

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [High Speed Two: Update](#), HC 1105

Wednesday 6 January 2021

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Members present: Huw Merriman (Chair); Ruth Cadbury; Lilian Greenwood; Simon Jupp; Robert Langan; Chris Loder; Karl McCartney; Gavin Newlands; Greg Smith; Sam Tarry.

Questions 1–92

Witnesses

I: Deborah Fazan, Independent Residents' Commissioner for HS2; Councillor Phil Gaskin, Chairman, Calvert Green Parish Council; and Luci Ryan, Lead Policy Advocate for Infrastructure, The Woodland Trust.

II: Andrew Stephenson MP, Minister of State, Department for Transport; Clive Maxwell, Director General, High Speed and Major Rail Projects Group, Department for Transport; and Mark Thurston, Chief Executive, HS2 Ltd.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Deborah Fazan, Councillor Gaskin and Luci Ryan.

Chair: This is the Transport Select Committee's six-monthly review and evidence session on HS2. The Committee committed, over the course of this Parliament, to review and take evidence on the progress of HS2 and its impact. The Committee had endeavoured to do so by going on the road and the line of route, so we would perhaps have been in Buckingham Community Centre right now, but of course the pandemic has put paid to those plans. We are committed to ensuring that the scrutiny of HS2 is here in Parliament every six months.

We have before us a first panel that represents local communities and environmental groups. The second panel is the chief executive and the Minister responsible for HS2.

Before I ask the first panel to introduce themselves, I should formally register that the home I grew up in, and where my mother still lives, is about 3 miles away from the parish of Calvert Green, where one of our witnesses is from. Do any other Members wish to register an interest?

Greg Smith: I should for transparency declare that I live in a village that is affected by the HS2 route and, secondly, that one of our witnesses—Councillor Gaskin—is known to me as he is chairman of one of the parishes in my constituency and a constituent of mine.

Q1 **Chair:** Excellent, as indeed is my mum. Without further ado, let's introduce the witnesses, or ask them to introduce themselves.

Deborah Fazan: Good morning. My name is Deborah Fazan. I am the independent residents' commissioner for HS2. HS2 set out 10 community commitments in its community engagement strategy, which was published in 2017. My job is to hold it accountable for delivering against those commitments.

Chair: Thank you, Deborah.

Luci Ryan: Good morning. I am Luci Ryan. I am a lead policy advocate for infrastructure employed by the Woodland Trust. I am an ecologist, and I have been working on the Woodland Trust response to HS2 for the last eight, nearly nine, years. I cover all three phases and I have done all the consultation responses for the Woodland Trust. I give evidence before the House of Commons, the House of Lords and all the hybrid Bill stuff that is involved.

Chair: Thanks, Luci.

Councillor Gaskin: Good morning. I am Phil Gaskin, chairman of Calvert Green Parish Council. I am here today representing not only my own parish, but the parishes of Charndon, Steeple Claydon, Twyford and Edgcott, based on the cumulative impact of HS2 in our area.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Our parishes are located around what is referred to by HS2 as the Calvert Box, which is in rural north Buckinghamshire, halfway between London and Birmingham. It is actually an area where two major rail infrastructure projects cross over: High Speed 2 and East West Rail. It is also the proposed location of HS2's infrastructure maintenance depot. In the Calvert Box area the works for both East West Rail and HS2 will be carried out under the HS2 Act.

Q2 Chair: Thank you, Councillor Gaskin, and good morning to all three witnesses. We are going to start by looking at HS2 Ltd engagement and the treatment of local communities and residents. I will ask the residents' commissioner, Deborah, the first question. You touched a little on your role, but perhaps you could explain a little more, and how you hold HS2 to account for its treatment of residents, and indeed the findings of your latest report, which I believe is just two weeks' old.

Deborah Fazan: Thank you for the opportunity to explain the role of the residents' commissioner. It is a role that has no precedent in any other major infrastructure project. My aim is to improve things for those directly affected by HS2 by looking at the policies under which the project deals with both property matters and the way it engages and communicates with affected communities.

In simple terms, my job is to oversee the delivery of the residents' charter. Initially, it was launched in January 2015 and was focused on the land and property schemes. It was expanded in the community engagement strategy published in 2017, and it now focuses mainly on communities and community engagement.

I hold the company publicly accountable for delivering those 10 commitments. I do it formally through written reports to the chairman and the board of HS2, to which the chief executive responds in writing. All the reports are published and are available online. I meet the chairman, the chief executive, the HS2 Minister, the staff of HS2 and the DFT, but I also meet communities up and down the line of route. I attend community events, both those put on by HS2 and those put on by communities.

I believe I take a strongly independent line and I am not afraid to be critical when it is justified. My latest report is primarily focused on the Minister's land and property review, in which I was involved during the summer. My main contribution was to follow up on recommendations I had made previously about the express purchase scheme. Historically, it has taken between 21 and 22 months for a person applying to the scheme to actually have their house acquired by HS2. I have been pushing for a new, fast way of undertaking the valuation process, as that is where the main cause of delay lies.

I also reported on progress made on earlier recommendations for the property schemes—in particular, things like making it easier for residents to use the HS2 website for the property schemes. My other key



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recommendation, in my most recent report, was to ask HS2 for assurances about improved community engagement following an incident in which the Burton Green community had been given two weeks' notice of a road closure that would last four to five months.

As with all my reports, I expect those recommendations to lead to significant improvements in the experience of those interacting with the project. Over my time in post I have made 85 recommendations in total, and about four fifths of those have been implemented in full by HS2. The company has made significant progress in its approach to community engagement over the past six years, but it definitely still has more to do. It is particularly important that it makes sure that all its contractors take community concerns into account.

I am not an advocate for the individuals affected by the project, but I make sure that the concerns expressed by communities about the way in which HS2 operates are heard and make a difference to the future.

Q3 Chair: Thank you for the opening. As Members, we hear from communities that feel impacted and blighted by HS2. Obviously, we take those concerns seriously. The Oakervee review said that HS2 Ltd needed to "significantly improve how it treats and communicates with individuals and communities." We hear about a restart. In your view, Deborah, how has HS2 improved its performance over the last year? What further room could there be for improvement?

Deborah Fazan: I think you need to go a bit further back. When I started in January 2015, there were five people looking at community engagement over the whole of the line of route. Eight events took place in 2015, and they were all focused on phase 1.

One of my early recommendations was that community engagement needed to be improved, and it has grown exponentially since then. There are now 100 people involved in community engagement along the line of route. Last year, despite the pandemic, over 1,100 events took place up and down the line of route—things like webinars and different ways of engaging with people.

Over the last year, I think the most important difference has been the change in working to bring in integrated project teams, such that the community engagement people for HS2 are actually embedded within the contractors' teams. This means that they can see what is going on directly with the contractors, and local people can talk directly to them and to the contractors. I was talking to one community in December where they said they really welcomed that because they could call up the community engagement representative for the contractors, and he would come out straightaway to look at the problem they had. That meant it was a much more responsive process.

It is not perfect in every area. Not every contractor is getting it right all the time. There is a lot of work to be done in that respect to make sure



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that every single contractor is consistent in its approach to every single community and every individual.

Chair: Thank you.

Q4 **Greg Smith:** Councillor Gaskin, can we start by looking at HS2 Ltd? They have consistently spoken warm words about wanting to be a good neighbour. In your experience, have they been a good neighbour?

Councillor Gaskin: Absolutely not. For us, from the start, it has been what I would describe as a catalogue of errors. One thing I would stress at this stage is, please do not look at me and those I represent as whingeing nimbys. We are all pretty accepting of HS2. Sadly, our worst fears are becoming a reality because, despite all the promises that we were given during the consultation period, things have changed significantly. We have to remember that HS2 Ltd has not even started the main construction yet.

We have seen massive disruption to our communities, local businesses and even to our parish councils. There is an impact on health and wellbeing. I cannot stress enough the overwhelming impact to our area, taking into account all the assurances that were made. There has been non-compliance with the code of construction practice. There are deliberate attempts to hide significant changes from the community. A big one for me is retrospective justification of work that is carried out. In my mind, the whole consultation period that we went through seems to be undermined by all the changes that were enforced immediately after Royal Assent.

We look at the website as a very affected area. The plans that are shown are from 2013 and 2016. Although we see snippets of things that will affect us in our locality, when we actually request more detailed plans of what we are now likely to see because of all the changes, we are told that we are not allowed to see it because of potential espionage. In my mind, that is absolutely ludicrous. As I say, it has been a complete catalogue of errors.

Q5 **Greg Smith:** I hear you on that. Would you give the Committee a few practical examples of the disruption that residents are faced with, both in their everyday lives and indeed in their anxieties about what is coming down the road?

Councillor Gaskin: Yes. I grew up in a city, first of all, so it is probably worth me spending 30 seconds or so just setting the scene, because 90% of the HS2 route is in a rural setting. I have lived in Calvert Green, which is a village, for approximately 16 years. All our villages are completely scattered through north Buckinghamshire.

In my village, we have a shop and that's really it. Things like doctors' surgeries, dentists and the post office are all miles away in other villages. Schools are typically between 2 and 10 miles away. Unlike living in a city where, if there is a road closure or disruption, you take the next turning



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on the left or the next turning on the right, for us a diversion can mean anything up to 10 miles. It can cause complete chaos and actually cut off the entire community.

As was mentioned a moment ago by Deborah, we have seen very late notice, or no notice in some cases, of road closures. These road closures cause significant impact to the community, not just for people getting to and from work but for things like school buses. I have two sons who attend secondary and sixth form. They travel to Buckingham, which is about six miles by school bus. Between September and December, I think they got to school on time probably on only a handful of occasions because of the disruption. There is an impact literally across the board.

It is also impacting the company that operates school buses and other companies in the area. There was one time when I drove to Buckingham and the road was closed, so I took a diversion. On the way back, the diversion I had used to go was completely closed as well. It is complete chaos.

We have to bear in mind the cumulative impact. We have HS2 and also East West Rail. They are supposed to work together but they do not. HS2 often does not know what East West Rail is doing in terms of road closures. There is no continuity whatsoever. That is a real and serious concern at this point in the scheme.

On traffic management issues, from a safety perspective our roads are narrow. They are not lit. They are not gritted. There are no walkways. We do not have kerbs. Mud and the shovelling of verges is causing very serious problems, not just for motorists but for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders because there are no pavements. They are not lit. The situation with mud is so bad that HS2's most recent attempt to handle the situation is to use two road sweepers in tandem.

If you look at the code of construction practice and the route-wide traffic management plan, there are supposed to be things in place for wheel washing and to stop any discharge of mud on to the highway in the first place. These are things that are being looked at and discussed, but they should have been put in place from the start. That was confirmed by the HS2 transport compliance manager, who visited recently. He looked at one of the compounds and said, "Well, there should be more tarmac before you get into the compounds." It is no good talking about it afterwards. Those are things that should have been fundamentally considered from the start.

We have examples from an environmental health perspective. The hum of generators and lighting is distracting. Again, all of these things are covered by the code of construction practice and are clearly in breach of the code of construction practice. We are also seeing speeding vehicles and illegal routes for HGVs. HGVs use residential areas to queue up until they have their slot to get into the compound. They do not show proper



HOUSE OF COMMONS

signage, which is again part of the requirement. Communication is often inconsistent, especially between contractors.

We have had abusive contractors, and intimidating and excessive security. Recently, there was an instance where some work was carried out in Calvert Green. The ratio of security to workers was one to one. We are a small village. You feel like there is a war going on or something.

I have talked a little bit about delays with roads. I also want to mention the impact on mental health and wellbeing. Everybody feels completely drained and run down by the constant challenge. There is an impact on businesses with road closures; they are often cut off because road closures happen without them knowing and it stops them operating.

There is even an impact on parish councils. To give an example, I work full time, and all my parish councillors are volunteers, as is the case with all the parishes in the area, and there is an amount of work that we are having to take on because of the HS2 scheme. About 12 months ago, we were recommended by two different sources to increase our precept and to double the number of hours that our clerk works just because of what is going on in our area, which otherwise would be a normal, sleepy little parish council. There is a massive impact on us.

I touched before on the retrospective works justification. I really find that hard to grasp. Work is done. It is not something that has been planned or communicated, and when you challenge it, sometimes months go by before a report is put together to justify why that work was done, when it should have been transparent up front before the work even commenced. We have also started to see damage to vehicles and property.

Another concern of mine is policing. We are not well served by Thames Valley Police because we are rural. The burden on them now from an HS2 perspective means that they have to have a team of police officers specifically to manage the HS2 situation, and we are getting even more resource taken away from our community needs.

I will leave you with a personal anecdote, if I may. Imagine coming home from work and seeing your front lawn—my lawn—actually spray painted with blue lines and with wooden stakes driven into it. Nobody communicated with me; I knew nothing about it, and at the time HS2 knew nothing about it. Two weeks later, heavy plant turned up trying to dig up the lawn. When my wife challenged them, we were told, “Oh well, we were supposed to do it across the road but we couldn’t gain access, so this looked like a good substitute.” That is what we are up against.

Q6 **Greg Smith:** Thank you very much. That is incredibly helpful evidence, which I hope Mr Thurston is listening to right now. Do you think HS2 Ltd have any control or proper oversight over their contractors at all?

Councillor Gaskin: We are seeing a slight improvement, if I am honest. For me, the big point of today is that I do not want other areas to suffer.



During the enabling work, there is one set of contractors. Then the main contractor comes in. Before the notice to proceed was given, we were dealing, from an engagement perspective, directly with HS2. The moment the notice to proceed was given, all of a sudden we were dealing with different contractors and there was no governance.

It means that if we have complaints about vehicles where they should not be or damage to property, we have to ring individual contractors to try to get to the bottom of whose vehicle it is. That should not be our responsibility. Equally, there isn't a joined-up approach. There are a lot of stories of members of the community who have used the official HS2 line to report things, and not getting any response from it.

Q7 **Greg Smith:** I have one last question in this particular section before we move on to other areas. Like you, I am frustrated when I raise anything to do with HS2. The answer is always, "We'll look into it. We'll get back to you." That often never happens or happens weeks later. What do you think it would take to actually get proper oversight and accountability on this project for communities like Calvert Green?

Councillor Gaskin: Clearly, the parishes cannot do it. We have come together ourselves to try to make it easier to handle the situation. Certainly, in our area there needs to be some sort of sheriff or somebody who is independent and responsible for overseeing what is going on. As I say, there does not appear to be any governance; it is self-policed. HS2 is an Act, and what we are seeing is that land take that was previously planned and was non-disruptive is being changed. Nobody is there to challenge or question it. It is only afterwards, and then it is too late. Basically, I think that would be my response, summing it up.

Greg Smith: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Chair: We are going to look at the impact of construction. Obviously, we have touched on it already, Greg, but I will hand back to you and perhaps we can bring Luci in as well.

Q8 **Greg Smith:** I know that in the Calvert Green area there has been significant loss of woodland. From the Woodland Trust perspective, what have been your experiences of enabling works and where limited construction has already started?

Luci Ryan: It has been really interesting hearing what Mr Gaskin has just been saying because that has been completely our experience as well. In fact, his comments about retrospective justification of works, of works being changed and of works not being like we thought they were going to be through the hybrid Bill, are exactly what I was going to say to you. There is a disconnect between what HS2 understands is happening and what is actually happening on the ground. We have not been able to get timely responses to our questions.

What I look after in terms of ancient woodland is different from what both Phil and Deborah are responsible for, but the experience seems to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

replicated right across the board. From our point of view, we have had assurances breached. We might be in the process of having at least two more breached. When we had the first four assurances breached, it turned out that there was no process in place for dealing with breached assurances. We actually had to raise it when I was giving evidence to the 2a Committee, so that a process was put in place. When HS2 has issued over 3,000 assurances on phase 1, not to actually have a process in place for dealing with assurances if and when they were breached was really alarming.

This is something we have raised right from the beginning. We have been told all the way along that what was in the environmental statements and then going through the hybrid Bill was a worst-case scenario, and that once they got into detailed design it would be improved. What is happening on the ground is that we are seeing breaches of the ecology technical plan. We asked questions about it and, in fact, we ended up having to do a freedom of information request to try to get answers about some works that were done in April because no one would answer our questions. This is not something we do lightly. I had not done a freedom of information request on HS2 for nearly six years before that most recent one. They refused to answer. They refused to answer again. We have now been left in the position of having to go to the Information Commissioner to try to get our questions answered.

I am in a slightly more privileged position than most petitioners because I have monthly meetings with HS2. I can access the Minister. I can access senior management at HS2, but I still cannot get answers to questions. Again, it is the frustration that you go through the hybrid Bill process, which we engaged in all the way along as we were meant to, and we were made various promises and assurances, but then when things do not happen there is no mechanism for holding them to account. There is a governance issue.

Definitely around my area of interest, in woodland, there is a massive disconnect between what HS2 understands to be happening and what is happening on the ground. Not only that, there is massive disconnect between different contractors. There are contractors in the north area who are doing works as I would expect them to do, but the same type of works being done in the south area are not being done in the same way. When we ask questions about it, all I get told is, "Oh, we don't mark our contractors on the ground. The contractors are given a contract and it's up to them how they discharge that contract. All they have to do is discharge it within the law." HS2 does not seem to be aware of what is actually happening.

Q9 **Greg Smith:** Can I ask you briefly the same question I asked of Councillor Gaskin? What do you think would be the best way to tackle this? You and I both have the same experience of constantly asking questions and very rarely getting a clear answer. I very much like Phil's idea of a localised sheriff in each area that has teeth to hold HS2 Ltd and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

their contractors to account. From the Woodland Trust perspective, what would be the answer to the governance problem?

Luci Ryan: I think it would be an independent body of some sort, or an independent person, where you could say, "We thought this was happening and then it is not happening," and feel that it was not disappearing into a big black hole with people saying, "We'll get back to you." There needs to be a single point of contact or something like that.

Greg Smith: That is very helpful; thank you.

Chair: Obviously, we have Members who represent constituencies that will potentially benefit from the development of HS2 much further north than where Phil comes from. I will bring in one of those Members.

Q10 **Robert Largan:** Good morning, witnesses. I am as concerned as anyone to hear some of the stories that you have been telling us this morning. It is essential that they get resolved, but, to play devil's advocate, all infrastructure projects involve disruption. If the disruption was reduced significantly and stakeholder management was improved a lot, to what extent, Councillor Gaskin, do you think the disruption could be justified by improvements in connectivity for places in the midlands and the north? Do you think that overall the project is justified?

Councillor Gaskin: That is an interesting question; I was not expecting that one. I grew up in the midlands. Personally, I think that there are better alternatives. If you look at where HS2 is and what it is doing to benefit the north and the midlands, and Scotland for that matter, from my perspective I think there would be more benefit from investing that money directly to improve infrastructure and connectivity first in the north, and improving some of the existing available routes. There are all sorts of papers and information to support that.

Q11 **Robert Largan:** Can I ask the same question to Ms Ryan?

Luci Ryan: The Woodland Trust is not opposed to high-speed rail. We have serious issues with HS2 in the form it is at the moment. We accept that phase 1 has Royal Assent and works are going ahead, but in our instance, if you are removing irreplaceable habitat, any compensation and works that you are doing should be carried out in accordance with best practice. The problem is that they are not, and that is the issue we have at the moment. The works are not being discharged in the way they said they were going to be discharged.

Q12 **Robert Largan:** That is an important point. This is going ahead, but we definitely want to make certain that the problems that happen with construction and the way that residents are being treated are resolved. I am speaking as a Mancunian who proudly represents the Peak District in the north, but we still need to make certain that this project is delivered in a fair way.

Councillor Gaskin: I want to follow up and quote Philip Hammond from 2010, when he was Secretary of State for Transport. He said that where



HOUSE OF COMMONS

there is a national project in the interest of everyone and it imposes “significant financial loss...it is right and proper that they should be compensated fairly for that loss.” What we are seeing, particularly with landowners and the way that land is being taken from people, is that it is unfair. People are out of pocket, and that should not be the case when it is in the interest of the bigger national good.

Robert Largan: Thank you. Hopefully, we can get some of these issues resolved.

Chair: Councillor Gaskin, we saw that quote in the presentation that you sent to us as well, just to prove that we read it. We are going to touch on the issue of land and property acquisition. We will move from the Peak District to Nottingham, with Lilian Greenwood.

Q13 **Lilian Greenwood:** Thank you, Chair, and good morning to our witnesses. Deborah, issues around acquisition of land and property are fundamental to the work you have been doing. Maybe you could give us an update on how much you think HS2 Ltd is learning the lessons from phase 1 and improving on the situation. Perhaps you could give us a bit of an overview of the work you have been doing and, in particular, the review. That would be a helpful starting point.

Deborah Fazan: I go back to saying that this is unprecedented. I am also an independent commissioner for Hinckley Point down in Somerset. The land take for that project is about 3% of the land take there is for HS2 on phase 1 alone. The scale of this project is unprecedented, and I do not think that should be underestimated.

The new schemes that came in place in 2015 were also unprecedented in what they were trying to do to help the people who were affected by the project. There has been progress throughout the last six years, trying to refine those schemes and to get them better to improve the user experience. I did some work for the then HS2 Minister in 2018, Paul Maynard, to look at the user experience by talking to people who had gone through it. A set of recommendations came out of that, and I am really pleased that the HS2 Minister, Andrew Stephenson, has taken those forward and improved them in his new review, which came out earlier this year.

My fundamental issues are about speed. The two schemes that are in place—the need to sell scheme and the rural support zone scheme—follow a Red Book valuation process so that people can have their houses valued quickly and move on with their lives. The issue with express purchase and compulsory purchase is that it is a negotiated settlement. Two people can take very different positions, and finding a resolution to that without going through a Lands Tribunal can take a very lengthy time period.

One of the things I am keen on is trying to help that process, but it is not necessarily a process that HS2 alone can deal with. It is a policy issue, so in that way it is a departmental issue. There are fundamental changes



that need to be made as well, which go wider than just HS2. It is about changing compensation policy as a whole. The original legislation was set up in the 1960s and 1970s for motorway building. Life has moved on a lot since then. There are no generalised blight schemes available, so, when HS2 brought its schemes in, it was bringing in something completely new and unique.

I think it has set a bar, and I hope it has set a bar below which no infrastructure project will go in the future, and that people will always get, at a minimum, what HS2 has offered. It is not perfect, but, as I say, I think the Minister's review is taking even more steps to get there. One of the biggest issues is that people like to feel in control. The compulsory purchase process does not give you very much of an element of control. There is the introduction of things like the online portal, which is a bit like an Amazon tracking system. You can see where your parcel is. I would like a system so that you can see where your application is at any part of the process. You can see, if you are in conveyancing, what you are waiting for. That is the biggest thing. People do not have the information.

I am encouraged that that is coming on stream. It was one of my earlier recommendations from 2019. Things like fixed disbursements sound simple, but if you have never gone through a compulsory purchase process before, making sure that you have not forgotten anything can be quite difficult. If you have a fixed sum, it wraps it all up for you and says, "This is what you are going to get. We have looked at"—however many—"acquisitions that have gone through. This is an average. It should cover the majority of what you need for the process."

There are some ways that we can make it easier for people who have to go through this. My intention is always to try to help the user experience.

Q14 Lilian Greenwood: Thank you, Deborah. That is a useful summary. It sounds to me that you are saying it has been a difficult process. That is perhaps not surprising given the scale of the challenge. It sounds like things are improving and getting better. Can I ask the other witnesses what their experience is, or what they can share?

Councillor Gaskin: It has been a long challenge for us. We have been suffering for well over a year in terms of contractors in the area. We are starting to see improvements, but it is not consistent. It needs to be managed better. That is probably what I would say on that.

Q15 Lilian Greenwood: Luci, does the Woodland Trust have any comments to make on issues around land and property acquisition?

Luci Ryan: Yes. Obviously, we are not affected in the same way that Phil and Deborah are, but we actually own some woodlands in phase 2b—one that is going to be affected—and we have had HS2 asking for access to sites adjacent to the line to do survey work, which we have agreed to. Our experience, even in that tiny area, has been that we did not find out that the site was directly affected until it appeared in a consultation,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

despite me meeting HS2 on a monthly basis every month for the last goodness knows how many years and informing them where all our sites were. The first we knew that the site was being damaged was when I read it in a consultation. We then negotiated that it was not going to be affected, but just before Christmas I attended another presentation on the 2b refinements to find out once again that it was being affected, but the people giving the presentation did not know we owned it.

We do not take money from HS2 for access because we are actively campaigning, and we do not take money from people we are actively campaigning on, so we said we would like survey results from the surveys that they did on our sites. Despite the first surveys being done over four years ago, we still do not have those survey results. Every time we ask for them, we are told, "We don't know how to get them to you. We don't know how to give them to you. Phone the helpdesk." We have just gone round and round in circles. It is really frustrating.

Q16 Lilian Greenwood: Deborah, are you aware of the issues that Luci and Phil have raised? Are those things that you have also taken action on, or is it outside your remit?

Deborah Fazan: Phil less so, but I am very interested in knowing that Luci is unable to get the results of her surveys. It is not something I am directly involved in, in that it is not directly part of my remit, but it is certainly something I can follow up. Actually, it is not the first time I have heard that people have asked for survey results on their land, but they have been given them. I am not sure why it is different for the Woodland Trust.

Q17 Lilian Greenwood: Deborah, obviously phase 1 is well under way, and land and acquisition has been going on for a number of years. What do the Government and HS2 Ltd—I anticipate from your earlier answers that those are two quite different things—need to do to make sure that the same problems around acquiring land and property are not repeated on phases 2a and 2b, learning from what has happened on phase 1?

Deborah Fazan: There are two things. One is clarity of design. It goes back to a point that Phil made earlier, which is that not having clarity of design means they do not know exactly how much land is wanted. Periodically, I talk to people like the NFU to see how their members are operating. They would like much more clarity and that only one notice comes in rather than a series of notices. One thing that is being looked at is how it can be done better in terms of managing the land acquisition itself, so that it is less piecemeal and more single going forwards.

That has its own risks. Sometimes, until the design is completed you do not know exactly what you need. You can end up otherwise taking more land than you actually need. There is a bit of a double-edged sword in going down that route.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Generally, the whole process is getting better all the time. One of my earlier recommendations was on plain English. A lot of the booklets that came out were, frankly, written in legalese, so that they were not necessarily easy for the lay reader to understand. All of the documentation has now been reviewed by the Plain English Campaign so that it is much more user-friendly.

Some of it is small changes. It is about getting better documentation out there, so there are now new booklets on the compulsory purchase process, on selling your house to HS2 and on what the conveyancing steps are. A lot of my role is about trying to step back, look at it and say, "What can I do that means that, if my mother was affected, she would be able to go through the process more easily than perhaps people have done on phase 1?" It is continuously trying to look at it and saying, "What can we do to make it easier for people?"

Q18 Lilian Greenwood: That is really helpful. Do Phil and Luci want to add anything that the Government or HS2 Ltd need to do to avoid similar problems for people like yourselves, perhaps in the later phases?

Councillor Gaskin: When you asked the question originally, I answered it from a higher level rather than on the detail. It is clearly a difficult and emotive subject. There have been reports on the impact on people that have been involved in the process, and their mental health and wellbeing, which are very tragic to hear.

I would like to identify certain areas, particularly because it is a rural area. A lot of landowners are farmers. There is a lot of focus on permanent land take, but there is no compensation for temporary land take, apart from loss of the actual profit from crops. If you consider what happens when you chop off a farmer's land and it ends up, when you return it, providing just a small parcel of land, that land becomes unworkable and unmanageable. That is not being considered as part of the temporary land take.

The other point is that there are lots of examples of where the temporary land take is increasing and increasing, and some examples of where what was originally designated as temporary land take was then changed at very short notice and suddenly became a permanent land take. I am talking about literally within the last few months. That is a landowner's primary income that has suddenly been changed, but it is also an invasion of their private land.

There are other examples around property valuations, where people have been given property valuations from two and a half years ago through one of the property schemes, but since then residential blight has lowered the property's value, and it has been exacerbated by work that has been required by HS2 to the point where the initial offer should have been properly consulted by HS2. Now the owners are in a position where they are out of pocket and cannot have it revalued based on things that



should have been picked up as part of the surveying process, which was touched on earlier.

We have examples of property damage, when property has been acquired. Hedges have been removed and it has created a very unsafe access point for construction for HS2. They have obviously put things in place to improve that, but they have still left it in an unsafe situation from a security perspective for the landowner. The landowner then struggles because there is no vegetation, so the land starts to flood, and, particularly with the heavy rain we have had, that causes major problems and leaves them with part of their land that is completely unusable.

Q19 Lilian Greenwood: Thanks, Phil. You have made some really important points that need to be taken into account. Luci, from the Woodland Trust perspective, particularly listening to what both Phil and Deborah were saying about wanting clarity but equally the danger that that results in a bigger land take, rather than minimising the amount of land take, is there anything you want to add around what Government and HS2 Ltd should do to learn the lessons and apply them for the later phases of the project?

Luci Ryan: The big issue for us is around temporary land take because the habitats I represent are irreplaceable. You cannot temporarily take an irreplaceable habitat. What we have seen is that the take of veteran trees has been far in excess of what we ever envisaged. In fact, when I have been speaking to local people, we saw issues along the Fosse Way with a huge number of oaks taken out for temporary roads. We have seen issues on Grim's Ditch, where the whole thing was cleared of tree cover. It is that sort of thing. No one appears to have been given the opportunity to consult on it because it seems to happen on the ground when the contractors decide that is what they need to do to discharge their contract.

The overriding theme that I am experiencing, and hearing from others, is that there is a huge disconnect between what HS2 have said they are going to do and what people think is going to happen, and then what the contractors do. It is about trying to narrow the gap, or getting HS2 to know what their contractors are doing on the ground.

Q20 Lilian Greenwood: That is what I was going to say to you. Do you think that HS2 has sufficient control over the way in which the contractors are actually implementing the work? If HS2 has made commitments about trying to minimise the environmental impact, are you suggesting that those are then not carried through because contractors either do not understand or ignore the instructions they have been given, or are they not given detailed enough instructions?

Luci Ryan: I know in the first instance, when the first assurances we had were breached, they were breached because the contractors on the ground had not been properly briefed by HS2, and in fact were unaware of the significance of the site they were working on, or the fact that there



HOUSE OF COMMONS

was even ancient woodland there, or that there were assurances that applied to the site. They unwittingly breached the assurances; they had no idea what had been given because their work package did not contain that information. The HS2 legal team had removed it because they thought the work package was too wordy. I can provide reports on that to support what I am saying.

The other issue is obviously that the contractors are under huge pressure because the project has slipped behind time in a lot of areas. We are seeing, for example, ancient woodland that is being removed at completely the wrong time of year and against all professional standards, which HS2 said they would stick to but are not sticking to. We cannot get an answer as to whether HS2 has authorised that work—that is what our freedom of information request is about at the moment—or whether the contractors just pushed ahead and did it because they needed to get on with the job. We are about to see the same happening in Buckinghamshire because they have fallen behind on works. Again, we will see habitat removed at completely the wrong time of year, which of course increases the environmental impact.

There is an erosion of trust. That is what we are experiencing. We have had to accept that there are things happening that we would not have liked to see happening. We appreciate that it is legal work, and that it needs to go ahead, but it is not being done as it should be done for a flagship Government project. For a Government who are committed to some amazing environmental commitments and with the new Environment Act coming through and COP 26 coming up later this year—

Q21 Lilian Greenwood: It is about ensuring that HS2 Ltd and the Government stick to the commitments they have made and that they have sufficient control.

Luci Ryan: That's it. Exactly.

Q22 Lilian Greenwood: That is an issue we can raise with the Minister. Deborah, the Government have proposed expanding your role to include aftercare and a role in resolving small disputes. How would those changes improve the experience of local residents?

Deborah Fazan: The aftercare surveys are very much building on the work I did for Paul Maynard when he was Minister. It is about talking to people who have gone through the experience. I can step back and look at it from the outside, but when you have gone through it you have a completely different experience. If I can talk to more of the people who have gone through any of the schemes and who have sold their houses, they can give it to me, if you like, from the horse's mouth. I can see it at first hand. It helps to look at where the themes are, when more than one person has had the same experience. Every experience is individual, but if everybody is experiencing a delay at a certain point in the process, it is something we can address. That is the point of that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As regards the smaller value dispute claims, things get stuck. Most things go through fairly easily. You can get free quotes for your removals company. That is a very straightforward one to do. When people, for example, are putting in claims for their own personal time, those things are much more difficult to quantify and much more difficult to provide evidence for. It is about trying to unlock some of the smaller things to help people get their claims settled more quickly.

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you very much.

Q23 **Chair:** Karl, if you would allow me—not that you’ve said you wouldn’t—I want to carry on with this theme. Deborah, don’t take this the wrong way about you personally, but I want to ask Luci and Phil whether they think the residents’ commissioner role has sufficient bite or teeth to really hold HS2 to account and represent communities that feel impacted in the way you have described.

Luci Ryan: The work that I do does not cross over very much with the role of Deborah, although by the sound of it I should be talking to Deborah slightly more about some of the things that I have discussed this morning. I don’t feel in a position to comment because what I represent is not residents; it is the environment. I do not think I am best placed to comment.

Councillor Gaskin: Again, I have not personally worked with Deborah, but there is so much going on in our communities that it needs a team of people. As I mentioned earlier, we need somebody with a responsibility that can be accountable.

I would personally like to see an independent review of what is happening on the ground as well. That would be key to identifying some of these things. At the end of the day, I am not making all this stuff up. It is going on. Somebody needs to see it and understand that it cannot continue to go on as the scheme rolls out through the country.

Chair: It is quite telling in a way that neither of you has had involvement with Deborah’s role, but you both have issues with HS2 that you do not feel are being addressed. Maybe you have answered it in that way.

Karl will now talk about mitigations and costs.

Q24 **Karl McCartney:** I have two initial questions to the residents’ commissioner. We might be able to entice Ms Ryan and Councillor Gaskin to have some thoughts on the second.

Deborah, the first question is, as the hybrid Bill made its way through Parliament, various measures were introduced to mitigate the environmental and visual impact of HS2. This is quite general, but they have resulted in HS2 costing more than other high-speed lines. Can the Government afford to make the same concessions to those affected on future phases?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Deborah Fazan: I do not think that is necessarily a question that I can really answer. It is more a question that needs to go to the chief executive, to be honest, in terms of cost. My role is to hold HS2 accountable for the 10 community commitments.

If I can pick up on the previous question that was asked by the Chair, there is also an independent construction commissioner. I think that he is certainly aware of some of the construction issues, and perhaps he needs to be brought in more. He is Sir Mark Worthington. I am not sure whether you are aware of his role.

Q25 **Karl McCartney:** I am going to rephrase part of my question for you. Thank you for answering the Chair's question. Right at the very start you mentioned that there were only a few people involved in your role, whereas now in dealing with stakeholders and consultation there are now 100-plus people. There is obviously a cost involved with that, both financial and time. Do you think that is going to be replicated for the future phases of HS2?

Deborah Fazan: I do not know whether it will be, but I know that it should be. The communities are the most important part of this to me. Nobody asked for HS2. HS2 is going through every one of their communities, and every one of the individuals and their communities should be treated with the respect that they deserve. If it is not there, it certainly should be.

The other thing I would like to say about the contractors is that HS2 is very strong on being a good neighbour. It is one of the things that it wants to do and it is one of the questions that it asks. It even has a good neighbour programme that everybody in the company who is public facing looks to take. I would like that rolled out to the contractors, so that every contractor who comes on to the project knows what being a good neighbour means to HS2 in practice. They should get the HS2 values in place as well.

Q26 **Karl McCartney:** I understand that, but warm words butter no parsnips. In my mind, it all comes down to money. What sanctions are there if HS2 gets things wrong or the contractors get things wrong? What sanctions are put on them? Are they fined?

Deborah Fazan: You would need to ask the HS2 Minister that. I am afraid that is not for me. I do not have the power or the control to fine anybody.

Q27 **Karl McCartney:** But when an issue is brought to your attention, what happens to it?

Deborah Fazan: I can make it publicly known that the issue has happened in the way that I have with Burton Green. It is about publicly shaming, if you like.

Q28 **Karl McCartney:** Do you think there should be a fines commissioner?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Deborah Fazan: I am not suggesting that for a moment. There are other ways of doing it. I am not sure how fines would help in a project funded by the taxpayer, because you are looking at a different movement of taxpayer money.

Q29 **Karl McCartney:** It might focus the contractor's mind to make sure they think properly the first time rather than being told to do something and actually deciding to ignore that and crack on with making a mess, as they have done, of people's front lawns.

Deborah Fazan: I think that is a question for the Minister or the independent construction commissioner to look at. As I say, he looks at construction complaints, which are beyond my remit.

Q30 **Karl McCartney:** Phil or Luci, do you have any comments on the second question I asked Deborah?

Councillor Gaskin: I am all in favour of penalties because that changes behaviour. What we have seen over the previous months is repeats of the same thing over and over again, which is why parish councillors have had to intervene to try to stop these things. I would be all for that.

Luci Ryan: From my point of view, I would like to see HS2 being more accountable for what their contractors are doing instead of telling people that the contractors are just responsible for discharging the contracts within the law, and, if they don't, that that is an issue for the contractors. There is a disconnect between HS2 taking responsibility for what their own contractors are doing and accepting that some of the contractors are not doing a very good job.

Q31 **Karl McCartney:** My final question covers some of the ground that we have gone across already. Certainly, Councillor Gaskin mentioned that management was an issue.

We have heard from Deborah that improvements have been made over recent years, from when she started in the role until now. Could HS2 Ltd and the Government improve how they communicate and engage even better with communities and environmental groups about the trade-offs that are made? What other improvements do you think could be brought into being that you have not mentioned already?

Luci Ryan: From our point of view, as I say, I am in a slightly privileged position compared with most petitioners or people affected by this, because I have regular meetings with HS2. Despite that, our issue is that they are not doing the bare minimum in many cases of what they were committing to through the hybrid Bill or through our assurances. In terms of assurances, they are not proactive at all in saying, "Luci, here are the documents you require as part of the assurance." I have to chase endlessly.

Holding them to account in the case of ensuring that they have protected species licences in place takes time, and it should not be the job of an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

NGO to constantly ask HS2, "Are you adhering to the law?" That is the situation that we find ourselves in. It is not a situation I take any pleasure from. It is taking up all of my working time at the moment to hold them to account. I do not think that is a role that an NGO should take on board. I should be confident that a Government project is adhering to the bare minimum of the law and to the commitments they have made during the hybrid Bill—

Q32 Karl McCartney: I am going to move on to Councillor Gaskin. On behalf of your parishioners, do you feel the same frustrations as Luci?

Councillor Gaskin: Absolutely. I do not think I could say it much better than that, to be honest.

Q33 Karl McCartney: I have finished my questions. Deborah, do you want to come back on anything before I hand back to the Chair?

Deborah Fazan: The only thing is that the main point I recognise as well is that there is a difficulty when there are two main works contracts that overlap within the same area. Each main works contract can be looked at as a single package, but for communities they overlap and that can be a significant difficulty. Mr Gaskin touched on it earlier with East West Rail and HS2, but it is also the same with the two works packages. That is somewhere you need aggressive oversight, as well as an oversight of different contracts.

Karl McCartney: Thank you to the three of you for answering my questions and the Chair's previous one.

Chair: Karl, thank you for getting my answer as well. We are close to time, but the final section is on the impact of construction on woodland and biodiversity.

Q34 Ruth Cadbury: This is to Luci of the Woodland Trust. The HS2 track has to be built in a straight line because it has such a high operational speed. This has restricted the ability for HS2 to better serve communities or, indeed, to prevent the line from going through areas of ancient woodland. The Minister told us in June that reducing the operational speed of HS2 would result in it being "worse value for money." To what extent should the Government look to reduce the speed of HS2 in order to preserve ancient woodland?

Luci Ryan: Speed is slightly outside my remit, but on phase 1 and phase 2a we were told that the line could not be moved because of issues of speed. Obviously, it has to travel straight and it cannot be wiggled because you cannot travel at those speeds if it wiggles.

If the speeds were reduced, say, on phase 2b there is potential there. On phase 1 and phase 2a, phase 1 has Royal Assent and phase 2a almost has Royal Assent, so in both cases it would be either additional hybrid Bills or additional provisions. I cannot see from a practical point of view that that would work on those two phases.



The biggest issue is how we have ended up in the situation on phase 1, particularly with the number of ancient woodlands impacted, where HS2 failed to identify all the ancient woodlands that were going to be impacted, and only identified 18 in the draft environmental statement. It was not until after years of arguing about the other ones that were affected that they finally accepted that they were, by which point you cannot redesign the scheme. Unfortunately, while on phase 2a and phase 2b HS2 has been much better at identifying where the ancient woodland was, just identifying it is not good enough. You then have to put in place compensation measures or engineering solutions, like tunnelling, to avoid it.

Unfortunately, what we are seeing in phase 2b in the latest round of consultation, despite us having consulted on this for years and years, is that the amount of ancient woodland impacted has increased again. That is where our frustration lies. The baseline was never adequate in the first place. That is how we consider we have ended up in this situation.

Ruth Cadbury: Thank you very much.

Q35 **Simon Jupp:** My questions are to all the panel. We know that vast stretches of ancient woodland have been felled to make way for HS2 already. What lessons should be learned as a result of the felling that has taken place so far? Can we start with Deborah?

Deborah Fazan: My remit does not really encompass ancient woodland specifically. I suppose what it encompasses is where communities are affected because an amenity is removed. It will be looking at it in amenity terms. I am not sure that I am the best person to answer this, to be honest with you. As I say, it is rather outside my remit.

Q36 **Simon Jupp:** But you must have had responses from residents in relation to the issue that you have taken on board as part of your role.

Deborah Fazan: Not particularly. As I say, ancient woodland is not an area that generally has come to me in my role dealing with land and property owners and communities in general.

Q37 **Simon Jupp:** The same question to Councillor Gaskin, if I may.

Councillor Gaskin: First, I concur with what Luci said. If you look at the north of Buckinghamshire, the route of HS2 is literally a dot-to-dot of ancient woodlands and sites of special scientific interest and nature reserves. It is tragic.

There has been a lot of land take that has been cleared well in advance. There has been vegetation clearance, in my opinion, too far in advance, only for the contractors to realise that the detailed design has changed, and they no longer need that amount of woodland. You cannot put it back, but then sometimes, to make matters worse, they need additional land because the plans have changed. Not only do you end up with space



that is bigger than was required, but they then take more land because the design has changed.

A good example of that is the site for the infrastructure maintenance depot. The detailed design is not even out for that. Now, the changes that have been made to the HS2 scheme—changing the line height and the type of rail support so that it is now no longer ballast but concrete—all have an impact on reducing the size of the infrastructure maintenance depot, yet all of the damage has already been done.

Luci Ryan: From our point of view, what has been extraordinarily disappointing is that the first four ancient woodlands that were removed earlier last year in Warwickshire were done at completely the wrong time of year. If you are going to do this, setting aside that the Woodland Trust would have liked it avoided, it should be done according to professional guidance and professional standards in late autumn or early winter, but it wasn't; it was done in April, which increases the environmental impact. The contractors employed to do it had no experience of doing it. In fact, they had never even visited an ancient woodland translocation site.

One of the woods that was removed was the largest single area of ancient woodland on phase 1, and we think we are about to see the same thing happening on some of the woods in Buckinghamshire, because the works have fallen behind schedule for whatever reason. I cannot say at the moment, because we do not have answers from HS2 as to why this has happened. Now they are telling us that these woodlands might be removed in quarter two and quarter three next year, which again is not recognised by any professional standard. It is the wrong time of year.

They are already impacting on biodiversity by removing irreplaceable habitat, but then making it worse by doing it outside the season it should be done when the impact is even greater. It is frustrating. We had to accept that this was happening, but that it would be done to the best professional standards, and then it is not.

Q38 **Simon Jupp:** I am well aware of time, and I hope we are going to get some of the answers to some of the questions you have posed in the next session. Luci, do you believe that HS2 Ltd and its contractors have kept to best practice so far? I can guess the answer, but I would like to hear it from you.

Luci Ryan: No.

Q39 **Simon Jupp:** Have you had clarity on which ancient woodlands might be felled next, or any inkling so far? You hinted at that in your last answer.

Luci Ryan: No. I can tell you categorically that they have not adhered to best practice, and it looks like that is going to happen again, which is of grave concern. HS2 have to let me know of works within 100 metres of ancient woodland. They gave us a list earlier this year of the woods that were due to come out. Some of those woods have not come out because there have been issues around protected species licences that were



subsequently required and are being applied for at the moment. I know more or less which woods are going to come out. I do not necessarily know when they are going to come out.

Simon Jupp: Thank you. I will hand back to the Chair, and we look forward to the answers in the next section.

Q40 **Chair:** Luci, can I finish this section with you? I think your call is for a replacement tree ratio of 30 trees for every one lost, that there is no reduction of ancient woodland for temporary works, that all the replacement species should be native to the UK or Ireland, and that all of it should be bound by undertakings. Is that with precedent? Is it reasonable? Are you getting anywhere with HS2 with that call?

Luci Ryan: If you are removing irreplaceable habitat, whatever compensation you put in place should be comparable to what is being removed and should be at a higher level than what would be referred to as replaceable habitat. Natural England has supported our call for 30 to one, but so far that has not been committed to.

On the UK and Irish-sourced and grown issue, it is not that we expect all trees to be native but that we expect all the trees to be produced and grown—so that is seed and grown—within the United Kingdom and Ireland. The reason for that is biosecurity measures so as not to bring in diseases from overseas. For example, ash dieback came in that way.

We are not asking HS2 to do anything that we are not already doing. Every tree that the Woodland Trust plants—in the last planting season we planted 4 million in the last year, far more than HS2 are ever going to plant in a season—is UK or Irish sourced and grown. If we can do it as a relatively small NGO, I do not see why HS2 cannot do it.

We asked for all our assurances to be converted to binding undertakings because of the issues we have had with assurances being breached. We want more ability to hold HS2 to account. At the moment, we still have our assurances as assurances and not as binding undertakings.

Chair: That has given us enough to take into the next session. Thank you. Councillor Gaskin, you had your hand up. Greg will ask you the last question.

Q41 **Greg Smith:** We are coming towards the end of this half of the session, and the evidence we have heard has been incredibly useful and powerful. Could I ask you all if there is anything we have not covered that you want to bring up? Councillor Gaskin in particular, in the presentation that you sent the whole Committee you had a slide on the million-pound environmental mitigation fund, of which your final bullet point is “Currently stalled with no HS2 movement.” Would you be able to elaborate on what, in particular, the parish’s ask is around that, which would be relevant to other parishes up and down the route?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Councillor Gaskin: Yes, of course. First of all, we were very fortunate in being recognised in part of the consultation period as being heavily impacted by the scheme. As a consequence, four parishes were awarded a pot of mitigation fund money of £1 million. We agreed to split it equally through the parishes, and we have done that. The problem is around access to it and the scope of it, particularly as the description of the fund, once we were actually awarded it, was for environmental mitigation, which, to be honest, is what HS2 should be delivering as part of the actual scheme itself.

I accept that you could look at doing additional stuff. The challenge we have as communities is that the impact on us, and the cost that we are seeing, is nothing to do with environmental impact. It is caused by the environmental impact of HS2 but we are unable to access that money to spend for the benefits of the communities that will be blighted and are being blighted by the construction of the HS2 line itself, and of course the IMD as well.

Q42 **Greg Smith:** Luci, is there any last contribution from you?

Luci Ryan: My overriding issue is the fact that if the compensation for ancient woodland loss was translocation, which is an unproven technique, and that if HS2 were going to commit to that and keep pushing that it is somehow better or a good thing to do if you are removing ancient woodland, they should do it following best practice, which they have not done in a number of cases.

Q43 **Greg Smith:** Deborah, is there anything that has not been covered that you would like to bring up?

Deborah Fazan: Only to reiterate my point about consistency; every contractor needs a consistent and good approach towards the community so that it is a good neighbour to all of them, which at the moment, as we can see from the other witnesses, is not what is happening.

Greg Smith: On that terrible disappointment, back to the Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Luci, Deborah and Phil, for all the evidence that you have given to us. It has been incredibly helpful. As you can see, the Minister, Mark Thurston and Clive Maxwell have listened intently to the last part.

Councillor Gaskin, I particularly thank you. You have represented not just the parishes of Calvert Green, Charndon, Edgcott, Twyford and Steeple Claydon, but all of those impacted on the line of route as well. It has been very disturbing to hear, but we are very grateful because you have really brought the issues alive. I hope you feel that you have had a hearing from us today. You have certainly taken more time than we had allocated because it was so important to hear it.

I wish all three of you the very best at this difficult time. Thank you again.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Stephenson MP, Clive Maxwell and Mark Thurston.

Q44 **Chair:** Let us move on to our second panel. We will go through the introductions for the record.

Andrew Stephenson: Good morning, Chair. I am Andrew Stephenson, the Minister for high-speed rail.

Clive Maxwell: I am Clive Maxwell, the director general for high-speed and major rail projects in the Department.

Mark Thurston: I am Mark Thurston, chief executive of HS2 Ltd.

Q45 **Chair:** Good morning to all three of you. I am sorry we were 15 minutes late starting off. We are grateful for your indulgence.

Minister and Mr Thurston, it has been nine months since we last questioned you both. What are the key milestones that have been achieved with the project in that nine-month period?

Andrew Stephenson: Since we last met in April, there has been a whole range of milestones. Obviously, the No. 1 priority of the Government and the DFT has been responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, but we have been able to get on with achieving significant progress with high-speed rail at the same time. Over the course of the past nine months, we have seen a strengthening of governance with the monthly ministerial taskforce meeting regularly to discuss issues arising. We have seen the appointment of new non-exec directors. Obviously, with notice to proceed happening in April, the Prime Minister marked the official start of construction himself out on site in Birmingham in September.

There have been many other things to highlight. In particular, my first six-monthly report to Parliament provided a good update on where we were on things like cost and schedule. The land and property review, which the residents' commissioner mentioned, is something that I am pleased we were able to get lots of feedback on from Members of Parliament and other stakeholders to come up with 36 good recommendations as to how we could improve that process.

There has been a lot of progress on phase 1. The House of Lords has finished consideration of the 2a build. That will come back to the Commons shortly for Commons consideration of Lords amendments. There is progress on a number of fronts.

Q46 **Chair:** Mr Thurston, do you have anything to add? Are you satisfied with progress over the last nine months?

Mark Thurston: We have made good progress, Chair, physically on the project. There are now some 13,000 people employed across the country on HS2. There are probably some 2,000 organisations; 95% of those are UK companies and about 70% of them are SMEs, so there is an economic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

impact from the investment in HS2. We have about 250 sites open. We slowed down our work in March last year once we had come to terms with the impact of the virus, but the contractors have continued to open up more sites.

On the point the Minister made—I was on site with the Prime Minister in September—we are on a big campaign now to bring some 20,000 new jobs into HS2 over the next couple of years. As an employer and an enterprise for the country, we have undertaken a lot of work. We have over 400 apprentices working on HS2, and somewhere in excess of £12 billion of contracts. At that scale, we have made good progress, building on the back of the Oakervee review, which only concluded just over a year ago.

Physically on the ground, you may have seen some of the press coverage. Our first set of tunnelling machines is in the country. They go into the ground in May. The second two are en route to go under a woodland, interestingly. I know that we will come back to woods in light of the earlier session. The next two are on their way for the London tunnels.

We have put the first two permanent pieces of infrastructure in place in the midlands, one over the M42 and one over the A446 in Solihull. Two million tonnes of steel have been ordered, and of course we have been on a big tree-planting campaign. We will talk about it, but about 430,000 trees have now been planted along the route as part of the wider mitigation of the works that we are doing. There will be about 700,000 by the spring. There has been a big ecology programme, as we have been removing woodland, to plant back, and that will continue. We have the target of 7 million trees, which we will go at year over year for the next few years.

There has been a lot of good physical progress. Frankly, we would be pleased to be where we are anyway. We have had a particularly wet winter this year, and that continues to prevail. Of course, we have had the headwind of the pandemic as well. It is to the credit of the supply chain that we have covered quite a lot of ground.

Q47 Chair: Thank you, Mr Thurston. Obviously, we are going to touch on some of the issues that were brought up in evidence beforehand.

I should thank you, Minister, because you included the Committee in the design of the six-month report that you have given to Parliament. How do you feel that went down with parliamentarians? Is there anything in the process that you might tweak or change for your next report?

Andrew Stephenson: It is a good question. Thank you for the feedback that you and other members of the Committee gave me when we were drawing up how that report should be framed. The Public Accounts Committee also contributed to that process.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We were able to put forward a comprehensive statement covering some of the key points. I was disappointed that some in the media took some of the things that we said there out of context. For example, we talked about £800 million-worth of cost pressures and explained what they were. Immediately, sections of the media turned that into £800 million of additional cost and that we had blown the budget, and various other headlines flowed from that.

There is always a challenge. I am very clear that I want to be more transparent than ever before with Parliament about the programme. I am keen to look at how we can improve and put even more information out there in my next six-monthly report. Sometimes, we will have to caveat some of the information even more clearly to avoid the misinterpretations that some put on it, as we sadly saw with the first parliamentary report.

Chair: Thank you. We hope that is not at the cost of transparency. We know you are committed to that, notwithstanding the headlines. Let's open up to Members. First of all, things having changed in terms of rail passenger numbers, we are going to look at the practicalities or otherwise of HS2 going ahead.

Q48 **Greg Smith:** Good morning to the witnesses. There is a petition—another petition—circulating at the moment and gaining a lot of traction. It will almost certainly get to the point where there will be another parliamentary debate on the viability of HS2.

All opinion polling that we have seen still shows there to be a lot of hostility to the project in the country. Minister, you told Parliament in October that so far just under £10 billion has been spent on High Speed 2, and another £11.5 billion has been contracted. What would actually be the cost to the country and the taxpayer of stopping HS2 now compared with what would be saved by not continuing it?

Andrew Stephenson: At the broadest level, the most immediate impact would be the loss of about 13,000 directly employed people and then tens of thousands in the supply chain. You are correct with the figures, which I gave Parliament in my six-monthly report, about what has been spent. They are the figures for what has been spent on phase 1, I think. We are at about 50% of the target cost price of £40 billion having been either spent or now contracted for phase 1.

If we were to scrap the project at this stage, it is unclear how much of that money would be recoverable. It is unclear whether any assets could be sold. Obviously, there has been a significant amount of land and property bought. At a time when we are going through global turmoil, it would send a terrible signal globally about the UK intending to build back better from Covid if our first reaction to the Covid pandemic was to cancel a major infrastructure project, which has been talked about and committed to by successive Governments for more than a decade. I think that would have a chilling impact on the construction sector in the UK. It would also have a chilling impact on inward investment. It is hard to



quantify what the exact cost would be of stopping the programme now, but it is certainly something that I would very strongly advise against.

Q49 Greg Smith: On that point, it was reported a few days ago in the media and across social media that Mr Oakervee had made some comments at an event in which he suggested that the biggest driver for his recommendation to proceed with HS2 was in fact nothing to do with rail capacity whatsoever. He said the dominant factor was essentially a bail-out to the construction industry. Is that fair? Given what you have just said about building back better and the building of an infrastructure project, is it a fair thing to say that the Government's focus on this is as a construction project and not particularly what will come after it, which is a new railway?

Andrew Stephenson: I simply do not recognise those comments. If we think about the Oakervee review and the timeframe that took, and then the Cabinet's decision to proceed with high-speed rail, that was in February; the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons was on, I think, 11 February. That was before the Covid pandemic, so the decision was taken without knowing the impacts of Covid. At the same time, at that stage, there was absolutely no need for the Government to give a bail-out or additional support to the construction sector. The Government already give significant support to the construction sector through public procurement, particularly for housebuilding programmes and others.

I would not suggest that that was a motivating factor in either Doug Oakervee's review or in the Cabinet discussions that flowed from it. Certainly now, when we look at the programme, there are 13,000 people directly employed, and many thousands more will be recruited this year as the main works civils ramp up and get ready to start delivering the project. Therefore, if you now think of cancellation, it is right at this stage for us to reflect on the impact that would have on the construction sector and on the 2,000 businesses already involved, the majority of which are SMEs. It is worth thinking about the whole picture that we now live in. Yes, you can argue that Covid has impacted the business case, but if you look at the importance to us of building back better and of the levelling up agenda, and infrastructure projects being part of our way to recover as a nation, I think the case for HS2 has in many ways been strengthened rather than undermined.

Q50 Greg Smith: Minister, I understand the case for the protection or growth of the construction industry around it. However, what we are fundamentally talking about is the building of a railway. Although the decision was taken before Covid struck, what has been the latest modelling on where demand will be for HS2 passengers in five or 10 years after it is built, given what we have seen happen to rail numbers throughout this pandemic? There are projections that potentially up to one in five existing rail services will not survive it, let alone a new one. Where does the modelling sit on that now?



Andrew Stephenson: Fundamentally, the strategic case for HS2 is about joining up the biggest cities of England, and ultimately reducing journey times through to Scotland. I think that strategic case still holds sway. If you look at various parts of the world that have suffered from pandemics in the past, you still see urbanisation in those countries. You still see a desire of people to move to and live in cities.

Who knows what the outcome of Covid-19 will be? It could change the global megatrend we have seen for a number of decades, but it is far too early to say. Personally, I still see many people, particularly younger people, wanting to live in our cities. In our lifetime, we have seen the rebirth of many of the northern cities—places like Manchester and Leeds—where hardly anyone used to live in city centres, but they have now become desirable places to live. I cannot see that changing because of Covid.

We are constantly modelling the impacts. It is worth saying that the full business case in April had low demand and high demand scenarios. It is still too early to say exactly what the impact of Covid-19 will be. I certainly hope to say more in my six-monthly report. I am sure we will be saying more in the full business cases for things like phase 2a. This will be something we intend to set out our thinking on in the months to come. At the moment, with the ending of the current crisis still unclear, it is too early for us to produce modelling with any sort of accuracy.

Q51 **Greg Smith:** When does the Department for Transport next intend to model capacity or demand for HS2 passenger numbers? I accept the point that it is difficult to predict. Hopefully, we will be through Covid by mid-February, if the most vulnerable can be vaccinated by then. When is the Department next going to model those numbers?

Andrew Stephenson: We are looking at the emerging evidence and the emerging trends. Because they are published when investment decisions are taken, I think the next time we will probably publish a full business case will be if Parliament gives Royal Assent to the 2a Bill, taking the line from the west midlands to Crewe. Then we will be in the process of publishing a full business case. That will have to have the justification for continuing the line to Crewe. We will also have to revise some of the assumptions in the full business case for the BCR and various other indicators of the full network as then posed. Again, that is subject to the outcome of the integrated rail plan, which the Government still have not published.

There are lots of things that we are going to hear about in the coming weeks and months that will influence that. I think that will be the moment when we have to set out in a full business case, and a rational economic case, why HS2 still makes sense, with the investment decision not just to continue with phase 1, but why extending the line up to Crewe makes economic sense.

Greg Smith: Thank you.



Q52 Lilian Greenwood: Good morning to our witnesses. Minister, I think you have just explained why you think there is still a clear case for pressing ahead with HS2 despite the current low demand for rail. I appreciate that we do not yet know what the long-term impacts of Covid will be on people's working patterns and other things.

In the longer term, we could see that demand for rail has either fallen or has changed, and people may end up making longer journeys to work but work for fewer days per week. We could see a shift, and we still have expected population growth and the need for getting to net zero. Do you think that might result in you making substantive changes to the design or the scope of the project, particularly in the later phases?

Andrew Stephenson: It is important that we keep all of these projects under review in the light of emerging evidence. At the same time, it is important that we give stakeholders and businesses across the country certainty as to what the Government are going to do.

The integrated rail plan is admittedly delayed from the end of last year. Hopefully, we will have the outcome of that soon. One of the main rationales behind it is to give a clear steer to industry and others as to direction of travel on major projects, not just high-speed rail but Northern Powerhouse Rail and other major transport investments in the midlands and the north.

On HS2, the key point, adding to what I have already said, is that it is an investment for the long term. It is about modal shift. It is about freeing up the existing network to allow more freight and different journeys, and to allow easier improvements to an already congested conventional rail network. The target date for the opening of phase 1 is 2030, but it is much later than that for the full network. This is an investment for the country that should be delivering passenger benefits not just for the next few years but for the next 50, 100 and 150 years. It is a long-term investment. In any decisions taken about changing scope, that should always be borne in mind.

Q53 Lilian Greenwood: Thank you for that. One of the things that has perhaps changed in recent months is the great support that is being provided to improve cycling. There has been uncertainty about what is happening to the commitments to cycle-proof the HS2 rail route, with lack of clarity about whether there is funding for the HS2 cycleway. Can you update us on what the plans are for ensuring that we maximise the benefit of building this new rail route while also supporting improved cycling and, indeed, walking and other forms like the use of electric scooters on cycle routes?

Andrew Stephenson: It is a very important point and something that I have received inquiries about from Downing Street, considering how close it is to the Prime Minister's heart. Plans for cycling have been integrated into the HS2 design. This is something that has been looked at for a long time. Now that we have got to the point of main works construction, a lot



of the detailed designs are being refined, but I have been very clear—as have others—that we need to focus on cycling and on other local community benefits. We have heard from many communities, and obviously from the parish council chairman in Buckinghamshire. These communities will not see the benefits of HS2 in the way that those living in Birmingham, Manchester or London will, because the train just passes by them in a split second.

What can we do to further mitigate the impact of the blight on their communities? Sometimes, investing in cycling infrastructure or improving local road infrastructure, so that there is a positive legacy once construction is finished, is really important.

Q54 Lilian Greenwood: Are the DfT or HS2 Ltd committed to providing that cycleway? Is there funding for it to be alongside the whole of the HS2 route?

Andrew Stephenson: The last update I had on cycleways was that there were 11 sites being looked at from different local authorities. The estimated work to support those 11 sites was around £1 million, with £400,000 of contingency. We are currently looking at that, but I am certainly very favourable to supporting it. It is a small ask in order to boost active travel and cycling. Certainly, if you consider the amount of money that has been set aside in the spending review to support active travel, I see no reason why we cannot support those projects and ensure that we fully maximise accessibility and the benefits for cyclists along the line of route.

Lilian Greenwood: I am not sure that sounds like a commitment to a cycleway along the whole of the HS2 route. I hope that you will continue to look at that, not least for the reason, as you say, that it provides a huge benefit to parts of the route where, perhaps, the rail benefits are less clear. Thank you, Chair.

Q55 Karl McCartney: My first question is probably quite a quick one. First to Clive, Mark and then the Minister, Andrew. We have just had a very informative first session with some people who are very close to the ground. How much of that session did each of the three of you pay attention to? Clive? All, part or none?

Clive Maxwell: Most.

Q56 Karl McCartney: You should be a politician.

Clive Maxwell: There was a brief period when they started when I was not connected up, but about two thirds of it.

Q57 Karl McCartney: Mark?

Mark Thurston: I caught most of it, yes.

Q58 Karl McCartney: Good. Andrew?

Andrew Stephenson: I was here throughout on silent.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q59 Karl McCartney: Brilliant. Thank you very much indeed. Moving on, just before the Christmas break we listened to Network Rail. They have managed to bring some works forward. How confident are you that the opening of phase 1 from Old Oak Common will not be delayed beyond 2033? Have you managed to bring some works forward? Will it open early? Are we still aiming for 2033, or has it slipped?

Mark Thurston: The target date, as the Minister has said, is 2030. That has not changed. We are mobilising the civils contractors. They have hit all their major milestones in the last nine months, which is pleasing considering some of the challenges they have had. As I said, the next big milestone for us is to get those tunnelling machines in the ground in the spring and to maintain that schedule. No one is under any illusion as to the scale of what is in front of us in the next 10 years, but we are still looking to achieve that date.

Q60 Karl McCartney: Anything to add from either the Minister or Clive?

Andrew Stephenson: I agree with what Mark said. I think we are on course for 2030 from Old Oak Common to the west midlands. There are challenges and pressures that we identified in my six-monthly report about the opening of Euston and ensuring that we get Euston right. The delivery into service date for the entirety of phase 1 could come under pressure if we do not get a solution to Euston sorted out quickly. It is not under pressure yet, but it is a risk that the Committee should be aware of.

Clive Maxwell: We have very deliberately set a range for the opening period, recognising the fact that in planning for these sorts of projects we set a target date, which the Minister talked about. There is a range that provides contingency for exactly the sorts of issues that you have raised.

Q61 Karl McCartney: Thank you. Based on the work that has been done so far—we realise the pandemic threw up all sorts of different things that perhaps neither you nor your contractors were expecting—have there been any cost increases? If there have been any, can they be met within the contingency that you have been delegated?

Andrew Stephenson: We are still working on that, and I hope to say more about it in my next six-monthly report in April.

Karl McCartney: Oh, you tease.

Andrew Stephenson: The costs of Covid that have been incurred are currently being looked at. HS2 is doing a piece of work on that. Similarly, the Department is looking at it. During the pandemic, we have seen contractors working in more flexible and different ways in order to make up time and ensure that costs are not incurred. At the same time, it is clear that there may have been some costs incurred that are unavoidable. We are very keen to scrutinise that. It has already been scrutinised a couple of times by the monthly ministerial taskforce across Government Ministers, with Ministers from Cabinet Office, Treasury, DFT



and others coming together to look at and really challenge those costs. If costs arise, obviously we will then have to look at how that is drawn from contingency. At the moment, a lot of the contractors are working incredibly hard to ensure that, whatever those costs are, they are kept to an absolute minimum.

Q62 **Karl McCartney:** Thank you for the detail that you gave us within that answer. Do Clive or Mark have anything to add?

Mark Thurston: I think the Minister covered it. The only thing I would add is that we were probably hoping that as we went into the first quarter of this year the worst of the virus would be behind us, and we would be able to put our arms around the full impact. Clearly, it continues to be a fluid situation. To the Minister's point, we will continue to bear down on that. Credit to the contractors: they are doing everything to work around the conditions of the lockdown and the like, to ensure that we minimise the costs. I think the Minister is right. It is appropriate to give some update to Parliament on that in his next report. It is something that we are very alive to.

Karl McCartney: Thank you, all three of you.

Q63 **Chair:** Karl mentioned phase 1 opening from Old Oak Common in 2033. The dates we have seen range between 2029 and 2033, hence Karl's reference to that date. Minister and Mr Thurston, you touched on 2030. Is the date baked in now as 2030, or is that four-year range still applicable?

Andrew Stephenson: The four-year range is the most applicable—2029 to 2033—and is publicly what we are saying, but similar to us having a target cost for the project, we have a target date. The target date for the opening of Old Oak Common to the west midlands is 2030. I hope to report in my six-monthly report on any slippage from that date. It is most accurate, when we are talking about this, still to give the full range because we have seen with Crossrail and other major projects in the past how holding firm to one date, and political pressure never to deviate from a date, can have perverse impacts on the project. The range is still the most accurate way of describing it, but the target date and what we are hoping and working towards is 2030.

Chair: Thank you; that is very helpful. We will update our books accordingly. We are going to come back to some of the cost implications of Euston and also of phase 2, but we have had some powerful evidence from the communities and organisations impacted by HS2, and we would like to touch on some of that with you.

Q64 **Chris Loder:** Good morning, everybody. First of all, I would like to touch on land and property acquisition and then move over to the impact on local communities. Minister, in respect of the published land and property review in November, could you tell us a little bit about the material benefits for individuals, businesses and farmers as a result of the review?

Andrew Stephenson: The review looked at the land and property acquisition programme. I worked closely with Deborah Fazan, the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

residents' commissioner, whom you heard from. I also wrote to line of route MPs, many of whom came back to me with suggestions and observations from what they had seen in their patch, as well as working with various other stakeholders.

The 36 recommendations are a range of things, some of which can be put into place immediately, some of which are more medium term and some of which are longer term. Again, it is something I hope to keep people and Parliament updated on via the six-monthly report. Most of them are about streamlining and making the system more efficient and more responsive to what individual claimants want.

In the past, it has seemed, and my reflection has been, that we have acquired land when we needed it for the project. It was very much project driven. This is about trying to refocus the land and property acquisition programme to be more centred on the claimant, what they need and what their feelings and concerns are about the process.

Q65 **Chris Loder:** I would like to move on and talk about communities. I will come back to Mark about that; you will recall that we talked about this back in April, when I was very interested in the effect on communities. Could you tell us how HS2 is doing in its performance against your 10 community commitments?

Mark Thurston: Obviously, I listened with interest to the feedback from Mr Gaskin in the earlier session. Deborah Fazan made an interesting point. There has been a significant step change in activity for us over the last three or four years. We are holding true to all our commitments, but of course on any given day, as you heard, for whatever reason, we fall short of our own standards. That is something we continue to strive to get better at all the time. We have a lot of people on the ground, as have the contractors themselves. As we go into this year, with the mobilisation of the civils contractors, it has become clear that HS2 has a broader role to co-ordinate the works of different contractors in different areas. Thus far, it has simply been mostly just the enabling works contractors. It has been a simpler model for us, but, as we heard, there have been some examples where we have fallen short of our own standards.

The people who live on the route, the businesses and the local authorities did not choose to be on the HS2 route. We are very aware of our responsibilities to do our work, which has been approved by Parliament, in a sensitive way. That is something we will continue to strive to do. I think there are lots of green shoots of improvement in the way our helpdesk works and the way we respond. In fact, the team has done a super job working remotely in difficult circumstances through nine months of last year. As the work increases, we will need to increase our efforts to make sure that we minimise disruption.

Q66 **Chris Loder:** Mark, the question was specifically about the 10 community engagement commitments that you outlined to us when you last came to the Committee. You also outlined how committed you were to them.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What I really want to know is, what is your performance on those commitments and how are they measured?

Mark Thurston: In terms of the data, we recently issued, just before Christmas, our six-monthly update on our community engagement commitments. I do not know if the Committee is sighted on that. Perhaps, Chair, I could send it. We can circulate that to the Committee. That gives you all the detail about how we are responding to complaints, the number of complaints and how we are dealing with engagement on the ground. There are lots of stats and key performance indicators in there, which will probably do better justice to that answer.

Chris Loder: I think we would very much like that.

Chair: We did not get a copy of that in our brief, so we would like to receive it. Thank you.

Q67 **Chris Loder:** As you will have heard earlier, Mark, it is very clear that the community that is directly affected by the construction at the moment is particularly aggrieved and is finding the situation incredibly difficult. Since we last spoke in the spring, could you tell us what areas specifically of community engagement have improved?

Mark Thurston: I think we have improved generally on all fronts. We now have local area leaders. We have taken the phase 1 route and carved it effectively into 13 physical areas. We have an appointed senior leader from HS2 who now co-ordinates the work in that area. Frankly, that is a slightly different approach for us. It is a work in progress and will improve over the course of this year. We have talked to thousands of people in hundreds of events over that time. The activity is a constant one for us, Chris.

Q68 **Chris Loder:** Will those improvements be clearly articulated in the document you will be able to share with us as part of our evidence?

Mark Thurston: Yes, they will. If you take complaints as a case in point, 92% of all our complaints are dealt with in 20 days, which is one of our commitments; 99% of those are dealt with at the first stage of the complaint. If you use that as a barometer for how our progress is moving, that would be an example.

Q69 **Chris Loder:** One of the pieces of feedback that we heard earlier, and you may have heard as well, particularly from the local community, is increasing frustration that the contractors to HS2 are not necessarily aligned with your community commitments. Could you outline how the 10 engagement commitments, which you articulated previously, and will share more information on, go down to contractors to ensure that they fully work to the commitments you have given to the community?

Mark Thurston: In the first instance, we make sure that all the commitments we make publicly are enshrined in the contracts for our major tier one contractors. They have an obligation to do that. Most of the contractors will already be accredited to the Considerate Constructors



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scheme, which is an industry-wide scheme. To the point that Deborah Fazan made, we are doing stuff here on a scale that is slightly unprecedented. It is fair to say that this continues to be a bit of an education for some contractors. Some are better than others. I think Debbie said the same thing.

As part of our job, we have over 100 community engagement managers on the ground, working alongside the contractors. I think reference was made in the earlier session to the integrated project teams, which Mr Gaskin said had borne fruit. We are co-locating with the contractors, so we are much more integrated with them and their activity. I think that is bearing fruit in the sort of responsiveness and interaction there is with local authorities, parish councils and local stakeholders.

Q70 Chris Loder: In the contracts that you have with your contractors, do you have any specific clauses or provisions about meeting the community engagement commitments or, more to the point, any punitive measures in the event of the contractors not meeting them?

Mark Thurston: It is not specifically in punitive measures on community engagement. Where it manifests itself, Chris, is in the undertakings and assurances, which often have a community implication; for example, specific routes for lorries or the timing in which work can be conducted are all enshrined in the contract. It is actually all enshrined in law; it is in the Act. That flows into the contracts. Clearly, the contractor then has an obligation to meet those. I report each case in turn, every time it happens, directly in writing to Clive Maxwell and the Minister. That is where I think it probably manifests itself most.

Q71 Greg Smith: Mr Thurston, given some of your answers to Chris Loder just now, and the evidence we heard from both Councillor Gaskin and the Woodland Trust earlier, there is a little bit of a disconnect between what you are saying is engagement and what communities on the ground are actually experiencing. To go back to some of the evidence that Councillor Gaskin gave, there is the demolish first, design later principle that we seem to have seen time and time again. There is the inability for HGV routes to be kept to through rural villages. There is the mud on the road issue, which is massively important to rural communities.

In reality, how can we marry up the engagement that you talk about so passionately and the experience on the ground of the communities that are actually being affected by the enabling works and the start of construction, which—a point Councillor Gaskin made very eloquently—has barely begun? Worst days are to come for those communities. How do we marry up that disconnect?

Mark Thurston: The important point to make, Greg, is that this has been a process we have been going through for between 12 and 24 months. As we have heard, we have more work to do and we continue to learn. If you are talking about us as a case in point, we know where we have issues with mud on the roads. We would expect to put more wheel



HOUSE OF COMMONS

washers in place. There are things, frankly, that we expect the contractors to do as a matter of course.

The thing to remember is that most of the work we have done thus far in community engagement is about preparing communities for what is coming towards them in terms of construction. No one was under any illusion, when Parliament approved this scheme, that it would not be disruptive to people, particularly in rural communities where access roads and other issues are more constrained. We are monitoring things like lorry routes and some of the other issues that were raised, but much of the work we have done thus far is to make sure that communities understand what the extent of our work will be.

As Phil Gaskin rightly said, we are at the edge of what is going to be three or four years of fairly significant civil engineering. Where we are shifting our emphasis in HS2—I hope we see improvements on it over the course of this year—is more on community experience than community engagement. We have common workplace sites for every area. There is local information. We meet local authorities. There are regular meetings with local and parish councils. There is a lot of engagement going on, but at the end of the day the contractors are going to start work. It is about how we make sure that our supply chain is sensitive to the impact on communities and minimises that disruption as the workload grows in front of us. That is the challenge we face, and it is something we take seriously.

Q72 **Greg Smith:** I appreciate that you take it seriously, but I hope you won't mind my saying this. Given the statement you just made about the challenge and how you ensure it is met, aren't those questions that should have been answered way before enabling works even started, let alone construction?

We heard the evidence. I think it is a good idea that there should be what has been branded a sheriff role for each area where HS2 is being constructed along phase 1. It should be a role that actually has teeth so that when something goes wrong—where an HGV route goes off course—it can be rectified there and then in real time by someone who has the authority to say, "Get on to that contractor and fine them," or whatever penalties are in the contract. "Get them out of that village where they shouldn't be."

At the end of the day, what we are actually seeing on the ground is damage to people's homes in villages that were not meant to have HGVs rattling through them. They are already starting to see cracks and starting to crumble. In my own inbox as a constituency MP, I am seeing serious mental health concerns starting to emerge for people living with such fear and anxiety over what is going on around them that is different from what they were told to expect.

Can we commit between either yourself on behalf of HS2 Ltd, or perhaps the Minister could come in, to getting that sheriff role on the ground in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

each of the areas? There should be a sheriff for Buckinghamshire, a sheriff for Warwickshire and all the other areas along phase 1, who has the authority, when an issue arises, to not give the answer we so often get. I accept that all the engagement staff who work on this are very hard-working and are doing it with the best intentions, but the answer is almost always, "We need to look into that. We'll get back to you." Days and weeks elapse before we get any sort of answer. Let's get that sheriff role on the ground so that we can see realtime action.

Mark Thurston: I touched on this briefly. We are pivoting our organisation, as we go into this year and into the spring, to put, effectively, an appointed senior project lead into each of the geographic areas, so that would be the closest thing that I would identify, with the authority that they need to have, to your sheriff. They are empowered. We are working through the practicalities of that.

We should not underestimate the scale of what we are doing and why we are doing this now relative to where we have done our enabling works. Already on HS2 phase 1 we have effectively built the equivalent of four Commonwealth Games. This is vast. If we are not careful, we will lose sight of the demands of the programme.

Take lorry routes as a case in point. All lorries will be specified under the Act. We can only use roads that are pre-agreed. Where we see non-compliance, we take action. The number of non-compliances that I have seen—I have them reported to me directly—relative to the number of movements we are having, I think, is in the minority, but that does not excuse it, and we are constantly vigilant.

In a lot of the work we are doing, and the engineering design we are doing, which was touched on in the earlier session, we are looking, wherever we can, to make sure that we do not have to take a lot of the material that we are excavating to build the railway off the sites. Frankly, we are talking about millions and millions of tonnes of earth that has to be moved to build this railway. Wherever we can, we try to reprofile that back into the local landscape to make sure that we do not put as many lorries on the road.

The other thing we did over the course of last year was to enter into our first freight haulage contract, where we can start moving material around by train so that we do not have to put lorries on the road because, to your point, they have an inevitable impact, both in terms of noise and disruption and wear and tear on local roads.

We are very alive to what is in front of us, but again we should not lose sight of the scale of what we have to do. To come back to your earlier point, the senior project leads we have appointed, one for each area, sit within the integrated project teams. They are the people with the teeth that you refer to and would help to drive the right conduct we need from our supply chain.



The other point is that our supply chain understands this. I have engaged with their chief executives on the issue. We want to engage some of the local authorities in a community experience conference later this year. Of course, this Committee and the Public Accounts Committee would expect us to manage HS2 to time and budget. We have touched on that already. There is often a tension, as this Committee will understand, between making sure that we keep the thing safe, both for the workforce and in the interaction with the local community, and that we manage to the budget and schedule that we have committed to Government. At the same time, we must find a balance that minimises the disruption to local communities. That is a tension that will continue to exist for some time. That is the challenge for us.

Q73 **Greg Smith:** To be clear on the senior project leads that you are appointing, what is the geographic spread that each of them will have?

Mark Thurston: They are appointed, and I can furnish the Committee with the detail of the geographic boundaries for each one. We have carved the whole of the phase 1 route from Euston to Birmingham into 13 geographic areas. We have four integrated project teams for the four main civils contracts, but we have subdivided that into 13 geographic areas.

Q74 **Greg Smith:** Let's take a hypothetical. A resident contacts me in my office as the local MP at 11 in the morning to say that there is an HGV in the village of Quanton where it should not be, as it is not an approved route. Are you saying that I or one of my staff would be able to phone that project lead and get action in real time that afternoon, or would I end up having what happens so often at the moment, which is a holding response and then detail on what is actually being done about it days later? At the end of the day, that is no good.

Mark Thurston: I would make two points. We have a 24/7 helpdesk. That is the first port of call for the majority of all inquiries around HS2. The helpdesk is increasingly directly connected to the people on the ground. To your point, as the people on the ground become fully empowered and mobilised into the role, I would expect us to be able to deal with those issues in real time. That is going to be exactly the sort of philosophy that we are looking to implement. It is in its infancy. My expectation is that by the spring it will look and feel quite different.

Q75 **Greg Smith:** I would appreciate it if you could talk to all MPs' offices along the phase 1 route to help you shape and design that, so that you actually get it right this time, because all MPs along phase 1 are struggling with these issues. It is not just the Buckingham constituency that has the impact. I have to say that up until now we have not had a particularly responsive or timely comeback to legitimate and real issues that affect our communities.

Minister, could you comment on how you see the disconnect between the good neighbour promises made and what we are actually seeing on the



ground being closed?

Andrew Stephenson: We take all these issues seriously. Obviously, when the Prime Minister appointed me, he asked me not just to focus on the cost and schedule of the project but on resetting relationships with local communities.

I listened closely to what Councillor Gaskin was saying about the impacts in the Calvert area. There, it is worth reflecting on the fact that while that is not unique, and there are other challenging areas along the line of route, it is particularly challenging because it is the intersection between HS2 and East West Rail. We are also going through a period at the moment of handing over from enabling works contractors to main works civils. There are a lot of things going on at the moment that are causing a huge amount of disruption.

I am always keen to look at how we can strengthen governance. I have looked at the roles of the residents' commissioner and the construction commissioner, Sir Mark Worthington. It is worth our continuing to reflect on that. As the residents' commissioner said, the integrated project teams are a relatively new addition. I hope that they will become bedded in and will be able to strengthen oversight. We have to ensure that we are getting back to residents quicker. I know there have been occasions when you have contacted me and I have not been able to give you the information as quickly as you or I would have liked. There have been other occasions when I think we have been able to sort it out more swiftly.

Are things improving? I think they are. Is there more work to do? There always is. We can always do better. We take community engagement, and particularly ensuring that the undertakings and assurances given are not broken, very seriously.

Q76 **Greg Smith:** Thank you, Minister. It would be remiss of me not to put on record my thanks for the way in which, since you have been in this post, you have been incredibly responsive to me and my office when I have brought issues to you.

Can I push you on the request that was made by Councillor Gaskin towards the end of the first session as to how we unlock some of the funds that have been committed to in legislation, but that communities such as the parishes represented earlier find almost impossible to access to spend in a way that will have a meaningful benefit to the communities they serve?

Andrew Stephenson: I listened to those comments with interest. As you will be aware, a sum of £1 million was provided to the local area to provide additional environmental mitigation above and beyond the environmental mitigation that is being provided as part of the environmental statement. I believe discussions are currently going on between Buckinghamshire Council and the Department to see if there is any flexibility about how that money could be used to greater benefit, or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

more in alignment with the way local residents want to use it. I am taking a keen interest in those discussions. When I receive official advice, I will look at that request sympathetically. It is important that the money can be used by the local community in the way the local community wants to use it.

However, at the same time, it is worth noting that the money was provided for additional environmental mitigation by Parliament through the passage of the Committee, and some other areas—Hillingdon, for example—received similar commitments and similar funds of money. I would not want to set any precedent that could be used along the line of route, because then you would come into conflict with the Woodland Trust and various environmental stakeholders, who, I assume, would want the money very tightly spent on additional environmental mitigation as was promised. I am very sympathetic to the request, and I look forward to receiving official advice and being able to look at that and come back to the parish council as soon as possible.

Q77 **Greg Smith:** That is very reassuring. Thank you, Minister.

Mr Thurston, you spoke earlier about things that contain you within what the legislation says, and within the Act that gave phase 1 the go-ahead, yet we see every day that things are changing from what the Act set out. Sometimes that is the numbers of HGV movements; the A413, for example, looks like it is going to take a much bigger impact in the coming weeks. Where is the line really drawn on? How can we contain the project back to what the Act says, rather than pushing the limits of it, which has been happening on the ground?

Mark Thurston: If there is a specific one, Greg, you and I and your office should probably talk about it outside the Committee. As a general point, to your question, the Act is quite prescriptive about what we can and cannot do, particularly in sensitive communities, with the likes of lorry movements. Anything we want to do still needs to be signed off by the local authorities. They are the authority for the local road network. Road closures, road diversions and all that sort of thing have to be consulted on and agreed with the appropriate authorities in any one area.

I don't quite understand your suggestion that we are pushing the boundaries of what we can and cannot do under the Act. Our challenge to the supply chain has been to give consideration to minimising the impacts of their work. There are some good examples where we have been able to design the job in such a way. I know there was frustration in some of Mr Gaskin's comments about changing design and emerging design. In most cases, that was with positive intent, in that we want to minimise the amount of material we need to move, and hence to minimise the number of lorry movements we need. We are looking to make sure that we design a scheme in detail now that has community impact as one of the points of tension I referred to, up against cost and time.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I don't know if that answers your question, Greg, but if there are specifics to your constituency, we would be very happy, as you know, to pick those up with you separately.

Greg Smith: We will write.

Chair: Members, it is all well and good for us to lecture others about overruns, but we are having a shocking time ourselves, and I take responsibility as Chair. Ruth, I know you have to question the Prime Minister, so I will hand straight over to you on the impact on woodland and biodiversity.

Q78 **Ruth Cadbury:** It is connected, but thank you, Chair. Minister, similar to my question to the Woodland Trust just now, the operational speed of HS2 is higher than all international high-speed rail, apart from China. This means that the track needs to be built in a straight line and impacts on how communities are served by the line and by stations, and means that ancient woodland needs to be cut down.

The Oakervee review concluded that there were opportunities in the design of phase 2b to address those impacts. Do you think the benefits offered by the operational speed of HS2 outweigh the cost of cutting down ancient woodland and the other issues caused by the rigid straight line? Will you review the operational speed at least for phase 2b?

Andrew Stephenson: I think this is something that can be, and will be, looked at as part of the integrated rail plan. Obviously, the design for phases 1 and 2a is set and has passed through Parliament, so it is too late for us to deviate from that design.

My personal opinion as a northern MP is that I am not sure the north of England would react too well to having really nice high speeds in the south and the midlands and then it slows down to a snail's pace once it gets to the north, but on a more serious point—

Q79 **Ruth Cadbury:** Sorry, Minister, it is not a snail's pace. It is just bringing it down to the same speed as the Japanese Shinkansen or the TGV in France. It is not snail's pace to just bring it down by a few tens of kilometres per hour.

Andrew Stephenson: I take your point. That will certainly be something we look at when we are looking at, for example, the western leg, the eastern leg and other investments. It has an impact on cost. I think it is right to say, though, that money could have been saved on phases 1 and 2a if, many years ago, right at the start of the process, we had decided that we were happy as a country to go for something that was of an international standard and not the best in the world. What we have designed phases 1 and 2a to is a globally beating highest speed and highest capacity network. I should correct myself. I think the Chinese aim to go even faster, but it has certainly been designed to a specification that is among the very best in the world.

Ruth Cadbury: Thank you, Chair.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q80 Simon Jupp: For brevity, I want to focus my questions on HS2 Ltd in relation to tree felling. Mark, I know you were watching part of the previous evidence session. It highlighted concerns from the Woodland Trust and the local council about HS2's felling of ancient woodland. What lessons would you say you have learned so far from the process?

Mark Thurston: It is worth putting into context some of the wider points that probably got lost, because there was a lot of detail in the earlier session. There are something like 50,000 ancient woodland sites in the UK, of which HS2 phase 1 impacts 43, which is less than 0.1%. Of those 43 sites, we are looking to impact, by area, only about 20% or 25% of the area impacted.

In my earlier remarks on the progress made thus far, I talked about the fact that we are ultimately going to plant back an area of woodland 30% greater than is being removed by the scheme. Of course, the scheme has impacted woodland in some places, as you rightly say. In large parts of the route, for example the 16-kilometre Chiltern tunnel, we will only take about a hectare of land. We will protect that area of natural beauty through a tunnelling scheme, and similarly—

Q81 Simon Jupp: I am sorry to interrupt, but I am not asking about the scheme. I am asking about the lessons you have learned about the felling of ancient woodland so far during the process. What lessons have you learned? What snags have you come across? How could you improve what you do in that process?

Mark Thurston: I am not a technical expert, so I am probably not best placed to try to give an answer that would do justice to the people in the organisation. The key point for us is timing. The lady from the Woodland Trust made some points around the timing of work. Certainly, the impact of the Oakervee review meant that we had to rephrase some work. There are clearly optimum times of year when you need to relocate soils, for example, around trees. We take all the biodiversity and the soil around trees that we fell and relocate that to other areas. There are better times of the year to do that than others. That has been a key lesson for us.

Clearly, there are one or two areas where there is sensitivity, rightly so, in the local community about some of these woodlands. To the earlier question, we must make sure that our engagement is out in front of that and that people see that work coming. We involve the local community in some of the mitigation works that we are doing.

Those are the two from the work we have done thus far that would be the most obvious. Of course, we have a big tree-planting campaign, and we are very keen to involve local communities in that as well, so that they get a voice in what the legacy of the railway looks like when it is complete.

Q82 Simon Jupp: The earlier evidence session highlighted concerns from the Woodland Trust and the local council that you have not met best practice



when it comes to commitments over the felling of ancient woodland. Do you accept that?

Mark Thurston: The Woodland Trust is one of a number of NGOs, third-party groups or charities that we work with. We want a constructive relationship with them. I think it is important to remember that in law, in fact under the Act, it regulates what we have to do. All our supply chain has to appoint technically competent people—ecologists and environmental scientists—and the work is regulated by Natural England. We have a very good relationship with Natural England. They have to sign off certain licences and other things in our work.

What we are doing is enshrined in the scheme. How and when we do it sometimes requires us to get Natural England's consent. We have a good relationship with them. I am seeing their chief exec tomorrow. There have been some issues outwith our control around the timing of when we have done the work. That is probably where our practice has not been what would ideally be the right time of year. We would only sign off on work by the contractors when it has been signed off by a technically competent person, so—

Q83 **Simon Jupp:** Could you say quite happily that you have adhered to best practice and you have done everything you can, in the right way and at the right time, when it comes to respecting and dealing with the very emotive issue of cutting down ancient woodland?

Mark Thurston: Yes, it is certainly emotive. That has certainly been our intent. I have no doubt that there have been areas of non-compliance and issues where licences or paperwork have not been in place, or there have been other issues. We are not perfect. As the Minister said earlier, this is a huge and unprecedented scale of work. There is learning going on all the time, and we are transferring that learning between contractors.

Q84 **Simon Jupp:** In summary, you haven't. Timetables have slipped—we understand that with a big infrastructure project—and all those sorts of things. You have just pretty much admitted that you have not kept to best practice. Is that right?

Mark Thurston: Our intent is always to work to best practice, but, as I have said, for a range of circumstances that will not always be the case. But we would never do work that would be bad practice. Let's be really clear. We have deliberately rephased the removal of trees and other ecology sites to this year rather than last year, for the very reason that once you get to a certain point in time you cannot do that work. We are very sensitive to what the regulations are in that regard. It is enshrined either in the law or the Act, and that is what we comply with.

Q85 **Simon Jupp:** Very briefly, have you learned those lessons and will you adhere to best practice in the future, and make sure that everything you do is based on the lessons you have learned?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Thurston: Of course, yes. That is not just in this area but in many areas of what we are doing.

Chair: We have nine minutes left before we have to close. That gives me time to bring in very patient Members Sam Tarry and Gavin Newlands.

Q86 **Sam Tarry:** Good morning, Minister and Mr Thurston. I have a quick declaration of interest. I worked next to Euston station for nearly eight years. The organisation I worked for was a beneficiary of the Government's compulsory purchase scheme, which was brilliant, being a rail union at that particular time.

On a serious note, the issues around Euston station are pretty significant. I want to dig into them a little bit, because not only is it key to the success of the whole project, but, more importantly, the focus on the scale of money that we might end up spending could be contingent in part on some of the issues that are resolved, or not, around Euston station.

Minister, you warned in your first progress update to Parliament that the cost of phase 1 could increase by up to £800 million, with an extra £400 million for works to repair the line before construction. That was for things like moving asbestos. Another £400 million is a pretty big chunk on Euston station itself. How confident are you in the reliability of that cost estimate for phase 1? Minister, perhaps you could focus on that first.

Andrew Stephenson: I am happy to. I would say that Euston is without doubt the biggest risk that is currently facing us on phase 1. It may be useful after my remarks to bring in Clive Maxwell because he is the SRO for the project and has been leading an in-depth review into Euston and what we do around there. In answer to your question, there are various different cost pressures being reported. A lot will ultimately depend on where the final design ends up, and whether we go for 11 platforms or 10, and the level of oversight development we want to pursue. There is still a range of unanswered questions.

I am pleased that we have a Euston Partnership Board now established, led by Sir Peter Hendy. It will bring together all the different stakeholders and work closely with Camden Council in order to try to get us into the right place and to answer some of those questions as early as possible.

Q87 **Sam Tarry:** Before we turn to HS2 to answer that question, how seriously are you considering reducing the number of platforms at Euston station?

Andrew Stephenson: Everything has to be considered when you are looking at a cost pressure to the extent that we are looking at it. I have been very clear with all the stakeholders that the current cost pressure on Euston station is unacceptable. At a time of such pressure on the public finances, we cannot just merrily sign away taxpayers' money. It is a very important project and it is very important that we get it right, but we have to scrutinise every penny that is being spent. A huge amount of enabling works have happened, but a £400 million cost pressure at this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

stage before we actually start main works construction is something that is very concerning to me. That is why I am pleased that HS2 Ltd has been doing a lot of work on it. Clive Maxwell particularly has been doing some in-depth studies into how we can get the cost pressures under control.

Q88 Sam Tarry: The thing that concerns me is that I would not want to see the capacity issue not being addressed. The whole point of HS2 was not, as in the name, about the speed, but about building a secondary rail network over the top of the first one, which could not expand any further.

Turning to HS2, perhaps you could answer the question more specifically around why the cost estimate increased by £800 million and what work you did to try to bring that under control, as the Minister has asked. I am happy for Mark or Clive to lead on that.

Clive Maxwell: I will say a few words following on from the Minister, and then maybe Mark can touch on the wider points. As the Minister said, we have been looking at a range of choices at Euston, both to bring down some of the cost pressures, or deal with cost pressures, and to look at quicker ways of building the station overall and to have the full number of platforms open, and to look at some of the opportunities for better integrating the Network Rail arrangements and the High Speed 2 arrangements. That is something that Doug Oakervee in his review thought we should make more of.

There are also huge opportunities for oversight development. In addition to the points the Minister talked about—for example, the opportunities for looking at different numbers of platforms while maintaining as much capacity as we can—there are choices to be made about whether to go for a single-phase build or a two-phase build programme. A single-phase build might take longer to have the first set of platforms open, but it would allow all the work to be completed in a shorter timescale and therefore be cheaper. I know that is something that some of the local residents would prefer.

There are some choices to be made about some of the plans for oversight development. Those are all in the set of things we are looking at. We have been working very closely with High Speed 2 Ltd and with other members of the Euston Partnership Board that the Minister referred to, working through those design choices. HS2 Ltd is now starting to prepare work around a different sort of design arrangement that would allow that sort of single-phase build to be done. We are taking that though a set of gateway steps, where we are going to be working out the cost and the schedule options before we absolutely confirm them. That work is now heading in a new direction around a single-phase build option.

Q89 Sam Tarry: Thank you, Mr Maxwell. Would you be confident of the reliability of those cost estimates for phase 1?

Clive Maxwell: As the Minister said, Euston is an area of uncertainty around the programme at the moment. We need to work through what



the choices are. As the six-monthly report set out, that was an estimate from HS2 Ltd at the time. We are going to have to wait to see where we get to with this work. I cannot offer a full assurance that that is the number we will be sticking to.

Q90 Sam Tarry: I appreciate your honesty on that. Mr Maxwell, perhaps you would pick up as well the thinking about opportunities to reduce the cost of phase 1. Did you find any from the procurement of stations and railway systems at all?

Chair: Could you answer very briefly, Mr Maxwell, because this will need to be the last before Gavin's question?

Clive Maxwell: It is probably better to ask Mark to touch on the opportunities around procurement of the systems and the stations because he is involved in doing that at the moment.

Mark Thurston: That work is still in progress. As I said earlier, we are getting close to being in a position to award the trains contract, so there is potential opportunity there. All the other major line of route systems flow from this year into next. That is an opportunity in front of us. We are very aware, having locked the civils down, that stations and systems are now the area where we can drive further value out of the supply chain. I think some of the certainty around Brexit is helpful, frankly, in terms of supply chain confidence, cost of labour, importing materials and the like. That will be something that we can no doubt come back on in the future as it plays out.

Sam Tarry: Thank you very much. I know we are pressed for time, so back to the Chair.

Chair: I am sorry to rush you, Sam. Gavin, it is not about length, it is about impact.

Q91 Gavin Newlands: Thanks very much, Chair. I will be brief. Minister, will HS2 be built to the east midlands, Leeds and Sheffield as previously planned? That can be a yes or no because of time.

Also, you will be aware that Transport Scotland has called for faster action on the deal agreed in 2016 by the UK Government with the Scottish Government for three-hour travel or journey times between Glasgow/Edinburgh and London. With the entirety of phase 2 and phase 2b included, the journey is already reduced to three hours and 38 minutes. How do you plan to reduce it to three hours as per the agreement?

Andrew Stephenson: Members of the Committee will have to wait for the publishing of the integrated rail plan, which we intend to publish soon and which is going to look at the exact configuration of HS2 2b in the midlands and the north and how we best serve cities and reduce journey times to Scotland. There is a shared aspiration between the UK Government and the Scottish Government to reduce journey times between Edinburgh/Glasgow and London. We, of course, have the union



connectivity study under way at the moment, which is also looking at improvements to the conventional network as well as new-build solutions that would further reduce those journey times.

Gavin Newlands: Chair, I think that is all I am getting, so back to you.

Chair: You can ask one follow-up, Gavin.

Q92 **Gavin Newlands:** The infrastructure commissioner reported that regional links such as the Northern Powerhouse would provide better value for money. Are they going to be done in conjunction with HS2, phase 2b or a variation of phase 2b, or do we have to wait for the report?

Andrew Stephenson: Sir John Armitt did the rail needs assessment, which was published in December. The Government are currently reflecting on the rail needs assessment. It only came out in December, so we have to give it due consideration before we publish the integrated rail plan. His remit was to look at rail investment in the midlands and the north. It specifically excluded him from looking at phase 1 and 2a. The report said that east-west connectivity gained more value for money for the taxpayer and was more wanted and desired than north-south. However, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the main north-south part of the HS2 network was specifically excluded, so there was no comment on that and no reference to that. You should not read it as east-west being more important than north-south, and saying that HS2 is not important; Sir John himself has been very clear about that.

Gavin Newlands: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Gavin. I appreciate your patience. We have run out of time, so I am unable to ask some of the questions that I wanted to. Minister, I will write to you on behalf of the Committee, if I may. It struck me during the session that there is a litany of complaints on the ground where it is felt that matters are not being delivered as it was said they would be delivered from the top.

It also struck me that the commissioner, whom we took great evidence from, does not appear to have the teeth to intervene to make a difference for the community. You have always been very open and transparent about the need to adapt and change. You touched on it, but I will be writing to you to ask if it would be possible to give additional powers so that there really is a commissioner with bite. We will leave that for a letter exchange, if we may.

Thank you, Minister, Mr Thurston and Mr Maxwell for giving us so much time. We are very grateful to you. We know there are big challenges with the pandemic at the moment as well. Best wishes to you and to all your teams. Thank you again.