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Dr Caroline Lucas MEP  
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14 February 07

Dear Mr. Skinner,

Thank you for your letter of 18 January, regarding our plans for Ashford International station. I do understand the continuing disappointment of local people over the announcement of the future reduction of services at Ashford International. However, the points you make in your letter also suggest a number of fundamental misunderstandings about our market, the role of Ebbsfleet International station, and the expected impact of our plans. I will therefore use the opportunity of this joint reply to each of you, to make the company's position as clear, simple and straightforward as I possibly can.

It may be helpful to take the points you make one by one.

Firstly, it cannot be argued that the decision to reduce services at Ashford at the same time as launching a large number of new services at Ebbsfleet is bad for the environment. As I have said to you before, we have undertaken lengthy and detailed research and analysis that has shown clearly that up to two-thirds of existing Ashford users (90% of whom currently choose to connect with Eurostar services by road) will find Ebbsfleet equally or more convenient, because it is equally near or closer to their homes – in other words they will drive less far. So as far as connecting with Eurostar services are concerned, the new option of Ebbsfleet is nearer or the same length for most connecting road journeys and therefore, taken overall, will reduce the amount of traffic and vehicle emissions generated by our existing travellers. The Highways Agency is undertaking road works at the M25/A2 junction to alleviate the congestion to which you refer, which are due to be completed within months of the opening of Ebbsfleet station.

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Secondly, only a small minority of our travellers (9%) currently use rail to connect with Eurostar services at Ashford, of whom the vast majority (more than 80%) then connect with destinations to which Eurostar will continue to offer direct services after the opening of Ebbsfleet International. I must reject your assertion that there is no alternative but to drive to Ebbsfleet: from the opening date there will be a high-quality, high-frequency Fastrack bus service linking with local rail stations at Dartford, Gravesend and Greenhithe; and from 2009 there will be high-speed domestic trains operating on High Speed 1, connecting with stations and services across Kent and Sussex.

Thirdly, regarding economic impact, you say that 'the loss of the Ashford service will have a hugely detrimental effect on the prosperity of South-East England in general'. On this point, I would again stress that the vast majority (83%) of current Ashford users will continue to have direct services to their destinations, after Ebbsfleet opens. Further, you do not appear at all to take into account the new services at Ebbsfleet International that, together with Ashford, will mean 45% more Eurostar stops in the South-East than exist today, a substantial increase. You also seem not to recognise the huge potential benefit of Ebbsfleet on the economic prosperity of the region you represent. Finally, although a number of parties concerned with Ashford have made anecdotal claims regarding economic impact, Eurostar has so far not been made aware of any research, produced by these parties or others, which provides any quantified evidence of the economic impact on Ashford, or other communities, of Eurostar's new service levels. As far as Eurostar itself is concerned, we remain committed to Ashford. We expect to continue operating services at the station for the full duration of the company's new five-year business plan – which represents our furthest planning horizon. We have also recently refurbished our Ashford contact centre, where we employ more than 300 people, and have renewed the long-term lease until October 2017.

Fourthly, there is absolutely no doubt that the completion of High Speed 1, and the opening of Ebbsfleet, will make it more attractive for millions of travellers in South-East England to use high-speed rail for travel to the Netherlands, Germany and beyond. Journey times to the Continent will be more than 20 minutes quicker. By 2008, new high speed lines will open between Brussels and both Amsterdam and Cologne, and between Paris and Strasbourg, further shortening travel times on these connecting journeys. Eurostar has seen a 28% increase in traveller numbers since journey times were cut by 20 minutes with the opening of section 1 of the CTRL in September 2003, and we are fully confident that we will see a similar increase over the next few years. We have also seen a substantial increase in connecting journeys over the last year, as travellers increasingly recognise the benefits of Europe's fast growing high speed rail network.

Fifthly, on the subject of consultation, it is totally untrue that Eurostar has been unwilling to disclose the parties with which we consulted. I will repeat what we have said before, that we consulted with the Department for Transport, Kent County Council as the statutory transport authority for Kent, Ashford Borough Council as the key local authority, Damien Green MP as the local Member of Parliament, East Sussex County Council as representative of passengers using the Hastings-Ashford rail link, and London Travelwatch as Eurostar's appointed contact with Passenger Focus, the national rail watchdog.

We also held meetings with Shepway District Council and Michael Howard MP and Locate in Kent. We are a relatively small business of 1500 employees across three countries and we do not have the resources to consult with every party who may feel that they have an interest. There is, so far as I know, no statutory guidance on this issue for international rail services. As MEPs for South-East England, you may feel that we should have consulted with you and, if that is the case, I regret that we did not do so. We have also shared our research and analysis extensively and in detail with officials from both Kent County Council and SEEDA.

Sixthly, Eurostar is far from a monopoly operator. We welcome competition and we currently compete with a wide range of airlines at Gatwick, London City, Luton, Heathrow, and shortly at Stansted airports. Together they offer more than 70 flights a day to Paris and Brussels. We also compete indirectly for 'share of wallet' with the low cost airlines, which offer vast numbers of cheap fares to leisure travellers to destinations all over Europe.

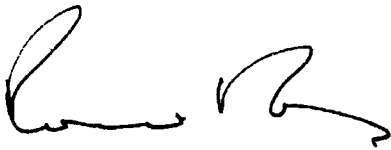
In summary, I must completely reject your accusation of 'riding roughshod' over millions of people. Our plans will deliver economic benefits for the region, with Ebbsfleet International station acting as the vanguard for massive regeneration in one of the most deprived areas of your region; they will produce environmental benefits by encouraging millions more people to travel by high-speed rail instead of short-haul air, which independent research has shown is ten times more polluting; and our new station and overall increase in Eurostar services in the South-East will improve choice and convenience for the large majority in your region. These are all huge benefits.

The plain fact is that Ebbsfleet International, by virtue of its location, is a more accessible station than Ashford International to more people across South-East England. An average of 50 passengers currently join each Ashford to Brussels service. We expect two-thirds of these will switch to Ebbsfleet International, leaving a future demand of fewer than 20, for whom a stop would add eight extra minutes to a service with 750 seats and typically 400 passengers wishing to travel direct, city centre to city centre. Journey time elasticity calculations show that the consequence of the extra journey time would be the loss of more than 40 direct London-Brussels passengers. Unfortunately, it is clear that there is no commercial justification for continuing a direct Ashford - Brussels service. Eurostar has a commercial remit and we cannot provide loss-making stops.

It is certainly the case that the construction of High Speed 1 has been supported with large amounts of public money, but Eurostar is required to pay very substantial sums towards the construction of the line through track access charges, and as Chief Executive of a company with a commercial remit, I must seek to maximise the number of fare-paying travellers that we carry in order to be able to meet these substantial new access charges. I firmly believe that European funding bodies have the same expectation. Happily, I also believe that in doing so, Eurostar will maximise the benefits of HS1 for taxpayers across the region, nation and Europe.

As you know, we will be opening Ebbsfleet International station in November this year. As the first business to start operating at Ebbsfleet, we have a very considerable job to do to put this as yet little known name on the map. If Eurostar is successful, we will kick start a massive regeneration in a deprived area of the South-East of England, bringing many thousands of homes and jobs. I would ask for your full support for our efforts and I hope I can count on your assistance to help make the new station a success and realise the enormous potential that the Ebbsfleet area represents.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Brown', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Richard Brown  
Chief Executive  
Eurostar