

Joint Transportation Board

Minutes of a Hybrid Meeting of the Joint Transportation Board held in Committee Room No. 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **5th September 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Heyes (Chairman) - ABC
Mr. P Bartlett (Vice Chairman) - KCC

Cllrs. – Forest, Gathern, Joseph, Meaden, Michael - ABC

Mr M Hill – KCC

Mr G Cosgrove - KALC Representative

Apologies:

Cllr. Feacey – ABC

Mr C Campkin, Mr D Robey, Mr D Ross, Mr C Simkins – KCC

Mrs C Drury – KALC

Also present

Cllrs. Hicks, Shilton, Spain - ABC

Head of Economic Development, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Technical and Transport Officer, Member Services and Ombudsman Complaints Officer

In Attendance (virtually):

Cllr. Ledger – ABC

Highways & Transportation Strategic Resilience Manager, Highway Manager
Ashford – KCC

Mr G Williams - Secretary General and Chief Strategic Partnerships Officer
Eurostar

120 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Board held on the 6th June 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

121 Update on Eurostar Service to Ashford

The Chairman introduced this item and acknowledged receipt of a petition from Ms Akhtar on the return of the Eurostar service to Ebbsfleet and Ashford. He reminded the meeting that the Council, as the local authority, had no decision-making powers in this regard. The Council, together with KCC, had lobbied central Government, High Speed 1 and Eurostar and this topic had been discussed at previous Joint Transportation Board meetings on numerous occasions. He emphasized that the Council was very keen to encourage the return of the service to Ashford.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 9.3, Ms Akhtar attended and spoke on the item. Her speech is attached to these Minutes at Appendix A.

In accordance with procedure Rule 9.3, Ms Mbali attended and spoke on the item. Her speech is attached to these Minutes at Appendix B.

In accordance with procedure Rule 9.3, Mr Bienfait submitted a speech on this item and his speech was read out on his behalf by the Member Services and Ombudsman Complaints Officer. His speech is attached to these Minutes at Appendix C.

The Head of Economic Development explained that the service to Ashford had stopped in March 2020 as a result of the Covid pandemic and that a great deal of work had been undertaken pre-Covid to enable Ashford International Station to accommodate the Eurostar service. He said it was important to recognize that there were significant challenges to reinstating the service at Ashford but attention must be given to sustainable travel and the green agenda with the ability to access this service locally.

The Secretary General of Eurostar introduced himself. He explained that the Ashford service had only been 3% of their market, but it was a steady and loyal service, and closure of the service had not been a trivial decision. The Covid pandemic had cut Eurostar revenue by 97% for 18 months and the company had not received any direct Government support. It had been necessary for the company to borrow at full commercial rates and the consequence was that difficult commercial decisions now had to be taken to maximize income to repay the loan. The other important factor was the future of border controls and the consequences of the UK exiting the EU. New entry systems would be required at Eurotunnel and Dover and it would be some time before the effects of the new systems would be fully understood. Both the financial effects of Covid and the future border control systems had led to a need for harsh commercial choices and a cutting back to servicing core routes only. Next year could see changes following a company merger when consideration would be given to the company's financing and structure, and more would be known about the new systems of access to European borders.

The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following points/questions were raised:

- A Member suggested that as the Olympics were to be held in Paris next year, this would be an opportunity to support a reinstated service at Ashford, which could provide excellent transport links and parking opportunities. The Secretary General said that he understood this point, but that at present the business needed to focus on making the most effective use of resources, and that focus would continue to be on the London market. He advised that there had been a significant increase in loads on trains in London post-Covid, and it was not commercially viable to add the costs of stopping at Ashford while the trains from London were full. However, it may be possible to look at broader options in future.
- There was a question whether Eurostar had exclusive rights to the international service from Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations. The Secretary General said that this was not the case. Access to services was regulated and open to any operator and he confirmed that Ashford had no lack of station or track capacity. In response to a further question about trains, he said that only one type of train had been cleared for passing via the Tunnel and this could be purchased from the manufacturer by any operator.
- A Member asked whether the commercial impediment to stopping at Ashford was related to the extra cost of staff or whether it was due to running costs. The Secretary General replied that the running costs to Ashford were already built in so there was no penalty to stop at Ashford or Ebbsfleet. However, there would be additional staffing costs at Ashford in relation to border control. International train running costs were very high, with steep commercial charges imposed on operators. A Member asked if there was no potential to stop at Ashford and the Secretary General replied that there was currently too much demand from the London market and there was insufficient rolling stock to add extra services for the Ashford market.
- There was a question about border fluidity and how it impacted the service. The Secretary General said that 9 million people per year passed through security and exit/inbound border control, which required intense staff resources. Now that the UK was out of the EU, UK travelers would be third country nationals requiring additional border checks. Limited resources from control authorities meant that those resources had to be used where the need was most pressing.
- A Member asked whether the situation might be reviewed next year. The Secretary General said that business recovery was key at the moment, but the company did want to grow and diversify and they would continue to keep the situation under review.
- The Head of Economic Development emphasized that the Council was highly supportive of the reintroduction of the service at Ashford. He asked what more the authority could do. The Secretary General said that the Council was currently doing all the right things, such as maintaining visibility of the issue via petitions and support from the local Member of Parliament. This was effectively keeping this issue on the radar.

- A Member asked whether the primary impediment to reintroducing the service at Ashford was the company's debt situation. The Secretary General replied that it was a combination of the need to maximize contributions to pay down the debt and complexities around future border controls. He finished by saying that he appreciated the opportunity to attend the meeting and provide an update and he thanked those who had submitted the petition and spoken at the meeting. He said that Eurostar were aware that Ashford had been a steady and loyal market in the past.

122 Minutes of meeting with Stagecoach on 11th July regarding bus service changes

The Chairman opened this item for discussion and invited comments/questions.

- A KALC representative said that he had been asked by Kennington Parish Council to enquire about the withdrawal of the bus services from Little Burton Farm. This had been done without consultation or communication with the Parish Council or residents.
- Mr Bartlett commented that KCC had supported 44 bus services across the county, and that other authorities were also available to provide support if they so chose.
- A representative from Kennington Parish Council said that there used to be an hourly service running through the estate. The withdrawal of the bus service from that route clearly impacted residents, with no information or warning given prior to ceasing the service.
- A Member said it was necessary to give notice to the Transport Commissioner before suspension of any bus service. He added that he was disappointed that at the meeting with Stagecoach in July they had not mentioned the withdrawal of the service from Little Burton Farm.
- A Member asked whether there was any work being undertaken to see if the services were viable for funding by others. He also noted that buses in other local areas were empty at certain times of the day and he questioned whether it would be viable to reduce services at those times and increase them at busier times.
- The Safety and Wellbeing Manager advised that a new District Bus Partnership Group has been established and the first meeting is on 12 September, to include Council Members, Stagecoach senior representatives and officers from the Council and KCC.
- There was a question about the recent free bus weekend which had been designed to encourage bus use. A Member said that this had not been well publicized and many people she had spoken to knew nothing about it. She felt this was a missed opportunity. The Safety and Wellbeing Manager said she would feedback to KCC on this point.
- A Member noted a diminution in bus services around Ashford in past years, and he pointed out that this was not encouraging less car use.

123 Border Traffic Management

The Strategic Resilience Manager introduced this item. He said that Operation Brock had been in place over the summer, and would continue for some time as there was currently no alternative when there was congestion at Eurotunnel or Dover. Although Operation Brock was not in place at the moment, National Highways were undertaking works between Maidstone and Ashford and hence the limits on the motorway were still in place. The system of border controls would be changing next year after the Olympics with the introduction of the Entry Exit System (EES) system, followed by the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) system. The full impact of the new systems could not be assessed until more was known from the EU. The Kent Resilience Forum and KCC were looking at transport systems to encourage fluidity and would develop traffic management plans as soon as more information was available

The Chairman opened up the discussion for comments and questions:

- The Head of Economic Development noted that Eurostar was piloting an app at St Pancras Station but it needed final approval before it could be fully rolled out.
- A Member asked about the land reclamation programme in Dover and questioned whether this would provide more traffic holding capacity. The Strategic Resilience Manager said that he was familiar with the suggestion but that it was a long-term project. At present there was no space at Dover for holding traffic for customs clearance. There was a proposal to fill in the dock at the old marina to process coaches and cars, but this had some drawbacks as well as the obvious benefits.
- A Member suggested using the car parks at the IBF facility in Ashford. The Strategic Resilience Manager explained that the French border force were likely to require the security of a vehicle once it had been checked. He considered that the IBF facility would be too far away to guarantee this security.
- There was a question about transport of goods. The Strategic Resilience Manager advised that 85-90% of freight was European which would impact less on checks and these could be managed by the port. The main problem was the necessary checks on coaches and cars.
- A Member noted that, in the main, HGVs had kept to the main routes in the past during Operation Brock. He asked whether checks were still in place with penalties for using different routes. The Strategic Resilience Manager replied that the authorities set up controls in strategic areas to mitigate the problem but resources were limited.
- A Member asked whether it was likely that the motorway between Ashford and Maidstone would have all three lanes in operation again. The Strategic Resilience Manager said that National Highways were currently working on the road but he had been assured that once the maintenance works were complete, all three lanes would be open, together with the 70mph speed limit. This would be the situation unless further maintenance work was required or Operation Brock was introduced.

124 Highway Works Programme Update Report

The Highway Manager – Ashford introduced this item and drew Members' attention to the key points within the report.

The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following points/questions were raised:

- A Member asked about the roadworks on Trinity Road. He said he usually got advance warning about road works in his ward but this had not happened on this occasion. The Highway Manager – Ashford replied that Ward Members were usually notified about road works in advance unless they were emergency road works, in which case the work could commence before an advice was sent out.
- A Member asked the Highway Manager – Ashford to report back to her colleagues that the roundels in Bybrook Road had not been repainted.

125 Parking

The Technical and Transport Officer introduced this report and highlighted the key points. The Chairman opened up the item for discussion:

- A Member noted that a great deal of work had been done in preparation for the parking spaces on Tannery Lane outside the Sorting Office and he thanked officers. He was very pleased to learn that three spaces were to be provided instead of two. However, he was disappointed that the introduction of the parking spaces coincided with severely reduced hours at the Sorting Office. The Technical and Transport Officer confirmed that parking outside the Sorting Office is anticipated to be in place by end of October 2023.

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Member Services:
Telephone: 01233 330349 Email: membersservices@ashford.gov.uk
Agendas, Reports and Minutes are available on: <https://ashford.moderngov.co.uk>

APPENDIX A

BUSHRA AKHTAR

Thank you for inviting us to this meeting which is of great importance to us. My name is Bushra Akhtar and I am part of the 'Bring Back Euro Trains' residents committee who are a group of active Kent based residents passionately campaigning for the reinstatement of our European train connections. We present to you a petition with over 30,000 individuals who have signed, who want to see the return of the Eurostar service in Ebbsfleet and Ashford as it was before Covid. The signatures represent a small fraction of individuals who would be using this critical service for either business, tourism and visiting families.

The ceasing of the Eurostar service in Kent has had an impact to our communities, particularly to jobs and businesses, not to mention dual European and British families like mine, who have had to reduce how often we visit each other. For these reasons we hope that you will hear our voices and help support the initiative to get our European train connection re-instated.

<https://www.change.org/p/bring-back-eurostar-train-services-to-kent>

We understand that behind the scenes there are complexities to the Eurostar service returning, including the impact of Covid and border control checks caused by Brexit. We hope that the 'Bring Back Eurostar Petition' can be used as an element in order to help build a case for Eurostar to re-consider their current position, as it shows sentiment and interest for their service within Kent. We want to continue to help support the joint initiative with local government and would like to provide our modest contribution where we are able to.

Under what circumstances would Eurostar re-consider re-instating this service?
How can we continue to help build enough of a solid case to convince Eurostar to return to Kent?

JTB
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APPENDIX B

CHARLOTTE MBALI

I am Charlotte Mbali, the Vice chairperson of East Kent for Europe.

East Kent for Europe is a branch of the European Movement. One of the movement's aims is to further links between THE UK and Europe. We wish to know if Eurostar, in advance of restarting regular timetabled stops at Ashford for individually booked passengers, would consider charter trains again, similar to the ski train that used to run. Also, to enhance tourism on both sides of the Channel, it would be good to run local-to-local tourist trains (Ashford-Calais-Lille and back) for group bookings by youth groups, choirs, battlefield and heritage tours etc.

APPENDIX C

ALEXANDER BIENFAIT

I am Alex Bienfait, a resident of Ashford, and part of the 'Bring Back Euro Trains' residents action group. Part of the reason my family choose to come and live in Ashford was because of the town's international train connections.

There are well-publicised capacity constraints at St. Pancras station; reportedly some Eurostar trains are filled to only 70-80% of their maximum capacity. It is perplexing, given the bottlenecks in London, why a short stop in Ashford is not used to help alleviate these problems, and thereby make maximum use of the space on trains. This would also help alleviate the reported shortage of passenger seats.

We look forward to understanding this issue further.