Manchester to Paris Night Trains: An Appraisal of the Outline Business Case

A current assessment of the 2012 proposal:
Manchester to Paris night trains within existing rail resources – an outline business case

September 2026

Executive Summary

In 2012 an independent outline business case proposed an overnight train from Manchester Piccadilly to Paris and Brussels, using trains and tracks that already existed, without public subsidy. It was ahead of its time, and time has now largely caught up with it.

Three of its central claims have been vindicated.

First, that excessive Channel Tunnel and HS1 access charges were the real barrier: both have since been cut, following European Commission enforcement action and regulatory reform.

Second, that open access competition would come: in August 2026 the regulator approved track access for Virgin Trains, with Trenitalia targeting services from 2029 — the first genuine competition since 1994.

Third, that night trains were a viable market: a Continent-wide sleeper revival, led by ÖBB and new entrant European Sleeper, has proved it.

Two things have moved against it: the purpose-built Regional Eurostar trains have been scrapped, and Brexit has made the border arrangements at a regional station harder to establish.

The strategic point stands. Every current proposal terminates in London. The North's case for direct European connection remains unanswered — and the market conditions to answer it are better now than at any point since the Channel Tunnel opened.

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What the case got right

The most striking feature of re-reading this document in 2026 is how much of its analysis has been vindicated by events it could only anticipate.

The OBC's central economic argument was that the proposal's unsubsidised viability turned on track access charges — that the Channel Tunnel's per-kilometre charge, then reportedly fifteen times HS1's and thirty times Network Rail's, was the choke point strangling all cross-Channel growth, passenger and freight alike (Technical Notes 24.2 and 42). The document tracked the European Commission's infringement proceedings in real time and recorded Eurotunnel's 2014 charge reductions running to 2023. That trajectory has continued. In January 2026 the ORR further reduced HS1's charges for international services, a move widely credited with accelerating the current wave of market entry (Country & Town House, August 2026). St Pancras Highspeed and Eurotunnel have gone further than merely tolerating new entrants: they signed a Memorandum of Understanding in February 2025 committing both infrastructure managers to recruit new operators, shorten journey times, and treble cross-Channel services, as part of Getlink's stated plan to double the number of destinations reachable from London within ten years (Getlink and London St Pancras Highspeed, MoU, 19 February 2025). The infrastructure managers, in other words, have adopted the OBC's underlying premise — that the tunnel's chronic under-use was a pricing and access problem, not a demand problem.

The second vindication is open access itself. The OBC argued that the UK Government's "no subsidy, open access only" stance, far from being fatal, created an opportunity for a first mover (Technical Note 8). For a decade nothing happened; then everything did. In August 2026 the ORR approved a framework track access agreement between Virgin Trains and HS1 Ltd, running from October 2030 to December 2040 and permitting up to twenty daily return services — the first such agreement with any operator other than Eurostar (House of Commons Library, Eurostar and potential

competitors, CBP-10356, August 2026). Virgin had already secured access to the Temple Mills depot in October 2025, after the ORR's commissioned study found spare maintenance capacity that Eurostar had disputed. Trenitalia (FS Group) is targeting London–Paris services from 2029, investing a reported €80 million in its own maintenance facility near Paris, and Gemini Trains — chaired, in a pleasing continuity, by Lord Berkeley, quoted in this OBC's Technical Note 42 in his then-capacity as Rail Freight Group chairman campaigning against tunnel charges — continues to develop its plans despite losing out at Temple Mills. Eurostar's response has been a fleet order: up to fifty double-deck "Celestia" trains from 2031, and route ambitions to Frankfurt and Geneva. The competitive market this OBC assumed as its operating environment now, belatedly, exists.

The third vindication is the night train itself. In 2012 the proposal's at-seat overnight format looked eccentric against a Continental sleeper network in managed decline. The reversal since has been remarkable: ÖBB's Nightjet network now runs more than twenty routes with purpose-built new-generation stock; European Sleeper, a Belgian-Dutch cooperative founded in 2021, operates three international routes and in late 2025 stepped in to revive the Paris–Berlin sleeper after SNCF subsidy was withdrawn (Forbes, 13 November 2025). The revival is driven by exactly the passenger logic the OBC set out — arriving in a city centre before 9am, saving a hotel night, and a lower-carbon alternative to short-haul air. The OBC's specific design choice of seated and reclining accommodation rather than full sleeper berths, made on power-supply and cost grounds (Appendix 3, A3.4), also anticipated the sector's economics: the new Nightjet mini-cabins and couchette-led formats sit much closer to this OBC's model than to the hotel-train concept that failed in the 1990s.

Finally, the demand analysis has aged well. The OBC's cautious assumption — Manchester achieving a quarter of London's modal shift, under 18% of the air+rail market — was framed against a London–Brussels rail share of 80%. Demand has since outrun even the optimists: Eurostar carried 19.5 million passengers in 2024, its best year, and research commissioned by London St Pancras Highspeed forecasts growth from 11 million to 35 million passengers a year by 2040 — the figure driving the current plan to expand St Pancras international throughput from roughly 2,000 to nearly 5,000 passengers per hour (London St Pancras Highspeed and Eurostar, letter of intent, 2 July 2025). Nobody now disputes that the market exists.

What time has taken away

A fair appraisal must be equally clear about what has moved against the proposal, and here there are three substantial losses.

The first is the rolling stock. The entire scheme was built, with admirable frugality, around the seven Class 373/2 "North of London" Regional Eurostar sets — the only trains ever constructed that were approved for the Channel Tunnel, HS1, and the UK classic network including the WCML. That fleet no longer exists. The Class 373 was progressively withdrawn as the Siemens Class 374 e320s arrived from 2015, with the last Eurostar 373 services running in late 2018; the North of London sets were scrapped in stages in France and at EMR Kingsbury, with one power car (reportedly 3733080, from set 3308 — the very half-set this OBC identified in Technical Note 41 as stored at Temple Mills) preserved at the National Railway Museum. The "within existing rail resources" premise, the OBC's most distinctive feature, has therefore lapsed. Worse, the problem the OBC flagged in Technical Note 47 has hardened: every train now being ordered for cross-Channel service — the e320s, Trenitalia's Frecciarossa 1000 derivatives, Eurostar's Celestia — is built to the Continental loading gauge and cannot run north of London on classic lines. A 2026 revival would require a new-build classic-compatible international fleet, which is a wholly different capital proposition from leasing an idle half-set.

The second is the border. The OBC's security architecture (Technical Note 49) rested on the pre-Brexit framework: Schengen exit checks conducted flexibly under Annex 6, juxtaposed controls extendable by administrative agreement, and a TRANSEC appraisal of the operator's security programme. Since 2021 the UK–Schengen border has become a hard external frontier, and since October 2025 it has carried the EU Entry/Exit System, requiring biometric registration of British travellers, with full rollout targeted for April 2026 (The Local, 14 January 2026). EES processing at St Pancras required 49 kiosks, years of planning, and repeated warnings from HS1 that inadequate French provision could force a cap on passenger numbers. Juxtaposed controls exist only at St Pancras, Folkestone and Dover under the Le Touquet arrangements; establishing French border police and EES infrastructure at Manchester Piccadilly platform 1 is now a treaty-level undertaking, not the "segregated passenger route with portable screening" the OBC could reasonably envisage in 2012. This is the single heaviest new barrier, and it is the same barrier that has kept Ashford and Ebbsfleet closed to international services since 2020, and Stratford International without an international train ever calling.

The third is the gravitational pull of London, which the OBC explicitly warned about ("It would be foolish to ignore the attraction of London… such commercial advantages overwhelm any consideration of services beyond London", and Technical Note 50). This warning has proved entirely accurate. All four current challengers — Virgin, Trenitalia, Evolyn, Gemini — propose London-terminating services on the proven Paris/Brussels/Amsterdam corridors. The scrapping of the HS1–HS2 link (recorded in this OBC's Appendix 4) was followed by the 2023 curtailment of HS2 itself, cancelling the Manchester leg altogether, so no through high-speed route from the North to the tunnel will exist for a generation. The North London Line remains the only physical connection, and it is more congested with freight and Overground services than in 2012 — which, it should be said, makes the OBC's overnight timing argument stronger, not weaker: the off-peak night path remains the only credible window, exactly as the document argued.

The balance in 2026

Weighing these movements, the honest verdict is this: the OBC's analysis has been substantially vindicated while its implementation route has closed. The barriers it identified as artificial — punitive access charges, regulatory inertia, an untested open access regime, scepticism about night-train demand — have each fallen, one by one, over fourteen years, in almost exactly the manner the document anticipated. The barriers that have replaced them — no eligible rolling stock, a hardened biometric border, and a challenger field wholly fixated on London — are real but of a different character: they are problems of investment and political will rather than of market failure.

And that is where the hope lies, because problems of investment and political will are the kind that get solved when the surrounding conditions change, and the conditions are changing in this proposal's favour. A genuinely competitive cross-Channel market will, within a decade, contain second movers looking for differentiation beyond the saturated London–Paris corridor; a night service from the North is precisely the kind of niche that open access operators exist to find, as Hull Trains' profitability (recorded in this OBC's Technical Note 38) demonstrated on a much smaller canvas. The infrastructure managers on both sides of the Channel are now commercially incentivised to fill overnight paths that earn nothing empty. St Pancras's capacity crunch strengthens the case for international departures that do not touch St Pancras at all. Greater Manchester's devolved transport ambitions, and the wider devolution settlement, give the city-region levers it did not hold in 2012. Even the border problem, though hard, is a known quantity: the EES infrastructure now operating at St

Pancras is a template, and the Kent stations campaign is building the political precedent for extending international border facilities beyond the current three sites (House of Commons Library, CBP-10356, August 2026).

The 2012 document closed by asking Government to reduce risk and uncertainty and signal a long-enough open access horizon for investment to stabilise. In 2026 the ORR has just granted a ten-year framework agreement to a new entrant. The ask, it turns out, was reasonable; it was merely early. A refreshed case — new-build classic-compatible stock, an EES-era border annex, and the 2026 market data — would find a more receptive industry than the original ever met. The train that tested the route in January 1998 has gone for scrap, but the argument it carried is in better condition than at any time since.

Sources not internal to the OBC:

House of Commons Library, "Eurostar and potential competitors", CBP-10356, August 2026;

ORR approval of HS1–Virgin Trains framework track access agreement, August 2026;

Getlink and London St Pancras Highspeed, Memorandum of Understanding, 19 February 2025;

London St Pancras Highspeed and Eurostar, letter of intent on St Pancras capacity, 2 July 2025;

The Local, "What's the latest on rollout of Eurostar, Eurotunnel and Dover EES border checks?", 14 January 2026;

Forbes, "These 4 European Night Trains Are Debuting in 2026", 13 November 2025;

Country & Town House, "A Eurostar Rival Service Could Be Launching Soon", August 2026;

RAIL magazine, "Why there is still no Channel Tunnel competition", August 2026. Fleet disposal details are drawn from rail enthusiast and reference sources and are reported accordingly.