

APPG Thames Estuary – HS1 Sub-Committee

Meeting Summary | Wednesday, 12 November 2025 | 10:00–11:30 | House of Commons

Attendees

Parliamentarians & Local Authorities

Sojan Joseph MP (Chair), Jim Dickson MP, Kevin McKenna MP, Helen Whately MP, Cllr Jeremy Kite (Leader, Dartford Council), Cllr Diccon Spain (Ashford Borough Council), Cllr Vince Maple (Leader, Medway Council), Cllr Linden Kemkaran (Leader, Kent County Council), Noel Ovenden (Leader, Ashford Borough Council).

Officers & Representatives

David Godfrey (Kent County Council), Sarah Nurden (KCC / KMEP), Andrew Osborne (Ashford Borough Council), Vince Lucas (KMEP / Adviser to the Sub-Committee), Charles Croft (Thames Estuary Growth Board).

Offices of MPs

Oliver Aston (Office of Sojan Joseph MP), Chris Bradley (Office of Sojan Joseph MP), Nick Beall (Office of Jim Dickson MP), Bjorn Simple (Office of Lauren Edwards MP), Carter Powell (Office of Mike Tapp MP).

Industry & Operators

Wendy Spinks (St Pancras High Speed), Joel Herga (St Pancras High Speed), Martin Jones (Office of Rail and Road), Other representatives from HS1 and the ORR.

Strengthening International Rail Connectivity Through HS1

The HS1 Sub-Committee of the APPG Thames Estuary, chaired by **Sojan Joseph MP**, met to review the recent ORR ruling on capacity at Temple Mills, consider implications for reinstating Kent's international rail services, and agree next steps for engaging operators and government.

Sojan Joseph MP reaffirmed the Sub-Committee's purpose: to champion HS1 as a key economic asset, restore international stops at Ashford and Ebbsfleet, promote greater passenger and freight use, and ensure fair market access for new entrants.

Positive responses have been received from the Rail Minister and ORR following the Sub-Committee's earlier correspondence, and the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy, has expressed willingness to meet the group.

Update from the Sub-Committee Adviser – Vince Lucas

Recent developments outlined by Vince Lucas include:

- **Eurostar's new train order:** 30 new 200m trains, with an option for 30 more, all planned for Stratford Temple Mills.
- The fleet renewal replaces older Thalys and 400m UK sets and creates **additional growth capacity**.
- ORR awarded **20% spare depot capacity to Virgin Europe**, enabling their proposed services.
- **Virgin Europe has placed an order for 12 Alstom trains** to operate new international routes.
- Media reports suggest **Eurostar may consider legal action** on the ORR decision.
- Eurostar will shift maintenance from Paris to Temple Mills, further increasing activity at the depot.

ORR Briefing – Martin Jones, Deputy Director (Access & International)

Martin Jones provided clarity on the regulatory decision:

- Four applications for HS1 capacity were assessed; Virgin's plans provided the greatest confidence in delivery.
- Operators have a three-month window to challenge the decision.
- ORR is engaging both Eurostar and Virgin on next steps to develop depot agreements and service access.
- ORR cannot dictate station stops, but Virgin has stated plans to serve Ashford and Ebbsfleet.
- Additional depot capacity may be required if Eurostar pursues its expansion strategy.
- Resilience, border operations, and mobilisation timelines remain key areas for further work.

HS1 & Station Readiness

Representatives from St Pancras High Speed noted:

- Ashford and Ebbsfleet remain “soft mothballed” and will require consultation and mobilisation before reopening.
- SPHS cannot compel operators to stop at specific stations.
- Border force capacity—on both UK and French sides—will be essential.
- Station operations for a new entrant will be structured differently to the previous Eurostar-only model.

Key Contributions from MPs and Local Authorities

Members raised several strategic issues:

- **Timing and impact** of any Eurostar appeal.
- **Operational resilience**, including the ability to manage disruption or emergency diversions.
- **Economic benefits** and whether Treasury engagement could support reopening.
- Whether and when to **engage the CMA** to assess Eurostar’s market dominance.
- Interest in **future freight opportunities** on HS1.

Next Steps Agreed

- **Invite Rail Minister Lord Hendy** to a future meeting to discuss opportunities following the ORR decision.
- **Consider writing to the CMA**, with timing dependent on the ORR appeals process.
- Continue engagement with HS1 operators, ORR, and local authorities on readiness, capacity and mobilisation.
- Develop a clearer communication plan for wider stakeholder engagement.
- Seek to **invite Virgin Europe** to a future Sub-Committee meeting.
- Explore **freight capacity and opportunities** as part of future agenda planning.
- Identify membership of and establish a fact-finding **Working Group of the Sub-Committee** to take forward exploration of the Kent station stops servicing and funding issues.
- Write to the **Department of Transport** regarding invitation to participate in the Working Group.