

Written evidence submitted by Ashford Borough Council (EEE0005)

European Scrutiny Committee – Commons Select Committee

Inquiry - EU Entry / Exit and the UK border

Response by Ashford Borough Council, Local Authority.

1. The EU first proposed an entry/exit system for the Schengen Area in February 2008. How have proposals for its introduction developed over the last 15 years?

Answer - There has been very little progress made to resolve this issue over the last 7 years following the Brexit vote, and over the last 3 years since the formalised withdrawal of the UK from the EU. With less than a year to go before the expected introduction of this new system, there is considerable concerns by the Council that the systems are not in place to be able to manage this properly either through the International Rail services through the Channel Tunnel, or through the Port of Dover. If implemented without useable systems being in place, this will have considerable disruption on the Kent and Ashford Economy, resulting in considerable queues and disruption not only for passengers, but also for the residents of Kent and Ashford.

2. Are there currently any other domestic or transnational systems either planned or in operation that are similar to EES?

Answer - N/A

3. The EU's Entry/Exit System was initially due to be introduced in 2022. What challenges do the EU and its Member States face in ensuring the full introduction and effective operation of EES?

Answer - Passenger numbers through Eurostar International Rail services resulted in approximately 11 million passengers travelling on these services in 2019, with figures in 2023 due to get back to over 10 million. Delay to the processing of passengers will have a considerable impact on the passengers and infrastructure in terms of the stations. This is already one of the reasons Eurostar is presenting as to why they can't reopen Kent International Rail Stations following the impact of the COVID pandemic.

Passenger numbers through Dover port were 10.9 million during 2019, and Eurotunnel had combined passenger numbers of over 21.5 million through Le Shuttle and Eurostar during 2019. This

shows the scale of movement through Kent to Europe, and the scale of disruption that will be caused in processing this number of people through these ports and stations with the enhanced EES systems and delays to passengers.

4. What challenges will 'third country' (non-EU Member State) ports and operators face servicing destinations in the Schengen Area when EES becomes fully operational?

Answer - Eurostar, Dover Port and Eurotunnel have all expressed concerns over the delays that will currently be created with the introduction of the EES system as the additional checks increase the time it takes to process each passenger through the current terminals and stations. The introduction of the EES system is one of the key challenges Eurostar have stated in not reopening Ashford International Railway Station. They have stated that the requirement for additional customs officers at St Pancras Station has required this resource to be diverted from Kent Stations to St Pancras Station to deal with the additional checks. Therefore Ashford International Station has not been reopened following Covid due in part to the additional checks and the imminent introduction of the EES System and further additional checks. The timely introduction of a workable EES system is therefore essential to get International Services back to Ashford International Station. In implementing the system, this will need to allow a system that will enable customs officer resource to be able to be deployed to Ashford International Station as well as enough resources for St Pancras, Ebbsfleet, Eurotunnel and Dover Port.

In addition any new infrastructure requirements surrounding the EES system implementation will need to be installed at Ashford International Station alongside the other ports and terminals to ensure services can commence again from this station. The international rail link and the stations within Kent are the result of multi-billion-pound UK state investment to enable fast, convenient and seamless travel between the UK and its largest trading partner. As late as 2019, £8.5 million of UK government funding has been directed into the international rail link, with investment at Ashford International station to ensure that power and signalling upgrades for the route between the station platforms and the international high-speed track can continue to allow modern international train fleets to stop at the platforms for the benefit of passengers. This investment and the wider investment represented a recognition of the substantial journey time benefits and environmental credentials of international rail. Eurostar states that a Eurostar journey emits up to 93% less

CO2 than a plane journey, with the carbon footprint of one flight being the equivalent to 13 Eurostar journeys.

5. How will EES affect the travel experience of third country nationals?

Answer - The form of the EES in terms of the technology used, the infrastructure needed and the process that travellers have to follow, all pose risks to ensuring that the international rail link and its stations, and the Ports and Eurotunnel for accessing services (given the juxtaposed border arrangements) remain a go-to choice for the millions of passengers who already do and could further use the links in the future. Delays within the entry and exit for Dover Port and Eurotunnel will impact on delays to traffic within Kent, causing congestion that will impact companies and passengers across the country, but most significantly the businesses and residents of Kent and Ashford with the implementation of traffic management systems such as Brock within the County. Any challenges to the reopening of Ashford International Station will have ongoing specific costs for International Passengers that previously used Ashford International Station, with increased journey times through St Pancras of at least 75 minutes each way from Ashford, so over 2.5 hours for a return journey. There will also be additional costs per person from Ashford of between £38.70 and £68.80 per journey for rail tickets from Ashford International to London St Pancras.

The existing rail stations at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International remain unserved by international services since 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, with the risks of EES now cited by Eurostar International as a further factor weighing against the prospect of future services. Potential new operators on the line provide an opportunity, but for any operator the ease of conducting convenient and efficient station operations and quality of journey experience will be a vital factor in determining operating models using the stations available to serve the southeast region's market. Given this, as with non-rail juxtaposed border points, Ashford Borough Council strongly urges the Committee to use the inquiry evidence to recommend extensive effort by the Government to work with operators and infrastructure owners and managers, such as High Speed Limited (HS1 Ltd), and with the French Government and all services involved in frontier control, to ensure the EES is conducive to maintaining the benefits of international rail, and places no new barriers for customers to use the international rail link. Furthermore Ashford Borough Council urges the Committee to use the evidence from the inquiry to recommend to the government that the Kent stations of Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International

be reopened so that they can continue to provide benefits following the substantial sunk UK public investment in these stations, by ensuring that any remaining infrastructure needed to facilitate passenger service operations is provided in the public interest at both Ashford and Ebbsfleet, and not at the mercy of solely commercial decisions by operators and HS1 Ltd.

The Port of Dover has very limited space in the buffer zone between the Eastern Docks roundabout and the French Customs booths. Currently, the buffer zone is the only area that EES Registration can be carried out. This will mean lengthy delays for all tourist traffic entering the port. Any queuing tourist traffic outside the Port may then in turn impact the outbound freight (85% of which is from Schengen areas) causing lengthy delays for good supplies between UK and Europe. Queues for tourists have been quoted as a reasonable worst case of up to 14 hours. Such queues will create welfare concerns for passengers as well as having a significant effect on the local communities, specifically the towns of Dover, Folkestone and Ashford. Whilst Eurotunnel has more space to manage the flow of tourist traffic, lengthy delays at the Port of Dover is likely to see queues back along the A20 and M20, which in turn has a significant impact on Eurotunnel, blocking access for staff and ultimately blocking access for tourist traffic. In the summer of 2022, delays on the approaches to both the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel in Kent caused long delays with tourists stuck in queues for over 15 hours – the impact of EES on tourist traffic crossing the short straits is expected to be much worse.

6. The EU is not planning to allow registration for EES remotely—e.g. via a dedicated website or mobile phone application—or physically at a location away from London St Pancras, Dover or Folkestone (such as an EU or Member State facility in a major UK city).
 1. Is this approach justified?
 2. Would remote registration be justifiable for nationals of countries with comparable immigration and security standards to the EU

Answer - Ashford Borough Council feels that remote registration is essential and the use of technology and remote registrations should be justifiable whilst ensuring security for the UK and EU, but also improving the passenger experience for those using International Rail Stations, the ports and Eurotunnel. Eurostar have been piloting facial recognition technology in St Pancras and this should be developed, but off site registration before travelling should be considered where this can speed up the process within stations and terminals. As

stated in response to question 5 there is limited capacity at St Pancras and at Dover Port and Eurotunnel to process passengers using the EES system. If technology solutions and the use of remote registration cannot be used, significant delays will take place, and this will impact on the amount of passengers and freight that the different stations and terminals will be able to process. This in turn could have a significant impact on the whole economy due to our considerable trade with the EU.

7. Juxtaposed UK/France(Schengen) border controls are in operation at London St Pancras International, Folkestone and Dover. 1. introduced in its current form, what challenges will EES present UK sites facilitating juxtaposed border controls? 2. Should special dispensation for remote registration or remote pre-registration for EES be provided for at these sites?

Answer - Ashford Borough Council wishes to bring the Committee's attention to the prospect and opportunity that, additional to those locations listed, Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International stations are two further locations in the UK where juxtaposed control bureaux are required by legislation, and where border controls have operated until Eurostar suspended services during the pandemic in March 2020. These important locations for providing access to the southeast region via the convenient motorway network connections and their considerable vehicle parking provisions, as well as providing arrival points for international visitors to enjoy the wealth of visitor attractions across the southeast, must not be overlooked. We urge the Committee not to lose focus on these important international transport assets and to ensure that in their recommendations to government, whatever provisions are promoted and undertaken for St Pancras, Folkestone and Dover are similarly undertaken for Ashford and Ebbsfleet International stations as this is in the public interest. Failure to do this could provide additional barriers to the return of international services to these locations and lead to the under-utilisation of significant strategic rail assets.

8. In addition to EES, the EU plans to introduce a 'European Travel Information and Authorisation System' (ETIAS) in 2024. The UK's 'Electronic Travel Authorisation' scheme will go live in November 2023. 1. What challenges does the introduction of new EU and UK electronic travel systems present for operators and travellers? 2. Should the UK EU and international partners prioritise interoperability between their respective systems?

Answer - It is felt that interoperability between the respective systems would be preferred.

9. What steps should the UK Government be taking to mitigate potential disruption stemming from the introduction of EES for UK ports, operators, and passengers travelling to the Schengen Area?

Answer - Whatever is needed for St Pancras International should similarly be provided for Ashford and Ebbsfleet International stations. The opening up of the Kent Stations could provide extra capacity on the network to process passengers onto the International Rail services.

If there is no facility for prior registration, as mentioned previously there will be lengthy queues of tourists at the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel. Freight will be delayed, Operation Brock could become a permanent feature at considerable cost to implement and operate, rather than just at peak times. Increased facilities for holding EU bound freight is essential so that the Strategic Road Network through Kent does not become a permanent lorry park. As previously stated, welfare for tourists will be a major issue. UK government must enable the Local Resilience Forum to be funded accordingly to enable provision of adequate welfare. In addition, the UK Government must recognise that the Short Straits is the most important entry to Europe for the whole of the UK and Kent County Council, Kent Police, and District and Borough Council's must be supported with managing the expected impact on the county.

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