

Sir Mark Worthington

HS2 Independent Construction Commissioner

Sent by email:

complaints@hs2-cc.org.uk

5 July 2021

Dear Sir Mark,

Thank you for your recent reports as the HS2 Independent Construction Commissioner covering the final quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. Thank you also for continuing to engage with colleagues at HS2 Ltd and our contractors, and with local residents and stakeholders in the communities along the route. Your ongoing guidance continues to help us in how we respond to construction complaints and engage with those impacted by the construction of the new railway.

During this period, as you highlight, new works have commenced in areas along the route. Construction of the new railway between London and the West Midlands is now well underway. Last year, our four Main Works Civils Contractors working on Phase One of the project were given notice to proceed with full detailed design and construction, with main works construction formally starting in September 2020.

As you are aware, we have recently marked some significant construction milestones on the project. In May, we launched 'Florence', the first of our ten tunnelling machines that, between them, will dig 64 miles of tunnels between London and the West Midlands. The name Florence was suggested by local school children and then selected in a public vote. Florence launched from HS2's South Portal site next to the M25 in Hertfordshire and will spend the next three years digging the first of a pair of 10-mile-long tunnels under the Chilterns, helping to safeguard the woodland and wildlife habitats above ground.

Last month, we started work to install the first permanent structure for the new Old Oak Common station in West London, which will become one of the best connected rail stations in the country. This is the first permanent station construction work on the HS2 project. Over 2,300 jobs will be supported on the Old Oak Common site at peak construction, and over 250 apprenticeships will be created. Across the project, the construction of the railway is already supporting over 16,000 jobs, including more than 500 apprenticeships, and over the next decade will provide around 400,000 supply chain opportunities.

These milestones demonstrate significant progress for the project but we also recognise that, as work progresses, concerns will remain in local communities impacted by the construction of the railway. We welcome your ongoing support in helping to ensure that we respect the people and communities we impact and the environment in which they live.

During the first quarter of this year, we dealt with almost 15,600 enquiries and almost 550 complaints, of which just over 500 related to construction. As reflected both in the representations you have received over the last two quarters, as well as the complaints handled by HS2 Ltd, we are likely to continue to see an increase in the volume of enquiries and complaints received as construction activities increase.

Our teams continue to work hard to ensure that they are responding quickly to residents' queries and concerns. We have taken steps over the last year to assure the quality of our procedures, ensuring the teams involved are equipped both to handle the changing nature and volume of enquiries as we have moved into main works construction and to be able to operate remotely. The HS2 Helpdesk has continued to offer a fully operational service all day, every day, throughout the pandemic.

As the HS2 Minister set out in his second written update to Parliament on the progress of HS2 in March 2021, we are also deploying a number of measures to strengthen our approach. We have introduced a unified single management system for community engagement and complaints handling across HS2 Ltd and our supply chain, so there is a single consistent record for all organisations operating in a single location. We have introduced shortened Helpdesk response times for urgent construction issues to ensure that these can be picked up, assessed and mitigated quickly. We are also continuing our programme of proactive local communications to provide notice and raise awareness of HS2 activity in impacted communities.

In your reports you outline a number of observations relating to the use of public roads, environmental works and construction noise, as well as specific local cases related to the memorial woodland in Wendover, the A425 outside Southam and Stoneleigh Park.

We know that construction traffic is, and will continue to be, a significant area of concern for impacted communities. You have previously raised issues around mud and debris on local roads and you are aware of the measures we have put in place to respond to residents' concerns. In Hillingdon for example, which was one of the areas you highlighted, our contractors have improved vehicle washing at site access points, increased the regular cleaning of hard standing on sites and deployed road sweepers when required. We have also engaged with local stakeholders, including residents who had raised concerns and the London Borough of Hillingdon, to discuss the measures we have implemented and the regular reviews that are taking place. I was pleased to read your comments that these measures have led to a decline in related complaints. I agree we need to be fully aware that this will remain an active issue throughout the construction period and we also have processes in place to quickly rectify any future reports of debris on public highways.

We also recognise concerns around construction traffic using roads in rural areas and, as you highlight, such locations are likely to have less experience of large vehicles. We are seeking to avoid this situation as much as possible by using the strategic road network and dedicated haul routes for much of our construction traffic. In Chipping Warden, for example, we have worked with West Northamptonshire Council to open a new relief road, which will allow heavy goods vehicles, and other local traffic, to avoid the centre of the village and the local primary school. In instances where rural roads are used, our priority is ensuring they are used in accordance with the terms of the High Speed Rail Act and any relevant highways consents. We are also committed to ongoing engagement with local communities, ensuring they are aware in advance of traffic movements or road closures that may affect them, and looking at ways to mitigate local impacts, such as using traffic marshals.

Concerns around wildlife and vegetation clearance continue to be raised by communities and are likely to be subject to ongoing public debate. As you are aware, we take our environmental responsibilities very seriously and are committed to minimising the impact of construction on the natural environment. Our ecological work is designed to protect wildlife and across the whole HS2 route we ensure that all works are carried out in accordance with the correct legal requirements. We are also delivering an unprecedented programme of tree planting and habitat creation alongside the new railway. As you highlight, there has been illegal trespasser activity at locations along the route. We continue to keep residents informed about our works in these areas but, as you recognise, at times this will need to be carefully balanced with the risk of potential protest activity to the safety of our staff and members of the public.

I know you continue to receive regular updates on the roll out of noise insulation and ventilation units in the Euston area and I would like to thank you for your ongoing input into discussions with HS2 Ltd and our contractors on this issue. We are very aware of the sensitive location of the construction works at Euston and continuously strive to find ways to reduce the impacts of these works on residents. This includes the adoption of Best Practicable Means (BPM) when undertaking construction activities and the use of modern equipment and techniques to reduce emissions, noise, dust and vibration. We continue to work to install noise insulation and additional resources have been put in place to deliver the installations. HS2 Ltd also has a dedicated noise insulation engagement team who ensure that regular communications are sent out to eligible properties and are a dedicated point of contact for residents on noise insulation. In addition, our noise insulation scheme remains open to those who have previously declined the scheme, and we have made a commitment to work in partnership with Camden Council to recontact all eligible residents who have not yet taken up the scheme. Finally, our discussions, through the Euston Partnership and with the support of the Department of Transport, continue with Camden Council on how we can support them with the rehousing of their most vulnerable and affected residents at Euston.

You have also raised a number of local cases in areas along the route. In order to construct the Wendover green tunnel, which when built will reduce noise and disruption for the local community, we unfortunately needed to clear a section of woodland planted ten years ago by Rennie Grove Hospice Care in Buckinghamshire. As you highlight, this generated a large amount

of correspondence and comment. We recognise the depth of feeling about this and, as you know, worked to act quickly on the concerns raised. We are in contact with the Hospice and will continue to engage with them both during and following the completion of our works in the area.

In relation to the A425 near Southam in Warwickshire, we are continuing to work closely with local representatives including the county and district councils and local MP. A significant amount of progress has been made at the site, enabling the road to be re-opened this summer as originally planned. Our target is to re-open the road by early August subject to the receipt of necessary consents. We will be engaging further with the community during July to communicate the details of the re-opening.

Finally, I was pleased to read your observations on how we have adapted our works in the vicinity of the Covid vaccination centre at Stoneleigh Park, also in Warwickshire. We have worked closely with local stakeholders, including the local authorities and NHS, to ensure that our works have not impacted the successful operation of the centre. As we have discussed over the last 16 months, our first priority throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has remained the health, safety and wellbeing of communities and our staff.

Thank you again for your reports and your continued advice and guidance as we work together to minimise the impact on communities living and working along the route of the new railway.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Bennett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Bennett
Delivery Director
HS2 Ltd