

Dedicated social media community helps disabled people with rail travel in industry first

April 28, 2021



Avanti West Coast has become the first UK train operator to provide a dedicated social media forum for disabled customers.

The forum enables passengers on the West Coast Main Line to connect with each other as well as a social media team assigned to provide specialist support.

The long-distance operator has launched a group called 'Accessible Rail Travel with Avanti West Coast' on Facebook, to build an interactive online community that aims to both help disabled customers directly and give them an opportunity to help others with the benefits of their experience.

The private and visible group is designed to provide a support network by connecting disabled customers who are planning or making a journey with Avanti West Coast's specialist social media team, as well as people who have a shared understanding of disability and rail travel. The aim is to create a community where valuable insights as well as information are shared to enable independent travel for all.

Managed by Avanti West Coast's social media team, the group can be easily found by searching Facebook

– members and content can only be seen by those who have been permitted access.

Members can use the group to contact Avanti West Coast directly – making it easier to receive direct support from the social media team, who will offer reassurance and help those who may need extra assistance when travelling.

This new approach of an exclusive social media platform for disabled customers is a first for the rail industry and is the idea of Emma Martell, Avanti West Coast’s Head of Social Content.

Emma was inspired to create the group through her own personal experience. Following her diagnosis with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) – a condition that makes connective tissue weaker – she found support by joining Facebook groups, which helped her to find ways to cope with some of the issues more practically.

From this experience, she worked with Avanti West Coast’s external Accessibility Panel to change communication with disabled customers with the aim of building a community engaging in regular dialogue.

“We believe creating a sense of community with our customers through a private forum on social media can add real value for those who may need extra assistance. We want to both help them directly and enable them to help others, so everyone feels supported when planning or making a journey,” said Emma.

“By connecting people who have a shared understanding we want to build a support network, where tips and experiences for journeys on our route can be exchanged. We hope this platform will help to improve the overall journey experience for disabled customers and encourage more people to travel by train.”

As part of the platform’s launch, Avanti West Coast’s social media team have received training on the social model of disability – a way of viewing the world developed by disabled people – to help them recognise barriers that make life harder for disabled people.

They are receiving further specialist training focused on how they communicate with disabled people from Furner Communications (an external agency specialising in the disability sector) that will equip them with the knowledge and skills to assist disabled people in the best possible way.

UK Rail Minister, Chris Heaton-Harris said: “Ensuring our network is accessible for all passengers is crucial, and it’s positive to see Avanti West Coast creating a dedicated social media community to help those who require extra assistance to travel safely and with confidence.”

Daniel Doherty, Community Manager at Facebook, said: “Over 35 million people in the UK use Facebook Groups every month as a powerful way to connect, share their interests, learn new things and support their communities. It’s great to see Avanti West Coast using this new Facebook Group to connect and offer support to their disabled customers as the world begins to open up, helping them to feel confident when travelling again.”

Tony Jennings, Co-Chair of Avanti West Coast’s external Accessibility Panel, said: “Accessible social media plays an important part in welcoming and reassuring disabled people back onto the railways and helps

with journey planning, giving us the confidence to travel. I'm really looking forward to being involved with the group."

Anyone on Facebook can find the group at this link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/accessiblewestcoast> and request to join it. Their request will then be approved by the Avanti West Coast social media team.

Photo credit: Avanti West Coast