inform communities about what is happening in their area. We are also starting to share and develop extended notifications, which provide a timeline of activity coming up over a period of months, so that communities can know what to expect. We are also identifying new ways to actively engage with residents interested in our ecology works. For example, we are currently running a series of online webinars for residents, looking at ecological mitigation. These webinars cover topics such as our works and how we are designing and delivering a Green Corridor along the route, which will provide a 30% increase of new woodland and wildlife habitats.

Finally, as we continue to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, our top priority remains the health, safety and wellbeing of our staff and the communities along the route. Our sites are continually reviewed to ensure they are compliant with the latest Government guidelines. Where sites are unable to comply with guidance, they will be unable to operate. As you are aware, we have taken the decision to postpone our face-to-face engagement and we are now carrying out much of our usual engagement activity online. Some recent activity has included virtual key design events and exhibitions, community drop-in sessions and webinars on topics

from archaeology to local business opportunities. In early October we launched the Phase 2b Design Refinement Consultation. To ensure we deliver a meaningful consultation while ensuring community safety, we launched a number of several online tools to make it easier for communities to access information, ask questions, and provide feedback. Some of these included our interactive navigator map, a virtual exhibition space, a series of community area webinars and a programme of one-to-one appointments for those newly affected by our proposals.

Thank you again for your continued advice and guidance which supports us to be a good neighbour and I look forward to continuing working together to minimise the impact on communities living and working along the route of the new railway.

Yours sincerely,

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

David Bennett
Delivery Director
HS2 Ltd