

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL
PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Report Title **Bus Network Review**

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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. To update members on the Bus Network Review undertaken over the past 12 months, key findings and next steps.

2. Background

1.2. The Council commissioned consultants to undertake a review of the bus network in West Northamptonshire and advise on how best to achieve a future sustainable network that provides a stable and financially viable bus network on which to build upon. This was in response to a request from the Department for Transport to all council's to review their bus networks post-Covid. It was also an opportunity for WNC as a new council to review and define an updated policy and approach to local bus provision.

1.3. Local buses in West Northamptonshire face considerable challenges. Following the Covid pandemic, bus patronage levels have still not recovered to pre pandemic levels, and are around 80% of previous levels. Concessionary travel levels are lower than this, and this has been the experience nationally. At the same time of reduced demand, bus operators are experiencing problems with driver shortages and cost inflation related to pay, fuel and maintenance costs.

3. Bus Network Review

3.1 The Bus Network Review is in two parts. Report One provides an understanding of the current situation with a focus on local bus services but also considers demand responsive transport,

community transport (CT), academic and worker bus services. It is informed by engagement with parish and town council's, cross-border Local Transport Authorities, bus operators and other relevant organisations.

- 3.2 Report One provides an overview of existing services operating within West Northamptonshire and provides an analysis of the commercial viability of these with an associated RAG rating of them. The report goes on to discuss gaps in the network and various ways in which these are, or can be filled, as well as risks and opportunities facing the local bus network.
- 3.3 Report Two builds on Report One and aims to provide a framework for decision making in order to inform a future bus network which serves West Northamptonshire to its full potential. As part of this it recommends a new interim bus policy, to guide decision making in the short term, ahead of the adoption of a new Local Transport Plan in late 2024/early 2025 which will define a new overarching transport policy framework for the Council.
- 3.4 The report also includes an options assessment to guide implementation of the policy and how the council should seek to support the local bus network. The appraisal tool used for this has the potential to be used in future for assessing options on particular routes, or the merits of supporting one route over another, therefore providing a tool for officers to support decisions.
- 3.5 The options assessment includes sensitivity tests for various levels of funding to understand whether increased levels of funding significantly alters the relative merits of the different approaches. The report has also considered how local bus subsidy budgets compares to other local authority areas.
- 3.6 The options appraisal provides guidance on how the council should look to support local public transport services, and even if funding remains at similar levels in future years there are still opportunities for the council to better integrate what it spends on transport services to better meet needs cost effectively. There is likely to be some scope to optimise the bus services we subsidise, as well as to support CT providers to fill more gaps in the commercial network. In the short term there will be a need to work with commercial operators through our Enhanced Partnership to direct funding to sustain the commercial network we have, given the pressures faced by the sector, with the intention that the services supported have good prospects of becoming commercially viable in future years.

4. Next steps

After we have considered any feedback from the Scrutiny Committee we will be refining the Bus Review outputs and undertaking a public consultation on the draft interim bus policy. This consultation will also include information on how we intend to progress support for the local bus network in alignment with the policy. Subject to the outcomes of the consultation, Cabinet will then be asked to adopt the interim policy.