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Dr Caroline Lucas MEP
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BELGIUM

19 DEC 2006

Dear Caroline

Thank you for your letter of 27 November to Douglas Alexander, about the proposed reductions in Eurostar services from Ashford International. I am replying as Minister responsible for rail.

Firstly, it is important to state that the Government has no formal powers over Eurostar's operating decisions and that Eurostar, whilst under an obligation to operate a sound commercial business, is at liberty to set its own timetables. Following the opening of Ebbsfleet, Eurostar has calculated that the residual number of passengers wishing to travel from Ashford to Brussels will be less than 20 people per train, too few commercially to justify a direct service.

Eurostar recognises that for the small number of Ashford users in South Kent and East Sussex who wish to catch a direct service to Brussels, there will be a longer journey to Ebbsfleet International. However, this number will be vastly outweighed by the volume of travellers who will have to drive less far or who, instead of driving to an airport to use short-haul air travel, will travel to Ebbsfleet to catch Eurostar's far less environmentally damaging high-speed rail services. Recent independent research shows that flying to Paris or Brussels generates ten times more carbon dioxide than travel by high-speed Eurostar.

Ashford is to be a major beneficiary from the introduction of the domestic high speed services in 2009 via the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL). These services will be run by the SouthEastern rail franchise and will bring huge reductions in the journey time to Stratford (for London Docklands) and

Central London, while continuing to place Ashford as ideally positioned for Kent, London, the South East and Europe.

It is anticipated that the high speed link will provide additional demand for Eurostar services from Ashford in the future, while supporting Ashford's objectives to create 28,000 jobs and 31,000 new homes by 2031 Ashford Borough Council recognises this and I attach a copy of the statement from the leader of Ashford Council, Cllr Paul Clokie, for your information.

Eurostar has provided assurances that their decision in no way indicates an end to the provision of an international service at Ashford. Ashford will continue to have trains to Paris which will be timed to suit both business and leisure travellers and the daily service to Disneyland will make an additional stop at Lille to provide Ashford with a connection to Brussels. Eurostar is demonstrating its continued commitment to the town through the retention of its Ashford based control centre which employs 300 people.

Eurostar sets its timetable for one year and I would expect Eurostar to review its stopping pattern should demand from Ashford increase in the future, particularly as Ashford is a growth area. Ashford Borough Council will continue to discuss with Eurostar the provision of future services from Ashford International.

Best wishes

Tom

TOM HARRIS