

Residents' Commissioner's third report: Chairman's response

18 February 2016

Introduction

Deborah Fazan has been the HS2 Residents' Commissioner for over a year, and as an organisation we welcome the continued scrutiny that she provides. The scale of HS2 cannot be underestimated, and we are always looking for ways to improve what we do. While we wholeheartedly believe in the value of HS2 to Britain as a whole, we also recognise the emotional, financial and personal impact the project is having on individuals and communities. This is why 2016 will see a step change in how we undertake community engagement, which I believe addresses the comments that Deborah has made in her latest report.

The Select Committee considering the Bill for Phase One concluded its public hearings on 4 February 2016 and, during the 18 months or so of its hearings, heard more than 1,500 of the petitions lodged against the Bill. We look forward to hearing its findings later this month. However, it is imperative that HS2 now progresses to deliver the undertakings and assurances, especially around engagement, that we have already committed to.

Community engagement

Phase One

We held engagement events for Phase One in Autumn 2015; these demonstrated that there is significant public appetite for information from HS2 Ltd about the project. Our spring series of events is going to locations that were not covered by the earlier series. However, we recognise that engagement must be delivered more broadly than just through events: we also need to specifically reach people who don't come to events or contact their local political representatives, or who aren't online. We are taking several steps to improve this.

Firstly, we have three new senior engagement managers in place, working in the following areas:

- Greater London
- the Thames Valley and Northamptonshire
- the West Midlands

A recruitment campaign is under way to recruit engagement managers and executives into these area teams to support the delivery of engagement. This is a locally targeted campaign – we will be looking to recruit people who know their local area to be the go-to person in their community on HS2 matters.

A similar recruitment campaign will be carried out for Phase Two later this year, applying the same principles.

Secondly, in broad terms, our engagement will take place using various techniques, and our approach has been and will continue to be informed by what people want. We will use the following tactics:

- Proactive individual engagement, such as direct mail, door-knocking, and telemarketing.
- Proactive group engagement, such as consultation events, community engagement events and community forum meetings.
- Partnerships with third parties, such as local authorities, parish councils, residents' associations, charities, faith organisations and schools.
- Local presence, such as HS2 drop-in centres or presence with local third parties.
- General information campaigns, such as project newsletter updates, and property compensation and safety campaigns.

Our activity will be supported using the information papers that are available on our website. We will review them to make sure that they are accessible to the general public, and that they conform to our equality, diversity and inclusion guidelines. Finally, we will continue to run our helpdesk service.

We have also taken into account feedback from community forums during their initial use in 2012-2013 and are intending to re-establish them, run on the following principles:

- HS2 Ltd will lead them with a focused agenda.
- Actions will be followed up in a demonstrable fashion.
- The forums' timing will be led by project milestones, rather than a time-driven commitment, ensuring they are relevant and meaningful.

Property compensation schemes

We note the commissioner's comments regarding turnaround times, so will be paying particular attention to these, including ensuring that the process from application to acquisition of property is completed in a timely manner under all of the schemes.

The issues raised by the commissioner to a large degree mirror those raised in the recent Select Committee hearings. While we do not think that the current approach is broken, we do recognise that there may be scope for change. The HS2 Land and Property team will be working closely with the Department for Transport to review these points and to make any appropriate changes to the guidance and process. We will continue our useful dialogue with the Council of Mortgage Lenders and with individual mortgage providers to ensure that decisions in respect of individual properties are made with the benefit of all the available information.

The commissioner recommends that we undertake a broader communication programme about our property compensation schemes, and we agree with this. To that end, we are planning a programme of activity along the Phase One line of route to raise awareness about these during 2016, using direct mail, local and social media, and ongoing engagement activity with our teams on the ground.

Phase Two

For the West Midlands to Crewe route, the team has held seven property consultation events in January, and an announcement on the results of the consultation is expected in Spring 2016. We will carry out further communications on the schemes and how to apply to them after the announcement. For the rest of the Phase Two route (to Manchester and Leeds), we are continuing to speak to stakeholders about the principles of the schemes, though we are unable to give certainty until there is a route announcement, which is anticipated by Autumn 2016. We recognise that this causes uncertainty and upset among affected communities, and we try to address this through regular contact.

Our plan will be reviewed every month to evaluate its efficacy and enable us to change our approach to increase its reach and effectiveness as the year progresses.

Conclusion

There is still much for HS2 Ltd to do to reach people affected by the project, specifically if they may be eligible to apply for property compensation schemes. While I believe that what we are doing is robust and will deliver this necessary step change, I will continue to ensure both the Land and Property and Community Engagement teams work very hard to make sure they are doing all they can in this critical area.



David Higgins, Chairman, HS2 Ltd