

EXECUTIVE 18th November 2021

Report Title	Bus Service Improvement Plan
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Executive Member	Cllr Graham Lawman, Executive Member for Highways, Travel and Assets

Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1974	

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Bus Service Improvement Plan

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To agree the Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan which has been published in accordance with Government deadlines under delegated powers.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 In March 2021 the Government published *Bus Back Better*, the National Bus Strategy for England. The objective of the strategy is to improve bus services for economic and environmental benefits.

- 2.2 In response to the strategy, the Executive in June 2021 committed to:

- Developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by October 2021; and
- Forming an Enhanced Partnership with bus operators by April 2022.

This will allow the Council to access funding available to improve bus services through 'Bus Back Better', the National Bus Strategy for England.

- 2.3 The BSIP was being prepared for approval by the Executive on 28th October 2021, but the change in the date of the meeting meant that it had to be agreed under delegated powers in order that it could be published on the Council's website by the Government deadline of 31st October 2021.
- 2.4 Now that the BSIP has been submitted, attention has turned to the development of the Enhanced Partnership.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Executive:
- a) Endorse the Bus Service Improvement Plan in **Appendix A**;
 - b) Note the additional £154,450 capacity funding received from Government; and
 - c) Agree that the proposal for restoring a subsidised bus service budget outlined in the Bus Service Improvement Plan should be included as part of the consultation on the Council's budget proposals for 2022-23 and beyond.
- 3.2 Reason for Recommendations:
- To improve bus services for North Northamptonshire communities, enable more communities to have a bus service and minimise the risk of any communities losing their bus service;
 - To facilitate climate and environmental benefits through increasing bus use and the operation of more low emission buses;
 - To contribute to the implementation of the Northamptonshire Transportation Plan (the Local Transport Plan);
 - To enable the Council to access the funding being made available by Government to support the National Bus Strategy.

4. Report Background

- 4.1 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 funding secured through the planning process (commonly referred to as section 106 money) to secure new bus services for developing communities. The Council also provides infrastructure which buses use (roads and bus stops/shelters) and administers the concessionary travel scheme.
- 4.2 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.

- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 Having committed to form an Enhanced Partnership, the Council was required to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan by 31st October 2021 which detailed how it proposes to use its powers to improve services. The Enhanced Partnership must be created by 31st March 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.
- 4.5 Discussions have commenced with bus operators serving North Northamptonshire to understand current issues and future aspirations, and this has been fed into the preparation of the BSIP. A stakeholder consultation was also undertaken in September and October 2021 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.

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1 The Bus Service Improvement Plan was being prepared for approval by the Executive on 28th October, but the change in the date of the meeting meant that it had to be agreed by the Chief Executive on the basis of urgency, in consultation with the Leader, in accordance with the Executive Procedure Rules in order that it could be published on the Council's website by the Government deadline of 31st October 2021. That decision is now being reported to Executive.
- 5.2 The Bus Service Improvement Plan which was published on 29th October 2021 is included in **Appendix A**.
- 5.3 While the Government has set key parameters around what it expected the BSIP to include, the Council had choices around its priorities for bus service improvement. Key themes which have been developed in the BSIP include:
 - Returning 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

- Providing bus services to communities which have lost them, and the need to consider reinstating a bus subsidy budget
- Exploring the increased use of demand responsive transport (sometimes known as dial-a-ride) where passengers need to book the bus rather than it running at fixed times.
- Improved bus priority to improve journey times and reliability
- Better roadworks liaison to improve journey time reliability
- Introducing zero-emission buses to tackle air quality and decarbonisation issues
- Improved information for bus passengers
- The development of a Bus Passenger Charter.

6. Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

6.1.1 As noted in the June 2021 Executive report Government provided an initial £100,000 of capacity funding to the Council in 2021/22 to provide additional resources for preparation of the Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan. Subsequently, a further £154,450 of capacity funding has been approved. External consultancy support is being procured to help with the Enhanced Partnership stage of this work, together with legal support to develop the governance arrangements.

6.1.2 The Bus Service Improvement Plan provides a means for the Council to secure significant additional funding for bus service improvements. However, to maximise the impact of improving our bus services in North Northamptonshire, and to seek to ensure the sustainability of any new subsidised services introduced should Government funding not be available beyond the current Parliament, the BSIP has stated that the Council will explore options for funding as part of the Council's budget setting process for 2022-23 and beyond and the public consultation thereon.

6.2 Legal

6.2.1 The Council will form an Enhanced Partnership in accordance with the Bus Services Act 2017. The development of the Enhanced Partnership must be undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Act, and Pathfinder Legal Services will be supporting with the drafting of any legal documents.

6.3 Risk

6.3.1 The challenging timescales mean that there is a risk the deadlines may not be achieved. However, additional resources are being procured to help with the next stage, in order to mitigate this risk. Obtaining additional resource has been challenging because other Local Transport Authorities are also seeking additional resource for similar reasons.

- 6.3.2 There is a risk that the Enhanced Partnership will not be able to proceed due to objections from bus operators, which could mean we were unable to access the funding available. This risk is being mitigated by working with bus operators to develop the proposals which will be included in the Enhanced Partnership.
- 6.3.3 In the longer-term, there will be risks associated with the implementation of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership should the funding promised by the current Government not be sustained by future Central Government administrations.

6.4 Consultation

- 6.4.1 Engagement with stakeholders has been undertaken to highlight potential areas for bus service improvement. The views informed the preparation of the BSIP and will also feed into the development of the Enhanced Partnership. While the short timescales have not made it possible to complete a full consultation on a draft Bus Service Improvement Plan document, consultation with bus operators and other stakeholders must form part of the formation of the Enhanced Partnership, in accordance with the statutory guidance.
- 6.4.2 Initial analysis of the on-line responses showed that the vast majority (512 out of 519 responses) have had occasions when they could travel by bus but could not or did not. 55% said this is because there is no bus, which supported the reinstatement of a subsidised service budget. 32% would support demand responsive transport.
- 6.4.3 Leisure, social and shopping were the most popular reasons for people making bus journeys, although half of respondents were of fare paying/working age.
- 6.4.4 Various suggestions for improvements and observations are made:
- 39% say better end to end accessibility and user friendliness would encourage them to use buses more
 - 34% there is poor information and 33% would like audio and visual information on or off buses
 - 27% would like bikes on buses, but this will be very difficult to deliver
 - 23% would like more electric buses
 - 21% would like wi-fi and charging points but this is falling out of favour due to things like 5G
 - 20% say that their bus is often delayed
 - 15% would like more shelters (mainly at their local stop)
- 6.4.5 The Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership have also been considered by the Climate Change, Growth and Environment Executive Panel.

6.5 Consideration by Scrutiny

- 6.5.1 Given the timescales required by Government and the establishment of the new authority and the Committee timetable, it has not been possible to provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to consider this report.

6.6 **Climate Impact**

- 6.6.1 The proposals in the Bus Service Improvement Plan would have a positive climate/environmental impact through increasing bus use, reducing car use and potentially the introduction of lower or zero emission buses.

6.7 **Community Impact**

- 6.7.1 The recommendations in this report reduce risk that communities in North Northamptonshire will lose their bus service and should secure an improved bus service in future.

7 Background Papers

- 7.1 Executive paper, 22nd June 2021, Agenda No 7 National Bus Strategy
- 7.2 Bus Services Act 2017
- 7.3 Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England, Department for Transport 2021
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980227/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf