

Stephanie Tobyn
Director of Strategy, Policy and Reform



Steve Montgomery
Managing Director, First Rail

By email only

24 January 2023

Dear Steve,

Enabling passengers to plan their journeys

I am writing to ask that you make improvements to the recovery plan for timetable production that we accepted from you in September 2022.

Background

In August 2022, Avanti introduced a reduced timetable at very short notice. One consequence was that passengers were offered very short booking horizons, often only a matter of days. You agreed that this position was unacceptable. We required you to provide a recovery plan in August and, after rejecting your initial proposals, accepted the plan submitted on 30 September.

Avanti made reasonable progress against this plan and booking horizons had improved in the period leading up to Christmas. However, the position has deteriorated significantly in 2023. For several weekends in January, passengers have only been able to book tickets at a few days' notice. Avanti's current plans for February show a better picture for weekday travel but still fall short of industry norms and your customers' needs for weekend journeys. I remain unclear when you expect to be able to return to releasing timetables in line with industry norms.

As well as the significant impact on passengers' ability to plan and book their journeys, if Avanti is not able to work to the same timelines as the wider industry you are increasing the risk that you will not secure the timetable that you bid for. This in turn can lead to increased journey times for passengers, a need for you to re-plan your services at pace, and additional demands on Network Rail.

We recognise that the external environment is creating significant challenges for timetable planning, including the work needed to establish revised timetables where there is industrial action and to establish novel solutions for complex engineering



works planned by Network Rail. Equally, Avanti's delivery of published timetables remains worse than that of other operators who are exposed to very similar challenges. We expect you to anticipate better these risks and to be able to demonstrate that you are taking all reasonable steps to deliver timetables to passengers. In particular, your arrangements need to be sufficiently robust to deal better with situations where a "normal" timetable is not planned to be operated, such as the upcoming engineering work at Carstairs junction.

Recovery plan for timetable production

Under Condition 4 of the Passenger Licence, Avanti is required to secure the provision of accurate and timely information to enable passengers to plan and make their journeys with a reasonable degree of assurance, including when there is disruption and to achieve this to the greatest extent reasonably practicable having regard to all relevant circumstances. Consistent with this licence requirement, **we are now asking you to submit an improved recovery plan for timetable production to us by 2 February 2023.**

As a minimum, we expect you to set out: an assessment of the reasons for your deterioration in performance and, with this in mind, your subsequent plans for 2023; an assessment of opportunities for improvement against current plans, together with risks and mitigations; key milestones that will take you back to releasing timetables in line with industry norms; and wider plans for passenger information. We also expect you to demonstrate that Network Rail is content to support delivery of your plan. Further guidance is provided in the Annex.

We will monitor your delivery of the improved plan and we expect you to consider how to communicate transparently with passengers about your progress. You should note that failure to produce an acceptable plan or to deliver it may lead us to consider more formal measures under your licence.

I am copying this letter to Jake Kelly, Group Director for the System Operator at Network Rail. In the interests of transparency and understanding I will organise a tripartite meeting to consider your recovery plan, after it has been submitted to us.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Tobyn

Annex: Guidance on extension to your recovery plan

The extension to your recovery plan should, as a minimum, set out:

A. Assessment of performance

- A description and assessment of the reasons for the different recovery rates projected for weekdays and weekends in the current recovery plan
- A description and assessment of the causes of the very late release of timetables and tickets to passengers for weekends in January 2023
- A description and assessment of the causes of late release of timetables for the Carstairs blockade

B. Opportunities and risks

- Explanation of where opportunities lie to bring forward release of timetables to passengers against the progress report submitted to us on 16 January 2023, for some or all routes, and an explanation of which of those Avanti will progress and where not, why not.
- Explanation of where risks to plans for release of timetables to passengers lie, and steps that Avanti will take to mitigate those risks.

C. Improved recovery plan: timetable production

- The improved recovery plan should set out a small number of key milestones that identify the steps that Avanti will take, and when, in order to return to submitting bids to Network Rail, and releasing confirmed timetables to passengers, in line with industry norms. It should also identify where there are significant external dependencies.
- We expect Avanti to confirm that they have secured agreement from the System Operator and relevant Region(s) at Network Rail that they are content with the improved plan.

We expect Avanti's weekly progress reporting to continue as now (setting out reservations opening status, reservations bid status to Network Rail, reservations opening timetable, and T-x schedule), with the addition of reporting progress against these key milestones.

D. Extension to recovery plan: other passenger information

- A description of steps that you plan to take to keep passengers informed of timetable and ticket releases, and changes to services ahead of and on the day of travel, including through use of notifications and alerts. Where you are implementing new activities, you should set out planned timescales for implementation.
- A passenger communications plan for the Carstairs blockade, including what you plan to communicate, when, and through which channels.