



BRING BACK EURO TRAINS
Kent campaign for trains to continental Europe



Enroute



○ Returning international rail services to Kent

○ The challenge and the need for change

○ January 2025



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Foreword

In early-2020, the world was thrust into unprecedented change due to a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. While the global situation eventually stabilised, the impact felt endless for many. One significant and lasting consequence domestically, however, has been Eurostar ceasing operations at Ebbsfleet and Ashford International stations - facilities representing over £180 million in infrastructure investment, in the sixth most populated county in the UK.

While the global situation has largely stabilised, these vital transport links remain suspended, despite High Speed 1 and the Channel Tunnel running at just 50% and 40% of their capacity respectively. The impact has been substantial: journey times to Brussels have more than tripled from 90 minutes to over 4.5 hours for those across Kent and the wider South East, while costs have nearly doubled for many travellers on all routes, towards Brussels, Amsterdam and Paris.

The withdrawal has had far-reaching consequences across the region. Hotels and restaurants that once benefited from international visitors have seen reduced footfall, while the region's retail sector has lost valuable European customer traffic. The impact extends beyond tourism - businesses conducting regular trade with European partners now face increased costs and logistical complications, undermining Kent's position as a gateway to Europe, and the UK's wider international standing as a country open for business.

The Bring Back Euro Trains (BBET) campaign has emerged in response, gaining over 60,000 petition signatures from supporters across the UK and Europe. With particularly strong support in the south east, where over 32,500 signatures have been gathered, this grassroots movement has united local communities, businesses, and transport advocates in calling for the restoration of these essential services.

We are pleased to present this report, the first collaboration between Enroute and BBET, examining the challenges and opportunities in returning international rail services to Kent. Our findings demonstrate both the clear demand for these services and their crucial role in supporting regional economic growth and sustainable transport objectives.

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○ The Situation



Background

Service withdrawal

Both Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International stations have remained closed to Eurostar services since March 2020. While demand for international travel has rebounded post-pandemic, Eurostar has not resumed operations at these stations, citing “financial and operational constraints”.

The company has deferred reopening plans, tentatively suggesting ([ITV News, 2022](#)) that services may not return until 2026 or later due to ongoing resource prioritisation for London St Pancras ([BBC News, 2024](#)), despite High Speed 1 and the Channel Tunnel running at 50% and 40% utilisation ([Open Edition Journals](#)) respectively, with space for new services, including those that stop within Kent.

The campaign

The Bring Back Euro Trains (BBET) campaign is a call to restore the European passenger rail services that once stopped in Kent, connecting the South East of England with the continent via Eurostar, the only international rail service in the UK. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Eurostar stopped calling at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International, leaving these purpose-built terminals under-used and with their future uncertain.

The BBET team was formed in June 2023 by people passionate to see the return of international rail services in Kent, the majority of them residing in Ashford. Some members of the BBET team moved to Ashford for the fast and convenient links to other European cities. In 2025, the team is now working with groups such as Campaign for Better Transport to establish an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Rail.

The team are all members of the public specialising in different sectors, who came together to campaign for the return of international rail services to Kent stations. Full information about the BBET campaign, their story, webinars and link to the petition can be found on [their website, bringbackeurotrains.com](#).

The campaign also highlights the considerable investments made in the region to support international train services. Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International have seen millions of pounds spent on infrastructure since opening, including a £10m upgrade at Ashford to accommodate Eurostar’s new Siemens fleet in 2018 ([Modern Railways, 2018](#)).

However, shortly after this launch, a major ongoing power failure affecting the e320 trains was discovered ([Kent Online, 2019](#)), resulting in the new trains unable to call once again, with cruel irony, repaired in 2020 just in time for services to be suspended.

With these resources now under-utilised, the campaign argues that the ongoing lack of services represents a waste of taxpayer money and a lost opportunity to capitalise on the area's strategic position. The petition seeks to bring back these vital connections, benefiting both the local economy and the wider region.

Wasted infrastructure

The construction of Ashford International Station, which was rebuilt to serve both domestic and international Eurostar services, cost approximately £80 million. The rebuild included adding new platforms, lengthening existing ones for international trains, and constructing new facilities such as car parks and access infrastructure (Source: [Kent Rail](#))

Ebbsfleet International Station, designed for High Speed 1 (HS1), cost around £100 million to build. This station serves as a key hub for Eurostar services, domestic high-speed trains, as well as services to Hastings, Eastbourne, Thanet and the South Coast, featuring modern infrastructure and large passenger facilities (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Specifically, signalling and infrastructure upgrades included:

- Upgrades to signalling for Ashford and Ebbsfleet as part of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) included a shift to European standards, such as the KVB system (French signalling technology used for interoperability)
- The introduction of new Siemens Eurostar rolling stock required a £10 million investment to address technical issues such as compatibility with the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS) (Source: [Kent Rail](#))

The High Speed 1 (HS1) rail line and the Channel Tunnel are currently under-utilised. HS1 operates at about 50% of its capacity, and the Channel Tunnel is used at approximately 40% of its potential. Despite their advanced infrastructure and critical roles in connecting the UK with mainland Europe, the services face significant limitations:

- **Limited Traffic Growth:** International passenger and freight traffic have fallen short of expectations. For freight, demand has hovered at around 1.7 million tonnes per year, far below the forecast of over 10 million tonnes ([OpenEdition Journals](#))
- **Eurostar's dominance:** Eurostar remains the sole international passenger operator on HS1 and through the Channel Tunnel. Its monopoly, combined with stringent technical requirements and high costs for new entrants, has discouraged competition. Eurostar even made an attempt to hold up potential competitor Evolyn's access to Temple Mills depot, where Eurostar trains are maintained ([Office of Rail and Road, 2024](#))
- **Competition:** Carbon-intensive alternatives such as low-cost airlines and ferries continue to offer competitive options for cross-Channel travel, reducing the share of high-speed rail in the transport market ([OpenEdition Journals](#)). This has also grown the market share of alternative options, with easyJet operating a new route between London Southend and Paris Charles de Gaulle, with tickets starting at £14.99 ([easyJet](#)).

Eurostar's monopoly limits the ease with which other operators can enter the market, who need to navigate expensive upgrades like compatibility with legacy signalling systems (TVM 430) and meet strict safety requirements for the Channel Tunnel. This raises costs and technical complexity, deterring investment (above-cited).

Despite these challenges, HS1 and the Channel Tunnel represent critical infrastructure. Increasing their utilisation will likely require reforms to reduce barriers for operators, enhance connectivity, and compete effectively with other modes of transport (above-cited)

Key arguments

A key point made by the campaign is the potential for Kent to become an even more prosperous route for international travel, with the right investment and the reintroduction of international rail services. The area's existing infrastructure, combined with growing residential and business relocation to Kent, creates a strong case for re-establishing continental rail links.

Moreover, the campaign ties the need for these services to broader environmental goals, arguing that the Climate Change Act 2008's carbon reduction targets can be better met through moving short-haul traffic to rail. Rail produces far less carbon than flying or driving.

Why hasn't Eurostar returned?

Eurostar have made a few statements about why service to Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International are on hold. Each year, they announce a further delay to the decision, which keeps being pushed into the future. The reasons set out by Eurostar specifically are:

- **COVID-19:** Both stations were closed early in the pandemic, primarily due to a sharp decline in passenger demand and the financial toll on Eurostar's operations, which lost hundreds of millions of pounds during this period ([The Independent](#), 2022).
- **Post-pandemic challenges:** Eurostar has focused on its most profitable routes, such as London to Paris and Brussels, while limiting stops elsewhere to stabilise operations. Ashford and Ebbsfleet are considered less critical to its financial recovery ([RailTech](#), 2023).
- **Brexit:** Brexit has introduced additional complexities, including increased border control requirements and delays. More about this later.
- **Future prospects:** Eurostar's CEO (Gwendoline Cazenave) has stated that reopening these stations will only occur "when we can afford it," with the current projection being no earlier than 2026. The company prioritises investments in ensuring optimal services at major hubs like London and Paris (as cited above), taking advantage of their comfortable position of sitting in a monopoly and maximising profits from a route with no competition or alternative rail offerings.

Eurostar's decision is attributed to the combined pressures of post-pandemic recovery costs and the increased complexity of cross-border rail travel due to new Brexit-related border checks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government was notably hesitant to provide financial support to Eurostar, despite the operator's critical role as a high-speed rail link between the UK and continental Europe.

The government emphasized that Eurostar, being majority-owned by France's SNCF and other foreign stakeholders, was not its responsibility to rescue ([Rail Journal](#), 2021). This stance contrasted sharply with the financial aid extended to airlines, which received significant government-backed loans and support packages in both the UK and France.

Critics argued that the reluctance to support Eurostar reflected a broader undervaluation of international rail as a critical component of the UK's transport infrastructure. Eurostar, unlike airlines, was left to rely on shareholder contributions and restructuring efforts, highlighting a disparity in the government's approach to safeguarding cross-border connectivity.

Economic and social benefits of Eurostar

Before the pandemic, Eurostar's presence at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International delivered substantial economic and social benefits to Kent, enhancing its connectivity with European markets and supporting the region's economy through increased tourism, trade and business travel. Key historical benefits include:

- **Economic uplift:** High Speed 1 (HS1) contributed significantly to Kent's economy by improving business accessibility to European markets. Specifically, businesses in Kent benefited from faster travel times, enhanced connectivity, and increased access to both suppliers and customers. For example, domestic HS1 services generate £146 million annually in socioeconomic benefits, with £33 million attributed to productivity improvements through agglomeration, allowing businesses to interact and cluster more effectively. This effect has also supported trade, partnerships, and overall economic activity in the region [University of Kent](#) and [HS1](#).
- **Tourism revenue:** With Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations positioned as gateways to Europe, Kent saw a significant number of international visitors, particularly from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The only public figure we have identified for Eurostar terminal usage is 614,000 annually in 2006, at Ashford International, which is a significant number of passengers (Kent Messenger, 2006).
- **Regional investment:** Improved accessibility boosted Kent's appeal for investment and potential residents seeking connectivity to continental Europe. Key investors included Ashford Borough Council, which supported the station's development and benefits for international connectivity. The Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce also voiced support, highlighting the region's economic boost and emphasizing the significant role the stations played in driving business and tourism ([Ashford Borough Council](#), 2023)



Eurostar's high-speed links from Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam made Kent a more attractive destination for international tourists. Ashford, in particular, became a convenient gateway for visitors looking to explore London, Kent, and surrounding areas, being a lower-cost alternative to accommodation in the capital and coast around Kent and Sussex.

These benefits contributed significantly to local economic growth, particularly in tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors, creating employment opportunities and supporting small businesses.



Industry highlight

Hospitality

The hospitality industry saw significant benefits from the steady flow of international passengers. Hotels, restaurants, cafes, and other services catering to tourists and business travellers flourished. The close proximity of Ashford International to London made it an attractive option for visitors seeking more affordable accommodations outside of the capital, thereby supporting both large hotel chains and smaller, independent guesthouses. The hospitality sector also benefitted from the increasing number of business travellers who used the high-speed rail service for meetings and events.



Industry highlight

Retail

The retail sector in Ashford and Ebbsfleet also experienced growth due to the increase in foot traffic generated by Eurostar passengers. Ashford, with its retail outlets, notably Ashford Designer Outlet, attracted shoppers from across Europe. The convenience of rail travel encouraged tourists to visit, boosting retail sales, especially in outlets offering high-end fashion and local goods. Small businesses along Ashford's town centre and near Ebbsfleet stations also saw an uptick in sales, benefiting from the more connected and easily accessible local economy.

In addition to the above benefits delivered to these industries, the rail network surrounding Ashford International also allows for interchange to many other parts of Kent and the south east through frequent high-speed and regional services, including Hastings, Eastbourne, Canterbury, Dover, Margate, Ramgate and Folkestone, as well as and other picturesque towns in the surrounding area such as Ore, Folkestone and Tunbridge Wells.

Conversely, Lille-Europe on the continental side provides a useful hub for reaching other continental destinations, including Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Bordeaux and potentially Zürich, Cologne and Frankfurt, through rapid high-speed services, which also includes Eurostar connections to London, creating a north-western Europe continental super-hub.

○ The Challenges



Key impacts of Eurostar suspension

The discontinuation of direct Eurostar services in Kent has had significant repercussions for the region, affecting both its economic vitality and its residents' connectivity. We now examine the multifaceted impacts resulting from the absence of these services, including the economic implications for local businesses, the inconvenience faced by travellers, and the broader socio-economic consequences for Kent's communities.



Challenge

Reduced connectivity and accessibility

With Eurostar services suspended at Ashford and Ebbsfleet, Kent's direct rail access to Europe has been severed. This reduced connectivity has:

Limited business mobility

Kent businesses face increased travel time and costs for accessing European markets, impacting the feasibility of partnerships and trade ventures. A business owner in Ashford said "My activities have always required excellent connections to the continent. It has become an important part of how we operate the business". Another business owner has mentioned having the same experience ([YouTube](#), 2024)

Restricted resident travel options

Local residents now lack direct, convenient routes to European destinations, forcing them to travel to London for international rail services, drive or fly which all involves extra costs and planning more ahead of time. One resident who has signed the Bring Back Euro Trains petition said, "crazy to go to London to pass back where you started, more expensive, more time-consuming and not to mention not possible when there is a domestic strike as happened to me recently!"

Reduced resilience

In addition, lack of capability to call at Ashford or Ebbsfleet International significantly reduces resilience if there is an incident further north between Kent and London. For example, flooding-related disruption in 2023 that could have been supported by turning back limited services at Ashford International ([Sky News](#), 2023)





Challenge

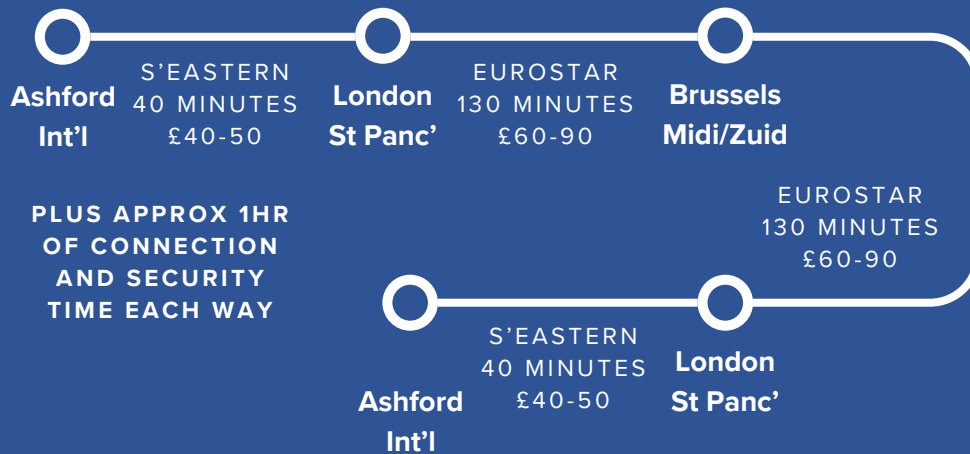
Additional time and cost

It would have taken approximately 90 minutes to travel on Eurostar from Ashford International to Brussels. Now the journey would take over two hours, via St Pancras, bearing in mind the extra added time and ticket needed to get to St Pancras from Ashford and the longer queues for security.

Pre-Eurostar cut round trip (3 hours total journey time, £120-£180 total cost)



Post-Eurostar cut (9 hours total journey time, £200-£280 total cost)



This shows what it cost residents in Ashford who travel by Eurostar nearly £60 more (even more if during peak times) and with over six additional hours of travel time.

These times are not inclusive of having to leave home even earlier to be at London St Pancras earlier for going through security checks, and any possible delays on the Southeastern rail service. The Southeastern Highspeed service to London St Pancras runs every 30 minutes, another factor residents to have to consider when travelling.





Challenge

Economic impacts on tourism and trade

The absence of Eurostar services has also had significant economic consequences for Kent:

Decline in tourism revenue

Prior to service suspension, the Kent tourism industry benefited from a steady influx of European tourists who travelled directly via Eurostar. Without these services, local businesses—including hotels, restaurants, and cultural sites—report reduced visitor numbers.

An example, Dev Biswal, a chef in Canterbury and restaurant owner, explained that with Eurostar services, tourists would often use Kent as a stopover or even a destination in itself, positively affecting the local hospitality sector ([Travel Tomorrow, 2024](#)). Surveys from local business associations indicate a notable revenue shortfall, directly attributable to the reduced number of international visitors

Lost trade opportunities

Local enterprises, particularly those in export and logistics ([Ashford Borough Council, 2024](#)), have faced operational challenges due to the absence of Eurostar services. The extra logistical effort needed to reach St Pancras station adds time and costs, making Kent less attractive for European business partners and investors.



Petition: A proof of demand

The petition to reinstate international rail services to Kent's purpose-built stations was launched on 9th March 2023 by the Bring Back Euro Trains (BBET) campaign.

The petition's core "ask" is to restore international connections that ceased in 2020, either through Eurostar or new market entrants. Hosted on Change.org, the campaign capitalised on public sentiment around the environmental and economic benefits of the rail links. Promotion strategies included local media coverage, social media outreach, partnerships with transport advocacy groups, and regional stakeholder engagement.

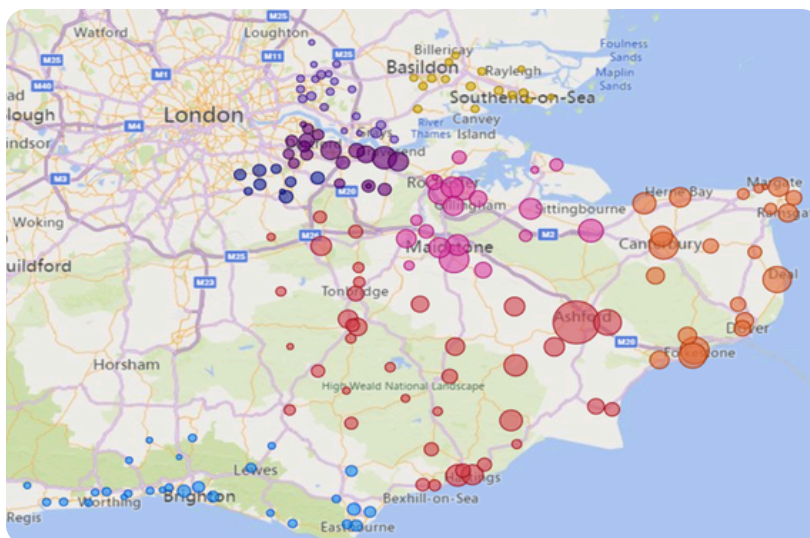
As of 27 November 2024, the petition has garnered 60,075 signatures, highlighting significant public demand for the restoration of services. This robust response supports a compelling case for investment and operational changes to enable renewed connectivity.

Regional-catchment support

Support within the key postcode areas of TN (Tonbridge), CT (Canterbury), ME (Medway), DA (Dartford), BN (Brighton), BR (Bromley), RM (Romford), and SS (Southend) demonstrates concentrated interest from regions historically benefiting from Ashford and Ebbsfleet services. Detailed insights show:

- **TN postcode:** 12,992 signatures, representing 37.8% of the primary catchment total. With a local population of approximately 713,871, this translates to roughly 1 in 56 residents signing the petition.
- **CT postcode:** 8,555 signatures, or 24.9% of the catchment support. Based on an estimated population of 501,887, 1 in 58 residents have backed the campaign.

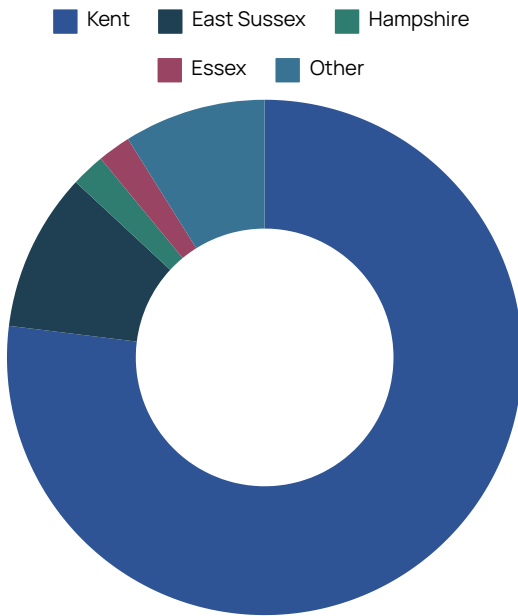
These participation levels reflect clear regional-catchment engagement, reinforcing the relevance of direct international services to Kent (and beyond) communities.



Postcode Area	Percentage of Catchment Total
TN (Tonbridge)	37.8%
CT (Canterbury)	24.9%
ME (Medway)	21.2%
DA (Dartford)	9.0%
BN (Brighton)	3.1%
BR (Bromley)	2.0%
RM (Romford)	1.1%
SS (Southend)	0.9%
Total	100%

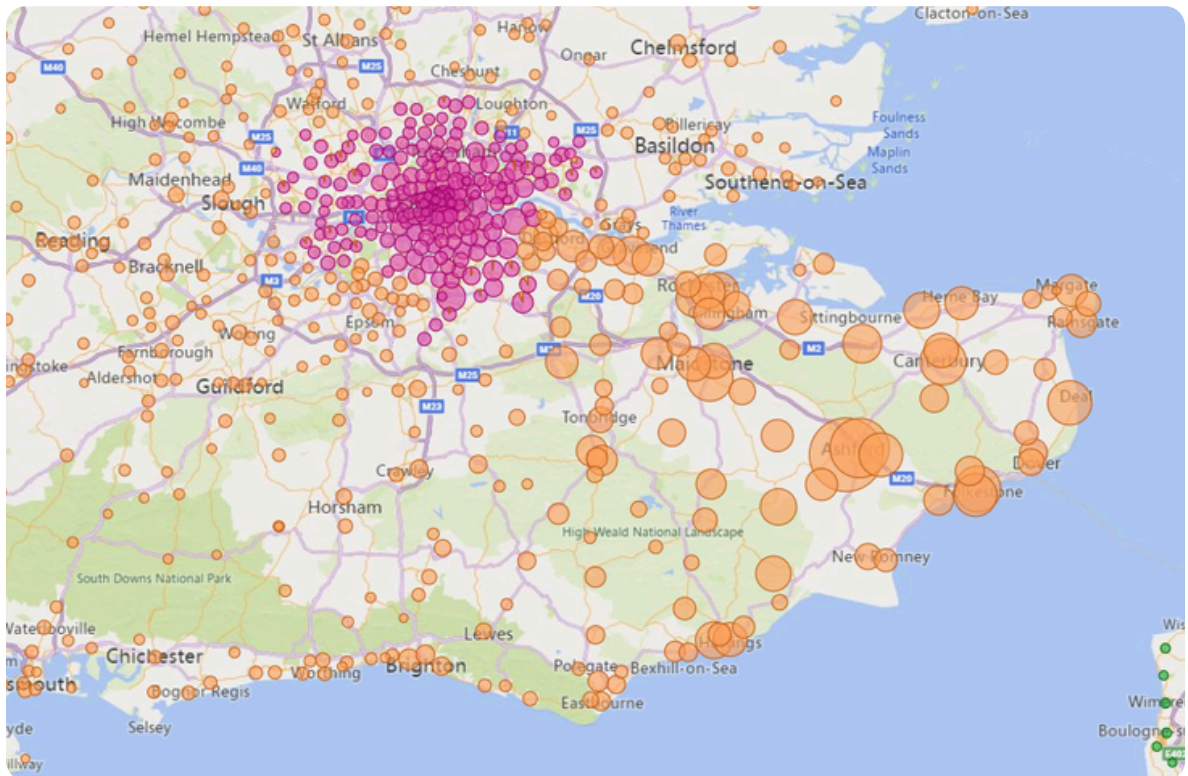
Regional support

Across the South East, signatures total 32,565, accounting for over half of the petition's backing. The breakdown by county demonstrates that demand is geographically widespread, not confined to Ashford and Ebbsfleet's immediate vicinities.



Region	Total percentage of signatures	Total number of signatures
Kent	76.92%	25,048
East Sussex	9.94%	3,238
Hampshire	2.12%	691
Essex	2.07%	675
<i>Other</i>	<i>8.95%</i>	<i>2,896</i>

This broad support highlights the strategic importance of these stations beyond their immediate localities. Shown below is a bubble map of responses centred around the South East of the UK and around the M25.



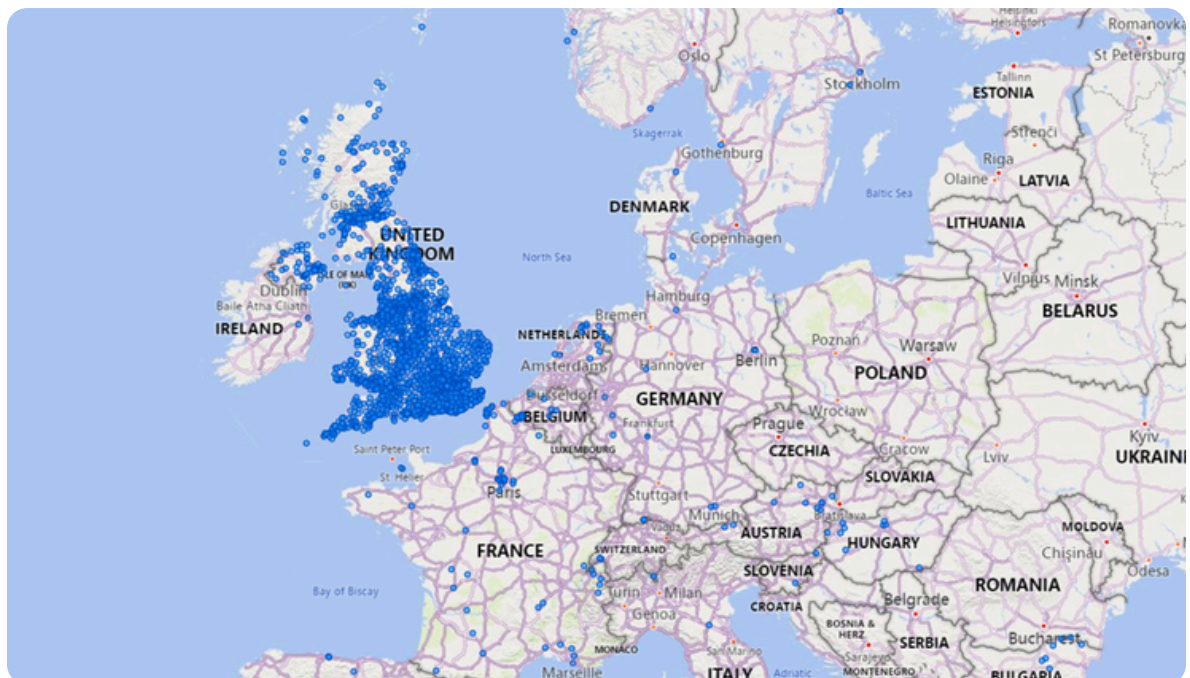
National support

Regionally, the petition shows strong representation from across the UK. The national-level interest suggests that international rail links to Kent are viewed as critical infrastructure with wide-reaching benefits. This data is shown below:

Region	Total percentage of signatures	Total number of signatures
South East	55.01%	32,565
London	15.27%	9,041
Outside of the UK	12.21%	4,291
Scotland	2.74%	1,621
South West	2.65%	1,569
North West	2.31%	1,366
West Midlands	2.15%	1,274
East of England	2.09%	1,240
East Midlands	1.96 %	1,162
Yorkshire and Humber	1.64%	968
Wales	1.05%	622
North East	0.64%	377
Northern Ireland	0.27%	160
Channel Isles	0.01%	3

International support

The campaign's global reach, accounting for 12% of total signatures, reflects recognition of Kent as a gateway to Europe. Signatories span France, Belgium, and beyond, demonstrating international backing for the connectivity improvements sought by the petition.



Some respondents to the petition submitted comments with their own stories, and an exercise has taken place to group some of these comments into categories.

Connectivity

📍 Folkestone

“I moved to East Kent to take the Sunday evening Eurostar to work and back on Friday evening...”

Travelling via London

📍 Appledore

“It’s ridiculous to nearly double your journey by having to travel to London and then back through Ashford!”

Accessibility

📍 Croydon

“Accessibility for all is extremely important especially for the disabled like myself. Not to mention the extra jobs such a local service would provide”

Environment

📍 Spain

Translated from Spanish: “Less CO2 emissions and less vehicle = accidents on the road! Plus, of course, it makes travel easier for everyone”



Challenges with reinstating calls

As noted earlier on, Eurostar have cited a range of factors behind their decision to maintain the suspension of their services to Ebbsfleet and Ashford. We further elaborate on these and other challenges to serving these stations with international trains here.



Challenge

Proving demand

Although there was an established customer base for these services prior to the pandemic, with the services having been suspended for such a long time, people have adjusted their travel patterns, and may have moved home or changed employment due to the loss of direct services. Although we have collated survey data demonstrating continued demand, as noted above, making a business case for commercial or public investment into reinstating stops will likely require robust evidence of demand which may be challenging to prove.



Challenge

Eurostar's financial position

Following the pandemic, Eurostar's financial strategy has been to focus on its core routes to generate short-term revenue in order to pay off debt it took on during periods of unprecedented low demand. As a commercial operator, these financial imperatives have taken priority over serving 'non-core' routes and stations. Demand on the 'core' route from London St Pancras is strong enough for Eurostar to fill trains with seats sold for profitable prices, meaning stopping at Ebbsfleet and Ashford is not necessary for Eurostar's short-term financial goals ([International Rail Journal, 2022](#)).



Challenge

Eurostar's monopoly

The complexities involved in cross-Channel rail operation, including passport and security requirements, strict regulations on rolling-stock type and complex operation, present a high barrier for entry for potential competitors (see section 4). Eurostar thus remains the only cross-Channel long-distance high-speed rail operator currently in a position to serve Ebbsfleet and Ashford with international trains.



Challenge

Complex requirements and high costs

To serve international trains, Ebbsfleet and Ashford require dedicated border and security infrastructure, with passengers passing through both UK exit and EU entry checks in dedicated ‘sterile’ areas prior to boarding the Eurostar. Although the physical infrastructure for these facilities remains in situ at both stations, staffing them (including with French border staff) comes at a high cost, raising the requirements for a financial case to reinstate stops. This makes it harder to ‘test the waters’ with a gradual reintroduction of service, as most of this cost will be fixed on a daily basis.



Challenge

Brexit and border requirements

The requirements for juxtaposed passport and security controls are not new, predating the UK’s exit from the European Union (the UK was never a member of the Schengen Zone) and indirectly the Entry-Exit System (EES). However, Brexit has increased the requirements and time taken for border checks due to the requirement to stamp UK passports on entry to the Schengen Zone. Furthermore, the incoming EES ([The Independent](#), 2023) will further complicate requirements, increase costs and increase check-in times for UK passport-holders.



Challenge

Brexit and the policy vacuum

The other key effect of the UK’s exit from the European Union is the vacuum in wider strategic policies which may previously have provided political support for calling international services in Kent. The UK is no longer included in the EU’s Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) or Interreg frameworks, covering long-distance corridors or cross-border cohesion respectively. International service provision for Kent stations could previously have aligned with the strategy for the North Sea – Mediterranean TEN-T corridor, and the England-Channel/Manche-French ‘Interreg’ region, and thus may have otherwise benefitted from funding or wider political support. Instead, it has not been viewed as a priority by either the UK or the EU.

Timetabling is not a major barrier to reinstating international calls, as the required infrastructure is already in place and has remained in situ throughout their suspension. HS1 and the Channel Tunnel have adequate capacity available, with the effect on journey times by calling at either Ashford and Ebbsfleet being relatively minor.

○ The Analysis



Drivers of Success

The restoration of international rail services to Kent's stations will be driven by multiple complementary factors working together. Central to this is the stations' role as Regional International Hubs, serving communities across the South East and providing a model for expanding Britain's European rail connectivity beyond London. Success requires the alignment of market forces, policy frameworks, infrastructure capabilities, economic benefits and sustainability goals.

Each of these drivers strengthens the overall case for service restoration, and indeed new offers, and helps create the conditions where multiple service patterns and operators can flourish

Regional Hub Development

Kent's railway stations have the potential to serve as strategic international rail gateways beyond London, positioning the region as a key player in global connectivity. The model for such a transformation is proven by the success of Lille Europe, which evolved from a regional station into a major hub within Europe's high-speed rail network.

With a vast catchment area encompassing South East England, Kent's stations are well-placed to replicate this success, offering direct international services to mainland Europe. This would not only improve transport links but also align with broader regional economic growth strategies, supporting the UK government's levelling-up agenda.

Crucially, integrating High Speed 1 (HS1) with High Speed 2 (HS2) and key classic rail lines could provide a national framework for seamless international rail connections, creating a template for future expansion of the UK's international rail reach.

Market Competition

Eurostar's ambition to grow to 30 million passengers annually by 2030 underscores the growing appetite for cross-Channel rail travel. This goal is further strengthened by the entry of multiple new operators seeking to run competing services through the Channel Tunnel, fostering a dynamic and competitive market.

A significant opportunity lies in developing a regional shuttle service linking Kent directly to Europe's high-speed rail network, making it easier for passengers to travel internationally without needing to transit through London. Before the pandemic, demand for regional international services was clear, with approximately 614,000 passengers using similar routes annually (Kent Mail, 2006). This existing demand provides a solid foundation for future service development and route expansion, proving there is a market ready to be tapped.

Strategic Policy Framework

A robust strategic policy framework is essential for enabling the growth of international rail services. The UK government has expressed its commitment to fostering international rail connections while ensuring a level playing field for all operators. Policies ensuring fair and timely access to infrastructure and station facilities will encourage new entrants into the market.

Reformed funding mechanisms, such as a revised Air Passenger Duty (APD) structure that incentivises rail over air travel, could further support market growth. Additionally, streamlined border control processes and ultra-efficient passenger handling — akin to London City Airport’s 15-30 minute departure model — will be vital in enhancing the customer experience. By adopting a station operating model where charges are linked to passenger throughput, the financial risk to service operators can be minimised, promoting a sustainable operating environment.

Infrastructure

Kent’s international rail ambitions are underpinned by robust infrastructure, with two fully equipped international stations — Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International — ready to accommodate new services. Significant spare capacity exists on HS1, and the Channel Tunnel offers room for additional train paths, making the infrastructure well-suited to scaling up operations. Proven technical systems and operational frameworks are already in place, ensuring safety and reliability. The seamless integration of these international routes with domestic rail networks will further enhance connectivity, enabling passengers from across the UK to benefit from enhanced European rail access.

Economic Growth

Expanding international rail services in Kent will boost tourism revenue, improve business connectivity, and stimulate trade across South East England. Local retail and hospitality sectors will benefit from increased passenger footfall, while new transport services will generate employment opportunities in logistics and customer service, supporting broader regional prosperity.

Sustainable Transport

International rail travel offers 90% lower carbon emissions than short-haul flights, reducing congestion at airports, on roads, and at ports. By driving a modal shift from air and road to rail, it supports the UK’s net zero goals and delivers a greener, more efficient transport network.

Financial incentives

Across all of the above drivers of success, the fundamental challenge for any commercial operator to serve the stations remains the provision of a financial incentive. This could be addressed in the following ways:

Commercial case

The market organically becomes favourable for an operator to call trains, due to economic or demographic change, a growth in passenger demand, or a re-evaluation of economic analysis. Supportive local authorities, business groups, advocates or Getlink could contribute to market analysis on behalf of operators to encourage Ashford and Ebbsfleet to be served.

Air Passenger Duty Reform

In addition, reforming Air Passenger Duty (APD) could help fund regional international stations. A new 'A'-band would introduce a higher rate where rail provides a journey time of 5 hours or less, and could create a feasible funding stream while encouraging modal shift.

Subsidy

Prospective operators could receive a subsidy to reinstate stops, from local councils, Kent County Council, Transport for the South East, the UK Government, or the European Union. This could be in the form of a direct payment for calling trains, compensation for time loss on trains, compensation for additional costs (e.g. border security), subsidised tickets to drive demand or changes to APD. As noted above, Channel Tunnel owner and operator Getlink has already offered €50m of support for new operators ([Financial Times, 2024](#)); a fund could be promoted for calling trains at Ebbsfleet and Ashford.

Regulatory reform

Regulators like the Office of Rail and Road or the Home Office could review regulations applying to calling international trains at Ebbsfleet and Ashford, or regulations applying to international rail in general, to identify opportunities for simplification in order to reduce costs and complexity. This could include the security requirements which drive high (relatively flat) costs for keeping Ebbsfleet and Ashford's international stations open. [The Office of Rail and Road \(2024\)](#) recently recommended the lowering of track access charges for HS1 to encourage more services.

Station operating model

A key idea that came out of discussions through Bring Back Euro Trains with vital stakeholders included an arms-length Government body owning and managing the HS1 regional stations (Stratford, Ebbsfleet and Ashford), charging operators per passenger (for example, £15-20 per passengers). This would reduce risks for operators while making costs proportional to demand, and allowing easier and more efficient Government subsidy.

Public or co-op operator

Rather than relying on a commercial case, an alternative solution would be for a publicly-owned or co-operative international operator to be set up to serve Ebbsfleet and Ashford. Such an operator could be owned by the UK Government (as part of [Great British Railways](#)), regionally owned, or set up as a co-operative owned by its employees. There is precedent for open-access co-operative railways: Prospective operator Go-op has recently received approval by the Office of Rail and Road to run services between Swindon, Taunton and Weston-super-Mare ([Rail Advent](#), 2024). In France, a similar venture, Railcoop, recently attempted (unsuccessfully) to launch a new service from Lyon to Bordeaux ([Railway Gazette International](#), 2024).



Potential development scenarios

Considering the above drivers of success and financial incentives, here are a few example scenarios in which international rail services in Kent could develop in the future:



Option 1

Reintroduction of Eurostar services

Eurostar is the only rail operator with the rolling stock, access rights and operational experience ready to begin serving Ebbsfleet International and Ashford International in a short timescale, if the company chose to do so (which would rely on a strong commercial case or other funding).

Notwithstanding the barriers or disadvantages for Eurostar of doing so, as detailed above, reinstating these stops does offer the company an avenue for growth by expanding its geographical catchment, helping it reach its target of serving 30m passengers per year by 2030 ([Eurostar, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, capacity at London St Pancras has been identified as a long-term limiting factor for growth, prompting work to explore ways to increase passenger capacity ([International Railway Gazette, 2024](#)); ready-to-use facilities at Ebbsfleet International and Ashford International could provide part of the solution to increasing passenger handling capacity





Option 2

Service by emerging competing operators

Although Eurostar have maintained a monopoly on long-distance cross-Channel operation since the opening of the tunnel, recent years have seen multiple reports of prospective competitors seeking to enter the market, such as Virgin Trains, Spanish-owned Evero, Dutch startup Heuro, Spanish-state-owned Renfe, and German-state-owned Deutsche Bahn ([DW](#), 2024; [EuroNews](#), 2023; [The Guardian](#), 2021).

Most have proposed to compete with Eurostar on its core London to Paris/Brussels/Amsterdam routes, although Deutsche Bahn have previously proposed running direct services from London to Frankfurt (a [January 2024 article](#) suggested they are “still keen”, although a number of significant challenges remain).

The Channel Tunnel owner and operator, Getlink, have long sought to grow the cross-Channel market ([The Guardian](#), 2023), and have recently offered up to €50m of support for new operators ([Financial Times](#), 2024). Emerging operators, seeking to carve out a market and exploit available capacity and infrastructure, may find it advantageous to fill the gap in the market left behind by Eurostar’s suspension of stops ([BBC](#), 2024).





Option 3

Shuttle service

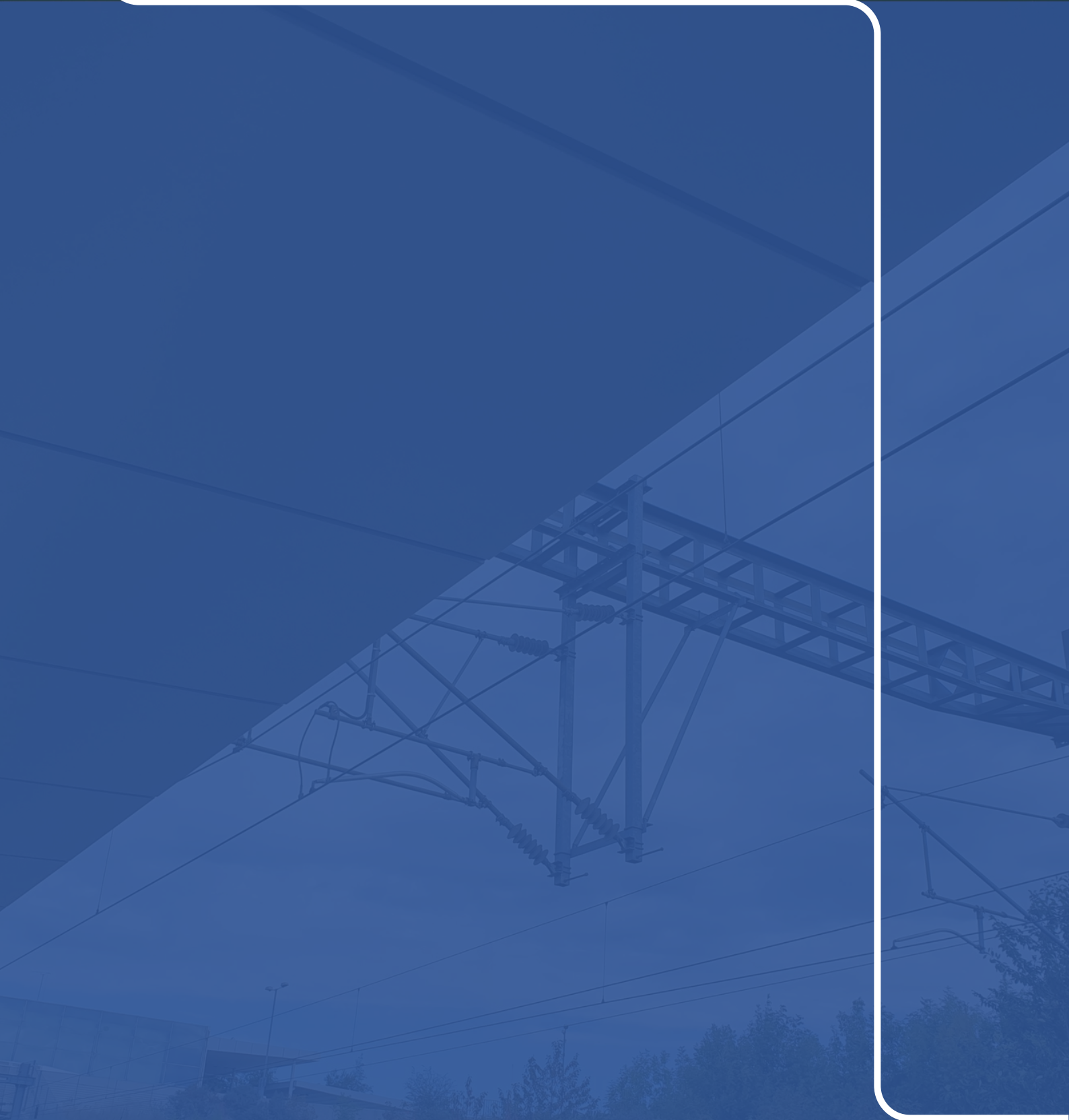
A shuttle service from Stratford International (which has never been served by international service) to Lille-Europe, calling at Ebbsfleet Int'l, Ashford Int'l and Calais-Fréthun, which could be operated by either Eurostar or another operator.

Running this service as a shuttle, taking advantage of available capacity, could potentially reduce costs significantly compared to using major stations such as London St Pancras and Paris Gare du Nord. Lille-Europe provides a useful hub for reaching other continental destinations, including Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Bordeaux and potentially Zürich, Cologne and Frankfurt, as does Ashford across the south east. However, finding suitable rolling stock and developing a market based on solely serving these stations may prove to be a challenge





The Ask



Our ask to decision-makers

The successful restoration and development of international rail services at Kent's stations requires coordinated actions from key national decision-makers and is aided by the actions of supporting stakeholders. The actions of key national decision-makers will create the conditions necessary for service restoration and market development. The following actions align with and enable the key drivers of success.

Key asks

UK Government Ministers

Chancellor of the Exchequer

- Review the economic case for regional international hub development including maximising the use of existing assets
- Consider strategic funding to enable efficient border processing
- Develop air passenger duty reform to support modal shift
- Assess potential for government-backed guarantees for new operators

Transport Secretary

- Set clear policy for expanding international rail connectivity beyond London
- Direct DfT to prioritise regional international hub development
- Ensure fair competitive framework for new operators
- Support efficient border processing protocols

Home Secretary

- Direct Border Force to develop 'City Airport-style' passenger processing for international rail
- Support streamlined international rail border arrangements
- Enable efficient use of border staff across multiple operators and locations
- Review security requirements to ensure proportionality



Key asks

Department for Transport

Strategic Development

- Create a comprehensive strategy for UK international rail expansion
- Establish a framework for a regional international hub network
- Develop a clear pathway and low barriers for new operator entry
- Enable efficient infrastructure access arrangements

Implementation

- Work with HM Treasury on funding mechanisms including APD cross-funding
- Coordinate a cross-departmental delivery group
- Support the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) in ensuring fair competition
- Enable efficient international terminal/station operations that de-risk operators

Parliamentary Engagement

- Support Transport Select Committee inquiry into international rail
- Provide evidence on market development potential
- Demonstrate strategic national importance
- Show alignment with transport, growth and sustainability objectives

Key asks

MPs

Parliamentary Action

- Establish and support an All-Party Parliamentary Group on international rail
- Champion regional hub development through parliamentary questions
- Press ministers on a level playing field for new operators and between modes
- Support legislative changes needed for efficient border processing

Constituency Engagement

- Advocate for constituents' access to international rail services
- Support local business engagement with international opportunities
- Highlight economic benefits for regional communities
- Maintain pressure for service restoration and development

Advocating for change

To advocate effectively for the reinstatement of Eurostar services at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International, stakeholders such as Bring Back Euro Trains, Kent County Council (KCC), Ashford Borough Council, and Enroute must coordinate and align their efforts. The following outlines the key advocacy actions each stakeholder should take to lobby both the government and private sector for support.

Advocacy actions

Bring Back Euro Trains

- **Public mobilisation and campaigns:** Bring Back Euro Trains should continue to lead the charge in raising public awareness. This includes organising online petitions, media campaigns, and press releases that highlight the demand for international services. Work with similar groups abroad to share best practice.
- **Engage with affected stakeholders:** Bringing together testimonials from local businesses in the tourism, logistics, and retail sectors that rely on efficient international rail services. This can be shared through digital platforms and in meetings with decision-makers.
- **Use of research and data:** Present research and case studies showing the economic impact of the Eurostar service's absence, including disruptions to trade and tourism. Citing existing studies and producing new reports can help demonstrate the negative financial effects of reduced cross-Channel connectivity.
- **Lobbying government and transport authorities:** Collaborate with MPs and other local advocates to secure parliamentary support, engaging in meetings with the Department for Transport (DfT) and private stakeholders in the rail industry to make the case for the reinstatement of services.

Advocacy actions

Enroute

- **Feasibility studies and research:** Enroute, with its focus on technical transport skills, can continue to provide, in addition to this report, technical research demonstrating how reinstating stops can fit within a wider strategic agenda for sustainable transport. Enroute can collaborate with KCC and Ashford Borough Council to highlight the environmental and connectivity benefits of the service.
- **Community and economic impact analysis:** Given its community-based focus, Enroute can support other organisations in conduct research on how the absence of Eurostar may have hindered community mobility and access to jobs and services in Kent, especially in the context of wider environmental goals like reducing carbon emissions and increasing sustainable transport.

Advocacy actions

Kent County Council (KCC)

- **Research and economic impact studies:** KCC should lead efforts in gathering and presenting robust economic data on how the loss of Eurostar services has impacted Kent's local businesses, especially those in sectors like logistics, manufacturing, and publishing. In partnership with other stakeholders, KCC can commission in-depth studies to underline the economic loss and competitive disadvantage facing Kent businesses.
- **Policy advocacy:** KCC has the authority to lobby for a new rail link to the continent as part of broader regional transport and infrastructure plans. KCC can argue that without direct international rail links, Kent's ability to attract investment and foster growth in key sectors like tech, logistics, and tourism is diminished. Highlighting Eurostar's role in enhancing business connections with Europe is crucial.
- **Formal submissions:** KCC can engage in formal consultations and lobbying efforts, providing evidence and presenting data to government transport committees, making a strong case for why this transport link is vital for Kent's economic future.

Advocacy actions

Borough Councils (Dartford and Ashford)

- **Support for local businesses:** The borough councils can facilitate dialogue with local businesses and industries that depend on international transport links to highlight the need for the restoration of international rail services. They can help compile data and testimonials from sectors like tourism, retail, and logistics that are disproportionately impacted by the lack of cross-Channel rail connectivity.
- **Strategic advocacy:** As a primary location for international travel in Kent, the borough councils can continue to push for the inclusion of Eurostar services in national infrastructure planning. They can align efforts with KCC to lobby the Department for Transport (DfT), making the case that international rail is essential for the region's economic recovery and growth.
- **Collaboration with stakeholders:** Organise local meetings and roundtables with businesses, MPs, and regional leaders to strengthen the advocacy efforts for restored international rail services.

Conclusion

The suspension of Eurostar services at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International stations has created significant challenges for the connectivity, economic growth, and sustainable transport objectives of Kent and the South East of England. The strong public response to the Bring Back Euro Trains campaign, evidenced by nearly 60,000 petition signatures, demonstrates the clear demand for reinstating these vital international rail links.

Success in returning international rail services to Kent requires a coordinated approach across three key areas:

- **A unified message:** All stakeholders must align their messaging to emphasize the critical importance of international rail services, supported by economic impact studies, public sentiment, business testimonials, and environmental benefits data.
- **Government engagement:** A strategic approach to government engagement is essential, including direct lobbying of the Department for Transport, regular engagement with MPs, and participation in relevant transport and infrastructure consultations. We also believe Government should act to shape the HS1 market, making it fully functional, and enable multiple operators and further competition.
- **Private sector partnerships:** Engaging private sector stakeholders will be crucial, from exploring opportunities with potential new operators to investigating public-private partnership opportunities and innovative funding models.

The partnership between Bring Back Euro Trains and Enroute marks an important step in advancing this cause. Through continued collaboration, research and stakeholder engagement, we can work towards the ultimate goal of returning international rail services to Kent. This will not only benefit local communities and businesses but also contribute to the broader objectives of sustainable transport and international connectivity in the post-Brexit era.





BRING BACK EURO TRAINS
Kent campaign for trains to continental Europe



Enroute



Driving Sustainability, Empowering Communities

enrouteic.com

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