

# Avanti West Coast placed on short-term contract

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The Department for Transport (DfT) has placed **Avanti West Coast** on a short-term contract and challenged it to deliver the urgent increase in services required.

Over the past few months, Avanti has seen major operational issues primarily caused by a shortage of available drivers. Nearly 100 additional drivers will have entered formal service this year between April and December. This has meant the company has begun to add more services as new drivers and those who need re-training become available to work. They have also added extra trains on its key London-Manchester and London-Birmingham routes, bringing service levels closer to normal running.

With Avanti's previous contract coming to an end, the short-term extension will see it continue to run services on the route until 1 April 2023. This window is designed to provide Avanti with the opportunity to improve their services. The government will then consider Avanti's performance while finalising a National Rail Contract that will have a renewed focus on resilience of train services and continuity for passengers.

Alongside rolling ahead with training new drivers, Avanti's service improvement plans include:

- the successful delivery of its timetable recovery plan and a significant, sustained and reliable increase from about 180 trains per day to 264 trains per day on weekdays as new and retrained drivers become available
- continuing to deliver on its traincrew recruitment and plans to reduce reliance on rest day working to operate services
- extending booking options for passengers, making the full range of tickets available as early as possible

Transport Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan said: “We need train services which are reliable and resilient to modern day life. Services on Avanti have been unacceptable and 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 have agreed a 6-month extension to Avanti to assess whether it is capable of running this crucial route to a standard passengers deserve and expect.”

The DfT says problems facing Avanti over recent weeks stem from old working practices that mean shifts are often covered by existing drivers volunteering to work above their 35 contracted hours. This antiquated practice shows just how urgent it is for us to modernise our railways, so passengers benefit from reliable services that don’t rely on the goodwill of drivers volunteering to work overtime.

Graham Sutherland, FirstGroup chief executive officer, said: “We are committed to working closely with government and our partners across the industry to deliver a successful railway that serves the needs of our customers and communities.

“Today’s agreement allows our team at Avanti West Coast to sustain their focus on delivering their robust plan to restore services to the levels that passengers rightly expect.”

Meanwhile, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) has gained assurances from train operator, Avanti West Coast that it will return to providing timetables at least 6 weeks in advance of travel.

This will provide some comfort for passengers who have faced uncertainty in the past few months due to very short-term confirmation of timetables – in some cases as little as 48 hours ahead of travel for weekends.

In an attempt to improve reliability, Avanti introduced revised timetables in August. But this only led to passengers facing significant challenges with buying tickets and reserving seats.

ORR challenged Avanti in August to provide a recovery plan for returning to providing timetable information to passengers in line with industry norms (currently 6-8 weeks ahead of travel). This initial plan was rejected by the regulator.

A revised plan has since been submitted and shows a substantially improving picture for weekday timetable information, a more gradual improvement for weekends, and positive plans for the Christmas period.

The key enabler for delivering the improvements is additional resources brought into both the Avanti and Network Rail timetable planning teams, with Avanti drawing on consultancy support while the situation stabilises.

Stephanie Tobyn, Director of Strategy, Policy and Reform at ORR said: “We challenged Avanti under their licence condition with ORR that requires the provision of appropriate, accurate and timely information to passengers to plan and make their journeys.

“We believe their resulting plan is credible and appropriately ambitious given the interactions with planned engineering work and with the biannual industry-wide major timetable change in December.

“We will continue to review Avanti’s progress on a weekly basis and work closely with Transport Focus who are monitoring the passenger experience of the reduced timetable.”

Transport for the North Chair, Lord Patrick McLoughlin, said: “Our Members are naturally disappointed, as it’s communities and businesses across the North that are being impacted by this sub-par level of service that is undermining economic growth and the well-being of many people across the region who haven’t been able to rely on this service for far too long now.

“Returning to having a good, reliable service on the West Coast Mainline is a pro-growth policy that will benefit the North of England’s economy, and as such it should be a priority as the current level of service is just not acceptable.

“There now needs to be a clear action plan in place with transparent targets and consequences for the company if they do not meet them – and TfN are ready and willing to help provide oversight if called upon – as what matters above all else is getting back to putting passengers first.”

*Photo credit: Avanti West Coast*