T&E UK Political Briefing

Channel Tunnel international rail expansion opportunities August 2026

The Channel Tunnel is an iconic example of visionary transport infrastructure, directly linking the UK and EU together and bringing huge opportunities for economic growth, environmental modal shift and strengthening of diplomatic ties as the UK resets our ties with the EU as critical allies. However the Channel Tunnel is woefully underutilised, the UK is wasting a crucial asset and losing growth opportunities as a result. With a relatively small amount of investment, and policy and diplomatic work in line with the EU/ UK reset the Channel Tunnel could reach its full potential, bringing environmentally friendly growth to the UK and reducing the need for unnecessary, expensive and polluting airport expansion.

Economic waste: underused infrastructure

Underused tracks

- Eurotunnel confirmed 50% of passenger rail capacity is currently underutilized, therefore there is a huge potential for an increase in passenger services.
- This is not due to demand, Eurostar reached a record amount of passengers particularly on the Paris to London route this year. This is because there aren't enough trains scheduled through the tunnel despite availability on the tracks.
- Only 10% of rail freight is used, one million tonnes of goods, whereas the potential is estimated at 10 million tonnes.

Underused stations

- Only one of the UK's four international rail stations are currently operational.
- St Pancras is open and overcrowded, but the UK's second London station, Stratford International, has never run international services. Opening up Stratford International could reduce congestion at St. Pancras while making high-speed international rail more accessible to travellers across East Anglia and beyond.
- Ashford and Ebbfleet International have not been used for international rail services since 2020. £80 million of infrastructure investment in these stations has been wasted. Local businesses have struggled which has hurt deprived communities in Kent and East Sussex where there is a high concentration of child poverty and unemployment.
- The Good Growth Foundation expects that capital investment to re-open Ashford International would cost between £2 million to £3.5 million. Alongside this, there would be ongoing annual running costs of Border Force staffing ranging from £1.15 million to £1.4 million annually. Reopening Ashford International alone could make back £534 million annually into the visitor economy, or £2.7 billion over 5 years.

Passenger demand: growth opportunities

- In and out-bound international rail passenger demand is likely to increase from the current 11.2 million in both directions to up to 28.5 million by 2040 – 2.5 times the current volume of passengers by 2040.
- London High Speed St Pancras estimates that demand for international rail travel from the UK is expected to triple over the next 15 years, increasing from 11 million to 35 million passengers per

year. This could translate to over £1 billion visitor tourism spend in the UK per year with wider socio economic benefits
- Trenitalia and Virgin are set to run services from London as early as 2029 and 2030, which could increase services to 21 million passengers annually plus more passengers on the new Swiss and German direct rail links to the UK.
- London High Speed St Pancras found that competition could reduce ticket prices by 30%
- This is advantageous to business travellers, productivity gains. 58% of business travellers in major European markets prefer trains for domestic work travel

What has Eurostar's economic impact been so far?

- 2.8bn of Eurostar's economic contribution in the UK by 2035.
- Eurostar supported almost £2bn of GVA in the UK in 2025 and 23,000 jobs
- 40,000 new jobs supported by Eurostar by 2035. Eurostar found that "for every direct job at Eurostar, an estimated 16 further jobs are supported across the wider UK economy in engineering, supply chains, hospitality and tourism. The economic activity Eurostar supports generates around £87,500 of gross value added per job, approximately 9% above the UK average"
- 500,000 extra tourists who wouldn't have travelled to the UK each year. An additional 150,000 business travellers arrive in the UK by rail annually, adding £115 million to the UK economy.

Environmental impacts

- There are 17 million journeys by plane annually between London and cities in mainland Europe which could be reached by train. 73% of travel from London to continental Europe is taken by plane
- 96% lower emissions per journey compared to an equivalent flight
- In 2025, passengers who chose to take the Eurostar over flying saved over 233,000 tonnes CO_2 emissions compared to flying, this number is due to increase.
- This modal shift carbon efficiency can be worth up to £83 million annually.
- New Eurostar services from London to Frankfurt and Geneva could save the need for 20 short haul flights daily from London airports.

Policy recommendations

- Fund the re-opening of Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations to support the South East economy
- Fund the opening of Stratford International as a second station for London to ease St Pancras overcrowding and facilitate more passenger travel onwards across the UK
- Set a clear timeline for opening all four international stations, and opening depots to allow more operators access to the Channel Tunnel
- Set ambitious international rail passenger targets in the Long Term Rail Strategy as a means of tying the EU and UK back together in the UK/ EU reset.

Sources

- *Fast Track to Growth- Eurostar 2026*
- *Light at the End of the Tunnel, Good Growth Foundation 2025*
- *Runways to railways, Campaign for Better Transport 2025*
- *Travel by international high-speed rail set to triple by 2040 with ticket prices falling by a third London High Speed St Pancras 2025*