

Report To: Ashford Joint Transportation Board

Date: 1st March 2022

Report Title: Ashford International Station and Eurostar services

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<p>Summary: Report to update members on the suspension of Eurostar services from Ashford International Station.</p>
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Following the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, Eurostar suspended all services from all intermediary stations including Ashford International Station and Ebbsfleet International Station in Kent. Both stations have subsequently been closed due to the length of time before Eurostar expected services to return. In September 2020 following the first lockdown period, Eurostar announced that services from Ebbsfleet and Ashford would not return until 2022. Following the second extended lockdown period, Eurostar then announced in September 2021 that services would not return until 2023.
- 1.2 At the end of November 2021, just prior to the Omicron variant becoming a major concern, the Leader of KCC wrote to Eurostar's CEO to express concern about the further postponement to 2023, a potential return of services and the uncertainty the prolonged loss of services could cause to Kent's economy and planning. The correspondence sought for Eurostar to give some future clarity over the conditions or basis for a return of services, and how KCC and its partners could assist Eurostar with information and evidence to help make decisions based on those requirements.
- 1.3 In advance of the pandemic, the works to allow Class 374 Eurostar trains to access Ashford International Station were completed in December 2019, with the full 2016 Ashford service due to commence again in May 2020. This would have seen the introduction of the third daily Paris service alongside the Brussel's, Eurodisney, and South of France services, but this never came about due to the impact of the pandemic.

2. Eurostar Services

- 2.1 In advance of this meeting, Eurostar were asked for a statement on their latest position, which is provided below:

“Covid-19 devastating and prolonged impact on Eurostar has led to the difficult decision to remove services at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International until 2023.

“Since the beginning of the pandemic, Eurostar has been affected more than any other rail and air operator by the very different and constantly changing travel restrictions imposed independently by the governments of the countries it serves. This has resulted in a 95% revenue drop between March 2020 and June 2021 (15 months). Since last summer, recovery has not been linear. Despite claiming about 50% of patronage back and reaching breakeven in late October, Eurostar has been hit by the autumn’s fifth wave and by the Omicron variant very severely.

“The collapse in revenues has not been mitigated by direct public support, contrary to Eurostar’s airline competitors in the UK and France. As a result, the business has contracted an additional £500 million of debt under very restrictive conditions. In these circumstances, Eurostar has no choice but to control its costs rigorously and to focus on its core routes, which have the best prospect of supporting its debt and eventually returning the business to profit. These core routes are unlikely to recover fully until the end of 2022 and Eurostar will continue to bear considerable debt costs far beyond that.

“Eurostar will review the status of intermediate stations and services (which include Calais and French seasonal services) when it is back to normal business circumstances. Making progress on stabilising and meeting its financial obligations is likely to remain the business priority for some time.”

4.0 Next steps

- 4.1 Ashford Borough Council, along with colleagues from Kent County Council will continue to meet with Eurostar to monitor the commercial return of passenger numbers following the recent further lifting of restrictions on international travel. A high-level meeting is proposed to take place in May 2022 to discuss plans to support Eurostar in bringing back services as soon as possible.
- 4.3 Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council will continue to work with Eurostar to make the case for returning the services to Ashford International Station, highlighting the demand from local residents and companies within the area, and the potential increased demand through the expansion of the Designer Outlet, and future development of Newtown Works, alongside the growth of housing in Ashford and Kent.

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