

Avanti West Coast contract extended for a further six months

March 20, 2023



FirstGroup plc has announced that it has agreed with the Department for Transport (DfT) to extend the current arrangements for the West Coast Partnership (WCP) rail contract.

The current arrangements for WCP were due to expire on 31 March 2023 and are now extended to 15 October 2023 under broadly the same terms and conditions. The WCP rail contract comprises the operation of Avanti West Coast and acting as shadow operator to the HS2 programme. Discussions are ongoing with DfT regarding the longer-term National Rail Contract for WCP.

The group has also announced that Andy Mellors has been appointed managing director of Avanti with immediate effect.



Andy Mellors. Photo credit: FirstGroup

Andy previously held senior roles at Great Western Railway, South Western Railway and most recently as managing director of the Group's non-franchised rail businesses. Andy takes over from Steve Montgomery, First Rail managing director who has been acting managing director of Avanti since September 2022.

Graham Sutherland, FirstGroup chief executive officer said: "We are working closely with government and our partners across the industry to deliver a successful railway for our customers and communities.

"Performance at Avanti is steadily improving and since the introduction of the new timetable in mid-December, the number of services has increased by more than 40% compared to last summer, with more seats and better frequencies. Today's agreement allows our team to continue their focus on delivering their robust plans to continue enhancing services for our customers, including further progress on our train upgrade and refurbishment programme."

In its own release, the DfT says it has extended Avanti West Coast's contract for a further six months after it says significant improvements have been made since October.

This decision comes almost six months after the operator was initially put on a short-term contract by the Government and ordered to develop a recovery plan aimed at addressing poor performance on vital West Coast Main Line routes, including between Manchester, Birmingham and London.

Shortly after being placed on this contract, the Transport Secretary travelled to Manchester to meet with stakeholders to further understand what could be done to address the situation and improve services. This led to the decision to introduce a recovery timetable which has significantly reduced reliance on overtime working and has seen services increase from 180 trains per day to 264 on weekdays – the highest level in over two years.

Since the introduction of this timetable on 11th December, Avanti West Coast has seen very significant improvements across services including:

- Weekday services have risen to the highest level in over two years.
- Reducing cancellations from nearly 25% of the service in August 2022, to 4.2% in early March 2023 – the lowest in over 12 months.
- 90% of trains now arriving within 15 minutes of the booked time.
- Over 100 additional drivers have been recruited, reducing reliance on union-controlled overtime working.

Transport Secretary, Mark Harper said: “The routes Avanti West Coast run are absolutely vital, and I fully understand the frustrations passengers felt at the completely unacceptable services seen last Autumn. Following our intervention, Rail Minister Huw Merriman and I have worked closely with local leaders to put a robust plan in place, which I’m glad to see is working.

“However, there is still more work to be done to bring services up to the standards we expect, which is why over this next six months further improvements will need to be made by Avanti West Coast.”

Although Avanti West Coast has made significant progress in the past six months, further work needs to be done to restore reliability and punctuality to the standards that passengers rightly expect. This will include delivering more reliable weekend services, continued reductions in cancellations and improvements in passenger information during planned and unplanned disruption.

In a statement the government says the six-month contract was initially introduced after major operational issues primarily caused by a shortage of available drivers and a ban on rest day and overtime working. Last July, drivers for Avanti West Coast, who overwhelmingly belong to the ASLEF union, simultaneously stopped volunteering to work overtime.

To help address this, the Government adds that it continues to support the industry – including through setting a mandate – as they negotiate with unions to ensure we can take forward much-needed reform, including introducing a reliable seven day a week service to secure the future of our railways.

The Transpennine Express contract expires on 28 May and will be considered separately with a further announcement in due course.

Photo credit: FirstGroup