

Operational Update

Phil Whittingham
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I am writing to update you on the challenges that we continue to face at Avanti West Coast and across the rail industry, especially at weekends. As you would expect, we're working hard to improve the situation for the benefit of the customers and communities that we are proud to serve. It is important to us that you – our stakeholders – are kept up to date on our operations and plans, to help ensure you understand the decisions we are taking and why, and to receive your feedback.

Short notice cancellations and changing demand

Like other industries, we are experiencing a **shortage of key staff**, due to a number of factors including short term sickness. With the ongoing industrial dispute and strike action, we're also seeing far fewer people volunteering for extra weekend shifts than they have in the past. On top of this, the social distancing requirements during the pandemic meant we couldn't carry out training for new drivers, leading to a significant recruitment and training backlog.

All this means that we are unfortunately experiencing high levels of **cancellations**, particularly at weekends, due to traincrew (Train Driver and Train Manager) availability. We understand that this is causing disruption, and we're sorry for the impact on our customers.

In the face of these **unprecedented challenges**, please be assured that improving **performance is a top priority**. We are taking steps to reduce short-term cancellations, especially at weekends, including by changes to **rosters**.

New ways of working

We have been working with our trade unions and staff to **enhance our rosters** at weekends and make them more reliable. The new rosters increase the number of staff scheduled to work at the weekend and were put in **place on 17 July**.

We have also been working hard to **train more colleagues**. It takes eighteen months to train a driver and so Covid-related delays to training have had a big impact. We are pleased to say that the training backlog for our Train Drivers is now nearly cleared.

We have a long-term plan to improve and stabilise Train Driver numbers with the introduction of new drivers through the rest of this year and a schedule of recruitment taking us into 2024. We have a mixture of qualified and unqualified trainee driver courses and will be training a total of 69 new drivers across 13 courses by March 2023.

Despite these actions however, it **may take some time to get to where we want to be.**

5tph timetable at weekends to provide greater customer certainty and resilience

In the meantime, to help manage this situation and reduce short-notice cancellations which cause the most inconvenience for customers, we are **introducing a 5 train per hour timetable at weekends from 23 July to 11 September** inclusive, a reduction from our current 7/8 trains per hour timetable. This will provide **greater customer certainty and operational resilience, and reduce cancellations.**

The timetable will be adapted for the two weekends of the **Commonwealth Games** to maximise available capacity on the Birmingham route. We continue to work collaboratively with all partners in the West Midlands Grand Railway Collaboration to support Games travel.

The timetable will also be adapted to take account of planned engineering works. We will keep the situation under review and will start to add services back into our timetable earlier than 11 September if we are confident that they can be resourced and operated reliably. We continue working with other operators as appropriate.

This is not action we have taken lightly, but with ongoing resourcing challenges and leave increasing as we enter the summer holiday period, it is vital if we are to not leave customers disappointed and frustrated by on-the-day cancellations. Our amended train plan is as shown below.

Route	Service Level
Manchester	Two tph to Manchester; at XX00, calling at Milton Keynes, Stoke-on-Trent, Macclesfield and Stockport, and at XX40, calling at Crewe, Wilmslow and Stockport.
West Midlands and Edinburgh/Blackpool	Remove the current XX59 Euston to Birmingham services, leaving 1tph to Wolverhampton and either Edinburgh/Blackpool, calling at Watford Junction, Milton Keynes, Rugby, Coventry, Birmingham International, Birmingham New Street, Sandwell and Dudley, Wolverhampton, Crewe, Warrington, Wigan, and Preston. One train every two hours will then continue to Edinburgh, and one train every two hours will continue to Blackpool or terminate at Preston.
Glasgow	One tph going direct to Glasgow at xx10, calling at Crewe, Warrington, Wigan, Preston, then stopping points as in the current timetable.
Liverpool	One tph going direct to Liverpool, calling at Stafford, Crewe, and Runcorn.
Holyhead/Chester, Shrewsbury/Wrexham	Shuttles between Holyhead and Crewe – where possible there will be limited through services between Euston and Chester. Limited service but with connectivity to Shrewsbury and Wrexham.

The full weekend timetable will be available to view on our website over the next few days.

Strike action Wednesday 27 July, 18 and 20 August

As you may be aware, the RMT and TSSA unions have announced strike action on Wednesday 27 July, and the RMT on 18 and 20 August. ASLEF have announced strike action on 30 July which does not directly impact Avanti West Coast; the ASLEF ballot regarding Avanti closes 27 July and we will keep you updated.

This action is coordinated across other train companies and Network Rail and will cause significant disruption. We are advising our customers that they should expect our existing timetable to be reduced significantly on these days, and those services that do run could be busy. We will share our revised timetables in due course once they have been confirmed.

The days either side of industrial action are also likely to be affected. Any customers with existing tickets for travel from 26 to 28 July can use those tickets anytime between now and 29 July. Alternatively, customers with tickets for the affected days (26 to 28 July) can claim a full refund.

In the meantime, we are suspending ticket sales for 27 July in order to minimise the number of people disrupted. The advice for customers is to continue to check our website, and those of other operators, for updates. We are very disappointed with this action by the RMT and TSSA, which we believe is premature, and we are sorry for the inconvenience it will cause. We will provide more service information on the August strike closer to the time.

Continuous review – we want to uplift our services as soon as we are able

I hope that this update demonstrates how we are focused on improving services for the benefit of passengers, as soon as we are able to, in the face of unprecedented challenges. We continue working with all partners to continuously monitor change, innovating and flexing to address the changing landscape. Rest assured, we want to get back to a full timetable as soon as we can do so reliably.

Thank you for your ongoing support and engagement. We remain committed to the recovery of our network, attracting passengers back to rail, and to building the railway of the future for the benefit of the customers and communities we are proud to serve.

In the spirit of collaboration, we remain open to **further discussion**. If you would find that helpful, please contact stakeholders@avantiwestcoast.co.uk or your Regional Growth Manager.

Yours sincerely



Phil Whittingham
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