

Our ref: CEO-22-1086

Deborah Fazan

HS2 Residents' Commissioner

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Sent via email to: residentscommissioner@hs2.org.uk

01 March 2022

Dear Deborah,

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

I would also like to take this opportunity to formally thank you for all the work you have done over the last seven years. The Project has benefitted greatly from your knowledge, experience, and constructive challenge, as have communities and property owners along the route.

Throughout your time as the Residents' Commissioner you have helped to put communities at the centre of what we do; from the development of our 10 Community Commitments and the establishment of our Community Engagement teams across the route, to new guidance for property owners and most recently your contributions to the HS2 Minister's Land and Property Review. I am particularly grateful for the work you have done alongside our Engagement teams, making recommendations, driving improvement and holding us to account in our engagement activity.

In your report you highlight how much the Project has changed over those seven years. Indeed, there has been considerable progress on the Project in just the last three months.

In December, on Phase One, we launched our first Tunnel Boring Machine in the Midlands. The machine, named 'Dorothy', is now digging the first bore of a one-mile tunnel in Warwickshire, preserving the Long Itchington Wood above. On Phase 2a, enabling works have commenced following parliamentary approval last year to extend the HS2 network from the West Midlands to Crewe.

On Phase 2b, last month the Government introduced the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill into Parliament to seek the powers to build and operate the next section of the HS2 route up to Manchester, with a connection to the West Coast Main Line to serve stations in Scotland and the North West. Earlier this month we marked 825 apprenticeship starts on the project to date, with over 20,000 jobs now supported by HS2.

I recognise that as the Project progresses, concerns will remain in local communities impacted by the construction of the railway. We are committed to continuing to engage with residents to keep them informed, provide opportunities to hear their views and respond quickly to their queries and concerns.

Your report focuses on the work you have been undertaking on the recommendations from the HS2 Minister's Land and Property Review published in November 2020. As you highlight, and as the HS2 Minister reported in his third Parliamentary update in October 2021, over half of the review's recommendations have now been implemented. These proposals all seek to improve the claimant experience of property owners most immediately and directly affected by HS2 and we have been pleased to see a reduction in the number of complaints received relating to land and property.

We continue to work closely with the Department for Transport to deliver the review's recommendations and I was pleased to note your positive comments on the progress made. As you set out, this includes our online 'Track my property case' system, which has been launched and is now available for all those applying for the Statutory Blight, Rural Support Zone, Homeowner Payments and Need to Sell schemes, as well as for Compulsory Purchase Orders along the Phase 2a route.

The small claims disputes process has also been introduced to allow faster evaluation of small-value disturbance compensation disputes. As you know, disturbance costs refer to any losses sustained by a dispossessed owner following the acquisition of a property outside of the property value, agents' fees and statutory loss payments. This could include moving costs, changing of locks, or fixtures and fittings. In the event of being unable to resolve a case through discussions, this new process allows HS2 and claimants to request that a case is referred to you as the Residents' Commissioner if we are buying land or property as part of one of our statutory schemes or under the Express Purchase scheme and there are disputed amounts of disturbance compensation totalling no more than £10,000. This new process represents a more straightforward and simplified route to a resolution when disputes arise between claimants and their agents and HS2.

Thank you for the feedback that you and the Independent Construction Commissioner have shared following your recent meetings with a number of farmers located along the route. You have highlighted the challenges faced by farmers and, in particular, recommended that all communications should, where possible, be issued to tenant farmers at the same time as landowners. Please be assured that HS2 Ltd is committed to engaging with all parties affected by the scheme, and this includes tenants as well as landowners.

We endeavour to ensure engagement is consistent and carried out in a coordinated way, so that all affected parties have the same information. In preparing for possession, all affected parties are identified and engagement is planned prior to any notices being served. We encourage all impacted parties to appoint professional advisors, with HS2 Ltd paying their reasonable fees. This is to ensure that all affected parties are suitably advised of the impacts to them and are aware of their options.

Your report also covers your work on community engagement issues, including the recent refresh of our Community Engagement Strategy. Thank you for your guidance and feedback as we have undertaken this work and I am pleased to note that you have welcomed the new strategy.

As you know, our refreshed strategy, *'Respecting People, Respecting Places'*, reflects the progression of the Project over the last four years, including the start of main works construction and the very real impact the Project is now having on people's lives as construction activity increases. We recognise that the planning and building of the new railway disrupts the lives of those people living and working along the route. The refreshed strategy outlines our commitments to minimising that disruption, engaging with communities, and doing our best to put things right if we get something wrong.

On this last point, as you highlight and have previously recommended, we featured a number of lessons learned case studies within our most recent report on our progress on delivering our community commitments. We will continue to ensure that learning and best practice is shared amongst HS2 Ltd and our contractors on a regular basis.

As set out in our strategy, we are committed to keeping communities informed about our works in their local area. In your report you recommend that we must assure the quality and clarity of all information notices that are issued by our delivery bodies to local communities. I can confirm that HS2 Ltd undertakes quality assurance checks on advanced works notifications, newsletters and other communications produced by our contractors. We appreciate your feedback, both in relation to the specific notification about works at the Chiltern Tunnel North Portal near Great Missenden and more broadly on the quality and clarity of information required. We have also used this example to remind our contractors about the importance of these notifications and increased the number of quality checks undertaken.

I was pleased to read your observations following your visit to the Align South Portal site. Our visitor centre on the site is an excellent resource that, as you say, really brings the Project to life. We have been able to host a range of stakeholders at the centre, from Members of Parliament to colleagues working on other infrastructure projects, and conservation groups to local school children, including the pupils who named our two Tunnel Boring Machines 'Florence' and 'Cecilia'.

I agree with your recommendation on making educational opportunities available to members of the public through resources such as this visitor centre. We look forward to continuing to welcome visitors to the Align centre as an opportunity to both inform and inspire people about how we are building the new railway. Recognising that not everyone will be able to visit the site in person, we have also been producing and sharing materials to inform wider audiences so they can understand and experience the construction of the railway, such as a [video tour](#) inside our TBM Cecilia live in operation.

Elsewhere along the route we are offering similar opportunities tailored to the local area and the stage of construction work underway. For example, last year we opened a Field Museum at our archaeology site at St Mary's Church in Buckinghamshire. Over the course of several weekends, we welcomed almost 1,000 people to learn about this important piece of local history. Visitors were able to get a bird's eye view of the excavations, talk to our archaeologists and browse displays exploring the history of the church.

At the Long Itchington Wood Tunnel Portal site in Warwickshire, from where we launched 'Dorothy' in December, BBV have created a visitor centre including a viewing platform and model TBM. This year we will be opening further visitor centres at sites along the route. At Old Oak Common, for example, BBVS have built a visitor centre and viewing platform as part of their new main building at the station site, which we are looking forward to opening shortly.

Alongside our contractors, we also have an education programme that is helping to leave a skills legacy from building and designing the new railway. As part of this, we have developed a collection of resources to support teachers to bring a careers context to curriculum learning. They aim to inspire young people to take an interest in STEM subjects and careers. These are all available for teachers to access online at www.hs2.org.uk/educational-resources.

Thank you again for your latest comments and recommendations, as well as for all of your guidance, scrutiny and support throughout your time as Residents' Commissioner, which has helped ensure those affected have been kept at the heart of this Project.

Yours sincerely,

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

Mark Thurston
Chief Executive Officer,
High Speed Two Ltd