

# WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

16<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2024

## CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, HIGHWAYS, TRANSPORT & WASTE SERVICES - COUNCILLOR PHIL LARRATT

Report Title	Interim Bus Policy
Report Author	James Povey, Transport Strategy and Development Manager

### List of Approvers

Monitoring Officer	Catherine Whitehead	21/12/2023
Chief Finance Officer (S.151)	Martin Henry	13/12/2023
Other Director	Stuart Timmiss	22/12/2023
Head of Communications	Becky Hutson	13/12/2023

### List of Appendices

#### Appendix A – Consultation Feedback report on draft Interim Bus Policy

##### 1. Purpose of Report

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1.1. To seek Cabinet approval for the proposed Interim Bus Policy, following completion of the recent Bus Network Review and public consultation on the draft Interim Bus Policy wording. The proposed Interim Bus Policy will enable the Council to maintain support for local bus services and the communities they serve until a new Local Transport Plan is developed and adopted by early 2025.

1.2. The report also provides an update on funding for local bus network support, following recent announcements from the Department for Transport.

## **2. Executive Summary**

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- 1.3. Following a Bus Network Review during 2022-23 an updated interim bus policy is being recommended for adoption. This will guide activity in the next 12 months ahead of the adoption of a new Local Transport Plan which will include a more comprehensive set of updated transport policies. The draft bus policy wording has been subject to public consultation and has been well received. It is therefore recommended that this policy be adopted.
- 1.4. The remainder of the report provides an update on funding for local bus network support, and how decisions will be made on how this is spent to best support the local bus network in line with the new bus policy.

## **3. Recommendations**

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- 3.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:
- a) Agree the adoption of the Interim Bus Policy, which will be updated alongside a wider set of transport policies as part of the Local Transport Plan process by early 2025.
  - b) Note changes in funding for the local bus network for 2023/24 and 2024/25.

## **4. Reason for Recommendations**

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- The Council and customers will receive the maximum benefit from the option proposed.
- Consistency with previous decisions concerning local bus network support.

## **5. Report Background**

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- 5.1 During 2022-23 the Council has completed a review of the bus network in West Northamptonshire. This provided advice on how to achieve a future sustainable network that is both stable and financially viable. This was in response to a request from the Department for Transport (DfT) to all councils 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.
- 5.2 Local buses in West Northamptonshire face considerable challenges. Following the Covid pandemic, bus passenger 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.
- 5.3 The Bus Network Review is split into two reports. Report 1 provides an overview of existing services operating within West Northamptonshire and provides an analysis of the commercial viability of these with an associated RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating of them. The report goes onto 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. Report 2 builds on Report 1 and aims to provide a framework for decision making 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. Both reports and the draft policy wording were discussed at the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 11 September 2023.

5.4 The draft wording for the interim bus policy is:

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.

- Priority 1: The Council will encourage the commercial operation of local public transport services, through partnership working and infrastructure investment.
- 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.
- Priority 3: The Council will fund and administer concessionary travel for elderly and disabled residents in line with national regulations.

5.5 Following the Scrutiny meeting, a six-week public consultation, from 29 September to 12 November, was undertaken on the Interim Bus Policy priorities.

## 6. Issues and Choices

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6.1 There were 734 responses in total to the public consultation. 527 of these completed the survey fully, and 207 partially completed the survey and did not respond to all the questions. A review of all survey responses gave the following results:

- Priority 1: The Council will encourage the commercial operation of local public transport services, through partnership working and infrastructure investment. **67% (495) agreed, 4% (29) disagreed and 29% (210) had no view or gave no response.**
- 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. **63% (465) agreed, 3% (18) disagreed and 34% (251) had no view or gave no response.**
- Priority 3: The Council will fund and administer concessionary travel for elderly and disabled residents in line with national regulations **60% (440) agreed, 2% (12) disagreed and 38% (282) had no view or gave no response.**

This demonstrates that there is positive support for the interim bus policy, and we are recommending the policy consulted on is adopted without amendments.

- 6.2 A number of key themes were evident from the additional feedback we invited on our policy wording and support for the local bus network. In summary these were as follows (not ranked):
- Improvements requested to rural services including villages around Brackley, Towcester and Daventry
  - Maintaining and Improvements requested to existing services (frequency, hours of operation etc.)
  - An urban service requested to connect West Hunsbury to Northampton via Mere Way Tesco
  - Improved connectivity requested for villages close to the boundary with Milton Keynes (Deanshanger / Potterspury)
  - Positive feedback on Ability Community Transport.
- 6.3 A very small number of comments we received on the Council’s support for the concessionary travel scheme (ENCTS), and suggestions for enhancing this scheme to permit travel by certain groups before 9.30am. Other enquiries were also received recently for this to be investigated as such enhancements (which can also include passes for carers) are funded by some other councils. The DfT in late November published new guidance on reimbursing operators under the ENCTS. The Council needs to undertake some analysis on what the budget implications are for the changes to reimbursement rates effective for 2024/25 onwards. Any changes to the current ENCTS, including any enhancements, will require formal consultation and the financial impact would need to be assessed. Further work will be undertaken on this in 2024, with a view to including any policy changes in the new Local Transport Plan due for adoption in early 2025. Any changes would then come into effect from 1 April 2025.
- 6.4 At their meeting on 11 April 2023, Cabinet agreed the 2023/24 Bus Subsidy Budget. Since then there have been a number of funding announcements from the DfT, which have significantly altered the outlook for the extent of support the Council can provide to the local bus network. The DfT funding commitments only extend to 2024/25 currently and there is no certainty beyond this, although there have been indications that the Council may receive a multi-year BSIP settlement. The current budget for bus network support is as follows:

<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>2023/24 (£,000s)</b>	<b>2024/25 (£,000s)</b>
Council budget	315	315
DfT Local Authority Bus Subsidy (Revenue) Grant	109.5	
Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus – Grant	687*	687
Bus Service Improvement Plans Third Phase allocations		2,421

\*Received in year and we have 12 months to spend this following receipt so will be spent across 2024. Funding is subject to a number of conditions including that it will be spent on bus measures and the Authority must maintain their bus budgets from all sources.

- 6.5 In line with priority 1 of our bus policy the Council will be developing proposals for how this funding is allocated in 2023/24 and 2024/25 with its Enhanced (bus) Partnership, as well as being guided by the findings and recommendations of our Bus Network Review. The Enhanced Partnership will aim to agree the funding allocations at their meeting on 17 January 2024, which will enable procurement activity to proceed for any supported bus services. The Council has

majority voting rights on the Enhanced Partnership and representation includes the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways, Transport & Waste Services, and the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport. Details can be found on our webpages.

- 6.6 The funding can be used among other things to support/contract bus services, fund enhanced marketing and promotions activity and fund ticketing initiatives, with the overall aim to maintain and grow the local bus network and increase patronage. Given the uncertain funding outlook, decisions to financially support new bus services will need to be made carefully, and will aim to fund services that have some prospect of becoming commercially viable in the near future. This will reduce financial risk to the council and the prospect for services to be withdrawn if the DfT grants diminish in future. Where possible, and subject to consideration against alternative spend proposals, we are looking to bring forward solutions in response to some of the consultation feedback outlined in section 6.3, where gaps in the current bus network have been identified, in line with priority 2 of our policy.
- 6.7 The above represents a direction of travel in line with the Bus Network Review undertaken, and the policy wording proposed. A further area of focus that came from the Bus Network Review was for the Council to consider the potential for better integrating its transport budgets to realise efficiencies and deliver improved public transport provision. With some of the funding we have in 2024 we will seek to progress this, particularly with respect to community transport support and Home to School transport provision.

## **7. Implications**

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### **7.1 Resources and Financial**

- 7.1.1 There are no resource or financial implications to the Council arising from the proposals. Some of the initiatives to be funded by DfT grant funding may require additional consultant or temporary staff resource to support their delivery but this will be funded as part of the grant. Any bus contracts procured will only cover the period for which grant funding is secure, or include suitable break clauses, to ensure the council faces no financial risk.

### **7.2 Legal**

- 7.2.1 The proposed interim bus policy will enable the Council to maintain support for local bus services and the communities they serve until a new Local Transport Plan is developed and adopted early 2025. Production of a Local Transport Plan is a statutory requirement of the Transport Act 2000 and Local Transport Act 2008 which requires the Council to set out its plans and policies for transport including how those plans and policies are to be implemented.

### **7.3 Risk**

- 7.3.1 Overall there are considered to be no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report. The proposed policy wording aligns with national and local policy, and is informed by the Bus Network Review and a public consultation exercise. Cabinet have been asked to note the revised funding for bus network support, and this will be spent through close working with the bus network operators through our Enhanced Partnership and in

line with our procurement rules. Decisions on which bus services to support will be informed by a consideration of financial sustainability of the investment decision, so as to minimise the risk that new supported services will need to be withdrawn at a future date when the funding situation changes.

#### **7.4 Consultation and Communications**

7.4.1 The 6-week public consultation survey, which ran from 29 September 2023 to 12 November 2023, was hosted on the West Northants Council consultation hub and promoted via the Council's media channels. Details of consultation was circulated to local media and stakeholders, including West Northants Residents Panel and members of the West Northants Consultation, MPs, town/ parish councillors, bus and community transport operators, transport focus and stakeholder groups for the older people and disabled people.

7.4.2 During the Bus Network Review there was stakeholder engagement undertaken, which included bus operators and parish councils. A summary of consultation results and feedback has already been covered in preceding sections, and a fuller report is included as an annex.

7.4.3 The outcome of the Cabinet meeting will be communicated via the Council's corporate communication channels, outlining the next steps for the interim bus policy.

#### **7.5 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny**

7.5.1 The Bus Network Review and draft interim bus policy were discussed at the Council's Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 11 September 2023. Feedback included the need for better marketing of bus services to employers and students, and through our Enhanced Partnership and the funding available in 2024/25 we will aim to improve this. The committee also agreed to invite a representative from Stagecoach to a future scrutiny meeting.

#### **7.6 Climate Impact**

7.6.1 The bus policy will have a positive climate/environmental impact by supporting local bus provision and seeking to grow bus patronage. This will result in less car use and reduced congestion, reducing vehicle emissions. By supporting the local bus network and working closely with operators through our enhanced partnership, we will encourage investment by operators in newer and cleaner fleet with reduced emissions.

#### **7.7 Community Impact**

7.7.1 In advance of the bus policy consultation an Equality Impact Screening Assessment was undertaken which identified no negative impacts. This assessment will be revisited as part of work on the Local Transport Plan which will include a wider set of public transport policies.

7.7.2 As outlined in the Bus Network Review reports local bus provision varies widely across the authority area, with some communities being served by commercial services, some by the small number of services currently contracted by the council, and others by community transport

options. The bus policy wording addresses how the council will work to address unmet need and gaps in provision.

## **8. Background Papers**

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[WNC Bus Network Review Report 1 \(2023\)](#)

[WNC Bus Network Review Report 2 \(2023\)](#)