



APPG Thames Estuary – HS1 Sub-Committee

Meeting Summary | Monday, 23 March 2026 | 11:00–12:30 | Portcullis House

Attendees

Parliamentarians

Sojan Joseph MP (Chair); Jim Dickson MP; Daniel Francis MP;
Baroness O’Neill of Bexley (online).

Local Government Leaders

Cllr Noel Ovenden (Leader, Ashford Borough Council);
Cllr Vince Maple (Leader, Medway Council).

Officers, Advisers & Representatives

Tracey Kelly (Ashford Borough Council);
Andrew Osborne (Ashford Borough Council);
Sarah Nurden (KCC / KMEP);
Vince Lucas (KMEP / Adviser to the Sub-Committee);
Tudor Price (Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce);
Poppy Windsor (Port of London Authority);
Jay Turner (H-Advisors).

Offices of MPs

Nicholas Beall and Molly Hartill (Office of Jim Dickson MP);
Chris Bradley (Office of Sojan Joseph MP).

Industry & Operators

Phil Whittingham, Andrew Gibbs, Kate Cashmore (Virgin);
Joel Herga and Wendy Spinks (St Pancras Highspeed);
Alexander Bienfait (Bring Back Euro Trains).

Secretariat

Expanding International Rail Competition and Connectivity Through HS1

The HS1 Sub-Committee met to review progress following the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) decision enabling new entrants to the cross-Channel rail market, with a focus on Virgin's proposals and the implications for restoring international services to Kent.

Virgin has secured regulatory approval to progress plans for international services via HS1 and the Channel Tunnel, targeting operations from around 2030. Proposals include high-frequency services linking London with Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam, with potential expansion to additional European destinations.

The Sub-Committee reaffirmed its objective to promote competition, improve passenger choice, support the reinstatement of international services at Ashford and Ebbsfleet, and maximise the economic and connectivity benefits of HS1.

Chair's Update

Sojan Joseph MP welcomed attendees and provided an update on recent progress:

- A working group, led by St Pancras Highspeed with Department for Transport (DfT) participation, has now been established.
 - The Rail Minister has been invited to engage with the working group and attend a future Sub-Committee meeting.
 - Positive developments were noted in relation to potential freight services on HS1.
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Update from the Sub-Committee Adviser – Vince Lucas

Vince Lucas outlined a number of key developments:

- Ashford marked the 30th anniversary of international rail services with a successful stakeholder event.
- Funding has been secured for Barking Eurohub, a new rail freight interchange connected to HS1.
- Eurostar is considering ending or not renewing access agreements for Ashford and Ebbsfleet.
- Plans are progressing for 50 new double-deck Eurostar trainsets, increasing overall passenger capacity.

- Trenitalia has secured land near Paris for a new international maintenance facility, signalling potential future market entry.
 - The costs associated with reopening Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations are now better understood.
 - The HS1 working group is exploring options to reduce station operating costs under a revised model.
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Industry Update – Virgin

Phil Whittingham provided an update on Virgin's plans:

- Service launch is targeted for around 2030.
 - Virgin's cross-Channel plans are moving forward at pace and the company continues to make great progress.
 - Virgin has confirmed its funding consortium partners along with an agreement with global train manufacturer Alstom to purchase 12 Avelia Stream trains.
 - Virgin remains open to serving Ashford and Ebbsfleet, if the stations are reopened.
 - Challenges discussed that need resolving include:
 - Border control requirements
 - Station upgrades and staffing
 - Many of these factors sit beyond Virgin's direct control and require coordination with HS1, DfT and border authorities.
 - Virgin will continue to engage constructively on station viability and operational options.
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HS1, Stations and Border Operations

The Sub-Committee discussed key operational considerations:

- Station reopening costs remain a central challenge, with business rates identified as a significant pressure.
 - The working group is engaging with DfT to explore cost-reduction measures and potential support mechanisms.
 - Border Force is actively engaged, with biometric systems expected to be required at stations.
 - Capacity at Ashford and Ebbsfleet is considered sufficient once upgrades are complete.
 - Engagement with French authorities will be essential to align border resource requirements.
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Discussion – Demand, Competition and Delivery

Members and stakeholders discussed the wider context for delivery:

- The introduction of a second operator has increased momentum and stakeholder engagement.
 - Local authorities emphasised the importance of strong communication with operators to support the case for reopening stations.
 - Questions were raised regarding demand forecasting, including post-Brexit travel patterns, population growth, and evolving passenger demand.
 - Examples of demand stimulation in European markets were highlighted as potential models.
 - A key strategic issue remains identifying funding mechanisms for station reopening and operation.
 - MPs noted the potential to raise issues such as business rates with Ministers.
 - Public engagement and consultation activity were recognised as increasingly effective in building support.
 - Highlighted was the opportunity to utilise unallocated Interreg 2 Seas funding (c.£3m), including potential support for enabling works at Ashford and Ebbsfleet.
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Next Steps

The Sub-Committee agreed the following actions:

- Continue the work of the HS1 working group to refine station cost models and operational options.
- Engage further with the Department for Transport and Ministers on funding, business rates and policy support.
- MPs to write to the Minister for Devolution, Faith and Communities to support the use of Interreg funding to enable the restoration of international rail services at Ashford and Ebbsfleet.
- Invite Eurostar and Southeastern to attend a future Sub-Committee meeting.
- Continue discussions with Virgin and stakeholders on demand, operations and station viability.
- Invite the Rail Minister to the next Sub-Committee meeting ahead of the summer recess.