



HS2 RESIDENTS' COMMISSIONER

Introducing the Residents' Commissioner

As the HS2 project progresses, there is a need for more open and transparent communication with all residents who are affected by it – and for an impartial monitor to oversee this.

My role

I have been appointed to:

- hold HS2 Ltd accountable for the way in which it communicates with residents who are affected by its proposals, particularly in regard to property measures; and
- ensure that these communications take place in the clearest and plainest language possible.

However, I also focus on how well communications from HS2 Ltd are received and understood more generally, and monitor the way in which they are written and made available. This includes how often HS2 Ltd contacts residents, as well as the tone in which it communicates.

The HS2 Residents' Charter was introduced in January 2015. It aims to ensure that HS2 property schemes are understood by, and available to, all those who qualify for them.

I intend to keep the policies that underpin these schemes under review. If there are anomalies, or areas where the policy needs further consideration, I will seek to address these issues. However, it is important that the schemes themselves are given time to operate and become established before they are reviewed.

My reports

I make my reports directly to HS2 Ltd's Chairman, David Higgins. I have discussed my first report directly with him, so that he is aware of the background to my observations. His response will be published shortly. We plan to follow the same process for my future reports.



My professional background

I am a property surveyor and a member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, with experience as an independent commissioner and property advisor on transport and construction schemes. I worked at BAA Ltd for over 20 years, latterly on land and property acquisition for the second runway at Stansted Airport. I have also been an independent panel member for two exceptional hardship schemes, operated by Thames Water and HS2.

Report 1 - May 2015

Summary

Since I assumed my post in January 2015, I have reviewed the HS2 property schemes, both discretionary and statutory, from application to completion. I have also considered HS2 Ltd's communications with residents, both those about the property schemes and its general communications, in order to identify any issues.

In January 2015, new discretionary schemes were introduced: the cash offer and voluntary purchase scheme within the Rural Support Zone, and Need to Sell. The aim was to widen the suite of measures available to those who are most affected by proximity to Phase One of HS2.

The measures already in place were Express Purchase and the Exceptional Hardship Scheme. Need to Sell has replaced the Exceptional Hardship Scheme for Phase One, while Express Purchase primarily relates to those whose land is likely to be acquired as part the construction or operation of the railway.

The Residents' Charter was also introduced in 2015. It provides a guarantee to people affected by the project that HS2 Ltd will deal fairly with them and communicate clearly and competently. The charter pledges that all of the property schemes will be available to, and understandable by, the people who qualify for them.

My actions to date

- Gaining an understanding of each scheme.



- Following the operation of the schemes from application to acquisition.
- Monitoring the nature of enquiries received since the schemes were launched.
- Gaining an understanding of the recent communications with residents.

Initial observations

Property schemes

The property schemes need to be implemented for longer before I can analyse their effectiveness.

At this point, my recommendation is to look for ways to widen the public's understanding of the schemes. This is so that their positive impact can be more widely shared, and to provide greater understanding of decisions made by HS2 Ltd and the Department for Transport.

In the next quarter, I will be exploring ways in which more of the data on the schemes can be made available, while still maintaining confidentiality at all times.

Community engagement

Before the parliamentary hybrid Bill process began, HS2 Ltd had established a number of community forum areas, corresponding to areas near the proposed Phase One route. Each had its own stakeholder engagement team.

However, the community and stakeholder focus has shifted. These teams now primarily focus on petition management – that is, their activity focuses more on specific individuals or entities and how they may be directly affected, rather than on communicating with neighbourhood groups or communities as a whole.

Recommendations for HS2 Ltd:

- restore local engagement areas, each with an identifiable community engagement team;



- re-establish working links with communities to share information on the project and ensure those who are going to be most affected are kept fully informed; and
- promote more information days, such as the one recently held in Burton Green in Warwickshire, a community which is significantly affected by HS2. In general, the community welcomed the information day as an opportunity for people affected to seek clarification from HS2 Ltd on the matters which concern them.

Demographics and communication needs

HS2 Ltd would be better able to tailor its communications to the needs of those affected if it had a greater understanding of the demographics of affected households and communities. This might help to identify:

- where there are already groups within communities who can help HS2 Ltd to reach local residents; and
- how individuals might prefer to communicate – for example, whether they speak a first language other than English, or whether they can access email and the internet and are confident using them.

A survey could be undertaken to gather a wide range of information. The aim would be to ensure that local groups – as well as individual residents – are engaged with, so that they have the tools they need to inform their communities.

Recommendation for HS2 Ltd:

- undertake a demographic survey of communities and households along the line of route to enhance its understanding of residents' communication needs.

Newsletter

News stories about HS2 abound in the local and national media. However, communities are mainly interested in news stories that directly affect them, as well as in the wider project.

HS2 Ltd should produce its own newsletters, so that it can keep communities more fully briefed about local project issues.



The newsletters would reach and inform households in a wider area; this will be of paramount importance as the project moves towards construction.

Recommendation for HS2 Ltd:

- print and distribute regionally focused newsletters, every quarter or more frequently.

Next steps

During the next quarter, I will be examining the operation of the HS2 property schemes in more detail and looking for ways to enhance communications with affected individuals and communities. I will monitor the organisation's response to my recommendations in this report.

The Resident's Charter is a working document. I will make minor amendments to it, largely for clarification. Following Board approval, it will be published online and distributed more widely.

I will be meeting MPs whose constituencies are affected by the route, so that I can gain more understanding of affected communities and their perceptions of the property schemes.

I also wish to explore opportunities to engage with a national body, such as a not-for-profit organisation, which may be able to provide further assistance to affected individuals and communities in their engagement with HS2 Ltd.