Bring Back Euro Trains

Briefing: Eurostar & Competitor Landscape

Executive Summary

The Channel Tunnel passenger rail market is entering a new phase: Eurostar's 30-year monopoly is being challenged by Virgin, Evolyn, Trenitalia, and Gemini.

A critical constraint is depot access: Temple Mills in London is currently the UK's only facility for maintaining continental-gauge trains. ORR will decide depot access applications in October 2025.

Government guidance issued in July 2025 emphasises the importance of new entrants and encourages ORR to prioritise bids that include serving Stratford, Ebbsfleet, and Ashford International.

New operators plan modest fleets (10–12 trains each), limited by depot capacity and long manufacturing lead times. Without new depot provision, market growth risks being capped at only about 20% above Eurostar's current fleet.

Evolyn shows the strongest commitment to Ashford, recognising its resilience role and long-term growth potential. Trenitalia and Virgin are positive but defer Kent calls to later phases. Gemini plans to stop at Ebbsfleet from launch, but its tie-up with Uber and reliance on a car-based "door-to-door" model raises major sustainability concerns. Eurostar makes no commitment to Kent.

BBET calls for government leadership to expand depot capacity, and for new entrants to recognise their public service obligations — delivering services that meet the needs of communities, not just the highest-margin city-to-city routes.

Briefing: Eurostar & Competitor Landscape:

1. Overview

The Channel Tunnel passenger market is on the cusp of a major shake-up. Eurostar's 30 year monopoly is being challenged by four potential new entrants: Virgin, Evolyn, Trenitalia, and Gemini Trains.

A key limiting factor for all competitors is access to the Temple Mills International (TMI) depot in north London which is the only operational maintenance depot in the UK capable of servicing continental-loading-gauge trains. The **Office of Rail and Road (ORR)** have earlier in 2025, commissioned a report that has determined there is limited capacity available. They are now adjudicating bids to access to this facility. A decision is expected in the **third week of October 2025**.

A further barrier for early introduction of services is that **train manufacturers** currently have l**ong delivery timetables,** some more than others.

Additional context. On **17 July 2025** the Rail Minister, **Lord Hendy**, wrote to the ORR setting out further criteria for assessing bids:

> *"The Government firmly believes that the arrival of competition will benefit users of international rail services by expanding the number of stations served (including new markets), encouraging greater differentiation in service provision and promoting competitive prices.* ***For example, the Government strongly welcomes the fact that several new entrants are exploring the possibility of serving (variously) the currently unused Stratford, Ebbsfleet and Ashford International stations.*** *The Government believes these are important considerations for ORR in determining the various access applications, noting the interplay with the relevant duties outlined above."*

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2. Eurostar (Current Monopoly)

Fleet Plans: Publicly committed to a programme of 50 new trains. However, the practical effect on the channel tunnel route is very likely to be modest, as this order includes replacing both older Eurostar units and former Thalys stock. The net result for the UK international route is a growth from 26 to 34 units, i.e. only 8 units.

Strategy: Eurostar has a strong incentive to argue for exclusive depot access on resilience grounds. Their current business strategy focuses on the highest-yield, direct city-to-city flows.

Position on Kent: Eurostar ORR submission makes no mention of Ashford or Ebbsfleet. New trains are likely to be double-deck units which take longer to board and disembark and would increase minimum dwell times for intermediate stops.

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3. Virgin Trains

Fleet: Provisional agreement with Alstom for 12 **single-deck** Avelia Stream high-speed trains.

Launch: Earliest launch is 2030, with initial destinations: Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam. But 2030 is believed to be optimistic given that the trains they are ordering are on long lead in times.

Strategy: Their submission assumes two 200m maintenance roads for general use at Temple Mills, plus a third for contingency. The company is known for high-profile announcements ahead of detailed execution, which could potentially pose a risk. Virgin has indicated they will appeal if their access application is denied. The Virgin team has good operational experience of rail services, together with a strong brand reputation.

Position on Kent: Stations calls in Kent for the intial launch will not be included. However the bid documents states they ". . . actively engaging with stakeholders to explore future expansion, including Stratford, Ashford and Ebbsfleet stations,", and the forward states "We will also continue to explore ways to bring services back to Kent and to enhance onward connectivity to the wider UK rail network." Virgin also recognise the potential economic benefit of station calls to Kent citing an EU report that "improved cross-border rail links can boast regional GDP by up to 2.5% over time". Virgin's adoption of single-deck trains will make station calls at Ebbsfleet and Ashford more time-efficient than double-deck units.

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4. Evolyn Rail

Fleet: Originally selected Alstom Avelia Horizon **double-deck** trains but is in early-stage talks with Trenitalia to potentially use their Hitachi single-deck sets to accelerate a launch.

Launch: Earliest launch is 2029 should they stick with Alstom. Alstom has quoted a 45 month delivery of trains from date of order.

Strategy: Evolyn plans to start its service with a fleet of 12 trains, each 200 meters in length. It places a strong emphasis on a digital platform. While the company backing this bid has only limited experience with running train services, a team led by a former long serving Eurostar executive has put the bid.

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Position on Kent: Evolyn has the strongest positive stance on Ashford among the entrants, though they currently plan to serve the station only in a second phase of their launch**.** Their filings state they are "collaborating with local authorities to offer stops on HS1, particularly Ashford," and recognize the "social need and political pressure" for intermediate stops. They also see Ashford as a contingency option during disruption recognising the unique resilience the station provides. Their preference for double-deck trains, rather than single-deck would cause somewhat longer potential dwell times at intermediate stops as they take longer to board and disembark.

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5. Trenitalia (France)

Fleet: Has Hitachi **single-deck** high-speed sets already on order.

Launch: Realistically 2028, with trains already on order, although these would have to be set up for cross-channel operation.

Strategy: While in talks with Evolyn, they are pursuing a separate depot bid. Trenitalia's bid is backed by strong operational experience that includes UK operations - (Avanti West Coast with First Group, and C2C rail franchise.)

Position on Kent: Ashford stop considered for **Phase 2.** Use of single-deck trains will make station calls at Ebbsfleet and Ashford more efficient. They cite previous positive UK experience that intermediate stops can unlock real growth in demand. Their plans also include potential extensions to Lille, Lyon, Marseille, and Milan.

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6. Gemini Trains

Fleet: Bid documentation states train manufacturer and specification are not yet fixed, though there are industry rumours of a tie up with Siemens.

Launch: A 2029 start date is planned. As yet no tie up with a train manufacturer, provides potential flexibility but could be a risk.

Strategy: Their business model is built around all services stopping at **Ebbsfleet** and originating at **London Stratford International**. They are in a tie-up with Uber for ticketing and door-to-door service, a model that could risk a car-dependent access, underusing existing rail links. There is a strong emphasis on a digital platform.

Position on Kent: Gemini is the only applicant planning to serve Kent from launch, with all trains stopping at Ebbsfleet International. The initial business plan excludes

Ashford, but Gemini states it is "very open" to exploring its commercial viability with local stakeholders. This is promoted as a way to unlock "significant untapped economic growth" for Kent. However, stakeholders like BBET are concerned that the Ebbsfleet-only focus, combined with a car-dependent Uber service, makes the proposal less sustainable and misses opportunities to maximise existing rail connections by including Ashford from day one.

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7. Strategic Observations:

There is an urgent need for expansion of train maintenance depot capacity to unlock the full potential growth in UK international rail. All new operators appear to be limiting their proposals to just 10-12 trains, 200m long, representing only about 20% of Eurostar's current capacity. This happens to equate roughly to the space estimated to be available by the ORR in Temple Mills. It suggests ambitions are being capped by the availability of depot capacity.

BBET argues that government should be taking a lead in facilitating the urgent procurement of new depot capacity to support future plans for growth.

Analysis of bid proposals with BBET Priorities:

The bid proposals show varying levels of alignment with BBET's goals, particularly regarding service to Kent:

- **Best**: **Evolyn** demonstrates the strongest alignment with its recent statement to the ORR that says: "Evolyn is already collaborating with local authorities to offer services with stops at some stations on the HS1 line, particularly in Ashford", The document submitted to the ORR also highlights Ashford's strategic importance for operational resilience. It states, "This station is of some strategic importance as it connects the HS1 line with the traditional railway network. Using Ashford will allow Evolyn to design a contingency plan that minimises negative consequences for travellers in case of disruption on the network.
- **Positive** alignment: **Trenitalia and Virgin** are also viewed positively, with stated ambitions to introduce Kent station calls in later phases. Trenitalia has a particular focus on Ashford, and both plan to use single-deck trains which are well-suited for intermediate stops.
- **Challenging** alignment: **Gemini's** proposal presents challenges. Its reliance on a car-dependent "door-to-door" access model, combined with an Ebbsfleet-only focus, may clash with BBET's priorities for sustainable, integrated rail transport.
- **Least positive: Eurostar's** proposal completely fails to make any reference Kent stations in their proposals. Eurostar's business model appears to be exclusively

focused on high-volume, city-to-city routes, with no stated strategy to serve intermediate markets such as Kent.

8. Conclusion

The current status quo does not serve Kent or the wider country well. A single incumbent operator providing a service just focused on the highest margins and not on the economic needs of the south east or of its passengers; in short it is an example of market failure. BBET looks forward to positive change for Kent and the whole of the UK.

Bring Back Euro trains
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