

NORTH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN BRIEFING NOTE

The majority of bus services in Britain (outside London) are operated commercially. This means that like any commercial business, the bus operator decides when and where to run their services and the fares to be charged. However, North Northamptonshire Council still plays an important role in ensuring communities can access bus services, for example by using section 106 money to help new bus services for developing communities, providing infrastructure for bus services and by administering the concessionary travel scheme.

The Government published Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England (outside London) in March 2021. Backed with transformational funding of £3bn during the current Parliament, the strategy sets out a vision to make buses more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper so that increased passenger numbers lead to reduced congestion, carbon and pollution, and encourages motorists to use a bus rather than their cars.

In order to receive this funding, local authorities were required to commit by the end of June 2021 to forming either an Enhanced Partnership or introducing bus franchising across the whole of their area. The Executive agreed in June 2021 to form an Enhanced Partnership, which is a statutory arrangement under the Bus Services Act 2017. The Enhanced Partnership can specify, for example, timetables and multi-operating ticketing, and allows the Council as Local Transport Authority to take over the role of registering bus services from the Traffic Commissioners, the government body responsible for licensing bus and heavy goods vehicle operators.

Having committed to form an Enhanced Partnership, the Council had to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan, detailing how we propose to use our powers to improve services, by 31 October 2021, and now has to develop an Enhanced Partnership by April 2022. From that date, the new discretionary forms of bus funding from Government will only be available to services operated, or measures taken, under an Enhanced Partnership or where a franchising scheme has been made.

The Government has set a timescale of June 2021 for Local Transport Authorities to commit to establishing an Enhanced Partnership across their entire area under the Bus Services Act 2017 and all bus operators to cooperate throughout the process. From 1 July 2021 only Local Transport Authorities and operators who meet these requirements will continue to receive Covid Bus Services Support Grant or any new sources of bus funding from the Government's £3bn budget.

Discussions have been held with bus operators who serve North Northamptonshire to understand their current issues and future aspirations, and this has been fed into the preparation of the BSIP. A stakeholder consultation was also undertaken to highlight potential areas for bus service improvement, and this has fed into the BSIP and will also feed into the Enhanced Partnership and hopefully future work once funding has been obtained. A public consultation has been held to gather input from residents about the specific interests they have in bus services and routes.

Key themes in the emerging BSIP include:

- The need to return patronage to pre-COVID levels before considering expansion.
- Patronage growth will mainly come from enhancing existing commercial services
- Filling gaps in evening and Sundays on the most frequent services
- Reinstating withdrawn services in rural areas, and the need to consider reinstating a bus subsidy budget
- The need for improved bus priority to improve journey times and reliability
- The need for better roadworks liaison to improve journey time reliability
- Introducing zero-emission buses to tackle air quality and decarbonisation issues
- Improved information for bus passengers
- Publish a Bus Passenger Charter.

The public consultation has now closed (as of 10th October). At the time of writing, the team were reviewing the consultation responses and will be able to update the Panel verbally with the emerging themes.