Department for Transport

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Helen Whately MP
House of Commons
London
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14 April 2025

Dear Helen,

Thank you for your letter of 31 March, regarding international rail services at Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations.

As you noted, Eurostar services have not operated at these stations since the pandemic and, whilst Eurostar continues to keep this under review, it does not appear to have any plans to reinstate these services in the near future. However, the prospect of competition and new entrants to the market offers the potential of international rail services returning to Kent in future.

As you know, the Government fully supports a thriving and competitive international rail passenger service market, given the benefits this could bring including potentially greater choice, new service offers and lower fares for passengers. As you also noted, we are seeing substantial interest from several private entities looking to enter the market to compete with Eurostar, including those you mentioned. This is a promising and exciting time for the sector. The recent consultation announced by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) on access to depot capacity is an important, positive step to realising competition.

Turning to your questions, as I noted in my previous correspondence with you in February, my officials have engaged with local representatives from the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP) to hear their views and proposals and have committed to maintain a dialogue. I have also discussed this with a number of Kent MPs to hear their views on behalf of other Kent stakeholders like KMEP.

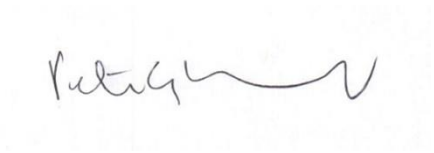
Secondly, my officials are engaging regularly with all potential new entrants, both to understand from industry the key challenges, as well as assisting operators to understand the unique requirements of operating cross-Channel services, including facilitating discussions with relevant Departments and authorities. We have also strongly encouraged Kent partners to engage with individual operators and facilitated introductions where necessary and appropriate.

Finally, in terms of infrastructure improvements, this will be a matter for operators and the infrastructure manager to consider once there are credible plans to operate at these stations. It is worth saying that the terminal facilities remain in place, and the previous works to upgrade the Ashford spur to accommodate new generation trains will remain beneficial to any future resumption of services, in the future. The Department stands ready to engage with industry partners to ensure necessary border and security arrangements are in place, noting this will also require agreement with French authorities, including implementing the EU's new EU Entry Exit (EES) controls.

I fully agree with you on the potential socio-economic benefits that international rail services could bring to Kent and the Government will continue to work with all relevant partners from industry, authorities and local stakeholders to support these efforts.

Thank you again for writing to the Department on this issue. I hope this response provides more clarity on the challenges associated with Ashford and Ebbsfleet International stations and the work we are doing to support industry and partners to address these.

Yours sincerely,



Peter, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill

MINISTER OF STATE FOR RAIL