

Deborah Fazan

HS2 Residents' Commissioner

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Dear Deborah,

Thank you for your thirteenth report as HS2's Residents' Commissioner and your ongoing work to help ensure we are delivering on our commitments to those communities impacted by the construction of the new railway.

We recognise HS2 will affect those communities along the route. I am acutely aware that no one chose to live on the route of HS2 and therefore how important it is to deliver this project with compassion and empathy. We recently published our latest report documenting our progress towards being a good neighbour and delivering against our Community Commitments. This report covers the six-month period July to December 2019 and is our fourth of these progress reports, completing our first two years of reporting on how we are living up to the commitments we have made. Over these two years we have dealt with 62,055 Helpdesk enquiries, seen almost 60,000 people at over 3,800 events, and received over 211,000 visitors to our community websites.

Being a good neighbour is a high benchmark for us and we have made progress over the last two years, but we also recognise there is more to do. We are listening to feedback from communities and continuing to identify ways we can improve. We continue to welcome your insight and advice as we do so, not least in the current environment as we adapt how we engage in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The health, safety and wellbeing of the communities along the route, and of our staff, remains our top priority. As you know, during the current period we have taken the decision to postpone all public face-to-face engagement events and meetings. We have put in place alternative ways of communicating with communities, including virtual meetings, regular updates and newsletters. This month, for example, we have posted a community newsletter to update 17,500 residents living along the Phase 2a route in Staffordshire and south Cheshire. The HS2 Helpdesk has remained available all day, every day, with no break in service.

Across the route, we are working closely with our supply chain to continually review the works on all our construction sites in line with the latest Government guidance for the construction industry on dealing with Covid-19. Where works cannot be delivered in accordance with the guidance, sites have been temporarily closed to ensure the safety of our staff and the communities in which we are working. Where our supply chain is confident it can operate in line with the guidance, we are continuing to deliver HS2 in line with the Government's strategy to invest in the UK's infrastructure, supporting the economy during this difficult time.

Managing the impacts on communities from a project on the scale and complexity of HS2 inevitably presents challenges. Your report highlights challenges particularly around the need to demonstrate that community concerns are heard in the decision-making process and the resources required to meet the engagement needs of affected communities. I agree with you on the importance of both these issues and we will look to include further information on how community voices are being heard in our future progress reports. As HS2 moves into the main construction phase we are working closely with our contractors to build integrated teams, bringing together HS2 and supply chain resources to deliver a joined-up approach to engagement in those communities. I recognise that a key challenge we will be facing is ensuring the behaviours we set out in our Community Engagement Strategy are understood and embedded not just across HS2 and with our contractors, but also down through their full supply chains. I would welcome your continued advice on how we can best ensure this.

In your report you also raise the potential for independent chairpersons to help facilitate meetings between HS2 Ltd and community representatives. As you know, there are some meetings where we participate in structured community discussions chaired by third parties such as the Euston Community Representatives Group, which you reference. There are also a number of forums in different areas along the route where the local MP or local authority plays a coordinating role. On other occasions, it is beneficial to continue building direct relationships with local communities, without overly formal structure to meetings. Overall our approach is to tailor our engagement to the needs of individual communities and therefore to consider the nature of meetings on a case-by-case basis. We continually monitor the effectiveness of our engagement activity, and remain open to all options, including working with independent chairpersons where effective.

As you have recommended, our construction and engagement teams are currently working to clearly identify each worksite with an individual number, making it easier for members of the public and staff working across the project to talk about a specific location and any issues. We will also be looking to display our Helpdesk freephone number at our sites by the end of the summer.

To build the new railway we must acquire a lot of land and property and I am very aware of the impact this has on people's lives. I welcome your feedback on the implementation of your previous recommendations related to users' experience of our property schemes and the positive results this is delivering.

As you note in your report, we have achieved Plain English Crystal Mark accreditation for our property scheme booklets, and I hope this will have a positive impact on those looking to apply. We are continuing to update our materials online, which will include an improved layout displaying our property schemes and additional information such as guidance on Claims for Temporary Possessions or Surveys. We are progressing other improvements, including the delivery of an enhanced IT-based case management system which will provide better information to case managers and improve the feedback system for applicants. This remains a priority for the team and we are currently in the detailed design stage.

We are very aware of the importance of making timely advance payments to claimants. We will encourage claimants' agents to make full use of the claim form that is already provided with every GVD notice served, and to ensure that a meaningful level of evidence is presented to HS2 in line with best industry practice to assist the payment process.

I know you are working with colleagues in our Land and Property Team to continue taking these recommendations forward and we appreciate your ongoing guidance. I would also like to thank you for your ongoing input on Settlement Deeds and the Prolonged Disruption Scheme. I know you have recently met with colleagues on both topics to discuss the schemes and proposed collateral. The teams adapted quickly and responsively to the additional constraints of working within the current Covid-19 environment and earlier this month we began the first stage of informing residents about excavation and settlement and their eligibility for settlement deeds. We will continue to keep you updated on developments related to both schemes.

Finally, following the Government's decision to proceed with HS2, you will be aware that in April the Department for Transport approved HS2 Ltd to issue Notice to Proceed to our Main Works Civils Contractors working on Phase One of the route. The issuing of Notice to Proceed marks the point in the main works contracts where work transitions from scheme design and preparatory work, to full detailed design and construction of the railway between London and the West Midlands. This will ensure our contractors and their supply chains have the confidence that they can commit to building HS2, generating thousands of skilled jobs and opportunities for businesses across the country.

We recognise that concerns will remain in local communities impacted by the construction of the railway and we will continue to work with you to deliver on our commitments to be a good neighbour to those living and working along the route.

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

Yours sincerely,



Mark Thurston
Chief Executive
HS2 Ltd