

Avanti given a deadline over stricken West Coast Mainline

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The pressure is on for Avanti, with the government threatening to intervene if significant improvements to the West Coast Mainline are not delivered.

Transport minister Kevin Foster, speaking yesterday to ministers, told how Avanti West Coast has been granted a six-month extension to improve services following a summer reduction, with improvements having to be evident by 1 April.

There is clearly no room for fooling about with the date, the minister stated that the extension provides a clear opportunity to improve the service to the standard expected by the public, and failure to do so could result in the government taking over Avanti's network.

Should this happen, it would mean government control of trains from London to the West Midlands, the north west of England and Scotland, via its Operator of Last Resort.

Mr Foster added: "Avanti has also begun to restore services, initially focusing on the Manchester and Birmingham routes. From December, Avanti plans to operate 264 daily train services on weekdays – a

significant step up from the circa 180 daily train services at present.

“We need train services that are reliable and resilient to modern-day life. While the company has taken positive steps to get more trains moving, it must do more to deliver certainty of service to its passengers.

“We will hold Avanti fully to account for things in its control; however, this plan is not without risk and importantly requires trade union co-operation. The priority remains to support the restoration of services before making any long-term decision.

“In assessing options for a longer-term contract, the Secretary of State will consider factors including outcomes for passengers, value for money, and the delivery of major projects and investments – in this case HS2, given the links they have with that future delivery model.

“But, to put things simply, things must improve during this probation period for this contract to be further extended.”

Following the announcement, the minister was scrutinised by others in the Commons. Labour MP Cat Smith questioned whether the government was rewarding Avanti for failure the West Coast Mainline should be bought back into public ownership, while SNP transport spokesman Gavin Newlands said: “Scotland and the North of England have been treated as third-class citizens.”