

Report to: Partnership Board –Transport for the South East

Date of meeting: 19 March 2026

By: Co-Chairs, Business Advisory Group

Title of report: Business Advisory Group

Purpose of report: To update the Partnership Board on the progress of TfSE's Business Advisory Group

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The members of the Partnership Board are recommended to:

- 1) Note the progress of the Business Advisory Group; and
 - 2) Approve the publication of the Business Advisory Group's 2025/26 Report.
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Business Advisory Group (BAG) was formed in October 2024. It is co-chaired by Vince Lucas and Daniel Ruiz. The group provides a business voice to support, advise and contribute to the Partnership Board.

2. Business Advisory Group – Feedback for Partnership Board

2.1 The BAG met on Thursday 5 March virtually. The BAG received an update on the status of key TfSE work, including the Strategic Investment Plan refresh, which members of the BAG had provided comments on.

2.2 The BAG also received updates on devolution, TfSE's recently approved rail strategy, and TfSE's workplan for 2026/27. Members of the BAG reported strong enthusiasm for TfSE's workplan, especially plans to develop TfSE's evidence base, which can support business' decision-making and strategic planning.

3. Business Opportunities and Challenges

3.1 Members of the BAG reported minimal immediate impact from regional devolution proposals, although businesses planning expansion have noted the formation of new planning authorities. Feedback indicates improving confidence among clients, with the pace of change requiring greater agility; TfSE's role as a regional convener, data source and storyteller was strongly emphasised.

3.2 Members highlighted ongoing multimodal transport challenges, particularly East–West connectivity and links with London. The new Strategic Investment Plan and recently adopted Rail Strategy were recognised as valuable resources to share with partners, alongside growing activity related to development around Gatwick.

3.3 Updates were provided on national and regional initiatives, including delays to the Government’s Integrated National Transport Strategy (now expected in 2026), engagement with the newly formed South East and Gatwick Diamond Growth Gateway APPG, and progress on the Heathrow Western Access study, which remains with DfT and Treasury prior to wider publication.

4. Business Report for 2025/26

4.1 The BAG has developed a report setting out their work on their three focus areas for 2025/26 (access to international connectivity, energy availability and rural transport). The report is attached at **Appendix 1**.

4.2 The report details some of TfSE’s evidence base in these three areas, but all the recommendations are the recommendations of business stakeholders, not the recommendations of TfSE, or its Partnership Board. The report summarises both the outputs of the group’s regular meetings and the previous Business Summit held in 2025.

5. Next Steps

5.1 The BAG is planning a second annual Summit to take place in Summer 2026. This BAG aims to grow attendance to around 100 senior stakeholders from business, government and local authorities. Sessions are currently being planned, but initial ideas are focused on affordability of transport and integration of transport across modes.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 The Partnership Board is recommended to note the progress of the Business Advisory Group and approve the publication of the Business Advisory Group’s 2025/26 Report.

Daniel Ruiz and Vince Lucas
Co-Chairs – Business Advisory Group
Transport for the South East

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How Transport Can Unlock Growth in the South East

**A call for change from TfSE's Business
Advisory Group – 2025/26 Report**



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Introduction

Transport for the South East (TfSE) is a partnership of 16 Local Authorities, who come together to advise the Government on the transport infrastructure that is needed to grow the region's economy.

A key part of this work is capturing the views of businesses across the South East. Businesses in our region know better than anyone else how transport holds them back, and how new infrastructure could unlock growth.

To help achieve this, in late 2024 TfSE formed its Business Advisory Group. The group was created with one aim, to get the views of businesses from every part of the South East, representing businesses of all shapes, sizes and sectors.

The business representatives quickly identified the three most pressing challenges that need transport improvements to unlock economic growth:

- 📍 **Access to International Connectivity**
- 📍 **Energy Availability**
- 📍 **Rural Isolation**

Throughout 2025, in both online meetings and a Business Summit held in Guildford, business representatives worked on these issues to understand the problems businesses face, and brainstorm solutions that could be implemented.

This report summarises the key recommendations raised by businesses representatives. Most of the recommendations would best be delivered by government, local authorities, businesses, and delivery agencies working in partnership.

These solutions are presented in this report, and the Business Advisory Group hope it will provide a compelling route map forward for the South East. It should be noted the recommendations outlined in this report do not represent the views of TfSE, but they reflect the input of business stakeholders within the Business Advisory Group.



About Us

Who are Transport for the South East?

Transport for the South East (TfSE) is the Sub-national Transport Body for the South East of England.

Our partnership brings together 16 local authorities, representatives of district & borough authorities, protected landscapes and national delivery agencies.



TfSE Chair
Councillor Keith Glazier OBE
East Sussex County Council



TfSE Deputy Chair
Councillor Simon Curry
Medway Council

This unrivalled civic and business leadership is best placed to understand the potential for economic growth in our area. By speaking with one voice on our region's transport priorities, we're able to make a strong case to government for investment in the South East.

Who are TfSE's Business Advisory Group?

TfSE's Partnership Board agreed to establish a Business Advisory Group in October 2024, following the dissolution of Local Enterprise Partnerships. The Board acknowledged that TfSE's Transport Strategy, Strategic Investment Plan, and other work are all stronger with the input of business.

TfSE's Business Advisory Group provides a forum for businesses to continue to input into our work and provide their views to government on transport infrastructure that is needed to drive economic growth.

TfSE's Business Advisory Group is co-chaired by two senior business leaders.



TfSE Business Advisory
Group Co-Chair
Vince Lucas



TfSE Business Advisory
Group Co-Chair
Daniel Ruiz

On 9 July 2025, TfSE's Business Advisory Group met in-person for the first time in Guildford. Fifty delegates attended the Summit, representing a broad range of businesses and organisations, all with a presence in the South East. Delegates were highly engaged, with deep connections to their communities and understood problems intuitively.

Delegates were split into three groups, with a workshop on each of the challenges in turn. The first half of the workshops focused on collecting evidence from delegates on how these issues were affecting their organisations and holding back growth. The second half focused on what is needed to help transport make a meaningful difference to these issues.

With thanks to Ruth Bagley, Chair of Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce's Western Rail Link to Heathrow Working Group and Dr Phil Evans, Director at VA Rail, for helping to facilitate the Business Summit.

Access to International Connectivity

The South East is the UK's gateway to the world. Heathrow Airport,¹ Gatwick Airport, the Port of Dover, the Port of Southampton, and the Channel Tunnel together move the majority of the UK's international passengers and high-value trade.

Yet access to these gateways is constrained by bottlenecks on key roads and railways, inconsistent international rail services, first and last-mile gaps, workforce access challenges at airports, and border or process frictions.

Targeted, integrated investment, paired with operational reforms and data-driven management can unlock faster, greener, and more resilient growth for the South East and the wider UK economy.

Why International Connectivity in the South East Matters



The UK's trade and travel hinge on South East gateways

Heathrow is the UK's largest port by value of goods, processing c. £198bn in trade; Gatwick and Heathrow together serve well over 120 million passengers in a typical year. Dover handles around £85bn of trade annually and up to 10,000 freight vehicles per day; Southampton is the UK's leading vehicle port and a major container and cruise hub; the Channel Tunnel is critical for both passengers and unaccompanied freight.



Growth opportunities are tangible but conditional

Solent and Thames Freeports together forecast tens of thousands of jobs and billions in investment – returns that depend on reliable, integrated access to ports, airports and logistics zones. Airports depend on employees, customers, and businesses being able to reach them easily. However, only a small part of the South East can currently access airports by public transport within an hour (Fig.1).

¹ Heathrow Airport sits in London, on the border of the TfSE geography. It is included in this report because of its importance to the South East's economy and transport network.

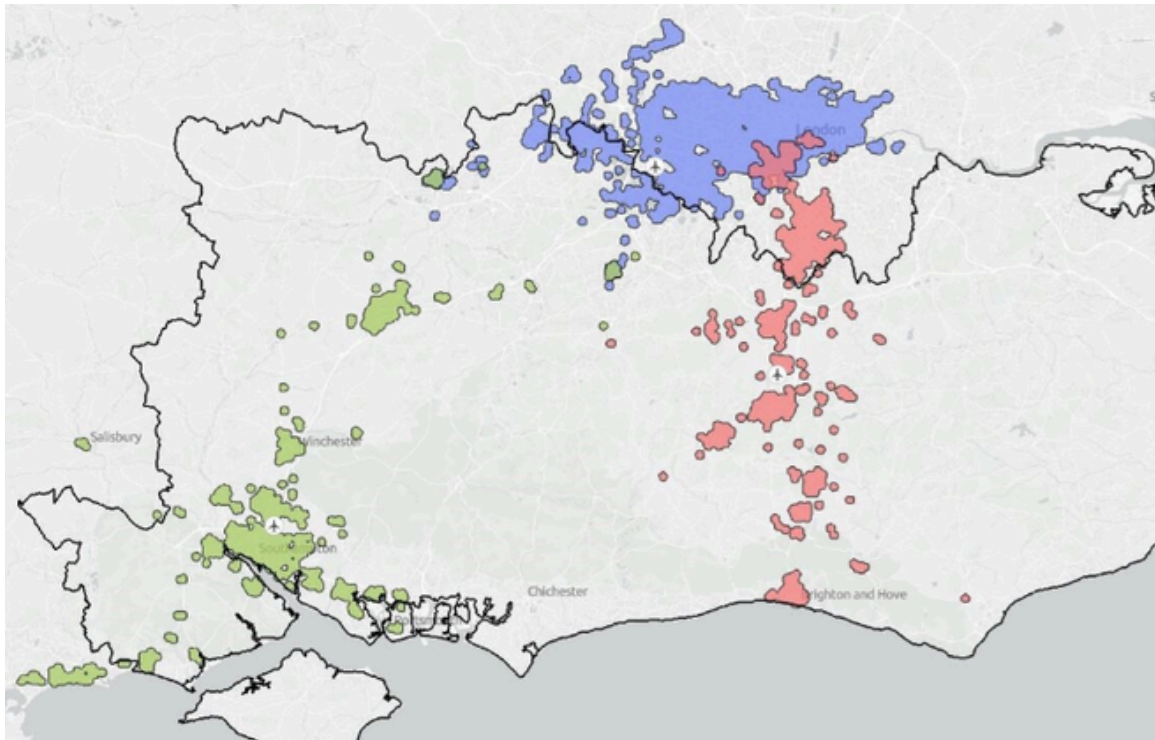


Figure 1: Areas within one hour by public transport from an airport



Capacity, energy and resilience are strategic dependencies

Congested corridors (M20, M2/A2, A27/A259, M3/A34) (Fig.2), limited rail freight capacity, and first and last-mile pinch points suppress productivity. Decarbonisation (shore power, EV charging) and resilience to climate shocks require grid upgrades, asset hardening, and modern data systems.

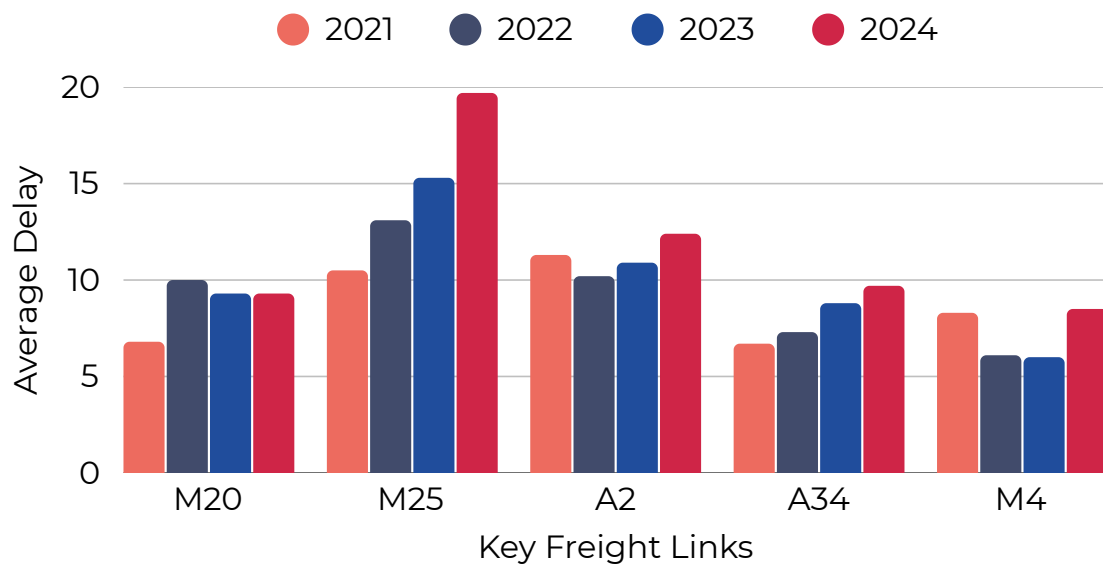


Figure 2: Average delay on the Strategic Road Network in England (narrowed down to key freight routes - Values are in spvpm (seconds per vehicle per mile)



Challenges

- 1. How do we ensure people and businesses can access the South East's exceptional international gateways?**
- 2. How do we maximise the growth opportunities that those gateways create – through access, enabling works and development?**

Recommendations of the Business Advisory Group

1) Reconnect the South East to Europe by rail and improve international rail usability

- Restore international rail stations at Ashford International and Ebbsfleet (subject to commercial negotiation, and security and processing solutions).
- Offer a single multi-modal ticket that integrates domestic rail, metro and bus, and international rail – learning from integrated models used in other cities.
- Upgrade UK–EU freight rail compatibility by addressing loading gauge and tunnel constraints on key corridors so standard intermodal containers can reliably reach the EU by rail.
- Provide consistent timetables for international services to rebuild demand and reduce perceived complexity.

2) Enable car-free access to airports, day and night

- Deliver Western Rail Link to Heathrow (WRLtH) and Southern Rail Link to Heathrow (SRLtH) to open direct, reliable access from the Thames Valley, South West, South London and the South Coast.
- Fill the timetable gaps so the earliest departures and latest arrivals are served by rail (for passengers and the 24/7 airport workforce).
- Close the remaining rail access gap to Gatwick (including reinstating the unused link where viable) and improve direct connections from parts of Kent and Surrey currently requiring multiple interchanges.



3) Unblock first-last-mile constraints at ports and along strategic corridors

- Targeted upgrades at Dover both within the port and “up the line” – to cut dwell times, improve HGV processing, and enhance the currently inconvenient 25-minute pedestrian link from Dover Priory to the port through better public realm and a dedicated shuttle trial.
- Resolve A34, M3, and other known pinch points impacting Southampton and inland distribution.
- Increase safe and secure lorry parking provision and last-mile logistics hubs near ports and railheads to improve safety and efficiency.
- Ensure A-road resilience where they provide the only diversionary routes when major corridors are disrupted.

4) Shift more freight to rail and expand intermodal capability

- Prioritise incremental upgrades on underused rail freight routes across the South East and between ports (Southampton, Dover, Thames) and the Midlands and North, reducing choke points (including the Midlands–Felixstowe axis) and creating additional rail ↔ road transition sites.
- Replicate Southampton’s successful road-to-rail incentives across other ports and authorities, combining pricing, access windows, and terminal process optimisation.
- Plan for energy and terminal upgrades (electrification readiness, shore power interfaces) that enable low-carbon operations across the end-to-end chain.

5) Modernise border, security and people-flow management

- Deploy demand forecasting and queue-management technology at airports and ports (integrating airline and ship manifests, booking data, and real-time flows) to match Border Force shift patterns and reduce queue length and variability.
- Pilot digital pre-clearance and automated gates expansion where appropriate, without compromising security.

6) Use data to maximise the capacity of the network and invest smarter

- Region-wide data platform combining real-time traffic, freight movements, weather, events and works – enabling proactive signal timings, variable speed limits, predictive maintenance, and rapid incident response with earlier, wider-area warnings and re-routing.
- Targeted analytics to prioritise micro-interventions (“modest improvements”) such as junction redesigns, signal upgrades, shoulder running, and dynamic HGV management at peak port times.
- Open standards so ports, airports, logistics firms, and authorities can share.



The Message to Government

1. **Invest where it multiplies growth:** Access to international gateways is a national productivity strategy, not a regional nicety. Improved links relieve pressure in the South East and unlock growth across the UK by speeding access to global markets for firms in the Midlands, North and devolved nations.
2. **Integrate, don't fragment:** Re-shape governance and funding to plan across modes, borders, and energy systems – with consistent priorities and outcomes across departments.
3. **Deliver quickly while building for the long term:** Pair “modest improvements” that de-bottleneck the system with a committed pipeline for WRLtH, SRLtH, rail freight compatibility, and climate-resilient assets.
4. **Partner with business:** Leverage private co-investment, share data, and co-deliver upgrades – replicating proven port-rail transfer models and modern border management.



Energy Availability

The South East is home to many of the UK's most critical global gateways – major ports, logistics corridors, and strategic transport hubs that keep UK trade and supply chains moving. But the ability of these gateways to remain competitive, resilient, and sustainable increasingly depends on something largely outside the transport sector: whether the region has the energy capacity required to power a fully decarbonised transport system.

Business representatives highlighted growing concern that the South East's current and planned energy infrastructure is not yet aligned with the scale of transport decarbonisation required – whether for electrified ports, hydrogen corridors, rail freight, EV charging networks, or logistics hubs. With National Energy System Operator (NESO) now developing Regional Energy Strategic Plans (RESPs), there is a narrow and critical window to ensure transport's needs are reflected in future energy investment decisions.

The Business Advisory Group believes this is an opportunity for change – and that TfSE, with its pan-regional remit, is uniquely positioned to provide the leadership needed.

Why Energy Availability in the South East Matters

The South East's gateways depend on reliable, future-ready energy. The region's ports, including some of the UK's most important maritime gateways, are central to freight, trade and the wider economy. But the decarbonisation of these assets will require significant increases in electrical capacity for shore-power, port plant electrification, hydrogen production, and future clean fuels. Gateway competitiveness will depend on whether these upgrades can be delivered at the pace needed.

The transport system cannot decarbonise without a transformed energy system. Across the region, decarbonisation plans depend on major new power demands:

- ⓘ widespread EV charging (cars, vans, HGVs, bus fleets)
- ⓘ hydrogen networks for heavier vehicles and maritime applications
- ⓘ increased rail electrification and traction power
- ⓘ grid connections for large-scale port electrification
- ⓘ renewable energy integration and storage

The transition to zero emission vehicles (ZEV) is taking place at different speeds across the TfSE region. 10% of people in some local authority areas have ZEVs and hybrids, compared to 19% of people in local authority areas with the highest uptake. (Fig.3)



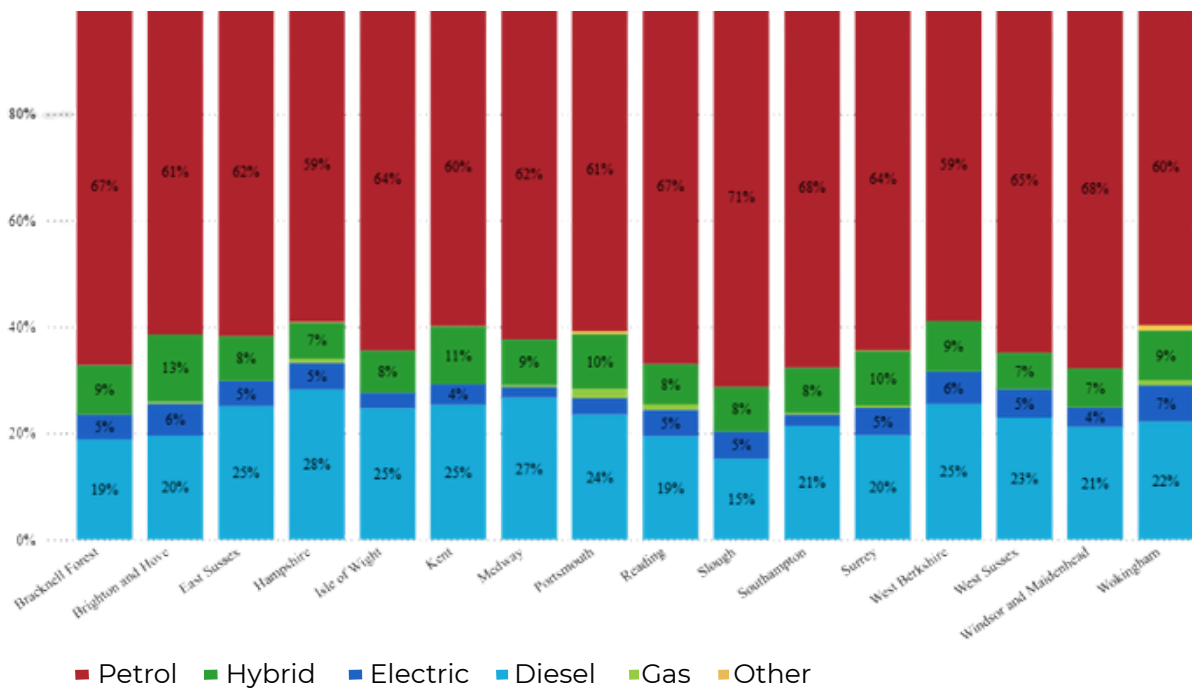


Figure 3: Car Fuel Profile in each TfSE Area

Some of this difference can be explained by geography, with higher uptake of ZEVs and hybrids in urban areas. Rural areas need more funding for public EV charging to increase uptake and give drivers the confidence to make longer journeys across the region. (Fig.4)

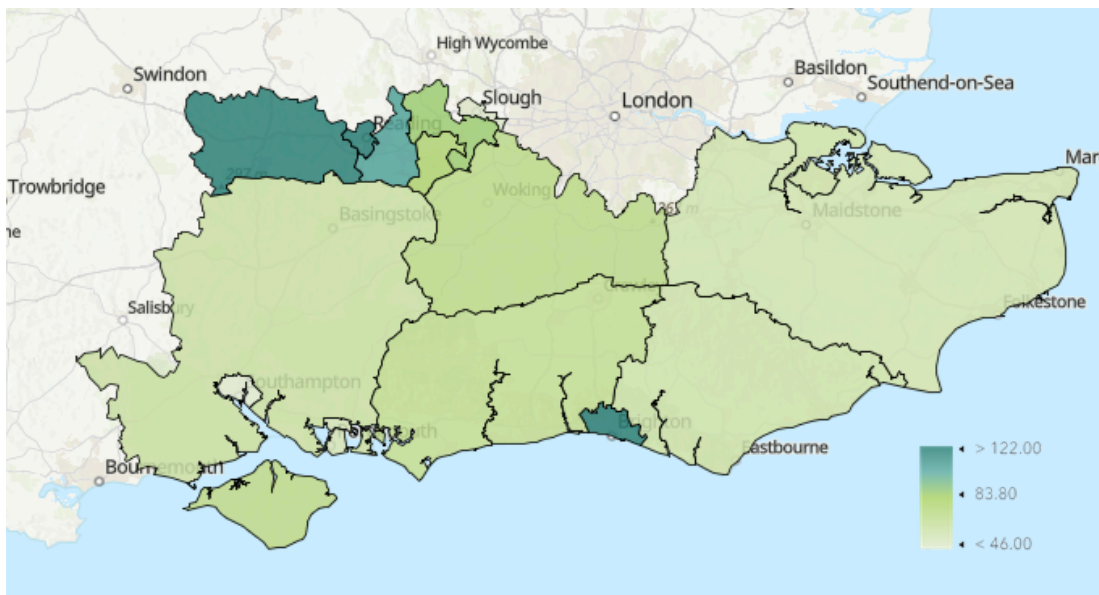


Figure 4: Public charging points per 100k residents

Attendees at the Business Summit stressed that energy availability is both a critical enabler and blocker of strategic transport projects.

Challenges

- 1. How do we keep business and transport moving while working towards Net Zero?**
- 2. How do we survive and thrive through energy shocks – from extreme weather or demand spikes – without disrupting transport?**

Recommendations of the Business Advisory Group

1) Ensure transport's needs are fully embedded in Regional Energy Strategic Plans (RESPs)

- Strengthen engagement with NESO and energy regulators.
- Provide evidence on future port, freight and corridor energy demand.
- Work jointly with port authorities and local authorities on RESP submissions.
- For transport bodies to be required consultees on RESP development.

2) Convene and integrate energy and transport at the regional level

- Support NESO's work to bring together regional and local leaders across the South East.
- Develop a joint energy–transport infrastructure needs assessment for the region.
- Provide funding and support to help local authorities to develop their own local energy plans
- Pilot integrated planning with one or more local authorities.
- Build relationships with emerging combined authorities and devolution areas.

3) Provide strategic leadership through devolution

- Set out TfSE's role in supporting new governance arrangements.
- Map scenarios for combined authorities and future devolution deals.
- Engage early with emerging partnerships.



The Message to Government

1. **Recognise the central role of transport** in energy planning and ensure it is systematically embedded in RESP development.
2. **Empower TfSE to coordinate regional transport-energy planning** (TfSE does not currently have this role, or funding from government to do this.)
3. **Support early investment in ports, corridors and logistics energy infrastructure**, ensuring the South East can continue to serve as the UK's global gateway.
4. **Align national policy across transport, energy and planning**, providing clarity and confidence to investors and industry.



Rural Isolation

Rural communities are an essential part of the South East's economic, social and cultural fabric. Home to more than 2.4 million people, these areas contribute significantly to the region's prosperity, natural capital and quality of life. Yet rural isolation continues to limit access to jobs, education, healthcare and wider opportunities, and risks widening inequalities across the region. As highlighted in Figure 5, rural and coastal communities within the TfSE region are at a higher risk of Transport Related Social Exclusion.

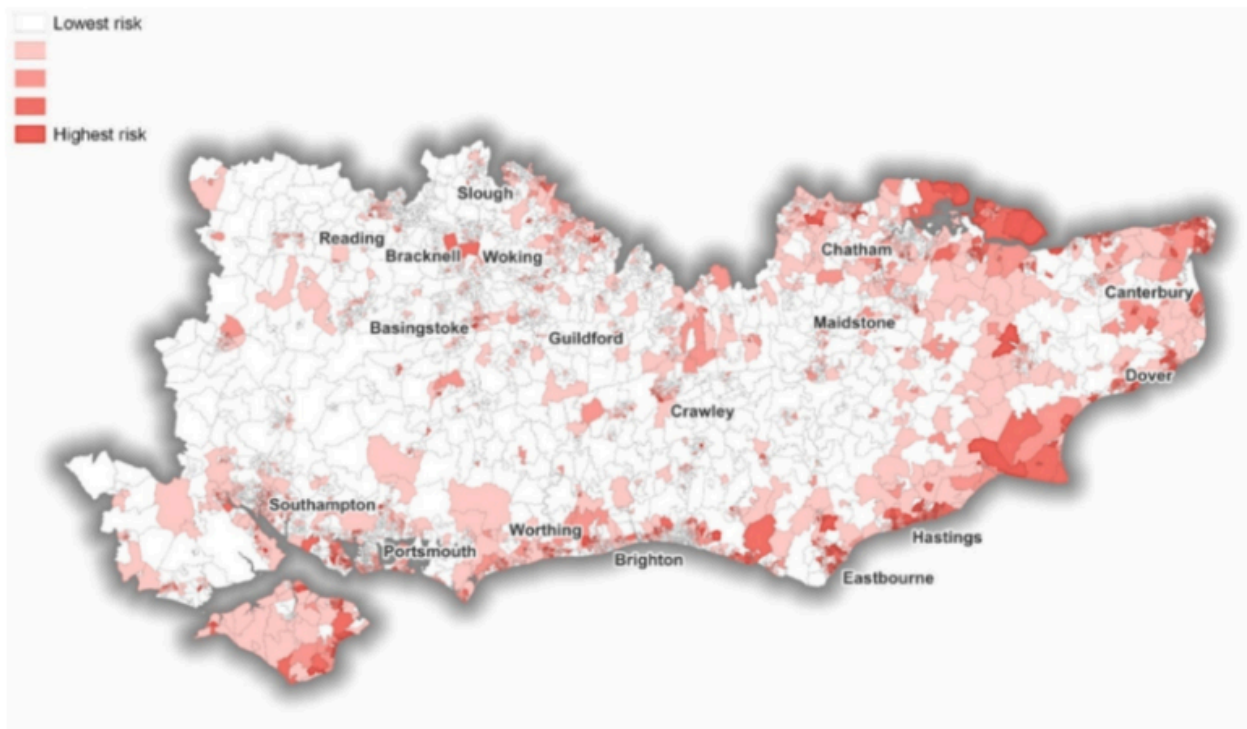


Figure 5 Places most at risk of transport-related social exclusion across the South East.
Source: [Transport for the North](#)

Public transport provision has steadily declined, leaving many places dependent on private cars for everyday journeys. Coastal, island and isolated communities face additional challenges due to limited resilience, seasonal pressures and constrained connectivity. At the same time, the transition to Net Zero risks deepening these divides, with rural areas often lacking the energy infrastructure, EV charging networks and digital connectivity required to support cleaner travel choices. (Fig.6)

The Business Advisory Group believes this is a critical moment for change. By rethinking rural mobility, using technology intelligently, and recognising the unique contribution of the rural economy, the South East can deliver a more inclusive and sustainable transport system that genuinely works for all communities.

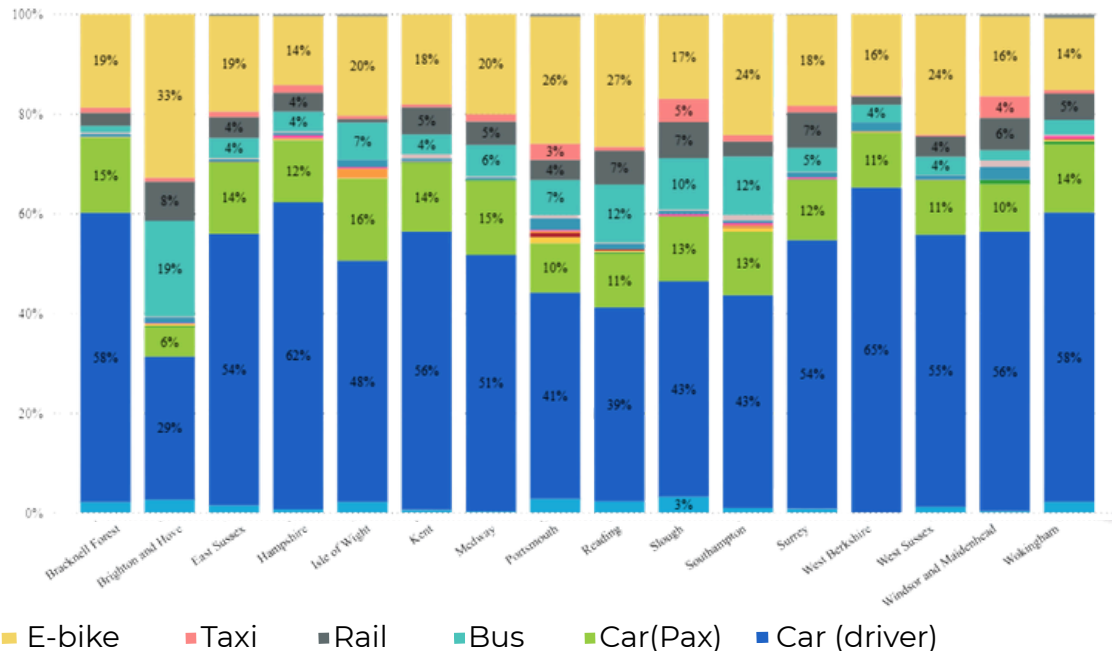


Figure 6: Percentage of journeys made by car in SE communities

Why Rural Isolation in the South East Matters

Rural communities are central to the region’s economy and identity.

Rural areas support agriculture, tourism, small businesses, coastal industries and vital services. Ensuring fair access to transport is therefore not just a matter of social equity – it is essential for the South East’s economic competitiveness.

Lack of connectivity undermines opportunity and increases inequality

Gaps in public transport provision mean many rural residents struggle to reach employment centres, further education, hospitals, and key services. This affects productivity, limits life chances, and can drive outward migration of younger people, leaving communities less sustainable.

Car dependency poses environmental and social challenges

High reliance on private vehicles increases carbon emissions, raises travel costs, and disadvantages households without access to a car. Without viable alternatives, rural areas risk being left behind in the transition to Net Zero.

Digital connectivity is now a prerequisite for rural mobility

Poor broadband and mobile coverage impede access to demand-responsive travel, remote work, online services and innovation. Digital exclusion worsens social isolation and reduces the effectiveness of modern transport solutions.

Challenges

- 1. In a challenging economic climate, how do we keep rural communities connected to jobs and opportunities?**
- 2. How do we stop rural, coastal and island communities from getting left behind?**

Recommendations of the Business Advisory Group

1) Recognise the contribution of the rural economy

- Embed rural needs firmly into strategic transport planning.
- Highlight the economic, social and environmental value of rural communities.
- Ensure appraisal frameworks reflect rural impacts – not just urban demand models.

2) Make the most of existing transport capacity

- Improve coordination between operators, local authorities and community transport providers.
- Support targeted enhancements to existing bus and rail services.
- Expand flexible, low-cost solutions such as community buses, shared transport, and integrated ticketing.
- Invest in small-scale infrastructure improvements (stops, shelters, interchange points).

3) Use technology and innovation to connect people

- Support digital platforms for demand-responsive transport, booking and real-time information.
- Prioritise digital connectivity as a transport enabler, especially for isolated and coastal communities.
- Encourage trials of zero-emission rural mobility solutions, including EV car clubs, e-bikes, and low-cost electric microtransit.
- Ensure innovation pilots are designed for long-term viability, not short-lived trials.

4) Recognise the limits of transport

- Accept that not all needs can be met by traditional public transport.
- Work across sectors – health, education, housing – to reduce the need for long journeys.
- Promote local service hubs, remote access to services, and digital inclusion to reduce isolation.
- Support planning policies that bring essential services closer to rural residents.

The Message to Government

1. **Rural isolation is a barrier to growth**, fairness and sustainability and must be treated as a strategic priority, not a marginal concern.
2. Funding and investment models must recognise that **rural mobility is essential infrastructure**, not an optional add-on.
3. **Government must support innovation** while also enabling long-term funding stability, so rural services are not dependent on short-lived pilots.
4. **Digital and energy infrastructure investment is fundamental** to rural connectivity, underpinning modern mobility and supporting Net Zero.

By empowering TfSE and its partners to deliver a coordinated, innovative and inclusive approach to rural mobility, the South East can reduce isolation, unlock opportunity for millions, and support a transition to a fairer, more sustainable transport system.



Cross-Cutting Recommendations from the Business Advisory Group

Business stakeholders have been highly engaged across all three big issues that TfSE have identified over the past year. Their feedback has been consistent: these are issues that need to be tackled and that they need to be tackled at the regional level. Many larger businesses have a footprint across the whole South East region, and struggle to engage with each local authority. This is where TfSE's Business Advisory Group can play a vital role.

Businesses also felt that the South East region continues to lack a clear, unified transport identity. Often overshadowed by London and frequently misunderstood as uniformly affluent, the South East's diversity and complexity are not well represented in national debates. A distinct regional messaging would help reframe perceptions and tell a more accurate and compelling story – of global gateways, rural and coastal communities, high-growth corridors and significant economic assets. This messaging must deliberately differentiate the South East from London, recognising the region's unique pressures, infrastructure needs and growth challenges.

The South East faces a set of interconnected transport challenges that cannot be solved in isolation. Housing growth, climate resilience, economic productivity and social equity all intersect with the region's transport system, demanding a more integrated and strategic approach. A systems-thinking model – championed and coordinated by TfSE – would enable joined-up decision-making across local authorities, operators and wider sectors. This would ensure that future investment delivers not only better journeys but also wider benefits for people, places and the environment.

At the same time, there is a clear opportunity for TfSE to step forward as the region's recognised thought leader. Bringing together a coalition of local authorities, business voices, transport providers and communities, TfSE is uniquely positioned to articulate the South East's priorities with the clarity, credibility and local intelligence that national government alone cannot replicate. Participants emphasised that no other organisation holds this mandate or convening power. By shaping long-term thinking, challenging outdated assumptions and promoting bold, place-based solutions – from decarbonising freight to reducing rural isolation – TfSE can ensure the South East speaks with one strong, coherent voice.



Recommendations from the Business Advisory Group

1) Create a distinct identity for the South East as a transport region

- Develop distinct regional messaging.
- Launch a narrative campaign emphasising challenges and opportunities.
- Promote a narrative that emphasises the unique challenges and opportunities of the South East outside of London.

2) Reinforce TfSE's position as the strategic voice for transport across the South East

- Clearly articulate TfSE's roles and responsibilities.
- Publish regular strategies and thought leadership, to move issues forward.
- Strengthen representation on national working groups and cross-sector forums.

3) Continue to bring businesses together to solve problems at the regional level

- Expand the Business Advisory Group to new sectors and members.
- Arrange another in-person Business Summit in 2026/27.
- Submit the Business Report to government, and build a mandate for further work.



Annex A: Full List of Recommendations from the Business Advisory Group

Access to International Connectivity

- 1) Reconnect the South East to Europe by rail and improve international rail usability
- 2) Make airports reliably accessible by public transport early in the morning and late at night
- 3) Unblock first and last-mile constraints at ports and along strategic corridors
- 4) Shift more freight to rail and expand intermodal capability
- 5) Modernise border security and people-flow management
- 6) Use data to maximise the capacity of the network and invest smarter

Energy Availability

- 1) Ensure transport's needs are fully embedded in Regional Energy Strategic Plans (RESPs)
- 2) Convene and integrate energy and transport at the regional level
- 3) Provide strategic leadership through devolution

Rural Isolation

- 1) Recognise the contribution of the rural economy
- 2) Make the most of existing transport capacity
- 3) Use technology and innovation to connect people
- 4) Recognise the limits of transport

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- 1) Create a distinct identity for the South East as a transport region
- 2) Create a distinct regional narrative for transport across the South East
- 3) Continue to bring businesses together to solve problems at the regional level





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