

Response to residents' commissioner's report

November 2016

Once again I would like to thank Deborah Fazan for her ongoing work as the independent Residents' Commissioner for HS2, and for her fifth report.

Fulfilling the Residents' Charter

We have been following up on our response to Ian Bynoe's independent report published earlier this year. Our community engagement team has been developing proposals for complaint handling and community engagement. These have been tested with focus groups, and their very useful feedback has helped us to rework our Residents' Charter.

We will soon be publishing this new Residents' Charter, the aim of which is to set out clearly our commitments to those people most affected by HS2. The Residents' Commissioner will continue to play a key role in holding us accountable to this.

The property schemes

I welcome the Residents' Commissioner's ongoing interest in the operation of the property schemes. We will keep working with her to make sure that people directly affected by HS2 are fully aware of its potential impact as well as the support available to them.

On 15 November, the Secretary of State announced the preferred route for Phase 2b of HS2. This runs from Crewe to Manchester, and from the West Midlands to Leeds. He also announced the safeguarding, and the proposed compensation and assistance schemes available to homeowners on this part of the route. As a result, there is more certainty for those living on or close to the Phase 2b route. Those homeowners who wish to move can now apply to the statutory blight regime, the Express Purchase scheme or the Need to Sell scheme. The Residents' Commissioner rightly drew attention to the consultation on the proposed property schemes for Phase 2b and we look forward to sharing the outcome of that consultation when it is available in spring 2017.

We welcome the Residents' Commissioner's positive comments about the property schemes awareness campaign we launched in August. During the campaign, monthly property-related enquiries to our helpdesk doubled for Phase One and almost doubled for Phase 2a. Overall, that month's enquiries rose by 185%. The Residents' Commissioner also noted that our Facebook campaign reached over 450,000 people and

resulted in just under 10,000 clicks to our property schemes webpage. We intend to build on these foundations in future awareness-raising.

Formal notices about land requirements will only be issued following Parliamentary approval of the Phase One hybrid Bill, but in the last month we have begun writing to and meeting with directly affected property owners, residents, farmers and businesses. This is to give them as much notice as possible of our requirements and help them understand the options available. We encourage all those who can benefit from the compensation schemes to apply.

As we step closer to Parliamentary approval of the Phase One hybrid Bill, our community engagement continues in the lead up to Royal Assent and beyond. This month we have started writing to owner-occupiers who are eligible to apply for the Express Purchase Scheme; provided information to businesses about our premises search agency service; and met with farmers to develop a tailored farm pack. The farm pack will set out how we will be considerate of farmers' individual needs, including any proposed mitigations or compensation arrangements. All these community engagement activities will intensify in the months ahead.

Work has also begun on the second Phase One route-wide property schemes awareness campaign to follow Royal Assent. This campaign will include the launch of the Homeowner Payment scheme. We will take the necessary steps to make sure that people who may be eligible are notified at that time, after Royal Assent of the Phase One hybrid Bill.

I am grateful to the Residents' Commissioner for sharing her concerns about some homeowners' experiences when dealing with companies working on our behalf. HS2's success will be measured in how well our company, including our key stakeholders and contractors, engages with directly affected residents and communities as we plan and build the new railway. It is essential that our suppliers are seen as an extension of HS2 Ltd, and that they communicate and engage with integrity and respect.

The Residents' Commissioner attended a meeting with senior representatives of the property suppliers to share her experiences and feedback. We have had further briefing sessions with all our suppliers and have just completed a full-day workshop on the behaviours, principles and approach for community engagement we expect from them, to ensure consistency and our suppliers' compliance with our duty of care.

Community engagement

We welcome the Residents' Commissioner's positive comments about the enhanced local area focus of our community engagement activity over recent months. The new staff in the teams along the route of Phase One have familiarised themselves with their areas of responsibility, and are gauging how the communities wish to engage. This is now paying dividends in terms of the quality of events held and attendance.

The Residents' Commissioner expressed concern that the focus of our community engagement was drawn towards more vocal communities, resulting in patchy awareness of other areas. Addressing this will be an ongoing challenge for us, as it is for all major infrastructure projects. Our commitment must be to engage in an inclusive way with all communities along the line of route and beyond, and in doing so reach out to all members of those communities. We welcome the Residents' Commissioner's reminder of this significant duty.

We are pleased that the Residents' Commissioner highlighted our Euston online community consultation platform as one particular success. We intend to establish similar platforms to cover the Phase One line of route – providing more channels to facilitate and promote two-way engagement with our neighbours.

We are delighted to have now appointed Julie King to the new role of Executive Director of Community Engagement. Her appointment is key to our continuous improvement and innovation in community relations, and emphasises the importance we place on engaging with people affected by HS2. We are confident that the Residents' Commissioner and Director of Community Engagement will establish regular dialogue to the benefit of people and communities along the line of route.

We also welcome the appointment of Gareth Epps as interim Construction Commissioner. The roles and remit that the Secretary of State has set out for the two independent Commissioners for HS2 are different, but they will both play crucial roles in holding us to account as we head into 2017.

The first meeting of the new Best Practice Engagement Advisory Group takes place on 9 December 2016. Representatives from the transport and infrastructure sectors, and beyond, will meet quarterly to advise us on how we can improve community engagement and learn lessons from other significant infrastructure projects. We thank the Residents' Commissioner for her suggestions about who should join the group and are confident that all those participating will provide valuable insights.

We are pleased that the Residents' Commissioner highlighted the vital relevance of Equality Impact Assessments to our regional community engagement delivery plans.

Community engagement must be inclusive, free from barriers and meet the needs of individuals affected in different ways. We can achieve this only by striving for continuous improvement.

There have been a few occasions where regretfully we have fallen short of providing enough notice of our events to neighbours. We fully acknowledge that we need to give people enough time to make arrangements to attend the events that we offer, and are committed to give earlier notice through the various channels at our disposal.

Conclusion

This year our community engagement team has grown significantly. These new colleagues have now had time to understand what is required of them in terms of our community engagement work. As we approach Royal Assent to the hybrid Bill for Phase One, this team is making preparations in anticipation of what we will need to deliver beyond that date.

I would again like to thank the Residents' Commissioner for her latest comments and observations. They help us to maintain a focus on the people affected by HS2 as we make preparations to build the new railway.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials followed by a long horizontal stroke.

David Higgins, Chairman, HS2 Ltd