

Residents' Commissioner's Fourth Report

Chairman's Response

25 August 2016

Introduction

I would like to thank Deborah Fazan for her continued work, and for her fourth report as HS2's Independent Residents' Commissioner. There were two separate reviews into HS2 Ltd's complaint handling and community engagement earlier in the year at which she also provided evidence. I am grateful to her for taking the time to do that. We have studied the findings of those two reviews closely and feel we have already made significant progress in a number of areas.

Fulfilling the Residents' Charter

We are committed to fulfilling our obligations set out in the Residents' Charter, including our promise to "promote awareness of all our discretionary property schemes". In August, we launched a large-scale awareness-raising campaign for communities along the proposed Phase One and Phase 2a lines of route. This included leaflets, community posters, Facebook advertising and stakeholder briefings. We have made contact with over 100,000 properties along the line of route – going well beyond the borders of our core property zones.

We will be applying what we have learned from this initial campaign. The types of queries raised will guide our future property-related community engagement activity, such as where and when we hold drop-in surgeries about property compensation schemes.

Property schemes

On 26 May, the Government launched the property schemes for communities affected by Phase 2a of the HS2 route. These are based on the ones already available along the Phase One route. Following consultation, a number of modifications to the running of the schemes were also announced and further clarification provided in the scheme guidance document. This illustrates how the Government, with our support, is responding to feedback about the property schemes and making improvements.

We recognise the Residents' Commissioner's concerns about eligibility for some of the property schemes. At the moment, this includes a requirement for applicants to have no prior knowledge of HS2 when they purchased their property. This principle is in place to protect the schemes from being exploited or seen as a profit-making opportunity. It is a complex issue but we are having ongoing discussions with the mortgage industry and the DfT to see if the 'no prior knowledge' criterion can be improved in future.

Community engagement

We welcome the Residents' Commissioner's positive comments about our strengthened approach to community engagement over recent months. We have significantly increased the personnel in our Phase One community engagement teams – helping us to increase the reach and range of our programme.

Our dedicated engagement team is available to talk with members of the community. We need to manage this process through our central helpdesk so that we can ensure all enquiries, complaints and information

requests are logged and dealt with in the appropriate way. Our helpdesk is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and has the tools to respond promptly to a variety of enquiries. The helpdesk has contact details for all of our engagement team and can initiate contact with them on behalf of the public, as and when appropriate.

Our expanding team has been using a variety of methods to maximise access to information for those most affected by the project, including events, forums, direct mail, posters, newsletters and door-knocking. Large-scale information events have been the cornerstone of our engagement strategy, with over 6,000 people attending the series of events held in autumn 2015 and spring 2016. We note the observation that we have not published a consolidated forward schedule of community information events from April onwards. That is largely because our events strategy this summer has gone beyond a simple series of generic information events, and has instead taken various initiatives tailored to the needs of individual communities.

This rolling events programme has included mass information events like the ones at Boddington and Maple Cross, as well as subject-specific events like our property scheme surgeries at Ickenham and business relocation surgeries in Birmingham. We have also placed an emphasis on attending third-party events that take us to the community rather than expecting communities to come to us. These have ranged from the Amersham Town Show and Carnival to the Chelmsley Wood Fun Day. We have been procuring events support services so that our programme can continue to grow and evolve, with initiatives such as a mobile events trailer that will enable us to readily engage with more people. We take significant steps to publicise our individual events to local communities, including letters, posters, media relations and digital activity. All public events are publicised in advance on our website at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hs2-events>

It is important that we take the views of each community into account when we plan and deliver future community engagement activity. Rather than tailor all of our communications methods to individual preferences, we provide information in the most appropriate way based on overall community feedback. One of the ways we capture this information is through primary research. For instance, we have launched an e-survey as part of the recent property campaign, asking local residents about how and when they would like to be communicated with, as well as what content they are most interested in. Along with our other sources of insight, this will help us refine our future communications. In addition, we often discuss our engagement plans with local community stakeholders, such as residents' associations, to ensure they use the right blend of communications methods.

The range of engagement tools at our disposal includes newsletters and we are aware that the Residents' Commissioner is eager for more of these. The first of our HS2 in Euston newsletters was distributed to 21,000 Camden residents in May, and we are planning to deliver similar newsletters further along the Phase One route later this year.

Special circumstances

Ensuring that our communications take into account those individuals with particular needs or vulnerabilities, such as language barriers or mental health issues, is a complex issue. One of the ways we are addressing this is by working with local and specialist stakeholders to gather information about vulnerable residents that can help us plan or respond to an individual's needs. For instance, we are already working very closely with the London Borough of Camden, with input from our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team, to research and identify needs in the Euston area.

We also appreciate the Residents' Commissioner's concerns on behalf of people whose circumstances do not easily align with the standard ownership categories in our property schemes guidance. We can provide some level of reassurance here, in that the existing policies already account for 'special circumstances' of this nature and can adapt to the needs of different occupier groups on a case-by-case basis.

Conclusion

It has been a positive period of growth and evolution for our community engagement activity, not least for property-related issues. At the same time, we recognise that more can always be done to help communities affected by HS2 in preparing for its potential impact and accessing the support available. The scale and range of our engagement programme will need to continue its upward trajectory as we approach Royal Assent and beyond, and we welcome the challenge.

I would again like to thank the Residents' Commissioner for her latest comments and observations as we continue to improve our performance in this area.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Higgins', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

David Higgins
Chairman, HS2 Ltd