

Deborah Fazan

HS2 Independent Residents Commissioner
2 Snowhill
Birmingham
B4 6GA

By email: Deborah.fazan@hs2.org.uk

22 January 2019

RE: Response to the Residents' Commissioner's 10th report

Dear Deborah,

Thank you for your 10th report as the HS2 Residents' Commissioner and your ongoing work with the communities along the route. We continue to welcome your insight and advice in this area.

Thank you also for continuing to attend and support a number of our community engagement events across the route, including information events we have held to support the recent consultations on the Working Draft Environmental Statement (WDES) and Equalities Impact Assessment (WDEqIA) for Phase 2b. During 2018 we engaged with over 36,000 people at over 2,200 engagement activities including meetings, drop-in sessions and events.

As you reference in your report, in October we published our first public report measuring how we are delivering against the commitments we have made to the communities in which we operate. We will be publishing these reports on a six monthly basis; the next report will cover July to December 2018, and will be published in Spring 2019.

As reflected in both your report, and our progress report, I am pleased we have made some good progress in a number of areas over the last year, including a significant increase in the volume of our engagement activity and an improved complaints process. However, both reports also recognise we have more work to do, and identify a number of challenges for us as we strive to be a good neighbour to those affected by the construction of the new railway.

As you know, I agree that we need to ensure we are communicating with all those affected by the project, including those without internet access. We use a wide range of communication methods to engage with communities along the route. This includes engagement managers

based in communities along the route meeting with local residents and community groups; regular community drop-in events in community venues such as parish halls and community centres which are advertised locally through parish updates and on notice boards; leaflets and newsletters sent by post directly to households as well as hand delivered letters where appropriate.

However, we recognise the challenges in engaging with hard to reach groups, including those you reference without access to the internet. As such we regularly review how to build on these methods of engagement so we can communicate in a way which is easiest for the people we need to reach. This year we are planning on introducing a mobile HS2 information point which we will be taking out into some of the communities along the route. This will allow us to visit locations and communities that are typically hard to reach, and provide more opportunities for people to get involved in the project. We are also capturing feedback from affected communities along the route on what works well, as well as listening to recommendations for better ways of working together.

I continue to value your focus on helping to improve the discretionary and statutory property schemes. As you will be aware, since you submitted your 10th report the Department for Transport have published their review of non-statutory property schemes. We welcome the review and will be implementing the changes that have been proposed.

As part of our review of Land and Property collateral, we have identified a number of areas where we can make improvements. This includes creating new guidance documents to support affected parties through the Compulsory Purchase process. We are aiming to launch the new documentation later this year.

We recognise the challenge we have had around recruitment in parts of our Land and Property directorate and have been working hard to address this. I'm pleased to say we've made progress in filling a significant number of these positions, and are currently finalising our resource plan for 2019-2020. In the longer term you rightly highlight the increase in blight applications we can expect with the Phase 2b. In order to ensure applicants have adequate levels of case workers to deal with this we are currently exploring alternative resourcing models. We would be happy to keep you informed as this develops.

Your report highlights the need for specialist telephone advice for applicants that are considering serving a blight notice. This is an issue we have been looking into. As set out in our response the Phase 2a Select Committee's second special report (published on 13 November), we are now in the process of procuring a new support and wellbeing service for those affected by the railway. The scope of that service will include the provision of support to people who may need help when applying to our various property schemes. We are aiming to make the new service available in 2019.

Finally, you will be aware that we are in the final stages of developing our Prolonged Disturbance scheme after consideration of feedback received from community and local authority engagement last year. Work is now underway on how the finalised scheme will be delivered, including guidance for residents, and we will continue to update you as we get ready to launch the scheme.

Thank you again for your latest comments and observations and I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure we deliver on our commitment to be a good neighbour.

Yours Sincerely,

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

Mark Thurston
Chief Executive
High Speed Two (HS2) Ltd