



Department for Transport

From the Secretary of State
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Lord McLoughlin CH
Transport for the North Chair

Mayor Andy Burnham
Rail North Committee Chair

9 January 2024

Dear Lord McLoughlin and Mayor Burnham,

I am grateful for your letter of 18 December regarding the recent performance of Avanti West Coast (AWC).

As you are aware, my Department's decision to award a new National Rail Contract (NRC) to First Trenitalia (FTI) to continue providing West Coast train services as AWC, was contingent on the operator continuing to win back the confidence of passengers. In 2023, AWC made significant progress in recovering from the poor reliability and punctuality delivered in the latter half of 2022, reducing AWC caused cancellations to as low as 1.1 per cent in June and July, with customer satisfaction scores improved considerably. This is again evidenced clearly in the latest Office of Rail and Road publication for July to September where AWC ran 12.5 per cent more services than the same period in 2022 and was the most improved operator in terms of reliability, with an 8.1 percentage point improvement in its cancellation score.

I am conscious that in recent weeks reliability and punctuality have declined and need to improve. However, when assessing performance, it is important to note it is not always the fault of the operator. In the case of the West Coast, poor infrastructure reliability, adverse weather conditions, and continued industrial action have been far more significant drivers of recent disruption. In rail periods 8 and 9, covering 15 October to 9 December, the majority of delay minutes incurred are attributable to Network Rail (67 per cent in period 8 and 56 per cent in period 9), and other operators (12 per cent in period 8 and 16 per cent in period 9).

Like you, I want a resilient, modern, punctual, and economically sustainable railway that passengers and communities in the North can rely on. That is why the Government is investing to make reliability improvements in Network Rail as well as focusing on improving the performance of operators.

The Government is working with Network Rail and the industry to ensure that a robust and reliable train service is provided, and journeys are improved, on the West Coast Main Line (WCML) and across the whole country. To this end, the Government made available over £44 billion to Network Rail to support the operations, maintenance and renewal of the rail network in Control Period 7 (2024-2029).

Network Rail recently carried out work over the Christmas period to upgrade and maintain parts of the WCML to support a better, more reliable railway in 2024. Works included improving and maintaining track, overhead electrical wires, signaling equipment and bridges between Euston and Crewe, vital repairs to steelwork and drainage at Manchester Piccadilly station and maintenance work along the track at Oxenholme.

In addition, following the Network North announcement, work is underway to consider potential upgrades to Handsacre Junction and the WCML north of Birmingham, with funding set aside. This is to support the introduction of HS2 services and improve journeys between London, the West Midlands, Liverpool, Manchester, Scotland and other locations.

Whilst AWC has not been directly responsible for much of the disruption that has impacted passengers in recent weeks, the data shows that AWC was responsible for roughly a quarter of the delay minutes incurred¹. This is too high, and we will hold AWC to account and continue to drive improvements. The Rail Minister is meeting with AWC's Managing Director today to challenge the operator on its operational resilience and review its plans for continued recovery in 2024.

As I set out in my letter to Mayor Burnham on 22 November, some of the challenges facing the industry are long-term, and only wholesale reform will deliver the solutions. Our ambitious rail reform agenda will bring together infrastructure, operational and whole industry finance decision making to take a whole system view for the benefit of customers and taxpayers. The draft Bill to establish Great British Railways (GBR) will undergo pre-legislative scrutiny in this Parliamentary session, giving all interested stakeholders the chance to scrutinise the Rail Reform Bill. This means once parliamentary time allows for its introduction, it will be able to swiftly pass into statute.

Industry wide traincrew shortages, linked to a continued lack of driver overtime and ongoing industrial action, also present a challenge to running services with the reliability passengers deserve. Some of the recent disruption is as a result of restrictive conditions that require the creation of work rosters to be undertaken with, and agreed by, trade unions.

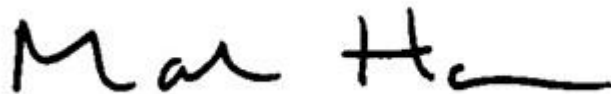
¹ 21.3% of delay minutes incurred in Rail Period 8 and 28.3% of delay minutes incurred in Rail Period 9

In recent negotiations AWC had sought to address some of its weekend staff availability challenges. However, agreement was not initially reached leaving a mismatch between the train service and the rosters staff could be assigned to. In such circumstances services are vulnerable to short notice cancellation and operators would normally rely on rest day working which is currently not an option for AWC.

AWC is undertaking unprecedented levels of annual recruitment, but difficulties in managing historic traincrew terms and conditions will continue to impact services until modernisation of working arrangements can be agreed. Annual leave quotas that are too high to ensure sufficient availability during periods of high leave demand, and agreements that prevent drivers working the same route more than once in the same shift are just examples of the kind of constraints which greatly reduce rostering efficiency. These same challenges face all our operators, including TransPennine whose performance I also continue to monitor closely.

My officials, the Rail Minister and I will continue to closely review AWC's progress to a sustained recovery, restoring services reliably on the West Coast and delivering the kind of service passengers rightly expect.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Harper', with a stylized, cursive script.

The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT