

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

11 JUNE 2024

CABINET MEMBER FOR HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT – COUNCILLOR PHIL LARRATT

Report Title	Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)
Report Author	James Povey, Transport Strategy and Development Manager, james.povey@westnorthants.gov.uk

List of Approvers

Monitoring Officer	Catherine Whitehead	22/05/24
Chief Finance Officer (S.151)	Martin Henry	22/05/24
Communications Lead/Head of Communications	Becky Hutson	22/05/24

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Draft WNC Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To update Cabinet on the refreshed annual Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and agree delegated authority for approval of the final plan.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 In March 2021, the Government Published ‘Bus Back Better’ which is a National Bus Strategy for England. The objective of the strategy is to improve bus services for economic and environmental benefits. In response to the strategy, and to enable access to related Department for Transport (DfT) grant funding, the council agreed a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and formed an

Enhanced Partnership with bus operators. To feed into this we also formed a cross party working group to ensure that the views of Members were assisting in the development of future strategies.

1.2. To secure release of its BSIP grant funding for 2024/25 the council has to produce a refreshed 2024 Bus Service Improvement Plan by 12 June 2024.

1.3. The refreshed BSIP essentially forms our Bus Strategy and has been developed to align with the emerging new Local Transport Plan (LTP) which is in development. The LTP will come to Cabinet in July 2024 to seek approval for it to go out for public consultation, ahead of its planned adoption in early 2025. The BSIP will be refreshed again in 2025 to ensure alignment with the approved LTP and build on the future opportunities and work considered during this time.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- a) Note the work undertaken to update the BSIP and the refreshed draft in Appendix A.
- b) Agree to delegate authority to the Executive Director for Place & Economy in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, to agree the final BSIP prior to submission to the DfT by 12 June 2024, and subsequent publication on the Council's website.

4. Reason for Recommendations (NOTE: this section is mandatory and must be completed)

- Consistency with previous decisions to adopt a BSIP in 2021.
- To improve bus services in West Northamptonshire and minimise the risk of communities losing their bus service or to lose funding towards routes;
- To contribute to the implementation of the Local Transport Plan
- To accord with DfT grant funding requirements

5. Report Background

5.1 The National Bus Strategy for England was published in March 2021. It sets out an ambitious vision and a comprehensive strategy to transform the quality of bus services in England outside London, making them more attractive, convenient, good value and popular for all to use. Locally-driven change is central to delivery of the Strategy and WNC has established an Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators to facilitate this. The BSIP is the key document setting out the vision, objectives and delivery plans of the Council and its partners. The BSIP should set out a plan for a step-change improvement in bus services required by the national strategy.

5.2 To secure release of its BSIP funding for 2024/25 the council has to produce a refreshed 2024 Bus Service Improvement Plan. The refreshed BSIP has been informed by feedback from the DfT on the current (2021) BSIP, and new guidance published by the DfT in January 2024. Key requirements outlined in the DfT guidance was for the BSIP to:

- **Update the baseline** to 2023/24: reflecting the post pandemic local bus market and achievements made since 2021.

- **Setting out the improvement programme** in financial year 2024/25: reflecting the known funding envelope of BSIP funding and all other funding sources for BSIP delivery.
- **Getting ready for 2025 and beyond:** refreshing the plan's ambition and content to set out a high quality and flexible pipeline of prioritised proposals for the four years 2025/26 to 2028/29.

5.3 The BSIP guidance clarifies the 2024 BSIP will not function as a bidding document for specific DfT funds. The purpose of the 2024 BSIP is to set out a realistic and attractive plan which explains clearly what will have been delivered by the end of 2024/25 and also sets out a 'shop window' of ambitions and proposals for the years after 2025.

5.4 Since the adoption of its first BSIP the council has undertaken a Bus Network Review, and in January Cabinet adopted an interim bus policy to guide activity in advance of the new Local Transport Plan (LTP) being adopted in early 2025. Next month Cabinet will be asked to approve a public consultation on the draft LTP. The refreshed BSIP has been informed by the Bus Network Review and the consultation feedback received on the interim Bus Policy. It also builds on the Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme which was agreed by Cabinet in 2022, and aligns with the emerging content of the new LTP.

5.5 In developing the updated BSIP consultants working on the council's behalf have created a data analysis note as part of its evidence base, which will be published as part of an annex to the plan. Our cross-party Bus Service Improvement Working Group of councillors has also held three workshops to discuss the content of the plan. The plan has also been discussed at the Enhanced Partnership with input provided from bus operators.

6. Issues and Choices

6.1 There is no funding certainty for local buses beyond 2024/25, so the BSIP only includes firm spending proposals using funding allocated up to the end of this financial year. This includes BSIP round 2 and 3 grant allocations totalling £3.795m, annual allocations of DfT Bus Revenue Grant (109k /yr) and WNC bus revenue support budget (£315k /yr). Beyond this any proposals in the plan should be considered aspirational and subject to future funding allocations.

6.2 The BSIP includes a new Bus Vision which aligns with our carbon reduction aims, as well as our interim bus policy and emerging Local Transport Plan. It also outlines a West Northamptonshire approach to delivering this vision which is informed by the data analysis undertaken for the plan and the Bus Network Review completed in 2023. The Plan reiterates the commitments made by the council when it agreed the Enhanced Partnership Scheme.

6.3 The funded improvement programme for 2024/25 included in the plan, reflects the allocation of the BSIP round 2 and 3 grants which have been agreed by the Enhanced Partnership and submitted to the DfT. They represent a package of initiatives to grow bus patronage, with a focus on supporting new and enhanced bus services which are expected to have potential for commercial viability, and hence be less dependent on future public funding support. This was a key consideration for the Enhanced Partnership given the lack of future funding certainty.

- 6.4 The future proposals for 2025-2030 are unfunded but represent an ambitious set of proposals we would look to advance to deliver our bus vision, grow bus patronage and improve connectivity. The BSIP also makes reference to work being supported by England's Economic Heartland to improve regional bus connectivity.
- 6.5 An Equality Impact Assessment Screening has been undertaken on the refreshed BSIP and concluded the plan has an overall positive impact on protected groups. This assessment applied to both the funded and unfunded packages of improvements included in the plan. Notable positive impacts of the plan on protected groups includes the promotion of the concessionary fare scheme to elderly and disabled people, improved accessibility from investments such as the bus network enhancements, and the improved air quality benefits arising from the ZEBRA 2 project in Northampton.

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1 Resources and Financial

The Plan only commits to funded activity, whether this is funded by existing council bus budgets and staff resources or DfT grant funding or third party funding such as from developers or the bus operators. Activity outlined for 2025/26 and beyond is largely aspirational and unfunded, and will be dependent on future DfT grant allocations and council spending decisions.

Activity included in the BSIP which is dependent on external grant funding will only be actioned when this is received. DfT have advised that for BSIP grants they expect outputs to be delivered within 12 months of funding being received, however we can submit Project Adjustment Requests to formally agree extensions to this. We have advised the DfT that the £2.4m BSIP phase 3 grant will be spent across 2024/25 and 2025/26, and this will help maintain the bus service improvements we invest in into 2025/26 where we currently have no certainty on additional grant funding to sustain these.

7.2 Legal

The Northamptonshire Transportation Plan is Northamptonshire Local Transport Plan and sets out the Council's transport policies, objectives and vision for the longer term. 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 as well as how the Council intends to implement them. Furthermore, to secure release of BSIP funding for 2024/25 the council has to produce a refreshed 2024 Bus Service Improvement Plan.

7.3 Risk

- 7.3.1 There are no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.' The only significant risk is by not submitting a BSIP by the required DfT deadline, we risk losing most (£3.1m) of the BSIP grant funding we have been allocated in 24/25.

7.4 Consultation and Communications

7.5 The interim bus policy was consulted on in Autumn 2023, and feedback captured as part of this has informed the BSIP. As referred to already in the report the BSIP has been informed by engagement with the cross party Bus Service Improvement Working Group of councillors, the Enhanced Partnership and bus operators.

7.5.1 Communications activity will play a key role in promoting the BSIP and its outcomes to residents and a comprehensive communications and engagement plan will be developed and delivered.

7.6 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

7.6.1 The Bus Network Review reports and interim bus policy were considered by the 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 has informed the BSIP proposals.

7.7 Climate Impact

7.7.1 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, notably via the ZEBRA 2 funded project.

7.8 Community and Poverty Impact

7.8.1 As outlined in the Bus Network Review reports and reiterated in the BSIP, 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 BSIP addresses how the council will work to address unmet need and gaps in provision, with some initiatives in the funded period such as the new service for West Hunsbury and the needs studies for Brackley and Deanshanger, and more in the unfunded period which will be more deliverable if funding was guaranteed over multiple years enabling initiatives to be sustained longer term.

8. Background Papers

8.1 None.