



Transportation Planning : Infrastructure Design

Bus Network Review

Report 2


West Northamptonshire Council

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Buses are the most used form of public transport in England, meeting the needs of old and young, rural and urban communities, and helping supporting the prosperity of towns and cities. Commercial bus operators have been encouraged to innovate in how they provide key local links and the public sector, both at government and local authority levels, have, particularly post Covid, started to develop and significantly now fund a new model for buses to meet residents and visitors travel needs. The journey is just starting in West Northamptonshire, with new government funding and staff resources becoming available, and new Enhanced Partnerships have been established to both protect and enhance existing networks, as well as encouraging a step change in provision.
- 1.2 SCP have been commissioned to undertake a review of the bus network on behalf of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) as requested by the Department for Transport (DfT). The review will advise on how best to achieve a future, sustainable network that provides a stable and financially viable bus network.
- 1.3 In December 2022 Report 1 was prepared and issued to WNC as a baseline review, considering existing services, their commercial viability and alternative provision, as well as opportunities and risks at a high level. It classified all current routes as red/amber/green, with red routes most at risk of not being commercially viable in the future and where WNC intervention will possibly be needed to maintain key links and network resilience.
- 1.4 This second report has been prepared to provide a framework for decision making in order to inform a future bus network which serves West Northamptonshire to its full potential. It will be presented to the Council and utilised in further policy development.
- 1.5 Building on the assessment of local bus services in Report 1 and initial discussions with operators, council officers and parish councils we have undertaken further analysis and testing of options to enable us to recommend a sound policy approach, funding criteria and a delivery mechanism for public transport in West Northamptonshire.
- 1.6 This report therefore develops:
- Policy - A draft local bus policy statement, consistent with the WNC Bus Service Improvement Plan, the Local Transport Plan and WNC corporate policies
 - Options - An appraisal and sifting tool for prioritising and selecting the optimal services or service models to support in the future
 - Scenario testing - A review of the potential outcomes of the prioritisation within a number of funding and operational scenarios

- A further review of opportunities and risks after the prioritisation exercise
- An action plan and advice on further consultation
- Conclusions

2.0 LOCAL BUS POLICY

- 2.1 Under the terms of the Transport Act 1985, West Northamptonshire Council is responsible for securing such local bus services as it considers necessary, that are not provided commercially by the market. The Council also has a duty to formulate and publish, from time to time, general policies as to the description of local bus services it proposes to secure through revenue support funding.
- 2.2 Northampton, as the largest town and key urban destination, has a well-established commercial network served by three local bus operators. Beyond the other main towns in West Northamptonshire (Brackley, Daventry and Towcester) where some commercial and supported bus services are provided it is often in the more sparsely populated rural areas and smaller towns where services could be procured by tender and financially supported by the Council. In practice the level of funding available to the previous County Council and now for WNC has historically constrained the level of supported services in the area.
- 2.3 Report 1 set out the current list of supported bus services and noted that the budget available for supported bus services could be further reduced. The budget for 2023/24 has been retained at the same level as the previous year by utilising £215k of contingency to supplement the £100k base budget, providing a base budget of £315k per annum (excluding government grants and S106 payments). This is the council budget funding which is within WNC's control. Based on recent years this revenue support budget would be supplemented by the DfT BSOG payment to Local Transport Authorities of £109,528. In addition WNC will receive its final Bus Recovery Grant allocation for April to June of £41,814.
- 2.4 On 17th May 2023 the DfT announced BSIP+, which are additional revenue funding allocations to support Bus Service Improvement Plan implementation, and WNC will receive £687,109 in the current financial year (2023/24). This funding can be used to support both new and existing services, and the DfT subsequently confirmed on July 24th 2023 that the same level of funding will be available for 2024/25, giving a total of £1,374,218. It is expected that LTAs will use the funding to maintain existing service levels or on measures that are consistent with Departmental guidance on BSIPs:

“You may use the funding to target it on the actions that you – and local operators through your Enhanced Partnership – believe will deliver the best overall outcomes in growing long term patronage, revenues and thus maintaining service levels, whilst maintaining essential social and economic connectivity for local communities. In some places that may involve ensuring existing connections are maintained (either by conventional services or DRT). Elsewhere it might be

achieved through increasing the frequency on key corridors or the operating hours of some services whilst reducing others; or reducing fares or introducing new local concessions to open up new markets and revenue.”

- 2.5 Notwithstanding the two year additional funding for BSIP+ the longer term context of ongoing public sector budget pressures suggests that the Council should consider adopting a new overall policy for supporting local bus services and then develop a mechanism for prioritising funding for an equitable, needs based and optimal supported network.
- 2.6 Previously Local Transport Authorities had a statutory duty to produce a Bus Strategy, as an element of their Local Transport Plan, as set out in the Transport Act 2000 (s108). This requirement was removed in the Local Transport Act 2008 (s26) but many LTAs have continued to include a Bus Strategy as a chapter in their LTPs or as a supporting document (as in Northamptonshire previously).
- 2.7 To a certain extent the production of Bus Strategy is now replaced by the Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP) and Enhanced Partnership (EP) process, albeit that theoretically an LTA could decide not to establish an EP. While the BSIP sets out the wider context and approach of an LTA, with reference to specific transport policies and wider corporate policies, for example on sustainability, it is primarily seen as a bidding document and the development of a business case for central government funding. It is therefore not in itself the core policy document which sets the framework for supporting local bus services, which continues to be the statutory Local Transport Plan.
- 2.8 The most recent LTP covering the WNC area is the 2012 Northamptonshire Transportation Plan, which was established for a 15 year period, and it therefore continues to be the key statutory transport policy document until 2026. It was supported by a stand-alone Bus Strategy, initially produced in 2013 and updated in 2018, which had as a core objective:

The bus strategy aim is to.....increase the attractiveness of bus travel to encourage modal shift and allow the housing growth proposed in the county to be accommodated.

- 2.9 Clearly much of the 2018 Bus Strategy has been overtaken by events, including council reorganisation, public sector financial pressures, slow economic growth, a slowdown in land development, the Covid 19 pandemic and a subsequent loss of bus services across the region. We understand a new LTP is being produced by WNC and we anticipate that the draft interim Bus Policy set out below could be incorporated as part of the statutory document.

- 2.10 In the 2018 Bus Strategy the 13 local bus policies covered all aspects of public transport, including commercial and supported services, home to school and voluntary sector, rapid transit, information, ticketing and infrastructure. The 2018 Bus Strategy policies are set out in Appendix 1 for reference.
- 2.11 It is also important that any new bus policy is incorporated into the new statutory WNC Local Plan, because of the importance of connections to development and access to jobs and services, which are currently highlighted in Policies C1-C6 in the adopted West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy Local Plan (Part 1) (2014).
- 2.12 The Council now has two clear choices on developing its own public transport policy:
- Update the 2018 NCC policies and following consultation adopt them as the WNC policies, or
 - Develop a new consolidated policy statement
- 2.13 It is our recommendation that while each of the previous 2018 policies had merit, the context for delivering on these promises has so significantly changed that a new pragmatic, yet still aspirational, policy position should be adopted.
- 2.14 We have undertaken a review of national, regional and local transport policies, as well as relevant West Northamptonshire Council policies on environmental, social, planning and economic development matters.
- 2.15 In addition we held a workshop with officers on 5th May 2023 to review the policy options, consider the draft policy statement and to agree strategic objectives to inform future service delivery. The policy structure is therefore an overarching statement of intent, with sub clauses introduced as necessary to cover specific modes and infrastructure. Because of ongoing policy development by West Northamptonshire Council, including a new Local Transport Plan, we have developed an interim policy, which could be adapted as new strategic transport and planning policies are adopted.
- 2.16 Our proposed policy statement is needs based, rather than supply side orientated and as such puts the communities and users first. The mechanisms for meeting that need, through identifying the demand for services and encouraging supply solutions, whether delivered by the private or public sector, is then indicated.
- 2.17 The proposed draft interim policy is as follows:
-

- *PT1: The needs of our communities to access employment, education, healthcare, retail and leisure is recognised and this mobility can be achieved through the provision of high quality, efficient and reliable public transport.*
 - *PT1.1: Priority 1: The Council will encourage the commercial operation of local public transport services, through partnership working and infrastructure investment*
 - *PT1.2: Priority 2: Where there are unmet needs and gaps in the commercial bus network provision, the Council will seek solutions through supported local bus services or community transport initiatives, where funding is available and it is consistent with Council policies and priorities*
 - *PT1.3: Priority 3: The Council will fund and administer concessionary travel for elderly and disabled residents in line with national regulations*

2.18 Additional policy sub clauses could consider integration with rail, education, health and social care transport, the provision of information and infrastructure, but our proposed simplified policy is focused on meeting current legislation responsibilities under the Transport Act 1985 (supported services and policies) and Transport Act 2000 (concessionary travel). Other matters can be considered as aspirations (or actions if funding secured) in the bus strategy element of new Local Transport Plan and within the BSIP.

3.0 OPTIONS ASSESSMENT

- 3.1 Based on our previous work in Report 1, we have generated a range of public transport options and prepared a “long-list” of possible public transport interventions for the future. This enabled us to undertake an initial multi criteria appraisal to provide enough information to enable a short list of options to be identified. This is based on a simplified DfT Early Assessment and Sifting Tool (EAST) type assessment, with additional scenario testing and scoring of the identified service options against the Council’s objectives.
- 3.2 The EAST process provides a useful template to undertake a high level sift which removes those options that are unfeasible on the basis of one or more ‘show-stoppers’, such as for significant social, economic and environmental criteria. The Red - Amber - Green (RAG) approach to scoring services within the BSIP, and as reviewed in our report 1, can be replicated in EAST and as such it provides a simple and easily understood visual guide as to a service option’s value and impact.
- 3.3 The use of EAST as starting point is fitting, as not only does the tool identify, at a high level, the nature and extent of all the social, economic and environmental impacts of options, it is also in line with the Treasury’s Green Book and is consistent with Transport Business Case principles. This is important when making a bid to central government for future funding of both revenue and capital projects.
- 3.4 We have therefore developed a two stage appraisal approach, utilising a spreadsheet tool, the West Northampton Council Appraisal and Sifting Tool (WNCASST), which is found in Appendix 2:
- Strategic – to include high level options such as ‘do nothing’, ‘do minimum’, and ‘do something’
 - Detailed assessment – a review based on current services, where a range of criteria are applied and a rank order for future financial support is developed

Strategic Case – WNCASST Summary Table

- 3.5 In our strategic consideration of options to secure public transport services for communities in West Northamptonshire we have utilised standard classifications of actions that a local transport authority would model and appraise:
- Do Nothing (DN): withdraw completely from the delivery of a service or project
 - Do Minimum (DM): the ‘business as usual’ option, maintaining existing services, projects and funding

- Do Something (DS): Consideration of all potential options and scenarios, from minimal change to comprehensive change

3.6 In the Summary table of WNCASST we have scored each of the standard options against business case objectives, based on HM Treasury and DFT guidance:

- Strategic – clear scheme objectives, policy compliance
- Economic – impacts on users/non users, economic activity, non-monetary benefits (social, environmental)
- Financial – costs, income
- Commercial - procurement, risks
- Management – resources, deliverability and timescales

Do Nothing

3.7 The Do Nothing option can act as a baseline in a ‘first principles’ review of local bus services, in that starting from a zero base position the reasons for supporting bus services (that would otherwise not be provided by the commercial bus operators) can be fully assessed. This can include how supported bus services aid the Council in meeting its social, economic, sustainability and connectivity objectives, for example.

3.8 However funding on local bus support is discretionary, despite the statutory requirement to identify needs under the Transport Act 1985, and therefore as other LTAs have reduced or removed such funding completely there is value in considering the impact the full withdrawal of support would have in the WNCASST assessment.

3.9 In the appraisal DN unsurprisingly scores low against strategic objectives, as it fails to meet both transport policy goals and wider corporate objectives, it has a net negative impact on the local economy but it scores positively on financial savings. On balance the savings would be significantly outweighed by the impacts on resident’s mobility, access to jobs, education and health care and should only be considered when other budget saving options have been exhausted or rejected.

3.10 The WNCASST score for Do Nothing is **35** (scored against a maximum of 90)

Do Minimum

3.11 This option represents ‘business as usual’ and therefore acts as more realistic baseline than a Do Nothing scenario, which is unlikely to be adopted.

- 3.12 For WNC the Do Minimum is to maintain support for the existing (May 2023) tendered bus services (33/A, 59, 60, 87, X91, 200 and 500), plus services still supported by developer contributions (55, 505, D1, D2 and D4). DM would also include maintaining the existing funding of voluntary and community transport organisations that provide a safety net of services that fill gaps in the network, primarily in rural areas. It should be noted that these community based services are being independently reviewed by the WNC Transformation Team concurrently with this study, so we have established this funding as a fixed component in the current DM model.
- 3.13 Within the appraisal the DM approach scored better on strategic objectives, albeit they are not as aspirational as the strategic objectives in the previous Bus Strategy or current BSIP. It is producing net benefits on economy and social welfare, for example, but because of the low numbers of passengers on supported services the benefits are spread relatively thinly. It meets the commercial and management objectives, as it is utilising existing systems and processes, but clearly there is a cost to provision which is rising and wider operational and market challenges are increasing as are risks.
- 3.14 The WNCast score for Do Minimum is **61**.

Do Something

- 3.15 We assessed 5 Do Something options, which represent a mix of providers, operating models and a balance of service within the existing funding envelope. If more or less funding is available then further runs of WNCast can be undertaken, but the initial review sets out to compare, as much is possible, 'like for like' inputs, outputs and outcomes.
- Do Something 1 - Rebalance within local bus services
 - Do Something 2 - Rebalance between local bus and voluntary sector
 - Do Something 3 - Reallocate all local bus support to community bus schemes
 - Do Something 4 - Greater integration with education, social care, health transport
 - Do Something 5 - Reallocate all local bus support to demand responsive transit

Do Something 1

- 3.16 The opportunity to rebalance the distribution of funds between services may arise through the loss of commercial services, which when tested within the WNCast model score more highly than existing services. This is one step away from the 'business as usual approach' and is a representation of the pragmatic approach and choices that officers will already present to councillors for decision.

3.17 As with the DM option this approach to optimising the use of limited funds scores well against policy objectives, will bring reasonable cost benefit outcomes and is deliverable, relatively quickly as it utilises existing tendering systems and relies on established commercial operator capacity. It is effectively moving resources around in a 'black box' where it is possible more trips can be made with WNC bus funding support, but with the down side that areas where tendered services have 'under-performed' may lose out. These services may still be a lifeline for more rural communities or socially excluded groups, where alternatives such as community transport, taxis or lift sharing, may not be available for relatively low numbers of users.

3.18 The WNCAST score for Do Something 1 is **71**.

Do Something 2

3.19 It is recognised that funding of community transport services can be highly efficient, especially where the cost base is lower than on tendered services because of small scale operations, low overheads and particularly the use of volunteer (or low cost part time) drivers.

3.20 Therefore rebalancing to utilise the community transport sector to fill gaps, either where a service is no longer considered viable by a commercial bus operator or where the service can provided at a significantly lower cost by a community based provider, should be considered.

3.21 The strategic objectives are generally well met by this approach and the cost benefit (and non-economic benefits) are generally higher, reflecting the community focus and use of volunteer drivers. The key issue is on deliverability and risk, as the sector has limited capacity and can take time to mobilise. It is also an issue that community transport responds well to meeting off peak travel demands, but is less able to recruit drivers who want to provide early morning workers trips or drive school buses, for example. Therefore the rebalancing can work best when the journey purpose of the underperforming tendered service can match the market served by CT schemes. In the long run the sector could broaden its offer, but investment in vehicles, systems and capacity building would be required.

3.22 The WNCAST score has been developed without taking into account the improvements that may be achieved as an outcome of the WNC Transformation Teams report on the Community Transport sector and the score therefore may improve dependent on the success of that project.

3.23 The WNCAST score for Do Something 2 is **60**.

Do Something 3

- 3.24 There are no examples identified in our research where an LTA has fully withdrawn support for conventional bus services to fund community transport, even with the lower cost model identified in DS2 above. This is not to say it doesn't have benefits, both on costs and building community involvement, but because capacity building can take time it is not an option that can be introduced quickly where a large scale deregistration of commercial services happens, for example.
- 3.25 Because of the exceptionality of this approach it is possible it could be undertaken as a pilot or trial scheme, possibly attracting government or third party funding. However while the subsidy cost per passenger may reduce the number of passengers, particularly for key work and education trips, may also be significantly reduced. Further work with the Transformation Teams review of the sector may identify a future role for CT in providing the majority of the socially necessary 'safety net' services currently provided by conventional local bus services, but at the cost of building sector capacity in the medium to long term.
- 3.26 The WNCAST score has been developed without taking into account the improvements that may be achieved as an outcome of the WNC Transformation Teams report on the Community Transport sector and the score therefore may improve dependent on the success of that project.
- 3.27 The WNCAST score for Do Something 3 is **53**.

Do Something 4

- 3.28 In 2016/2017 the DFT promoted the concept of Total Transport, with number of pilot schemes, including a scheme in Northamptonshire led by the County Council and the University. The premise of this approach is that there is often no shortage of vehicles and drivers in the public sector, just underutilisation, but through better integration and sharing of resources significant efficiencies can be achieved.
- 3.29 In practical terms many local authorities had previously introduced varying levels of integration, initially with their own home to school transport provision and subsequently with adult social care travel. Total Transport introduced NHS non-emergency ambulances into the mix, albeit subsequent reporting suggests integrating resources across separate council and health organisations was problematic in terms of systems, management process and control priorities.
- 3.30 However greater integration is theoretically a potentially driver of efficiencies, bringing new or underused resources into the market, possibly at marginal cost. It is identified in the WNCAST model as being relatively policy compliant, but scores low on deliverability and commercial

benefits because of set up costs and long timescales to secure agreement for fully integrated resource sharing. The costs in officer time and resources in establishing new ways of working, particularly where vehicle brokering and innovative contracting arrangements may be necessary, should also not be underestimated. With the pressures facing the NHS and the Ambulance Service at the moment this may be a low priority for their engagement with WNC. However it should remain as an option as the fundamental principles are sensible and with the right approach achievable over time.

3.31 The WNCAST score for Do Something 4 is **51**.

Do Something 5

3.32 Northamptonshire has some experience with demand responsive transport, both with the services provided by some community transport providers (offering a dial a ride type service) and with the County Council's previous use of the Call Connect model developed by Lincolnshire County Council.

3.33 The proposed approach with DS5 is to fully reallocate the existing tendered bus budget to supporting one or more DRT providers across the council area. This is a fundamental change from scheduled fixed route bus provision to fully flexible or semi flexible routes and timetables. Key to its success is minimising the overhead costs of booking, through call centres or preferably by an app. While this brings considerable efficiencies – generally the vehicle only travels in passenger fare paying services – the barriers to entry, to non-technology orientated users or infrequent travellers and visitors to the area, can be significant. Finally the costs of setting up DRT, ongoing operation and therefore the subsidy per passenger is consistently demonstrated in other schemes across the UK as significantly more expensive than conventional service provision. Therefore at times of constrained budgets, which have to be spread widely to meet many passenger's needs, DRT scores low on financial criteria.

3.34 Again if third party or government funding could be secured for a trial then some of the implementation costs could be reduced and the cost benefit ratio improved. While quicker to deliver than DS3 and DS4, it would take as long or longer than a retendering exercise for conventional local bus services.

3.35 The WNCAST score for Do Something 5 is **47**.

Hybrid Options

- 3.36 Each of the ‘do something options’ above, can to greater or less extent be mixed, to achieve different outcomes. The theoretical ‘all or nothing’ assessment of each is intended to be used in comparative analysis and it is recognised that in practical terms each of the approaches could be applied in part in specific geographical areas, for specific travel needs or to better allocate operator and financial resources optimally across West Northamptonshire. This opportunity to mix solutions is enabled in the detailed assessment in the WNCAS model.
- 3.37 In particular our discussions with officers has highlighted the benefits of a hybrid solution, where the optimal elements of DS1 and DS2 could be secured by rebalancing funding between local bus services in some areas or for some specific travel needs, while also considering whether community transport can be more efficient providers within a commercial bus, supported local bus and community transport combined network. In such a scenario if a conventional bus service is no longer viable, the default is to utilise any funds available for lower cost community transport. This presumes a level of capability and capacity in the community transport sector, but as a result of the WNC Transformation Team’s review this may be better option in the medium term as resources are reallocated or added as part of that review.
- 3.38 This hybrid DS1/2 could, particularly in the longer term, encompass greater integration with health (non - emergency patient transport services) and/or with technology and cost improvements ‘second generation’ demand responsive transit could be viable. It is also more dynamic in responding to the level of funding available, where local bus interventions may cost £100,000 pa plus but community transport service, especially building on existing structures and voluntary sector inputs, could be secured for say £20,000 pa. As such this allows a more ‘fine grained’ response to the needs identified and optimises the ways of meeting the user demand that arise from that need. As the funding sources increase in variety and availability – one off DfT or DLUHC grants, s106 contributions or Infrastructure Levy in the future, local bus revenue support budgets, town and parish council funds – the ability to fine tune the network and grow it efficiently is also enhanced.

Detailed Appraisal and Options Testing - Review

- 3.39 The WNCAS spreadsheet model has been developed to provide an initial assessment of a range of high level options, to inform public transport policies, overall budget choices and medium to long term opportunities. The Summary table provides this assessment.
- 3.40 It is also possible to use the tool for more detailed route and/or area specific decision making in each of the Do Something options. For example under DS1, where the balance of funded services

is being tested the score for a commercial service that is being withdrawn can be assessed against the score for an existing tendered service. If the withdrawn commercial services scores significantly more than the tendered route then this could be considered a rationale for reallocating funds, recognising that the costs are unlikely to be the same. We have therefore included current tendered service costs and the ability to introduce a proxy cost to replace the service, based on an estimate of vehicles required, peak vehicle costs and any income contribution. Annual patronage figures are included where available and therefore a subsidy per passenger trip can also be estimated, to allow further comparison.

- 3.41 Similarly in DS2 - DS5 inputting route specific data, community transport grants, demand responsive transport (DRT) tendered prices or estimates of integrated transport costs allow further comparisons to be made.
- 3.42 The major factor to consider in using WNCASST for detailed analysis and decision making is that inputting all of the data for every service and against every criteria in the WNCASST model would be very resource intensive and would need considerable attention to keep it up to date. It is therefore envisaged that the tool is used to support decision making on a case by case basis, to provide an evidence base and rationale, as a starting point for negotiation and stakeholder discussions.
- 3.43 The second factor to recognise is that the criteria are currently all equally weighted, so that high policy objective compliance will score as highly as positive cost benefit or ease of delivery. Some LTAs rank tendered services with regard to the predominant journey purpose, for example adopting a hierarchy with work and education trips given the highest priority for funding, then health, followed by shopping and leisure. However there is increasing concern that wider negative community impacts, such as social isolation, well-being and reinforcing rural poverty, could as easily lead to a reverse prioritisation with off peak social trips being considered the most valuable, not to the economy, but to the health and happiness of communities. As off peak travel is often marginally costed compared to peak travel for employment, for example, contracted services and therefore subsidy per passenger may be lower too.
- 3.44 In the workshop with officers on 5th May 2023 consideration was given to the possible weighting of the criteria in each of the 5 categories and a possible hierarchy of trips. The consensus view was that weighting the criteria is unnecessary at the moment as the model already replicates the WNC hierarchy of trip priorities, but if this were to change (for example in a new Local Transport Plan) then the WNCASST model could be updated with weight given to any new Council priorities.

- 3.45 The final factor to be addressed is the subjectivity that perhaps invariably can influence ranking and therefore scores. While some criteria are measured by real values, so in the Financial tab costs of services can be an absolute £ value, and to an extent in the Commercial and Management tabs the ease of delivery and timescales are broadly known, for example. However when considering how well a scheme, particularly where it is innovative and untested, meets Strategic and Economic objectives will be much more subjective. This should not diminish the value of the WNCast tool – indeed much the Treasury Green Book business case appraisal method it is based on rests on subjective views and estimates of costs and economic impacts. The subjectivity can be lessened where the inputs are considered by more than one officer (and indeed external stakeholders if appropriate) – in developing and testing the model for WNC we utilised a panel of three with varied experience and knowledge, including finance, policy, operations and procurement.
- 3.46 In this context we see multi criteria models such as WNCast as tools that have merit over standard basic measures such subsidy or cost per passenger or by km, that with considered inputs can challenge conventional thinking and bias, as well as supporting officers when the ‘right answer’ confirms their knowledge and experience. It will not provide an instant answer but it shows evidence to councillors, parishes and town councils, bus users, and operators that complex decisions are not made lightly or without evidence or thought to back them up.

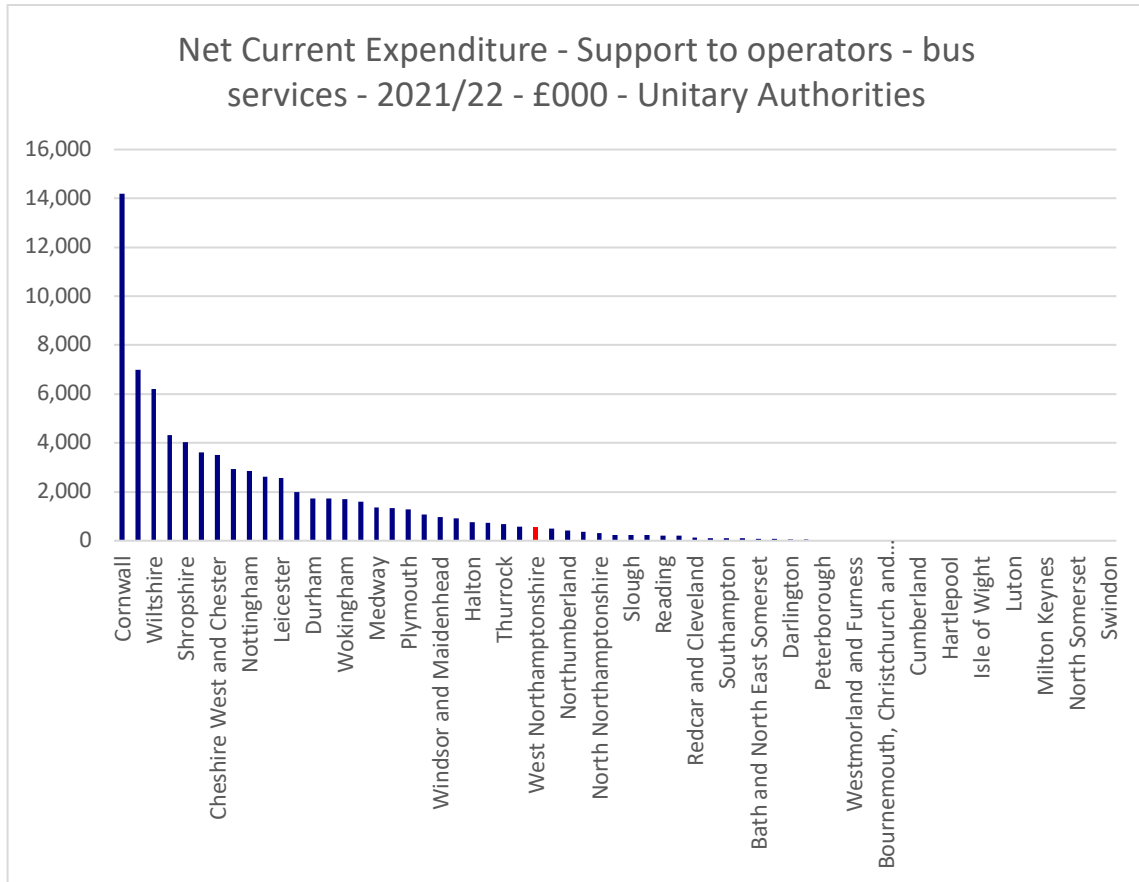
Benchmarking

- 3.47 At the workshop we discussed an additional task to set the level of bus support expenditure in context and we have reviewed a number of Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) data sets, to identify how well the Council is doing compared to its ‘next nearest’ neighbours, both geographically and in key demographics. The latest set of data available with local bus support budget out turns is 2021/22 and it is recognised that during this period there was instability with Covid and additional DFT payments to councils and operators, which we have excluded.
- 3.48 We have used ‘Net Current Expenditure - Support to operators - bus services’, from the Revenue Outturn returns which are compiled annually by DLUHC. ‘Support to operators - bus services’ is the specific code for bus revenue support expenditure from the return, RO2, which includes all Highways and Transport Services expenditure. The RO returns collect data on local government expenditure from each council, for provisional, interim and final spend, and the final out turn report is published in March in the following financial year (i.e. March 2023 for FY21/22). It is noted by DLUHC that some councils fail to submit data or submit partial data by the deadline and so we have undertaken further cross checks have been undertaken to ensure like for like comparisons.

Where necessary out turn data has been manually updated to reflect corrected final figures collected post RO2 reporting in March 2023.

3.49 In summary the WNC 2021/22 revenue expenditure out turn of £545,000 (revenue support and BSOG grant) compares as follows:

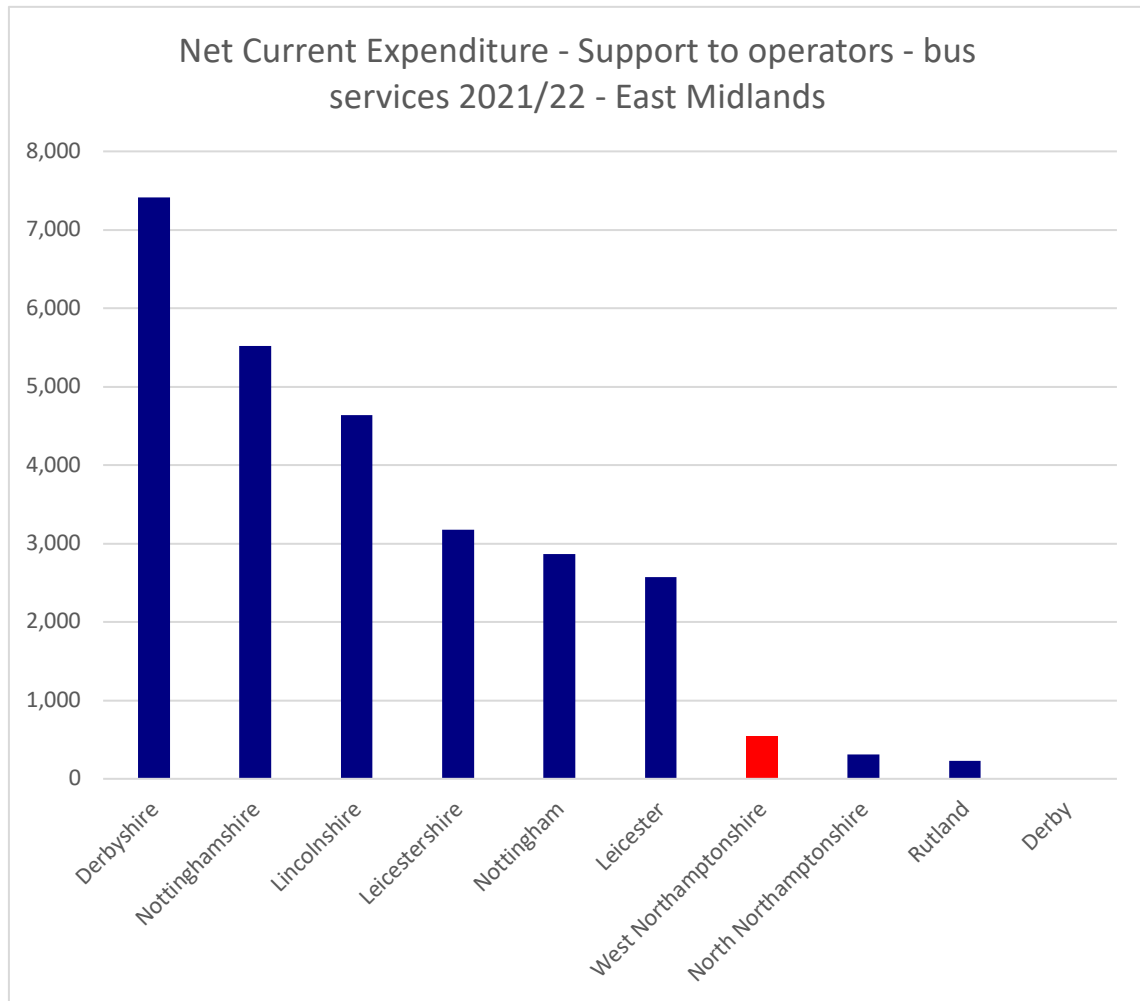
- 27th out of 59 unitary authorities



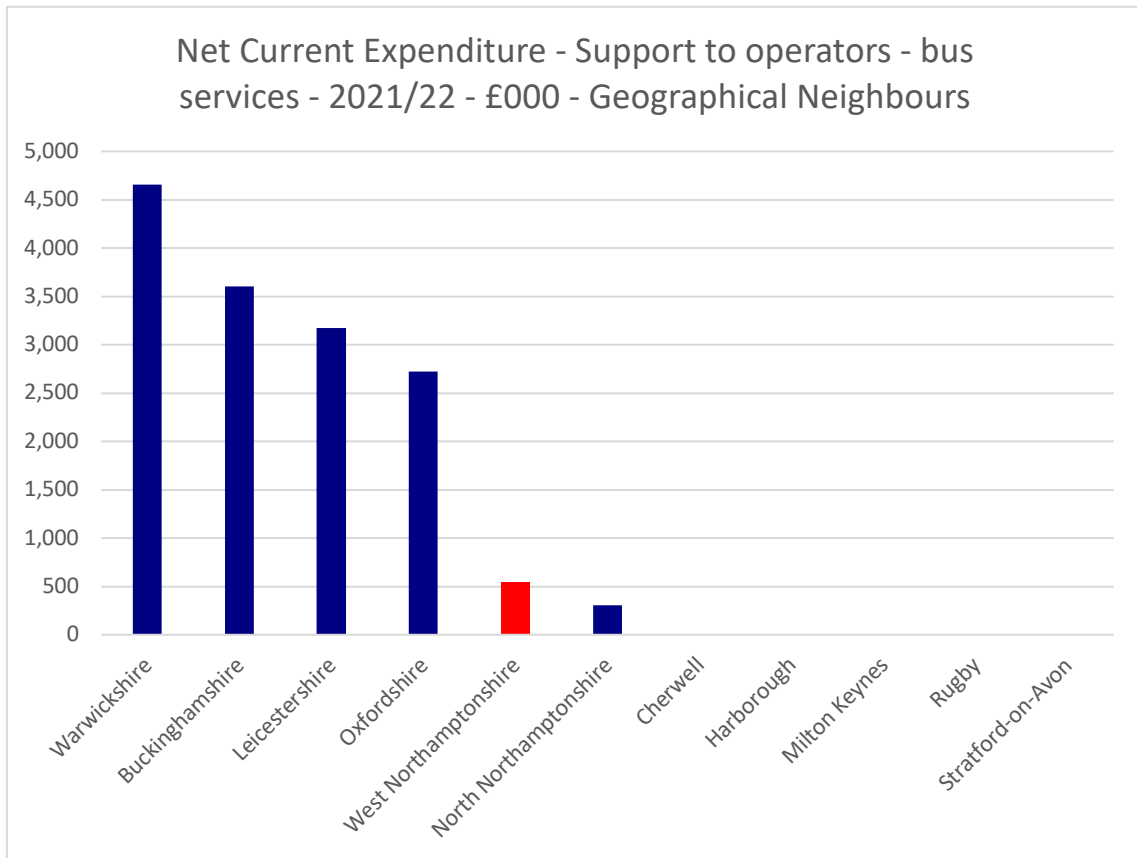
Cornwall is an outlier as it received significant additional DFT funding in a Devolution deal which created the integrated transport authority operating as Transport for Cornwall.

Not all unitary councils directly fund local buses as they may be part of combined authorities where they pay a precept to an integrated transport authority, such as in the ex-metropolitan counties or mayor led conurbations, and so the long tail on the graph above is primarily unitary authorities where transport responsibilities or budgets are devolved to other strategic bodies (or in few cases where no revenue support is offered – Blackpool where the network is wholly commercial, for example or NE Lincolnshire, where a policy decision has been taken not to fund buses).

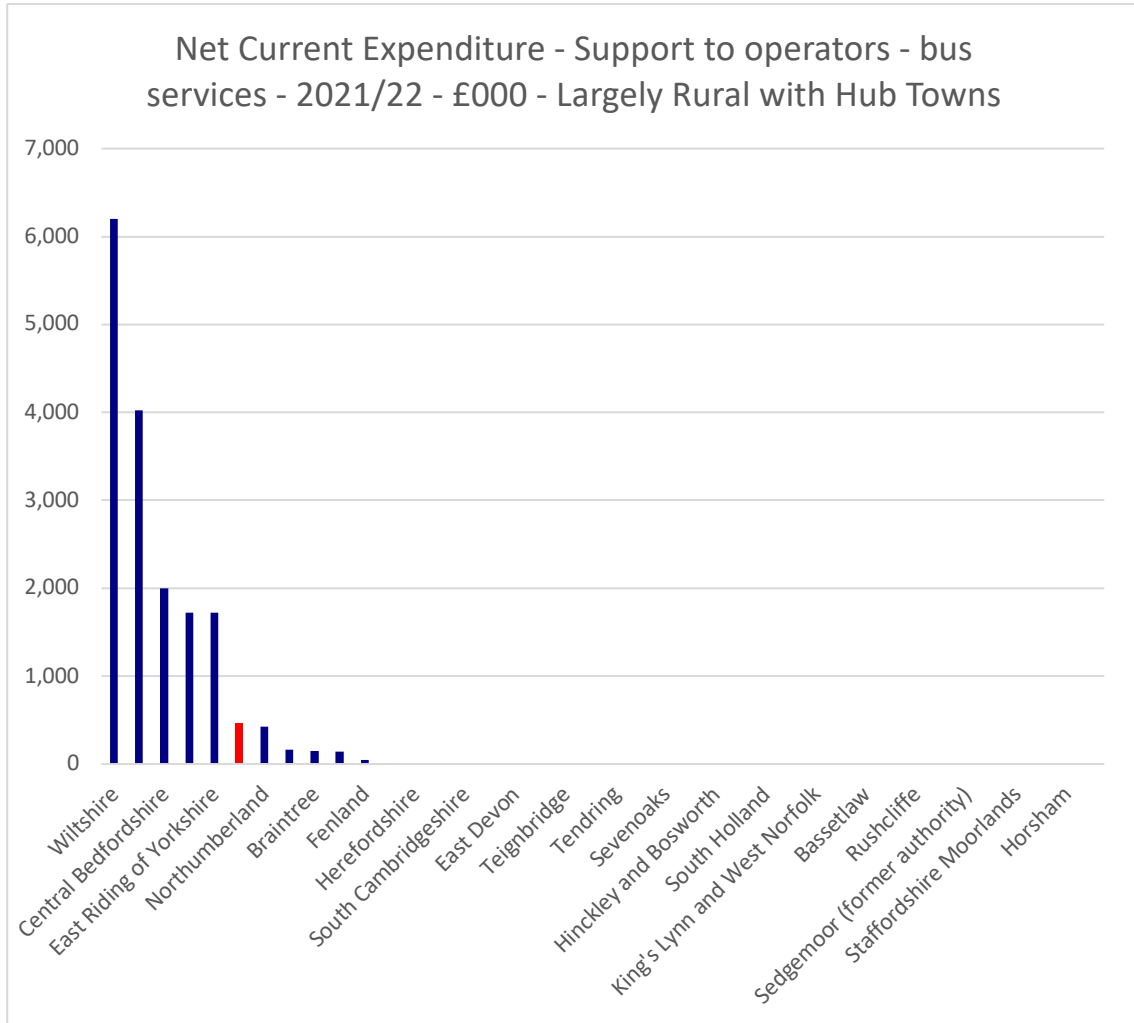
- 7th out of 10 East Midlands authorities



- 5th out of 11 geographical neighbours

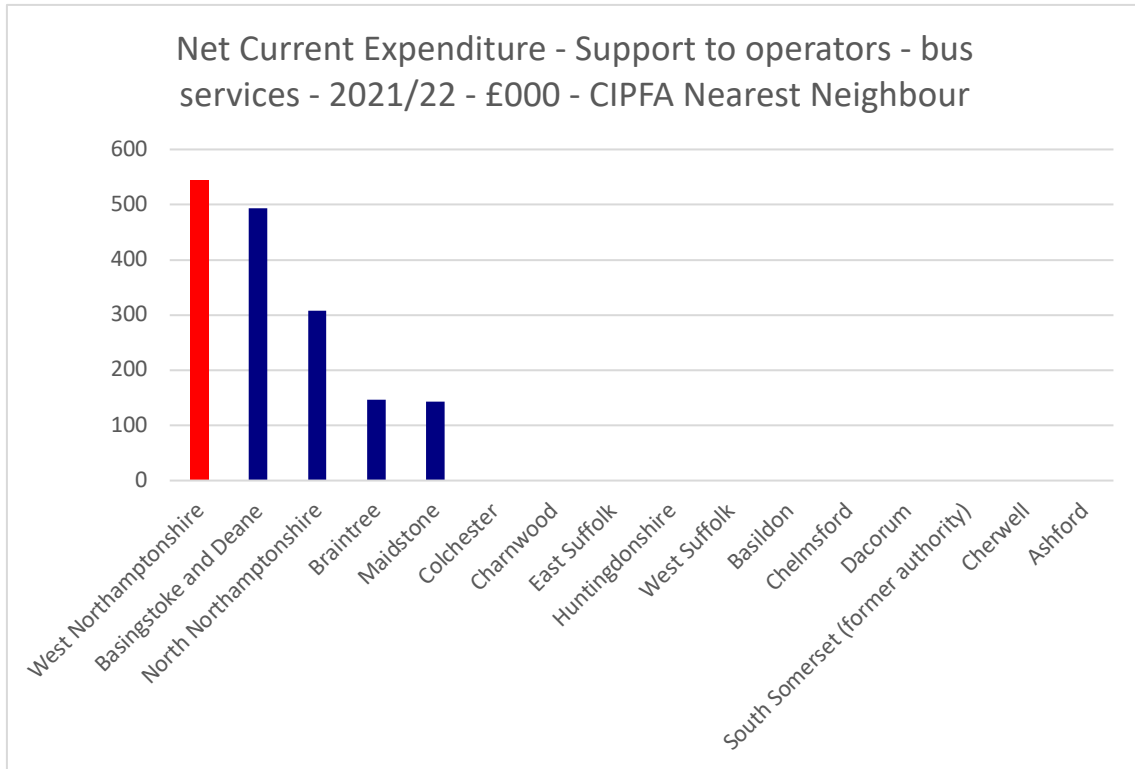


- 6th out of 36 'Largely Rural including hub towns 50 - 79%) - less than Wiltshire, Shropshire, Central Bedfordshire, Durham, Yorkshire East Riding, but more than Northumberland and Herefordshire, for example



3.50 West Northamptonshire scores well (highest) against the formal CIPFA nearest neighbour set but most of these are District Councils where revenue support is provided by County Councils.

3.51 The CIPFA Nearest Neighbours Model tool uses statistical processes and the factors upon which the classifications are based provide a balanced representation of the authorities' traits. The variables employed in making the assessment are all descriptive of characteristics of the area each authority administers. Featuring 40 metrics using a wide range of social-economic indicators, including population, age profile, incomes, employment, deprivation (but no transport indicators), the tool is designed to help to interpret statistical results and encourage benchmarking.



3.52 In this assessment it should be noted that the Basingstoke, Braintree and Maidstone expenditures are additional to the upper tier (County Council) spend on local bus support in their area and that all the others are district councils which do not directly support local bus services.

3.53 WNC scores well in English National Concessionary Travel Scheme provision, but this reflects both demographics and network coverage.

3.54 By undertaking this benchmarking exercise it is clear that, particularly as a new smaller local authority, comparisons with larger nearby local authorities should be addressed not only on overall budget expenditure but split per capita. In such a comparison in the East Midlands group West Northamptonshire scores low:

	Population	Bus Support	Per Capita
Derbyshire	796,800	£ 7,409,000	£ 9.30
Nottinghamshire	826,300	£ 5,519,000	£ 6.68
Lincolnshire	769,500	£ 4,637,000	£ 6.03
Leicestershire	712,600	£ 3,175,000	£ 4.46
Nottingham	319,600	£ 2,863,000	£ 8.96
Leicester	366,000	£ 2,576,000	£ 7.04
West Northamptonshire	426,500	£ 545,000	£ 1.28
North Northamptonshire	360,400	£ 308,000	£ 0.85
Rutland	41,400	£ 226,000	£ 5.46
Derby	261,100	£ -	£ -

- 3.55 This is probably reflecting a number of factors but undoubtedly the recent low levels of financial support for local buses from Northamptonshire County Council is a legacy budget which WNC may need to address if it is to meet the core public transport needs of its communities and to expand the offer of local buses to positively impact on mode share for West Northamptonshire.
- 3.56 We have undertaken some limited sensitivity tests on the scale of budget that would place WNC closer to the norm in the East Midlands region and at the mean with comparable unitary local authorities. A significant health warning is given on these projections as a percentage increase in budget may ‘buy’ more or less services in each area, dependent on operator capacity, supply and competitiveness. The types of passengers trips, services or routes that could be supported with extra funding will also vary and may not be strictly comparable. Finally external factors will have considerable impact – local economies, population densities, demographics, etc – will impact on demand for travel.
- 3.57 The WNCASST scores do not change significantly if realistic levels of extra funding are input – for example on an increase of £500,000 per annum the scores would change as follows:

Description	Current Budget Score (out of 90)	Additional Budget (£500k) Score (out of 90)
Do Nothing	35	35
Do Minimum	61	70
Do Something - Rebalance, local bus	71	73
Do Something - Rebalance, local bus and voluntary sector	60	61
Do Something - Reallocate all local bus support to community bus schemes	53	55
Do Something - Greater integration with education, social care, health transport	51	52
Do Something - Reallocate all funds to DRT	47	47

- 3.58 It has to be recognised that although Do Minimum improves considerably in scoring compared to other DS scenarios when an additional £500k is secured. In part this is an effect of the deliverability being simpler, as it is ‘more of the same’, primarily service development and tendering to existing suppliers. It could be argued that if the current budget was doubled, even if business as usual scored well, councillors and communities would be concerned that a step change in service provision is not being offered for a substantial investment.

- 3.59 However, if for example £2m pa were provided, perhaps through increased external funding such as DFT grants or revised BSIP+ funding, then investment in DRT, for example, become feasible, notwithstanding its general poor value for money and high passenger subsidy per head. Some Total Transport options of greater in house integration would begin to pay dividends, albeit that a longer timescale would still be required for implementation even if significantly improved budgets were on offer. The prime benefit would be in supporting more conventional local bus services or community transport schemes.
- 3.60 Our sensitivity tests therefore suggest that securing a step change in service provision (and future service protection) could be achieved with budget increases of £250k pa minimum and optimally £500 - 750k, to bring per capita spending in line with similar authorities, both in the region and in the 'nearest neighbour' statistical groups. With typical contract costs ranging between £50k for a limited off peak, marginally costed route extension to perhaps £150k for a net cost peak service with some guaranteed income a budget increase of £500k could represent 3 - 5 new, extended or retained services.
- 3.61 To aid understanding of the spending power that WNC has in the market we can develop anonymised scenarios, based on the Red/Amber/Green classification in Report 1, where red routes are commercial but judged to be at most risk – for example:

A – a red category inter urban route operating between a town in WNC and a larger urban centre in an adjoining council area is fully deregistered by a large national bus company. The service is hourly Monday to Saturday, but with no evening or Sunday service. Sufficient time is given to tender the service and an independent operator provides the lowest cost. There is no contribution to meeting the costs from the other council area, as few of their residents use the service. It is a two bus operation and the incumbent operator quotes £300,000 pa gross cost (£250,000 net if operator keeps fares income), the winning tender is £240,000 pa gross cost (£200,000 net).

If the current bus support budget was fixed (i.e. no BSIP+ or S106 funding) then using WNCast we would determine that the £200,000 required for a net cost contract was good value, carried more passengers, met more strategic objectives and was potentially commercial in the long term, after a period of seed corn funding, than two existing off peak rural services currently supported in a different part of the WNC area. One of the services if funding was withdrawn could be covered by a well-established community transport operator, with a small de-minimus payment of £10,000 pa, but the other would not be replaced.

This demonstrates the risk WNC faces if any of the red category frequent interurban buses are withdrawn, where the distances and the resources required make replacement costly. The

response should be to maximise efficient use of funds to serve the greatest number of passenger trips that would otherwise be unmet, particularly where all other strategic and economic criteria have higher values, but also recognise the importance of low cost bus and coach operators, taxi companies and community transport to fill the gap where there is high level market failure.

B – A town service, previously supported through s106 payments, has come to the end of its developer funding. A two hourly service, Monday to Saturday, categorised amber, it connects both new and existing suburbs of a mid-sized town. Operated by a small local bus company the fares income has not offset rising costs and therefore it is not possible to operate commercially. A de - minimus arrangement (at £3,000 per month) buys time for a full retender and when tenders are received one is from an independent bus and coach operator, offering older single deck buses at £30,000 pa net cost. A community transport provider offers an alternative but they need a one off grant of £15,000 to secure an accessible vehicle and then operating costs of £12,000 per annum net.

Using WNCAS, as well as officer's experience and knowledge of the market, the community transport option appears to be the better choice, albeit it requires a capital grant and there could be a delay in securing a new vehicle. Again assuming no additional budget is available this demonstrates the value in investing in the community transport sector, particularly based on the recommendations of the WNC Transformation teams current review.

4.0 OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

- 4.1 The modelling within WNCASST is offered as a tool to assist and inform decision making, but it cannot be the sole arbiter of where investment in local public transport should be made. To provide advice and support to officers we have developed instructions and supporting data worksheets to allow future customisation of WNCASST. We have built in the opportunity to add weighting to the scoring process, dependent if strategic fit, cost/benefits or deliverability are considered to be more important criteria, for example.
- 4.2 Using the proposed interim public transport policy (para 2.17 above) and WNCASST, officers and councillors can inform stakeholders, bus users and communities of the priorities applied in making choices on the future funding of local public transport. If challenged there is a logical process, which can be documented and shared with interested parties. It will also be useful in discussions with bus operators and community transport operators, as well as a starting point in discussions on future integration with the NHS, for example.
- 4.3 The most significant risk is that even with a model for the most efficient allocation of funds, if the annual bus revenue support base budget remains at a figure of £315,000 (including external DFT funding) or is reduced the flexibility within the various options is severely limited. Even with additional S106 funding, which is invariably linked to servicing needs of a specific area rather than being an allocation for use anywhere in West Northamptonshire, the local bus support funding is low compared to many other comparable LTAs, as demonstrated in the benchmarking section in chapter 3.
- 4.4 Therefore there needs to be some expectation management, as the policy and appraisal process brings order to the decision making, but there will invariably be winners and losers after these criteria are applied.

5.0 ACTION PLAN

5.1 Following the initial review of the WNCAS model and the proposed local bus policy in the officer workshop it is suggested that the following actions be undertaken to deliver the new approach:

Action	Suggested timeline
Presentation to senior officers and councillors	August 2023
Agree public facing summary report, with all commercial sensitive data redacted – include Summary table, but not DS1-5 detailed assessments	August 2023
Develop and agree a communications strategy for the review	August 2023
Discussions with Transformation Team with regard to community transport integration	August 2023
Discussions with local bus operators and community transport providers	September 2023
Share summary report with parishes and users as part of formal consultation	September 2023
Publicise a review of policy and funding choices, possibly within the wider LTP review process	October 2023
Report on consultation outcomes	November 2023
Adopt interim policy and utilise WNCAS in future decision making, budget setting	December 2023
Review impact after 12 months operation	December 2024

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 Local authorities face innumerable challenges currently in securing local bus services to meet the needs of their communities. Those needs (access to services, mobility, value for money and appropriate levels of quality) are changing, particularly post pandemic, and as this translates into demand for travel that is hard to predict councils are invariably playing catch up. The policies, plans and practices of even the recent past may no longer be relevant or applicable.
- 6.2 In this report we have developed a new interim public transport policy, building on our understanding of the Council's key policy objectives, as well as reflecting national policies and priorities. A draft interim local bus policy statement, consistent with the WNC Bus Service Improvement Plan, the current Local Transport Plan and WNC corporate policies, has been prepared and it could be a key element in the new Local Transport Plan 4.
- 6.3 We have assessed the current levels of funding and whether that offers a delivery mechanism for high quality public transport in West Northamptonshire. An appraisal and sifting tool has been developed for prioritising and selecting the optimal services or service models to support, within current budgets, and in the future.
- 6.4 The appraisal method, WNCAS, enables the Council to test multiple scenarios, from a 'Do Nothing' and 'Do Minimum' (business as usual) option through to increasing ambitious 'Do Something' options, DS1-5. In the scenario testing there was a review of the potential outcomes of the prioritisation within a number of funding and operational scenarios, including increased use of conventional local buses, community transport, integration and demand responsive transport. The highest scoring scenarios were based on a hybrid of rebalancing of existing local bus services with new community transport initiatives, with longer term integration and DRT implementation deemed viable options if external funding can be secured.
- 6.5 A further review of opportunities and risks was undertaken after the prioritisation exercise. We undertook a benchmarking review of both nearby (geographical) and 'nearest neighbours' type unitary councils, where the current WNC local bus support budgets scored low against most relevant comparators. Consideration was given to what level of future revenue support budget, and additional service provision, would place West Northamptonshire closer to the mean - the assessment suggested that an additional £500,000 (potentially secured from DfT BSIP+ and other external funding) would add 3-5 new or extended services, plus community transport investment and improve mode choices across the council area.
- 6.6 An action plan and advice on further consultation has been provided, as it is recognised that in changing the allocation of funding for any council services can result in 'winners and losers'. Early

engagement, particularly with rural communities, key stakeholders and operators, will be essential.

APPENDIX 1

Northamptonshire Bus Strategy 2018

Policies

Policy BUS 1

- We will work with commercial bus operators to sustain and enhance their core commercial networks, with the aim of improving the frequencies of core commercial services by 2026-31.

Policy BUS 2

- We will continue to support Home to School Transport and Adult and Children's Social Care Transport.
- Through our Network Northamptonshire Total Transport initiative, we will explore opportunities to make services available to wider sections of the community.

Policy BUS 3

- Working with operators, we will consider expansion of multi-operator ticketing schemes through:
 - Further development of the Northampton Buzz Card;
 - The introduction of schemes in Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough;
 - A county-wide ticket

Policy BUS 4

- We will support any proposals from operators to use smartcards for further ticketing products, and will consider wider applications for smartcard technology giving access to a wider range of services.

Policy BUS 5

- Access to real time information will be improved to make public transport easy and simple to use and more attractive. This will include 'live' display boards at stops, text-services and a simple and easy to use website which allows users to make well-informed decisions about whether, when and how to travel.

Policy BUS 6

- An interactive multi-modal journey planning service will be introduced, using local network information, which enables users to identify options for end-to-end journeys and to select the option that best meets their travel needs.

Policy BUS 7

- We will continue to concentrate our resources for bus stop improvements on the most heavily-used routes and stops, but also seek to provide each village in the county with a bus service that has at least one marked stop (normally in each direction) with a timetable case and raised boarding facilities. Northamptonshire Bus Strategy – April 2018

Policy BUS 8

- Where new or improved bus interchanges are provided, we will expect them to be provided with a range of facilities appropriate to their location.

Policy BUS 9

- We will consider the provision of appropriate bus priority measures:
 - Where buses are delayed by the volume of traffic on the road network, and
 - The provision of bus priority maximises the throughput of people.
- Where possible we will introduce such measures along complete route corridors, and in concert with other investments and promotions, to maximise their effectiveness.

Policy BUS 10

- The County Council will work with local operators and Government (including through the Green Bus Fund) to introduce hybrid (diesel/electric) and electric buses in Northamptonshire.

Policy BUS 11

- Investigate a rapid transit network for the Northamptonshire Arc that provides:
 - Rapid and frequent links between existing urban and planned growth areas
 - Modern high-capacity, low-emission vehicles coupled with latest technology guidance, command and control systems,
 - High levels of journey time reliability, approaching metro standards
 - High quality real time information when and where passengers need it
 - Smart, multi-modal integrated ticketing

Policy BUS 12

- The County Council will welcome any proposals from express coach operators to introduce additional coach services in the county.

Policy BUS 13

- Within available resources we will seek to:
 - Support operators with advice and financial support to launch new community transport services.
 - Provide a grant process through which operators can bid for on-going support for their schemes.

APPENDIX 2

West Northamptonshire Council Appraisal and Sifting Tool (WNCAST)

West Northamptonshire Council - Assessment and Sifting Tool
WNCASST v1.2.xlsx
25/01/2023

Overview				Strategic					Economic						
Strategic ref	Service ref	Description	Score (out of 90)	Scheme objectives	Scale of impact	Fit with Council bus strategy	Fit with wider Council, regional and government objectives	Fit with local, regional and third party objectives	Key constraints	Score (out of 20)	Impact on passenger mode share	Impact on economic growth in West Northamptonshire	Impact on wider economic growth	Expected benefit: cost ratio category	Wider social, well-being and environmental impacts
DN		Do Nothing	35	To remove revenue support costs completely	1 very negative	1 very low	1 very low	1 very low	Statutory duties not met, open to challenge, reduces mobility, access to services	4	1 red	2 amber/red	2 amber/red	low <1	1 red
DM		Do Minimum	61	To maintain current funding on existing supported services	3 neutral	3 moderate	3 moderate	3 moderate	Future funding unsecured, higher ranked needs may not be met	12	3 amber	4 green/amber	4 green/amber	medium 2>1.5	3 amber
DS1		Do Something - Rebalance, local bus	71	Retain highest scoring supported bus services, reallocate balance of funds to new routes	4 positive	4 high	4 high	4 high	Winners and losers, some communities lose services, political opposition, challenge	16	4 green/amber	3 amber	3 amber	high 4>2	4 green/amber
DS2		Do Something - Rebalance, local bus and voluntary sector	60	Retain highest scoring supported bus services, reallocate other funds to new or existing community schemes	5 very positive	4 high	4 high	4 high	Winners and losers, some communities lose services, political opposition, challenge, voluntary sector capacity	17	2 amber/red	2 amber/red	2 amber/red	medium 2>1.5	4 green/amber
DS3		Do Something - Reallocate all local bus support to community bus schemes	53	Withdraw local bus support, utilise budget to support voluntary sector	4 positive	4 high	4 high	4 high	Voluntary sector capacity, hours, coverage, drivers	16	2 amber/red	3 red	3 red	low 1.5>1	3 amber
DS4		Do Something - Greater integration with education, social care, health transport	51	Resource sharing with other public sector transport users, organisations	4 positive	5 very high	4 high	4 high	Conflicts over peak use, mixing of users, sharing of resources, administration	17	3 amber	3 amber	3 amber	low 1.5>1	4 green/amber
DS5		Do Something - Reallocate all funds to DRT	47	Contract to sole or multiple DRT providers (note not an in house option)	3 neutral	3 moderate	3 moderate	3 moderate	Booking system overhead, complexity, barriers to entry	12	2 amber/red	3 amber	3 amber	low 1.5>1	3 amber

Score (out of 25)	Financial							Commercial			Managerial					Score (out of 25)		
	Affordability	Capital cost	Third party funding	New funding required	Annual revenue cost	Annual income generation	Overall cost risk	Score (out of 10)	Procurement strategy	Delivery contract	Key risks	Score (out of 10)	New vehicles requirement	Operator interest	Stake-holder support		Implementation timescale	Contract length
7	5 affordable	0	0	0	0	0	1 very low	10	not defined	not defined	Loss of goodwill from operators At risk from future service withdrawals or increased costs	2	blank	1 very low	1 very low	5 <1 year	5 <6 months	12
17	3 neutral	0	0	0	£109,528	0	3 moderate	6	defined and compliant	defined and compliant		10	1 no action	4 high	4 high	5 <1 year	2-2-3 years	16
18	4	0	0	0	£109,528	0	3 moderate	7	defined and compliant	defined and compliant	Limited operator capacity, may impact on local bus operator viability, cross subsidy results in withdrawal of services	10	5 vehicles secure	4 high	4 high	5 <1 year	2-2-3 years	20
13	4	0	0	0	£109,528	0	2 high	6	defined but not compliant	defined but not compliant	Limited voluntary sector capacity, mobilisation may take longer, funding and cash flow	6	4 negotiations	4 high	4 high	5 <1 year	1 >3 years	18
9	4	0	0	0	£109,528	0	2 high	6	defined but not compliant	defined but not compliant	Limited voluntary sector capacity, mobilisation may take longer, funding and cash flow	6	4 negotiations	4 high	3 moderate	4-1-2 years	1 >3 years	16
15	4	0	0	0	£109,528	0	2 high	6	not defined	not defined	Requires agreed cost sharing mechanism, possible cross subsidy, control of costs, prioritisation issues	2	1 no action	3 moderate	3 moderate	3-2-3 years	1 >3 years	11
13	2	0	0	0	£109,528	0	2 high	4	not defined	defined but not compliant	Driver and technology costs, software dependent	4	3 tenders	2 low	4 high	4-1-2 years	1 >3 years	14

West Northamptonshire Council - Assessment and Sifting Tool (WNCASST)

Instructions for completion

Strategic Case	
Scheme objectives	Briefly state the key objectives and benefits of the scheme
Scale of impact	Select from drop down menu
Fit with Council bus strategy	Select from drop down menu
Fit with wider Council, regional and government objectives	Select from drop down menu
Fit with local, regional and third party objectives	Select from drop down menu
Key constraints	Briefly state any constraints
Economic Case	
Impact on passenger mode share	
Impact on economic growth in West Northamptonshire	
Impact on wider economic growth	
Expected benefit: cost ratio category	
Wider social, well-being and environmental impacts	
Financial Case	
Affordability	Select from drop down menu
Capital cost	Enter latest estimate of any capital costs
Third party funding	Enter understood Third Party funding i.e. s106, parishes
New funding required	Calculated by spreadsheet
Annual revenue cost	Enter estimated annual costs of operation, maintenance etc
Annual income generation	Enter forecast annual income
Overall cost risk	Select from drop down menu
Commercial Case	
Procurement strategy	Select from drop down menu, according to whether strategy is defined and compliant with Council processes
Delivery contract	Select from drop down menu, according to whether delivery contract is defined and compliant with Council processes
Key risks	Summarise the key risks to delivery of the project
Managerial Case	
New vehicles requirement	Select from drop down menu
Operator interest	Select from drop down menu, according to whether operator is engaged
Stake-holder support	Select from drop down menu
Implementation timescale	Select from drop down menu
Contact length	State expected duration of works

5 very positive	4 positive	3 neutral	2 negative	1 very negative	
5 very high	4 high	3 moderate	2 low	1 very low	
5 very high	4 high	3 moderate	2 low	1 very low	
5 very high	4 high	3 moderate	2 low	1 very low	

5 green	4 green/amber	3 amber	2 amber/red	1 red	no impact
5 green	4 green/amber	3 amber	2 amber/red	1 red	no impact
5 green	4 green/amber	3 amber	2 amber/red	1 red	no impact
very high >4	high 4>2	medium 2>1.5	low 1.5>1	low <1	
5 green	4 green/amber	3 amber	2 amber/red	1 red	no impact

5 affordable	4	3 neutral	2	1 unaffordable	
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5 very low	4 low	3 moderate	2 high	1 very high	
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defined and compliant	defined but not compliant	not defined	
defined and compliant	defined but not compliant	not defined	

5 vehicles secured	4 negotiations	3 tenders	2 specification agreed	1 no action	blank
5 very high	4 high	3 moderate	2 low	1 very low	
5 very high	4 high	3 moderate	2 low	1 very low	
5 <1 year	4 1-2 years	3 2-3 years	2 3-5 years	1 >5 years	
5 <6 months	4 6-12 months	3 1-2 years	2 2-3 years	1 >3 years	