

European Scrutiny Committee

Oral evidence: EU Entry/Exit and the UK Border, HC 169

Wednesday 31 January 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 31 January 2024.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir William Cash (Chair); Richard Drax; Adam Holloway; Dame Andrea Jenkyns; and Greg Smith.

Questions 41 to 72

Witnesses

I: Roger Gough, Leader of the Council, Kent County Council; Andrew Osborne, Head of Economic Development, Ashford Borough Council; and Deirdre Wells OBE, Chief Executive Officer, Visit Kent.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Kent County Council \(EEE0002\)](#)
- [Ashford Borough Council \(EEE0005\)](#)
- [Visit Kent \(EEE0014\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Roger Gough, Andrew Osborne and Deirdre Wells.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. On Thursday, we published a tranche of written evidence submitted to our EU entry/exit inquiry, which generated a great deal of press attention and press interest. We are very pleased to have you with us today as the issues we will question you on are arguably some of the most important, including what would happen to the people and businesses of Kent consequent on the introduction of EU entry/exit checks as we currently understand the system.

We have heard many concerning reports, and we would like your views about what you regard as the best way to prepare for EES at local level, and what should be expected of Government and other stakeholders. No. 10 suggested on Thursday that various bodies, like the Kent Resilience Forum, are prepared for the October introduction date. However, we are sure that you will want to tell us what you require of Whitehall both in Kent and perhaps in Brussels.

We are going to cover today what we currently know about EES, how it could potentially impact Kent in terms of traffic, tourism and local infrastructure, and possible solutions and mitigations. Before we get started and for those watching at home, would you mind briefly introducing yourselves, starting with Mr Osborne?

Andrew Osborne: My name is Andrew Osborne. I am the head of economic development at Ashford Borough Council, so I am part of the management team at that organisation.

Deirdre Wells: Deirdre Wells, chief executive of Visit Kent.

Roger Gough: Roger Gough, leader of Kent County Council.

Q41 **Chair:** I will ask the first question. The Committee knows that the EU's entry and exit system will require the collection of data of non-EU and Schengen area nationals, including biometric data. However, witnesses at our session in November told us that final specification of EES was still not available. Do you know the final EES specification yet, and how and when will the system be implemented? Has a lack of certainty over EES impacted your preparations for its introduction?

Andrew Osborne: As the local authority for Ashford, we are aware of some of the ideas behind the EES, but we are not aware of the detail of when it will come in. We understand that there will be facial recognition and biometric checks at the borders, but the level of detail that we would like to see we are not aware of at this stage.

Deirdre Wells: I echo what Andrew said. We are aware of the likely implementation and of the attempt to have some sort of format to enable the system to be as seamless as possible. What is worrying is not only that we have not had sight of the detail, but that partners such as inbound tour operators, whom I speak to regularly, equally do not seem to know



HOUSE OF COMMONS

what the system is. Given that they tend to operate 18 months or two years out in planning their UK itineraries, it is difficult for them to plan given that they are not sure what the precise requirements will be.

Chair: Mr Gough, are you in the same boat?

Roger Gough: Yes. A number of key local partners are still chasing to understand the precise spec. On timing, we know what I think is more widely known, that there is now an anticipated introduction in the autumn—October has been mentioned particularly in that connection. To come back to your point, we have seen multiple delays on this over recent years, which has certainly made it harder for all partners, local and national, to prepare. To the best of our knowledge, or working with the best knowledge that we have, we are now seeking to prepare for an October or autumn introduction.

Q42 **Chair:** To stay with you for a second, Mr Gough—but equally asking both the others—what is the reason? Who is failing completely to deliver something that is absolutely fundamental to the operation of the whole system? Who is at fault? Is it—but you tell me, if you know.

Roger Gough: Essentially, there has been a lot of drift—I don't know if that is quite the right word—in decision making in the European Union itself. Certainly the goalposts have shifted over time. That is my knowledge of the case. What we have sought to do is to work with national Governments in preparing for this.

Certainly, we as a local authority—probably both local authorities and, indeed, all the organisations represented here before you—have been very aware of that as an issue for quite some time, and have been raising it with national Government. It has been part of our ongoing agenda with national Government, to some extent linked to what have been more chronic—if I may put it that way—traffic issues in Kent, because of the border. It has been one part of that, but it has taken on ever greater urgency as we have had greater clarity on when this is due to take place. In terms of the actual decision making, that has very much been at the EU level.

Andrew Osborne: I think a multi-agency and multi-Government approach needs to be put in place. Who exactly should be driving that? It is probably more for this Committee and for Government to put forward—

Q43 **Chair:** We will certainly take it up, but I am pretty astonished that you all agree that this is as bad as it gets.

Andrew Osborne: At Ashford Borough Council, we have been having conversations with Eurostar for many years around the implementation of this. They have recognised that the implementation of EES is both a potential risk and one of the reasons why not bringing back the international stations into operation has been a key challenge. It has been on the agenda for a number of years, and certainly they have been raising it with Government and we have been raising it with Government from an Ashford perspective.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I have my leader here as well, Councillor Noel Ovenden, which shows the importance of the issue for us here today. We have been raising it with our MP, Damian Green, and he raised it in Parliament, alongside the issues around the international services back in the autumn. So the discussions have been ongoing for a while.

Q44 **Chair:** One of our Committee members is a Kentish Member anyway, so that is another spur to this position. I will leave it at that. Greg Smith, can you please ask the next question?

Q45 **Greg Smith:** Good afternoon, everyone. Can you go through some of the specific details of the impact you think the entry/exit system will have on the county of Kent? Within your answers, can you give us a sense of how much things that have been suggested, such as Operation Brock, could—or would not, in fact—mitigate? What are the calculations you have done on the sort of delays, particularly on the road network, that you are anticipating from the implementation point?

Roger Gough: The first thing to say is that, naturally, we are very focused on the impact on Kent. However, I am sure the Committee will be cognisant that there is a much wider impact as well, given the importance of what goes through the short straits—I think 84% of ro-ro traffic goes through the short straits. We have a slogan we have used quite a bit over the years about keeping Kent moving. Our sense in seeking to do that is actually keeping the country moving as well, because of the impact it has on supply chains and right the way up the country.

You mentioned Operation Brock. We already have and have had for many years extensive mitigations in place for what is already a very vulnerable system. I think that is the key feature of this. Already we have had a situation over many, many years where it takes very little. You could look at, for instance, some of the events that took place in 2022 around the P&O closure and dispute and everything that came out of that, or indeed some events later that year, including when the French authorities—the PAF—were not in attendance on the scale that was expected, and so on.

Anything of that kind quite rapidly generates an impact. It starts usually in and around the town of Dover. It rapidly moves to other parts of the county and has that effect very quickly. I am sure my colleagues will have something to say about what that means.

Coming to this, clearly, the key impact is the amount of time that will likely be taken for the initial registration and that whole part of the biometric process. We have estimates made both by the portals and by national Government as to how long that would take and how much that would extend us beyond.

It is by extrapolating from that that some of the figures that I think you have heard around 14-hour delays are being cited. That does not seem to us unrealistic; in fact, in some ways and under some circumstances, if you had extra aggravating pressures—weather or whatever—that could be worse. Certainly, when we go back to the summer of 2022, at the height of that, we were looking at 15-hour delays.



Clearly, Brock and all the things that go with it are designed to mitigate any of those elements. However, I am not quite sure even what you think about in terms of mitigation once we get to this stage of proceedings. If you have those delays, the space for processing within the port of Dover itself is very limited and that is where the issue would arise. Then, that is in contrast with many of the things we faced over many of the years, which have been chiefly oriented around freight or at least have very much started as a freight issue. This would be passenger transport. There are not the same powers to direct on that as there are with freight.

When you look at Eurotunnel, because there is more space, the immediate impact would be less, but once you start getting all those impacts on the highway building back from Dover, that would ultimately most likely have an impact on that portal as well. So there is a great deal.

The final thing to say about Operation Brock and all that goes with it, is that it is very much a learning process. The Kent Resilience Forum always try to learn lessons from each and every incident, and that will influence the judgments they make as to whether and when Operation Brock is stepped up.

It is perhaps finally worth saying that when you get an unexpected set of events, with Operation Brock in its current form, you have to move to what is called Brock Zero, which is what we used to call Operation Stack, which essentially then blocks you right the way back on the M20.

I hope I have answered your question. That is the kind of impact we have all seen.

Q46 **Greg Smith:** That was very clear. Thank you—Brock Zero sounds like a low-alcohol beer. Ms Wells?

Deirdre Wells: To put it in context, the visitor economy is worth just under £4 billion to Kent, but to the UK and England as a whole, it is about £45 billion. It is big bucks.

For us, there are three key areas of concern. First, which might sound counterintuitive from the chief executive of Visit Kent, is outbound traffic. France is the second biggest market for UK holidaymakers and the disruption to them at peak times could be quite significant. But the perception of Kent as a county that can welcome those transiting visitors—that is big business for us—is quite significant.

On the domestic and international tourism side, we surveyed our businesses last year and 13% of them said they had a significant impact of Operation Brock. That might not sound a huge amount, but bear in mind that most tourism businesses will seek to secure up to 50% of their tradings at peak times. When we have significant disruption during the first week of the Easter holidays, like we did last year, some of our leading attractions lost 50% of their takings in one week, and that was deemed to be 50%¹ of their annual takings because of the peaks and troughs of the season.

The impact on domestic travel and the perception that Kent is in gridlock has huge immediate impact for our businesses, for day visitors and for domestic travel, but the really worrying thing from our perspective is that long-term reputational damage—again, not just for Kent but for the UK as a whole. The media coverage of Kent being a car park—we all saw it, with many repeat library pictures that went on and on last year. That not only impacts our reputation, it also comes up time and again in our perception research for future visits.

Only last week, I was at a trade fair with hundreds of buyers from all over the world really keen to feature Kent. For key markets, like Holland and Scandinavia, a number of them said that they'd taken Kent and the UK out of their itineraries because they were worried about congestion.

A particular concern is around the treatment of coach travel. You may know that Eurotunnel stopped taking coaches because of the existing delays that we have had since we left the European Union.² And all of that is now bottlenecking at the Port of Dover. Many of our international groups and our education visits come by coach and any further delays that we might see could be really worrying, particularly on the back of a very difficult period last year where we saw up to 19 hours of delays.

I think we need to sort something that will alleviate the bottleneck at our ports, to ensure that whether you are coming to the county for business purposes or for domestic purposes, you can access the county easily, so that the experience of inbound and outbound travel to Kent and to the UK is professional, welcoming and speedy.

Q47 **Greg Smith:** What are your calculations on expected vehicle movements overall, and then broken down into holidaymakers versus those on a coach versus those travelling to France for business purposes, at the point of implementation?

Deirdre Wells: I don't have those figures to hand, but we can get them for you. There is generally a three-way split between cross-channel ferries, Eurotunnel and Eurostar; and obviously the summer, peak holiday season means peak leisure travel, both inbound and outbound. What we worry about most is those peak times and peak holiday travel points. That is not to say that we don't need a system that will work year-round, but for us, particularly on the visitor economy side, the issue is those peak holiday periods. And we are still recovering from the covid period; we are probably at about 90% of where we were pre covid, so we probably haven't even got to full—peak—visitation yet.

Andrew Osborne: May I give some context on the wider business community, because of course what Deirdre has talked about is, more specifically, tourism. Back in July 2022—we have talked about some of the

¹ Ms Wells misspoke and intended to say: [...] 25% of their annual takings [...]

² Ms Wells wishes to clarify this statement and add: "Although the number of coaches carried by Le Shuttle has been significantly reduced since EU exit, due to the challenges of facilitating the new border checks, they are still accepting some. Le Shuttle are working to increase coach capacity."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

events that were happening at that time—a business survey was undertaken among Kent businesses to try to understand what impact this was having. In response to that, 86% of businesses were saying that Operation Brock had a negative or severely negative impact on their business during disruption. Out of that, 80% of businesses said that Brock had a direct impact on their revenue or income. So those are the sorts of figures and statistics that we are getting in that local context.

Could I make some relevant points about key specific businesses in the Ashford borough? We have two global companies that operate—well, we have more than two global companies, but there are two that I have spoken to more recently, one being Coty/Rimmel. They are Coty's largest cosmetic manufacturing plant in Europe; they are situated next to junction 9 of the M20 motorway. Another one is Givaudan. They produce scents, fragrances and tastes; they are situated near junction 10.

We have been in discussion with both those businesses. Coty/Rimmel operate across Europe, the Middle East and Africa from Ashford; three quarters of their product is exported. Givaudan export 60% of their production from the Ashford site. Both companies have relationships with Europe; they have quite a lot of operations in Paris as well. So their concerns are in relation to the implementation of Operation Brock and disruption on the motorways, but also the reintroduction of international services at Ashford.

The context is that the implementation of Brock clearly causes those sorts of businesses considerable difficulty. They work off small inventory elements. In other words, their storage of product going into the supply chain within the operations is small in order for them to try to be lean in their operations. Therefore, disruption to that product's coming into the plant creates difficulties in terms of their operational output. That has commercial implications in relation to the sites and the plants specifically, and therefore their standing in relation to their global company and their global scale.

You can see from that that the implementation of Brock, especially during periods of direct disruption, can have a considerable impact not just on the tourism industry in Kent but on business as a whole, manufacturers within our areas, and what they are trying to do in terms of the national economy and export product that comes out of that.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will now go to Richard Drax, please. I understand that you are addressing Deirdre Wells. Is that right?

- Q48 **Richard Drax:** I will, Chairman, yes. Welcome to you all; it's nice to see you. My question is indeed to Ms Wells. Actually, you have answered the question that I was originally going to ask you and our very able Clerk has very helpfully rewritten the question, so I hope that this will give you something new to add. Will the EES cause the same problems for tourism in Kent as the recent delays that you have spoken of?



Deirdre Wells: I think it will exacerbate them—that is my fear. As a county, we have a number of mitigating procedures. The port has expanded. There are more booths at the port. Yes, there has been some amelioration of the problems that we had last year, but we have not eradicated them.

What we see because of the volume of both freight and leisure travel through the port—it is fantastic to be able to host that gateway, but a minute here and a minute there per journey suddenly escalates into the level of queuing that we have. That is my anxiety. We are limited in terms of the expansion opportunities at Dover to be able to process, so that inevitably causes a bottleneck.

When you are asked a question like I was asked last week by a Scandinavian tour operator—“Are the transport issues in Kent solved?”—your temptation as a marketeer is to go, “Yes, it’s all fantastic. Please come and bring lots of high-spending tourists.” But actually, hand on heart, you cannot say that, particularly when you know that there is a new system coming in that is likely to make things more difficult.

The question is, ultimately, if we have a more digitised border, will that help in the long term? There is an argument that that is true, but we need to make sure that we have a system that is as automated as possible, that is as customer-friendly as possible and that ameliorates our existing delays, rather than exacerbating them. That is what we need to give reassurance to our potential visitors.

Q49 **Richard Drax:** As I understand it, once the checks have been done once, they do not have to be done again unless you do not travel for a period of time. Once holidaymakers keep coming back—I suspect that many do—that will speed up the process too, no doubt.

Deirdre Wells: Yes. If inbound visitors are coming from the EU, some of this is moot in terms of their own particular requirements for exiting. The difficulty is that they get caught up in the outbound traffic. If the outbound traffic then bottlenecks back up into the wider network in Kent, getting across Kent and accessing different parts of Kent is what puts them off as much as the port issues. Once they get through, will they be able to go to Leeds Castle? Will they be able to go to Canterbury? Will they be able to go to London? Or should they just not come to the UK at all? Sadly, some of them have made that decision.

Q50 **Adam Holloway:** Ebbsfleet station is on the edge of my constituency. As you know, Ebbsfleet and Ashford have both shut for international journeys. What effect has that had on Kent? Is it significant?

Andrew Osborne: We have been doing a bit of work, and we have had some additional survey work done with businesses on that issue. The findings are not out yet. I have some interim elements that I will probably share, but the full findings on the impact on businesses will hopefully be out in the next month or so. As I have alluded to already, a number of businesses have located themselves in Kent—in either the Ebbsfleet area or the Ashford area, based on the fact that the infrastructure has been



HOUSE OF COMMONS

there for many years—and therefore utilise the stations. We know that 46,500 people have signed a petition to bring them back; they are people who actually utilised the service pre March 2020, when it was running. It was part of the fabric of the economy.

In the work we have done more recently, we have looked at some interim findings that come out of the business survey that we have just done. Some 90% of all the businesses that have come back have said that those international stations are important for their business, 98% are asking for the Eurostar services to be reinstated, and 95% say that they are very or extremely concerned that there is no commitment from an operator or Eurostar to come back to those stations. We are doing work in terms of what that means for the public within Kent, but also in terms of the impact that it is having on businesses.

Q51 Adam Holloway: What is central Government doing? Is it putting any pressure on or playing a helpful role here?

Andrew Osborne: You may well know that one of your colleagues, Damian Green, raised it in Parliament and exchanged letters with the Rail Minister on this specific point, and there has been a commitment from him to take this up.

We have certainly been working across the different organisations in Kent— Kent County Council, Visit Kent, Ashford Borough Council and others—to raise these issues and to bring forward the evidence as to why these services should come back.

We see them as key infrastructure for the county. They provide a great benefit to business, both from a tourism perspective and a general business perspective, and a lot of business decisions have been made on the basis of that infrastructure being there for many years. It hasn't been serving for five years and we are hearing stories of that having an impact now on business decisions. The longer it isn't there, the more those decisions will be made reflecting the services' not being in place.

Q52 Adam Holloway: To Captain Drax's point about the fact that, after a while, most people would have been through the EES system, will that—ironically, perhaps—make it easier to reopen those stations for international operations if it's more frictionless?

Andrew Osborne: I think that the challenge we have for Ashford and Ebbsfleet has been alluded to by the operators already; I think that Eurostar have spoken to this group and said that there are capacity issues at St Pancras station, which is a key challenge and concern for them.

One of the challenges for Ebbsfleet and for Ashford is that, in dealing with EES for St Pancras, they're looking to spend money on physical infrastructure, in terms of booths within the station, but they also need Border Force staff to process those people through.

When the challenges in March 2020 with the covid pandemic and the closure of the stations came about, the border staff who were at Ashford



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and Ebbsfleet were taken up to St Pancras to support the activity there. So, the challenge to open Ebbsfleet and Ashford will be to put additional infrastructure in place within the stations, in terms of booths, to ensure that processing can happen but also to ensure that there are enough border staff to staff those stations.

The challenge with our commitment for those is that the likes of Eurostar will concentrate the resource they have in the larger-patronage station, which is St Pancras. So, EES needs to be working well and the right resources in terms of infrastructure improvements at Ebbsfleet and Ashford, and in terms of border staff, will need to be in place in order to be able to—

Q53 **Adam Holloway:** What's your guess as to when those stations might reopen for international travel?

Andrew Osborne: Eurostar have told us that they won't open until 2025 and they reiterated that point earlier this year, so we are working and campaigning to try and bring them forward as quickly as possible, but with the realism that 2025 is probably the earliest that we will get—

Q54 **Adam Holloway:** But they will come back? Do you believe that commitment?

Andrew Osborne: I am very much an optimistic and positive person. I worked for eight years with Eurostar on resolving the issues at Ashford around signalling and around electricity. We came across a number of hurdles—a number of challenges—to get that in place. It was an investment—a public investment—of £8.5 million. I am passionate about seeing that investment realised, but I am also passionate about the service for Kent. I'm an optimist, so I will say yes, I'm positive that we can get them back.

Adam Holloway: What do you think, Roger?

Roger Gough: I would very much agree with that. The key arguments on this are partly about—I think this element particularly applies to Ashford—the degree of public resource that has already gone into it. As you say, in the case of the Ashford project, almost on the eve of what happened with the pandemic, those services were suspended.

You will certainly find in our submission from Kent County Council—actually, I suspect that you will probably find it in all our submissions—a strong desire that any representations made to Government recognise the potential impact on rail travel in general of EES, but also ensuring that if they are in any search for the infrastructure that needs to be put in place, that embraces both Ashford and Ebbsfleet as well as St Pancras.

There are arguments, in a sense, either way on that, because there is no doubt that Eurostar has cited the forthcoming arrival of EES as another reason for delay in terms of putting back the Ashford and Ebbsfleet services. Equally, however, there are these issues, as has been mentioned, around the physical capacity within St Pancras already and

certainly under EES, and therefore there is a case also for diversifying, if you like, where it is that people would join the train and be processed.

Deirdre Wells: To your question about what has happened as a result, from our perspective two things have happened. First, lots of people are driving. They have switched to driving directly over to France or, if they are taking the Eurostar—we have had colleagues who originally ran significant inbound French tours, which used to stop at Ashford and then do a Kent itinerary—they are going straight into St Pancras and we don't see them at all. So a lot of domestic travel means that instead of having a much more sustainable way of travelling, we are now pushing more and more vehicles on to the road as a result.

A significant portion of the people who responded to the petition are from the wider Kent/Sussex area. We are nowhere near reaping the rewards of all that investment that we put in many years ago. Not only is that a loss from an economic perspective, but at a time when we are trying to reduce our carbon footprint, we are pushing more and more vehicles on to the road. Pushing even greater pressure into St Pancras does not seem to be a long-term sensible solution.

Andrew Osborne: On the sustainability of rail, certainly we feel that rail is a positive way to travel into Europe and should be embraced. Eurostar themselves say that 13 trips on Eurostar are equivalent to one flight, so there are real benefits from a national perspective.

There is another thing that we advocate and that works well. Over the new year period we had quite a lot of disruption on the Eurostar service. The introduction of the Kent stations is back again and can do two things. One is provide capacity, as we have talked about, because it opens up additional border checks and the ability to take passengers through. The other one is around resilience on the network and the ability to then have services from the Kent stations as well as St Pancras. That provides that extra resilience that I think is positive for the whole of the UK.

Q55 Dame Andrea Jenkyns: After implementation of the EES, as you know, the EU is planning to implement a visa waiver scheme, the European travel information and authorisation system. Do you have any concerns about the impact of that on delays at the border? I will start with you, Deirdre.

Deirdre Wells: It is the same issue. Anything that adds another requirement on a passenger to complete another check before they depart or arrive at a new destination inevitably adds another time delay. That doesn't mean that these things don't need to happen. Every country is required to keep their borders secure and is ultimately looking for more and more streamlined and digital ways of doing that.

A lot is around communication—ensuring that passengers are aware in advance of what is going to happen, and that the EES and the ETIAS schemes are aligned and seeking to support each other, rather than adding another layer. Inevitably there will be a danger of confusion for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

passengers. We need to particularly ensure that the communication is clear in good time in the significant run-up to peak periods, and also that operators and port authorities have time to prepare because, as we have alluded to many times during our evidence, those small incremental delays—one person forgetting to do it—can mean that the queue suddenly ratchets up.

Q56 Dame Andrea Jenkyns: You mentioned information. Have you got any up-to-date information from the Government?

Deirdre Wells: No is the short answer. I am aware that colleagues may have more, but we in the visitor economy are at the frontline. Most of this implementation will be on people, a significant number of whom will be travelling for leisure purposes rather than for freight. It does mean that the communication to those individuals and through those operators and agencies that support the visitor economy is critical. We have not had huge amounts of communication. I also sit on the national Tourism Alliance, so I can speak from a national perspective as well. The engagement could be better, shall we say.

Q57 Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you, Deirdre. Andrew, have you got any concerns about border delays?

Andrew Osborne: What we put in our submission is that the nervousness is around operation on the motorways of Kent. We are the garden of England. We are the gateway to Europe—the economic gateway to Europe, you could say as well.

I think the nervousness is around systems coming in that are in close proximity to each other. What we would say is that both systems need to come in, but actually when implementing the first system, we need enough time for the impacts to be understood. Therefore, there needs to be a review on the second system coming in. When that comes in at an appropriate stage, when the first system is up and running well, if there is an additional impact for additional checks, they could be mitigated against and accommodated.

Q58 Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Have you had any information from the Government yourself, Andrew?

Andrew Osborne: No more than what Deirdre has mentioned.

Q59 Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Do you have anything to add, Roger, about the concerns at the border?

Roger Gough: No, I think the general view is that this is probably in and of itself not as disruptive as EES, but it comes on top of it. It is partly also because EES is coming first—that is where the greater tension has been focused so far. Otherwise, I would endorse what my colleagues have already said.

Q60 Greg Smith: On EES registration, what is your current understanding of the possibility, be it through a kiosk that is maybe just half a mile or further away from the main ports of Dover or Folkestone or via an app,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for remote registration, or is it a write-off already?

Roger Gough: It is something that we are very keen to see. As you have indicated, the remote registration could come in two forms—both physical and, indeed, ultimately the use of an app. At the moment, as I understand it, there are challenges in relation to both and how they would operate, which certainly makes it extremely difficult. If we were to get it, it would require a delay. We would be very keen to see all of this. In effect, if you were looking to have some of these changes made, I do not think you could do those in time for an October introduction. We do believe they would actually make—if they did come in—quite a big difference.

Just to take the two separate elements, if you take purely the use of an app, part of the delay on that at the moment, as I understand it, is what has been happening with the technology. In particular, there is the back end of it, which has operated on a Europe-wide basis—in effect, the EU has been leading on that. The relevant member state is leading on the front-end side. Certainly, for the French authorities, that has not been as high a priority as some of the other things that they are dealing with at the moment. Certainly, for whatever reason, it is not anticipated to be able to come in in time.

One thing we have been very keen to push at the same time in terms of the register, and I will come back to the more fundamental issues that all this raises in a moment, is a form of closer remote registration, if I can put it that way. There are actually sites—there is one site in particular on the edges of Dover—that we would very much have in mind for this. To go back to what we said earlier on, a big part of the problem is the very constrained situation within the port. Therefore, the ability to get this addressed earlier on would be helpful.

The challenge is that at the moment the regulations, as I understand them, say that the French authorities—the PAF—have to be present when that registration, or that pre-registration, is done. It is not wholly clear whether you could flex that to say that it could be done via a camera—remote monitoring of that—or, equally, whether there would be any scope, because at the moment the PAF's operation has to be very much within the area that they work in at present. Well, there is one slight exception, but that is a slightly different case. Whether or not you could get that done in that slightly more remote site, there would then be an issue around path resourcing to support that. That is a series of challenges.

From our point of view, we would be very keen to push for the ability of all forms of remote pre-registration to be carried out, because that starts to deal with that problem in the portal. If that requires a delay, then, to be honest, that would be better from the point of view of all concerned.

One of the wider issues is that, where there are problems for us, there are often problems for our French counterparts. This is where—I cannot remember whether it was Deirdre or Andrew who said this—it is multi-agency, multi-Government and so on. Any opportunity to make the case with both our immediate partners—I say “our partners” because we have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

quite a close working relationship with the authorities on the other side of the channel; we have something called the straits committee, which brings a number of those authorities together to work on this issue—and, equally, Government to Government and to the European Commission around what that would require would be hugely important. It could well mitigate what otherwise are going to be some very severe impacts, as I think we have sought to convey.

Q61 **Greg Smith:** If you had to choose one or the other, kiosks or app, what would you go for?

Roger Gough: I would go for the app. Even the kiosk options that we have described would still bring an awful lot of that process relatively close to the port of Dover. It would not be within the port. That helps, but clearly, the more remote, the better.

Deirdre Wells: I absolutely endorse what Roger says. But, again, whatever system is in place, there needs to be a very clear communication strategy to make sure that passengers are aware—notwithstanding the fact that, even if people have been told what they need 50 times, there is always a danger that they are going to forget.

Equally, if we were to do off-site registration, there is an opportunity there to support visitor welfare—rest facilities and eating facilities—so that visitors are well supported rather than stuck in their cars in a queue. In an ideal world, you would want to have enough time to test this properly, do a beta testing and get people used to it, so that by the time we get to peak holiday season, people are familiar with it. To me, that does not feel like a timetable starting in October.

Andrew Osborne: I think they have said it all.

Greg Smith: Fair enough.

Q62 **Chair:** The Government have been engaging with stakeholders on EES, but have they been engaging with local government and businesses in Kent in working out and preparing for the introduction of EES? Roger first.

Roger Gough: Certainly from the point of view of local government, the Kent Resilience Forum and so on, the answer is yes. But I will throw in one or two qualifications, if I may. I spoke at the start about the fact that the wider issues have been going on for a very long time, and therefore it has been a part of our engagement with Government, particularly the Department for Transport, over an extended period.

After the events of 2022—we had severe problems on a number of occasions in 2022—there was work undertaken between ourselves, the Department for Transport and other key stakeholders to try to advance what has been a long-running agenda about addressing particular issues to do with freight: where freight can be held, options for dealing with that and so on. Certainly in recent times, we have always raised EES as part of that. There is now much more engagement on that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Having said that, the Government are now in a position where, as I understand it, the Home Office is the Government Department taking the lead on this. We had the Roads Minister—Guy Opperman—down in Kent very recently. He met a number of our officers. He met my cabinet member for highways, Neil Baker. Our concerns were expressed very strongly to him, and he was clearly very much engaged with that. But we need consistent, strong engagement from Government and we need to be very clear about where leadership on the issue sits within Government. So yes, there is engagement on it and I think the whole pace of this is picking up, but clearly, as I think someone once said, the clock is ticking.

Q63 **Chair:** Deirdre, do you have the same sort of view?

Deirdre Wells: At a national level, there has been some engagement between the Home Office and colleagues at VisitBritain, and certainly with the Tourism Alliance. From a Visit Kent perspective, we have had no proactive engagement from Government. I suspect that there is a focus on outbound traffic and maybe also a lack of understanding about the impact that it has on tourism generally in the county.

It would have been helpful to have a little bit more engagement, particularly because we can help in preparing and supporting messaging throughout our tourism network for inbound and outbound as to what is coming. Yes, it would be nice to see a little bit more than we have had.

Andrew Osborne: A lot of the conversations I am having are with Kent businesses. I do not think there has been huge interaction with businesses. At this stage, a lot of the interaction is with public sector organisations, certainly around the resilience issues. I think the businesses are waiting for the plan and waiting to hear about how the potential issues are going to be resolved.

Part of the discussion today and part of your work is around what is going to be coming in, the speed of that and the plan that there is. In all the meetings that I have had, the business community is keen to have a plan around international rail services, around EES and the impacts it might have on the borders, and on the potential impact on congestion in Kent. I do not think there has been an articulation of a plan that the business community can hear at this stage. There certainly is not something that has been put across to it.

Deirdre Wells: One of the other difficulties we have had is that, because this has been kicked down the road a number of times, there is a real danger of lots of organisations and agencies thinking, "Well, is it really happening in October or is it going to get delayed again?"

A new system is going to be in place in October, but I do not think the imperative to get systems in place quickly enough has not really landed. Clearly, that is a matter for the EU to give some certainty on, but getting that certainty is going to be critical to the planning of all those concerned and particularly in terms of messaging to consumers.

Q64 **Chair:** One thing that is completely puzzling me at the moment is the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

real problem of the gateway. This is why you are here; you understand the Kent situation. However, everyone knows about it; they see all the congestion. It is on television and radio, and it is appalling. The people of Kent tear their hair out sometimes over it all, yet it seems that, from what you are saying, the Government are just not taking enough interest in it. Would I be right in saying that? We must send a message. That is why we are here as a Select Committee.

The answers you are giving are perfectly adequate—you have the knowledge of what is going on there—but on the question of who will do anything about it, you have this massive great influx of people and an enormous economic opportunity. You have problems in Dover because of the space there. I do not know what the answer to that is. Some people might even suggest that you start building into the sea. I do not know about that, but there is a really serious problem.

The impression I have—I am open to correction—is that the Government are simply not engaging. What is the Home Office doing? What is the Department for Transport doing? Who is taking an interest in this? Can you help me get over the puzzlement I am experiencing? Just give me a short answer: are the Government doing enough?

Roger Gough: “Not yet” is my immediate response to that.

Chair: They are taking a long time. We have known about this for a long time. Deirdre?

Deirdre Wells: No.

Andrew Osborne: I agree with my two counterparts. The reason we are here is to raise the issue.

Q65 **Chair:** Which Departments would you focus on to get the maximum benefit out of any attempt we make to get them to concentrate on this? Which Departments are the ones that you would most like to see something from?

Deirdre Wells: It has to be the Home Office, I think, in the sense that—

Q66 **Chair:** The Home Office. You mentioned the EU, too. I am a bit puzzled by this. I know that they can be difficult—I have had some problems with them in the past—but the question is this: do you mention the EU because the people you are dealing with in the Home Office cannot get the EU to respond, or is there something else that we are missing?

Deirdre Wells: Because it is an EU-introduced system, I think that we are outside the room in terms of where those decisions are made. I am sure that the Government will want to do all they can to try to influence it, but the fact of the matter is that we are no longer part of that decision-making process, so working with our colleagues, such as those in France—as Roger said, we have very strong relations with our colleagues in France—and influencing wherever we can is critical. In terms of the collaboration on the juxtaposed controls, however, the Home Office is obviously key to this and should be there to support us and businesses to prepare.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q67 **Chair:** We are not part of the United States, of China or of India, yet, when planes come in from elsewhere, there is a process that is worked out between different countries to make sure that it happens. I do not think that I can emphasise it more strongly that. If somebody is not doing their job properly in the Home Office, we need to identify who that is, or which department of the Home Office is not working properly. Can you be more specific? Which bit of the Home Office is it?

Andrew Osborne: I suppose the difference is the juxtaposed elements. The border checks to get into the EU are actually happening in the UK. The emphasis probably needs to be on the collaboration and the work that needs to be done with the EU—France, in particular, in this instance—to make sure—

- Q68 **Chair:** You are experiencing a problem, and that problem is connected with the Home Office; it is connected with the EU. But I would say that the fact that the EU exists does not really make much difference, other than the fact that someone has to give them direction as to what they have to do in talking to our Home Office. Is that what it boils down to?

Deirdre Wells: I suppose the problem is that we are not privy to those conversations. It could be that the Home Office is doing huge amounts of work to influence colleagues both in France and in the EU more generally, but we don't know what stage those conversations are at. We don't know, for example, whether the implementation date is a hard deadline or whether it still has the potential to move. It would be helpful if communication between the Home Office and businesses and organisations in Kent was a little more transparent, not least so that we could understand the conversations that the Home Office is having with its counterparts.

- Q69 **Chair:** I think that gives us a good steer. Roger?

Roger Gough: If I could, Chairman, I will add to what my colleagues said on that. First, it would be wrong and unfair of us to imply that nothing is happening, but I think that an instructive comparison—we saw this very directly in Kent—is the build-up that there was to the EU exit, and particularly the end of EU transition. At that point, there was very strong coordination and work within Government, which ultimately manifested in things that were quite literally on the ground in Kent. We saw that with Sevington, for example.

I don't think there is the same sense of that happening at present, even though the impact could potentially be at least as great. The Home Office has been designated the lead Department, as I understand it. I suppose, therefore, that that is where you would want to start, but the DfT is absolutely critical to this, as well, across a range of areas, including traffic management responsibilities.

It is perhaps also worth touching on the fact that the site I mentioned—I think we would make a strong case for that site being part of that preregistration—is the site that DfT owns. So, in other words, while work is going on, from our point of view, it has always been on the agenda,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

along with all of the other things that we have been pushing for a long time, in terms of seeking longer-term solutions for the problems that we have in Kent—for example, where HGVs can be parked and placed, how we deal with those immediate crises, and so on.

As I mentioned, the Roads Minister was with us recently, and certainly was, on a personal level, very much engaged with the topic, but we have not yet seen that scale of cross-Government, clearly-led, co-ordinated approach to this.

There are a couple of other areas that are perhaps worth touching on in that. I think that my colleagues mentioned this a little bit already, but the first is about how this is communicated. If this is coming up as fast as we all believe—this goes back to the point that you made, Chair—then communication of that, in part at least at a national level, needs to be taking place, because this will be a major change.

The other thing—and you would expect no less, I think, from somebody from local government—is that we would strongly put an argument to Government about resourcing. If this goes forward in the way that we believe that it will, or that is suggested at the moment, then the impact in areas could actually be very significant indeed.

One obvious example is driver welfare and the support that we and other local agencies would need to provide on that. Driver welfare has emerged as an issue in past crises, but this would be a crisis very much focused—certainly in its core, if you like—on passengers, who are almost inevitably going to be less well prepared than most HGV drivers.

There is a whole range of other resource requirements that we would have. As you know well, I am sure, local government is generally under severe financial pressure at the moment, and, as a result of our geography, we would be seeking to be dealing with this along with everything else. So, I think that we would have strong asks on that, but we would certainly be grateful for any voice that the Committee could add on that co-ordinated approach in Government, because it is certainly a case that we would see.

Q70 Chair: Would you both agree with that summary?

Deirdre Wells: Absolutely, yes.

Andrew Osborne: Yes.

Chair: It just helps us to be able to say that we heard from the evidence that a bit more oomph is required from Government on this. So, thank you very much indeed.

Q71 Adam Holloway: Very quickly, why can't freight trains run much deeper into the country? Why do they have to all unload at Ashford? Why can't you run some of the freight trains all the way up to Crewe or something?

Andrew Osborne: I think that this was raised at the first meeting, back in last July, so I would advocate for you to go and view that. As I



understand it, the issue is to do with the gauging of the trains, and therefore the size of tunnels when you actually get on to some of our rail networks. I am not a rail expert, but, with the Ashford project, we had to make sure that the actual platforms in Ashford were of the right gauge for the new Eurostar trains. In doing that part of the project, we had to shave off a little bit of the platforms to make sure that the trains weren't literally going to hit the platforms as they came in.

Q72 Chair: This keeps on coming back to me. Every time we have a discussion, it's either shaving something off a platform or it's taking off a quarter of an inch of brick from tunnels. I cannot believe what I have been hearing. Getlink has been giving evidence on this.

I just cannot believe that you can have a blockage on exit, entry, freight, and all that stuff, simply because of this. It is a relatively small amount of money compared with the amount that they have wasted on HS2, for example, yet the evidence that we have heard so far has been on this tunnel issue, and now you mention the platform issue, which is just—

Andrew Osborne: Well, the platform issue is resolved, yes, but—

Chair: Okay, it may be resolved, but these are the kinds of things that completely baffle ordinary people. Why can't they just get on with it and make the tunnels work effectively to distribute the freight right the way through the country? Adam, do you agree with that?

Adam Holloway: Yes, I think it is insane.

Chair: Well, there we are. That sums it up. Well, I think that that is a good note on which to end, actually. So, as far as I am concerned, I would be very glad to say thank you for coming; it has been very interesting, and I wish you a good journey home.