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Iain Stewart MP
Chair, Transport Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

15th June 2023

Dear Mr Stewart,

HS2 Progress update – 18th May 2023

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to the Transport Select Committee's recent session on 18 May 2023.

I welcomed the opportunity to give an update on of the HS2 project since the Committee's last session on HS2 in November 2022. We have seen significant progress across the programme over the last six months. Major civil engineering works are well underway and Phase One is now around 40% complete, with tunnelling underway in London and Buckinghamshire and our first twin-bore tunnel in Warwickshire already constructed. There are over 28,500 people working on the project and over 1,200 apprenticeships have already been created.

As you are aware, our priority is to maintain the momentum underway on the project to ensure the initial high-speed services, connecting Old Oak Common and Birmingham Curzon Street, are operational by the early 2030s. The Government has reaffirmed its commitment to delivering HS2 from Euston to Manchester. The hybrid Bill for the Phase 2b Western Leg, which will extend HS2 to Manchester, is progressing through Parliament.

HS2's construction will continue to support thousands of jobs, benefit UK business of all sizes and lay the foundations for the arrival of more new rail services into the next decade and beyond.

During the evidence session, I committed to follow up on several matters raised by members of the Committee. This letter contains the additional information that was requested. I understand Huw Merriman MP, the Minister of State, will be writing to the Committee separately.

Engagement with communities

Members of the Committee raised a number of questions about impacts on communities and landowners along the HS2 route and how we engage with these groups. I understand the Committee met with some local stakeholders and landowners in the Buckinghamshire area on the morning of the evidence session, which was held in Quainton.

As I have said at previous Committee sessions, no-one chose to live along the route of the new railway and we are committed to delivering respectfully and improving the community experience as a top priority.

In response to a question from Ms Cadbury, I offered to provide further information on how we respond to enquiries and complaints from local communities. Our freephone Helpdesk is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year, and we have a longstanding commitment to respond to all enquiries within 20 working days, or sooner where possible.

In 2021, we identified that as our main construction works gathered pace, we were receiving queries and concerns about construction issues that have a more immediate impact on individuals and communities. Recognising this, we have shortened our response times, committing to resolving urgent construction enquiries and complaints within two working days. I am pleased to report that last year, 100% of urgent construction enquiries and complaints were responded to within two working days.

In addition to our Helpdesk, every MP, councillor and parish council on the line of route has a named point of contact point within the Project.

Members also asked about how communities are informed about HS2 works and any potential local disruption – for example, because of road closures. We have to provide two weeks' notice to those affected by our works, as set out in the Code of Construction Practice. We provide works notifications directly to residents and local stakeholders, as well as through our tailored local community websites and newsletters. Our locally based community engagement teams also hold events and provide regular opportunities for residents to talk to us.

We have introduced a live interactive map showing all HS2 works in local areas along the route, including links to the relevant works notifications (available at www.hs2.org.uk/in-your-area/in-your-area-map). Residents can also subscribe to receive email alerts about HS2 activities in their area.

Mr Howell asked a question about organisations that can support those impacted by the project. We have procured a charity called POhWER to provide independent and free-to-access advocacy and support services to assist vulnerable people that are adversely impacted by the project and associated works.

The service exists to provide unbiased support to those who may be struggling to engage with HS2 Ltd and contractors in our supply chain for a number of reasons. Individuals can be referred to POhWER, whose professional advocates can then provide tailored support to those individuals to deal with issues they are facing and help us at HS2 Ltd to better understand the needs and wishes of those impacted by our works.

Undertakings and Assurances

Mr Morris asked about the enforcement of Undertakings and Assurances (U&As). U&As are commitments given by the Government during the Parliamentary passage of an HS2 hybrid Bill and are included in a Register of U&As held and published by the Department for Transport. We recognise the importance of complying with the commitments contained within U&As.

We have a specific process in place for a beneficiary of a U&A to report a possible non-compliance to HS2 Ltd. All reports will be investigated to determine whether a non-compliance has occurred and implement the actions needed to remedy any confirmed non-compliance incidents. We have published guidance on this process for U&A beneficiaries, which is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-speed-rail-london-west-midlands-bill-register-of-undertakings-and-assurances.

There were 4,768 U&As agreed at Royal Assent for HS2 Phase One. Some U&As will be current for the life of the project, including during operation of the new railway, while others will be discharged as works are completed and the requirements of the U&A are satisfied. Of the 4,768 Phase One U&As at Royal Assent, there have been 26 non-compliance incidents since 2017.

Compensation for loss of income (crop loss)

Landowners along the route are entitled to compensation for any loss of income as a result of temporary occupation. Losses need to be carefully evidenced for a claim to be successful. We are committed to supporting claimants to submit a successful claim, but ultimately it is their responsibility under the Compensation Code to provide suitable evidence and their appointed land agent should work with the claimant to supply this evidence. We recognise the importance of concluding negotiations under the statutory process as quickly as reasonably possible and following the HS2 Minister's Land and Property Review in 2020, we launched a scheme to make the claims process easier for farmers.

The Crop Loss Expedited Payment (CLEP) Scheme applies standard rates that are reviewed and updated each year. It allows farmers of arable crops to receive compensation as soon as their land is possessed, without having to wait for losses to occur. Farmers are not prevented from making further claims should the payments made under CLEP subsequently not cover all losses incurred.

Full details of the step-by-step process of making a CLEP claim, the schedule of rates and the claim form are published here:

https://assets.hs2.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CS1565_122022_Crop-loss-expedited-payment-guidance_accessible.pdf

Guidance on how to make a further compensation claim can be found here: http://assets.hs2.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CS1202c_062022_Comp-claim_temp-WEB.pdf

Return of land after temporary occupation

Mr Smith asked about the processes in place to return land following temporary occupation. I can confirm that HS2 Ltd is required to hand back land within one year of completion of the works for which temporary possession was taken. There is an established four-step process for the hand back of land that starts when the contractor identifies land where works are completed, as follows:

1. HS2 Ltd confirm to the relevant contractor that land is no longer required.
2. The contractor develops and agrees a site restoration plan with the original landowner and local planning authority. If the site is an ecological or landscape mitigation site, a Management and Mitigation Agreement is also prepared.
3. The contractor undertakes restoration works and communicates residual risks to the original landowner before conducting a site restoration survey.
4. A hand back date is agreed with the original landowner, with a site walkover undertaken and a hand back certificate agreed.

We endeavour to return land as soon as practicable and farmers are able to continue to claim compensation for any losses experienced during this period.

Roads

During the session, Mr Smith raised road conditions in Buckinghamshire and you, as the Chair, also raised the Buckinghamshire Council's comments on the Road Safety Fund. As referenced during the session, the Minister has since held a meeting to discuss these issues in more detail with representatives from Buckinghamshire Council, local MPs, including Mr Smith, HS2 Ltd and East West Rail.

As I explained during the hearing, baseline surveys of roads were completed prior to commencement of HS2 construction and information shared with the highway authority. Interim mid-point surface condition surveys are being conducted this summer with the expectation that data will be available to be shared with the relevant highway authorities by early 2024.

Mr Brereton asked about external scrutiny of HS2 Ltd's road safety audits. On the 17th May the Secretary of State for Transport wrote to the committee summarising the process HS2 Ltd follows to conduct road safety audits. We engage with the relevant highway authority throughout the road safety audit process. The highway authority is provided with the final reports alongside the proposed design during the consenting process and HS2 Ltd cannot undertake works until that consent has been granted by the highway authority.

Tree planting

Mr Newlands requested an update on the progress of tree planting on the project. Our vision is to create a green corridor running alongside the HS2 route. On Phase One alone, we are planting seven million trees and shrubs, including 40 native species specific to each location and during the 2022/23 planting season we planted over 180,000 trees and shrubs.

In December 2022, we published our second annual Environmental Sustainability Progress Report. These reports look at the measures we are putting in place to realise our ambitions to cut carbon emissions and boost nature recovery on the HS2 project, including our progress with tree planting. The annual progress reports are available at: www.hs2.org.uk/documents/collections/hs2-environmental-sustainability-progress-reports.

In addition to planting requirements, HS2 Ltd has committed £5m for the Phase One HS2 Woodland Fund to help landowners within 25-miles of the route to create new native woodland and restore existing ancient woodland sites. An additional £2m of Woodland Fund has been committed for Phase 2a.

HS2 service pattern

Mr Brereton asked about the future pattern of HS2 services. It is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport and Department of Transport to decide on the timetabling of future HS2 and other rail services. The Department has appointed West Coast Partnership Development (WCPD) as the Shadow Operator for HS2 Phases One and 2a. In this role, WCPD are providing advice and recommendations to the Department to help shape the design of future operations. The Department has not taken any decisions at this stage on of the future pattern and timetabling of HS2 services. These decisions will be taken nearer to the start of the HS2 operational services. However, we can say that HS2 services will open between 2029 and 2033 with 3 trains per hour between Old Oak Common and Birmingham Curzon Street. Once Handsacre Junction is available, connecting the Phase One infrastructure to the West Coast Mainline, there is then the potential for HS2 trains to serve destinations north of Birmingham.

I hope this information is useful for you and Members of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Mark Thurston

Chief Executive Officer

High Speed Two (HS2) Ltd