

Deborah Fazan

HS2 Residents' Commissioner
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Dear Deborah,

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

The last year has presented many challenges as we all face the continued impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our priority has remained the health, safety, and wellbeing of both our staff and the communities along the route of the railway. We have been able to operate most of our sites safely and in line with the Government's guidance. We have, however, had to take the decision to postpone our face-to-face engagement events and meetings ensuring that we protect communities and abide to the ongoing social distancing rules. As a result, we have adapted the ways we work with residents and put in place alternative means of communication to ensure we continue to engage and maintain relationships with our stakeholders. I wanted to thank you for your guidance and ongoing work with communities throughout this difficult period.

I also wanted to thank you for your contribution to the Land and Property Review commissioned by the HS2 Minister, which reported in November 2020 and on which you update in your recent report. As the review set out, the scale of the HS2 property acquisition programme is unprecedented since the Second World War. This has brought understandable challenges and we have not always got everything right. I welcome the proposals set out in the review, which I know you supported with your own observations and recommendations. We look forward to working with you, the HS2 Minister and the Department for Transport to take these proposals forward to improve the experience for property owners, using the lessons we have learned on Phase One as we move towards acquisitions on Phase Two of the project.

Alongside work to support the Minister's review and its proposals, HS2's Land and Property team have continued to implement several improvements, including those you have recommended in previous reports. We have taken positive steps forward over the last few months to update the HS2 website and improve how we track the progress of land and property cases. We have recently introduced a new case and data management system; this will be expanded over time and we are exploring the introduction of a customer facing portal, which will enable those engaging with property matters to track their case progress directly. We welcome the inclusion of this as a proposal in the Minister's review and the team will keep you updated on its progress. With regards to streamlined valuation approaches, I know the team would also welcome further discussions with you on how we, along with the Department for Transport, can make this process more effective for all parties.

As highlighted in your report, we have now published further guidance on the Prolonged Disruption Compensation scheme and temporary rehousing. We continue to work hard to ensure that disruption is first minimised and then mitigated. Where construction noise is predicted to be above the threshold as set out in the guidance, we will contact residents to offer a choice between compensation and rehousing. The Settlement Deeds scheme is also underway and the owners of the first properties to be potentially impacted and who are eligible to apply for a Settlement Deed were contacted last year, along with a Plain English guide to ground settlement. We have now started to issue deeds to those who have requested one and are eligible. All residents along the route are also able to contact the HS2 Helpdesk to request details or ask to be considered for either scheme. I recognise it has taken some time to develop both of these schemes and the accompanying guidance for residents; I would like to thank you for your ongoing engagement, providing advice and challenging us, as we have done so.

We have published our fifth report documenting our progress in aspiring to be a good neighbour and delivering the HS2 Community Engagement Strategy. As you highlight, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way in which community engagement is working and this is one of the key challenges explored in the fifth report. Our Helpdesk has continued to operate all day, every day, throughout the pandemic without a break in service. The Helpdesk team handled more than 42,000 enquiries over the course of last year and resolved 99% of complaints at the first stage of the complaints process. We have adapted the ways we engage, using digital and virtual channels to develop new, safe and accessible ways of keeping people informed about our activities. In 2020, despite the difficult circumstances, we held over 1,200 engagement activities engaging with more than 11,000 people. This included a new programme of publicly accessible webinars, covering topics from design development to archaeology findings, from how local businesses can get involved with the project to how local community groups can access funding.

In your report, you make an important observation about digital exclusion and the need to reach those who are not online. I know this is something we have discussed previously, and it is more important than ever given the current Covid-19 situation. In addition to our virtual channels, we have continued to use newsletters and mailouts to contact residents. We will, for example, shortly be sending a newsletter to around 18,000 residents living along the Phase 2a route of the railway.

As you are aware, during the recent Design Refinement Consultation on Phase 2b, in addition to our virtual tools we used phone calls and letters to engage with communities and relevant stakeholders. Over the nine-week consultation period we held more than 300 one to one appointments by phone or video call and distributed printed materials to over 380,000 households. We also made sure people could contact the Helpdesk to request printed versions of materials and access our independent advocacy and support service if needed. The consultation closed in December and I know the community engagement team would be happy to involve you in their discussions on how this type of engagement has worked.

You also raise the need for us to demonstrate the steps we are taking to improve community engagement practices and for the voice of the community to be heard within the organisation. Particularly you raise the example of Burton Green in Warwickshire where you received several complaints from the community about engagement regarding road closures in the local area. As you will be aware, we are committed to providing two weeks' notice to those affected by our works, as set out in the Code of Construction Practice. Although we met this commitment for the road closure in Burton Green, we appreciate and understand that the community would have valued earlier notification of these works.

We also recognise that, as we progress into main works construction, there will be increasing local concerns about the impacts of construction traffic, road closures and access. We know that we haven't always got it right on communicating relevant road and traffic information, and we have learnt important lessons from these experiences. We are working across the business and with our contractors to improve how road closures are planned and delivered, including how we communicate information about impacts to the local community as early and effectively as possible. We continue to talk regularly with communities, local authorities, local MPs and other stakeholders to understand their concerns and ensure we factor their feedback into how we further improve local communications and engagement.

As part of this approach, you will be aware that we have organised the Phase One route into geographical areas, in which the work of HS2's specialist teams and contractors is being coordinated and assured by local integrated delivery units. These delivery units are mostly led by senior project managers who assure work in their areas and act as internal escalation points for major issues. This way of working is designed to ensure our delivery activities happen in a coordinated way, ensuring that the delivery of the project is as effective and integrated as possible, while minimising our impact on local communities. We are ensuring lessons learned, for example from the road closures in Burton Green, are being embedded into the development of these delivery units.

We recognise there is still more to do, and we will continue to work closely with you to identify improvements to the way we engage and inform communities about the Project. I was pleased to read your comments about the implementation of two improvements you have raised previously, the clear identification of individual work sites and the introduction of reference numbers for mailouts. These improvements will help us in delivering our community commitments and I am grateful for your continued guidance.

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

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Thurston', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Thurston
Chief Executive
High Speed Two Ltd