

Deborah Fazan

HS2 Residents' Commissioner
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Dear Deborah,

Thank you for your ninth report as HS2's Residents' Commissioner and your ongoing work to help ensure we are delivering on our commitments to those communities who will be affected by the construction of the new railway. I'm pleased by the good progress we are continuing to make in the way we engage and communicate with the communities affected by HS2, but I recognise that we can still make improvements in this space. Seeking those opportunities to improve the way we work with communities will continue to be a priority for me as CEO.

I am pleased you have been able to attend a number of our recent community events, including the information event in Measham; one of the 31 events we held across the Phase 2b route in June and July to share new information and give over 5,700 residents the opportunity to discuss any questions with HS2 specialist staff. The events have helped ensure that communities along the route are better informed and ready to receive the working draft Environmental Statement, due to be published later this year.

Across the route of the railway we have local engagement managers working on the ground in each community. In addition to our information events, they hold a regular series of meetings and are available to meet with local residents, including things like monthly drop-in sessions in community venues.

We continue to identify ways to reach out and communicate with all those affected by the project, and welcome your advice and suggestions as we do so. I acknowledge that we have work to do to engage with those residents who may not have access to the internet and our online platforms. Our community helpline – which is a freephone number available 24 hours a day, every day of the year – has received almost 12,000 contacts during the first six months of this year. We have also started a series of community newsletters – the recent one for Camden was distributed in hard copy to 12,000 households – and distribute works notifications by post.

As you are aware, we have reviewed and are now implementing a new complaints process. Thank you for your independent advice and involvement with this review. The new complaints process is now available on the HS2 website and a booklet has been produced to assist any individual who may wish to complain. This booklet will be available at our community engagement events and meetings. It includes a pull-out complaints form and we have also introduced a freepost address for individuals wishing to contact us in writing, alongside the existing freephone community helpline. A member of our Public Response Team will be available to guide any individual through the complaints process.

As you mention in your report, there are now 10 local community websites for areas along the Phase One route. These online sites allow us to share information with local residents – such as when and where works are taking place – and they can also sign up to receive news alerts for their area. Across these 10 sites we have received over 30,000 views and over 1,400 subscribers since they launched. I was pleased to read your comments that you have found the new HS2 website more interactive and easier to search. We are seeking to continuously improve the new website and we welcome feedback from users.

I continue to value your observations, recommendations and continued focus on helping to improve the discretionary and statutory property schemes. In your report you identify important challenges around the complexity of the Statutory Blight and Express Purchase processes and the support and advice available to applicants, and those considering serving a blight notice.

We have previously discussed guidance on the Express Purchase scheme and, as you are aware, HS2 Ltd has published a new booklet to assist individuals through the process of selling their home or small business using the Statutory Blight or Express Purchase process. As you note in your report, the booklet provides homeowners with clear guidance on the steps that need to be taken before a property can be acquired and the approximate timeframes involved.

HS2 Ltd has also produced new guidance on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) for compulsory purchase claims. HS2 Ltd and our suppliers will do our best to reach agreement on compensation entitlement with individuals who have received a compulsory purchase notice, or successfully served a blight notice, by direct negotiation. This booklet sets out options for resolving disputes in cases where this has not been possible. As you highlight, this will hopefully lead to quicker and less costly outcomes.

We fully recognise that the Statutory Blight and Express Purchase processes, as well as the principles of compensation, are complex and can be difficult to understand. We will keep under review both our guidance and the impacts of the revised guidance.

I welcome your positive comments on the operation of the Homeowner Payments and Rural Support Zone schemes, in particular your observation on the new desktop valuation process.

Colleagues from across the business are working together to develop the documentation on ground settlement, in order to better help residents when applying for a settlement deed. This will include activities to communicate with local communities to raise awareness of the settlement deed process. We are also responding to queries and any requests for further information from local residents.

We continue to take these issues forward and will continue to keep you updated as we do so.

I would again like to thank you for your latest comments and observations and I look forward to continuing our discussions at our next meeting.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Thurston', written in a cursive style.

Mark Thurston
Chief Executive
HS2 Ltd

