

Sir Mark Worthington

HS2 Construction Commissioner

Sent by email:

complaints@hs2-cc.org.uk

3 April 2023

Dear Sir Mark

Thank you for your recent report as the HS2 Independent Construction Commissioner covering the final quarter of 2022. I have recently been appointed to the role of Civils Delivery Director (Interim) at HS2 Ltd. I look forward to working with you in this role, and will welcome your ongoing support in helping to ensure we deliver on our commitments to respect the people and places impacted by the construction of the new railway.

I know you have continued to visit impacted areas and stakeholders across the route over the last few months, and I want to take this opportunity to thank you for highlighting the key challenges you have identified to colleagues at HS2 Ltd and our contractors.

You will be aware that the Secretary of State for Transport updated Parliament on the Government's Transport Capital Investment Programme in early March.¹ The statement included an update on the HS2 project, recognising significant inflationary pressures facing all parts of the UK economy.

The Government has repeated their commitment to delivering HS2 from Euston to Manchester. Our priority is to maintain the fantastic momentum underway on the project to ensure the initial high-speed services, connecting Old Oak Common and Birmingham Curzon Street, are operational by the early 2030s. HS2's construction will continue to support thousands of jobs, benefit UK business of all sizes and lay the foundations for the arrival of more new rail services into the next decade and beyond.

We are working closely with the Government and our supply chain to work through the details of any changes to how we deliver the new railway. We will, of course, be continuing to engage with communities along the route about plans for the railway in their local areas.

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-03-09/hcws625>

With construction well underway, we have now completed around 40% of the works on Phase One of the project. In Birmingham, the first viaduct piers are now in place at Curzon Street; these will form part of the 300 metres long viaduct which will bring high-speed trains into the centre of the city. The structures, which will vary in height between five and six metres each, are being manufactured using an eco-friendly concrete, reducing the embedded carbon of the piers by over 60%.

We have now launched five tunnel boring machines on the project. In Buckinghamshire, 'Florence' and 'Cecilia' have passed the halfway mark into their 10 mile drive under the Chilterns. We have also completed the excavation of five shafts that will provide ventilation and emergency access. From the same site as our longest tunnel, in the other direction, we are building our longest railway bridge, the Colne Valley Viaduct. Foundation work for the viaduct is now complete and the first deck in position.

As construction continues, we remain mindful of the impact on communities and businesses along the route of the new railway. I am pleased that you have reported on the noticeable fall in complaints, both in proportion to the work and as a total. We received 790 complaints between April and December 2022. This compares with 1,268 for the same period the previous year, a decrease of 37%. Although the number of complaints has reduced, I recognise there are still areas of improvement, and I welcome your upcoming quarterly meetings with HS2 colleagues to compare contractor performance on complaints to help embed best practice along the route.

You highlight four key observations in your latest report around public roads and traffic, noise disturbance and insulation, site management and water issues.

I know that public roads and traffic congestion remain a community concern along the route. We remain committed to minimising and mitigating disruption for local communities, and I am pleased to report that in its first year of operation the Colne Valley temporary access bridge has already taken more than 10,000 vehicle journeys off local roads. Additionally, as of 14 March 2023, the spoil conveyor at Old Oak Common has transported 220,811 tonnes of materials from site, removing 13,000 lorries from local roads.

I am aware of the impact that traffic congestion has on local communities, and we are working to reduce disruption where possible. In Old Oak Common, for example, we have regular coordination meetings in place with all of our contractors to review the phasing of the traffic works and to identify additional measures that can be put in place, including re-sequencing temporary traffic lights based on feedback from road users to reduce traffic congestion. Across the route, we will continue to monitor our contractors and supply chain to reduce their impact in the communities where we are working.

Over the coming years, the alignment of the A413 at Small Dean will alter as the road is realigned and traffic management will be needed in this area for prolonged periods of time. We are in the process of planning these works and ensuring communities are aware; alongside our local engagement plan, we will be using new digital technology to share illustrations of the viaduct design with the community. We recognise that communities will also be concerned by the road closures in the Calvert area, and we have been working closely with East West Rail, undertaking combined community engagements events in the areas impacted by both schemes.

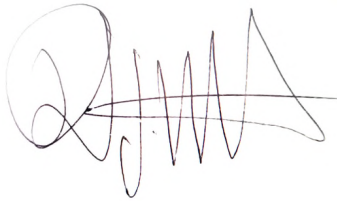
You highlight the need for good forward notification and community engagement to mitigate the disruption caused to communities by HS2 works. In particular, you mention the A38 in Lichfield and the M42 near Birmingham where the Marston Box Bridge was installed. For both closures, we developed detailed communication and engagement plans which included community events, newsletters, leaflets and early works notifications. I am pleased to report that in proportion to the scale of works, we only received a few enquiries from the public regarding the closures.

As you highlight, breaches of noise levels continue to be a rare occurrence. While site managers are aware of the need to be alert to impacts on local communities, including lighting and noise disruption, I recognise we should always aim to be more proactive and faster in mitigating these. At West Ruislip and Willesden Junction, as referenced in your report, we are monitoring noise and vibration levels 24 hours a day 7 days a week. In addition, we are putting a number of measures in place to minimise noise levels, including switching off the engines when freight trains are at a standstill and ensuring tracks are greased at regular intervals. We are also engaging regularly with residents living near to the sites and providing them with as much information in advance as possible on the planned rail deliveries.

Finally, I recognise that the impact of construction works on local aquifers and water flows is a topic of concern to the community. In March, we held an online webinar about how we are safeguarding the quality and supply of water in the Chilterns and the Colne Valley whilst ongoing works are taking place. During the session, we shared details about how we are employing water treatment, monitoring and construction mitigation across our sites to reduce and prevent impacts on ground and surface water. The session included an opportunity for residents to ask any questions and, for those who were unable to attend, we will be publishing a Frequently Asked Questions document on the local HS2 website. We will continue to meet with local stakeholders and community groups to share further information on our design and mitigation plans.

Thank you again for your report and your ongoing work as the Independent Construction Commissioner.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Speight'. The signature is stylized with a large initial 'D' and a series of vertical strokes for the letters 'S', 'P', 'E', 'I', 'G', 'H', 'T'.

David Speight
Civils Delivery Director
High Speed Two (HS2) Ltd