



Department
for Transport

Councillor Elwyn Jones
Chair of Gwynedd Council
Caernarfon
Gwynedd
LL55 1SH

From the Minister of State
Huw Merriman MP

Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 4DR

Tel: 0300 330 3000
E-Mail: huw.merriman@dft.gov.uk

Web site: www.gov.uk/dft

Our Ref: MC/418704

16 January 2023

Dear Councillor Jones,

Thank you for your letter of 14 December to Mark Harper, about improving train services in Gwynedd. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this issue.

The Government acknowledges that for too long rail passengers have not had the level of service they deserve.

Regarding Avanti West Coast(Avanti) services, the primary cause of recent problems with Avanti train services has been a shortage of fully trained drivers. It is a long-standing practice for train companies to use a degree of overtime to run the timetable, and this has been to the mutual benefit of staff and the operators. Like all operators, Avanti was heavily reliant on drivers volunteering to work additional days because of delays in training.

In July, an immediate and near total cessation of drivers volunteering to work passenger trains on rest days left Avanti unable to resource its timetable. Reducing the timetable provided greater certainty for passengers as it reduced the number of short notice cancellations. However, nearly 100 additional drivers entered formal service between April and December last year.

The timetable implemented in December includes a significantly improved offer to the North Wales Coast with the majority of pre-Covid services restored. Crucially, this uplift in services is designed not to be dependent on driver rest day working.

However, the Department is aware of the ongoing cancellations that passengers have experienced since this timetable change. Although more services are running and Avanti have been affected by the industrial action experienced across the network, the performance during certain periods has clearly not been acceptable.

The Department continues to work closely with Avanti and all other train operators to monitor performance on an ongoing basis and to review options to improve performance and increase services. The contractual agreements between the Department and operators include key performance benchmarks against which each operator's overall performance is measured. Together we are working to develop a resilient timetable that is appropriate to passenger demand and delivers good value for the taxpayer.

We have extended Avanti's contract with a short-term direct award of six months, which extends the previous contractual terms up to 1 April 2023. This is a probationary period to give Avanti a final chance to improve its services.

To be clear, this is a decision to keep our options open. An extension to the contract does not stop transferring the contract to the operator of last resort at the end of the extension but deciding now to place West Coast Partnership under the operator of last resort would have removed the chance to retain private sector expertise.

The issues experienced by Avanti are exactly why we need to modernise the railways, to ensure passengers get a reliable timetable no matter when they travel and are not relying on drivers working overtime in the first place.

On your wider comments about the quality of train services, we are fully committed to the transformation of Britain's railways through the Plan for Rail¹ that we announced last year.

A new public body, Great British Railways, will run and plan the rail network, own the infrastructure and receive the fare revenue. It will also be responsible for contracting passenger services, setting the timetable and most fares.

Passengers will be put first, with train operators rewarded for delivering high quality, clean and comfortable services that run on time. As set out in the Plan for Rail, the Welsh and Scottish Governments will continue to exercise its current powers and to be democratically accountable for them. The powers, roles and responsibilities of the devolved authorities will not be diminished. Great British Railways will work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure it benefits from the reforms to the wider network. These reforms aim to improve services, consistency, and coordination across the country.

The UK Government is committed to working with the Welsh Government and wider stakeholders to improve cross border transport connectivity, identifying the transport solutions which work best for people and businesses.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-british-railways-williams-shapps-plan-for-rail

I would point out, however, that the Transport for Wales rail operation is wholly managed by the Welsh Government.

In respect of HS2, the proposed interchange at Crewe could provide enhanced opportunities for journeys to North Wales and reduce journey times to London and Birmingham. The opportunities to enhance connectivity to Wales from the north of England and Scotland from HS2 may be further improved by the services using Crewe Northern Connection.

Thank you again for your correspondence. I hope this information is helpful.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Merriman', written over a faint horizontal line.

HUW MERRIMAN MP

MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT