

APPG Thames Estuary – HS1 Sub-Committee

Meeting Summary | Tuesday, 23 June 2026 | 11:30–13:00 | Houses of Parliament

Attendees

Parliamentarians

- Sojan Joseph MP (Chair)
- Jim Dickson MP
- Tristan Osborne MP
- Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister of State for Rail)

Local Government Leaders

- Cllr Linden Kemkaran (Leader, Kent County Council)
- Andrew Osborne (Ashford Borough Council)

Officers, Advisers & Representatives

- Andrea Pearson (Department for Transport)
- Lucy Druesne (Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce)
- Sara Waller (Ebbsfleet Development Corporation)

Offices of MPs

- Oliver Aston and Chris Bradley (Office of Sojan Joseph MP)
- Nicholas Beall and Molly Hartill (Office of Jim Dickson MP)
- Bjorn Simple (Office of Lauren Edwards MP)
- George Nkazi (Office of Dr Lauren Sullivan MP)

Industry, Campaigns & Operators

- Phil Whittingham and Andrew Gibbs (Virgin)
- Gareth Williams (Eurostar)
- Robert Sinclair, Joel Herga and Wendy Spinks (St Pancras Highspeed)
- Georgia Whitaker (Rail Campaign Manager)
- Cllr Diccon Spain (Bring Back Euro Trains Campaign)
- Alexander Bienfait and Mehdi Constable (Bring Back Euro Trains)

Secretariat

- Jonathan Shaw
- Mark Hill

Progressing the Restoration of International Rail Services to Kent

The HS1 Sub-Committee met to review progress towards restoring international rail services at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International, following continued engagement between Government, industry and local partners.

The meeting provided an opportunity for the Minister of State for Rail to hear directly from Parliamentarians, local authority leaders, rail operators and stakeholders on the practical steps required to reopen the international stations, support greater competition on HS1 and maximise the economic benefits of international rail connectivity for Kent and the Thames Estuary.

Members welcomed the continued commitment of Government through the Department for Transport and the International Stations Working Group. The Sub-Committee reaffirmed its objective of securing the return of international services to both Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International through close collaboration between Government, operators and industry partners.

Chair's Update

Sojan Joseph MP welcomed attendees and thanked Lord Hendy for attending the meeting.

The Chair highlighted progress since the previous Sub-Committee meeting, including:

- Continued engagement between the APPG and the International Stations Working Group.
- Ongoing collaboration between St Pancras Highspeed, the Department for Transport and rail operators.
- Further work to understand station operating costs and identify practical measures to improve commercial viability.

Update from the Sub-Committee Adviser

An update prepared by Vince Lucas was presented on behalf of the APPG Secretariat.

Key developments included:

- The International Stations Working Group met on 22 June to review progress on reopening the Kent international stations.
- The Office of Rail and Road consultation on Virgin and London St Pancras Highspeed's proposed Track Access Agreement closed in May, with negotiations continuing positively.

- Discussions are progressing regarding depot access arrangements for prospective international operators.
- Trenitalia continues discussions regarding potential future international services through HS1.
- Eurostar's access agreement for Ebbsfleet has lapsed and branding has been removed, while the agreement covering Ashford infrastructure is expected to conclude later this year.
- Network Rail funding remains in place to maintain the relevant infrastructure until 2029.

The meeting also noted continued progress on a five-point programme to support reopening the international stations, focusing on:

- Cost reduction and operational efficiency.
- Financial incentives.
- Passenger demand.
- Stakeholder engagement.
- Station readiness.

Further updates included:

- Kent Partners International Rail Group continues to develop investment propositions demonstrating the economic value of restoring international rail services.
- Bring Back Euro Trains has launched a passenger survey to strengthen the evidence base for future demand.
- St Pancras Highspeed remains committed to identifying commercially viable operating models for both stations.
- Continued maintenance of track and signalling infrastructure will be essential during the transition to new operators.
- Previous investment by Kent County Council and Ashford Borough Council in Ashford International was recognised.

Ministerial Update

Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE provided an update on Government policy relating to international rail services.

The Minister:

- Expressed condolences following the recent rail accident near St Pancras and noted that official investigations are underway.
- Reaffirmed the Government's support for restoring international rail services to Kent.
- Confirmed that the Government supports reopening both Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International, rather than pursuing a single-station solution.

- Confirmed that the Department for Transport continues to participate fully in the International Stations Working Group.
- Confirmed that **HM Treasury** and the **Home Office** are also engaged in the work of the International Stations Working Group, reflecting the cross-government commitment to restoring international rail services to Kent.
- Recognised that the principal challenges remain commercial rather than technical, particularly around capacity at St Pancras International and Temple Mills depot, while emphasising that Government will continue working with industry to facilitate commercially sustainable solutions.

Discussion – Restoring International Services

Members and stakeholders discussed the next phase of delivery.

Key issues included:

- Progress towards introducing additional international rail operators on HS1.
- The commercial and operational requirements for reopening Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International.
- The importance of removing unnecessary barriers to market competition.
- Ensuring supporting infrastructure, including signalling and track maintenance, remains available until services recommence.
- Government's role in facilitating commercial investment where wider economic benefits can be demonstrated.

Members welcomed confirmation that the work to reopen the Kent international stations is receiving support across Government, with the Department for Transport working alongside HM Treasury and the Home Office through the International Stations Working Group to address the commercial, operational and border arrangements required for restoring services.

Virgin confirmed it would serve both Ashford and Ebbsfleet should the stations reopen, reinforcing the commercial opportunity presented by the return of international services.

A representative of Kent County Council asked whether, given the surrounding infrastructure at Ebbsfleet, there may be merit in reopening that station first to enable international services to Kent to resume sooner. The Minister reaffirmed that the Government supports reopening both Ashford and Ebbsfleet.

The Minister stated that the Government supports reopening both stations and that the objective remains to facilitate commercially sustainable services rather than pursue a single-station approach.

Members noted that, while commercial issues remain to be resolved, there is increasing momentum through ongoing work on track access, depot arrangements,

station readiness and the development of evidence supporting future passenger demand.

Historic passenger data and future growth projections continue to demonstrate significant demand potential.

Ebbsfleet Development Corporation highlighted the importance of international rail connectivity in supporting future housing, employment and private investment.

Eurostar confirmed it continues to assess both stations from a commercial perspective.

The Bring Back Euro Trains passenger survey was welcomed as an important contribution to strengthening future business cases.

Members also recognised the wider economic opportunities arising from population growth, new infrastructure projects and evolving international travel demand across Kent and the Thames Estuary.

Next Steps

The Sub-Committee agreed to:

- Continue supporting the work of the International Stations Working Group to refine operational and commercial proposals.
- Maintain engagement with the Department for Transport and industry partners on reopening both Ashford International and Ebbsfleet International.
- Continue developing the five-point programme covering cost reduction, financial incentives, passenger demand, stakeholder engagement and station readiness.
- Continue gathering evidence on future passenger demand, including research undertaken by Bring Back Euro Trains.
- Explore opportunities to align the restoration of international rail services with wider economic growth and investment initiatives across Kent and the Thames Estuary.
- Consider future thematic Sub-Committee meetings focused on economic development and investment opportunities associated with HS1.
- Accept the offer from St Pancras Highspeed to host a future meeting of the Sub-Committee.