



WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

12 OCTOBER 2021

**CABINET MEMBER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENVIRONMENT,
TRANSPORT, HIGHWAYS AND WASTE: COUNCILLOR PHIL LARRATT**

Report Title	Bus Service Improvement Plan
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List of Appendices

Appendix A – Outline Bus Service Improvement Plan

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To update Cabinet on the progress made with developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan and agree delegated authority for approval of the Bus Service Improvement 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.

- 2.2. In response to the strategy, the Cabinet in June 2021 committed to:
- developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by October 2021; and
 - forming an Enhanced Partnership with bus operators by April 2022.
- This will allow the Council to access funding available to improve bus services through Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England.
- 2.3. The challenging timescales associated with this work mean that whilst the development of the BSIP is progressing, it is not possible to share a full draft when the Cabinet Papers are published. An outline BSIP is provided for information within Appendix A and it is proposed to finalise this document using the delegated authority requested ensuring submission to Government and publication on the Council's website by 31 October 2021.
- 2.4. Once the BSIP is submitted, attention will turn to the development of an Enhanced Partnership. It is the intention to enable increased member involvement in this stage by establishing a task and finish group.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:
- a) Note the work undertaken on developing a draft Bus Service Improvement Plan and the outline BSIP in Appendix A;
 - b) Agree delegated authority to the Executive Directors for Place, Economy and Transport and for Finance, in consultation with the Cabinet Members with responsibility for Environment, Transport, Highways and Waste and for Finance, to agree the final Bus Service Improvement Plan prior to submission to the Department for Transport and publication on the Council's website by 31 October 2021.
 - c) Ask Scrutiny to facilitate the establishment of a task and finish group to input to and review progress on the establishment of the Enhanced Partnership.

3. Reason for Recommendations

- To improve bus services in West Northamptonshire and minimise the risk of any communities losing their bus service;
- To facilitate climate and environmental benefits through increasing bus use and the operation of more low emission buses;
- To contribute to the implementation of the Northamptonshire Transportation Plan (the Local Transport Plan);
- To enable the Council to access the funding being made available by Government to support the National Bus Strategy;
- To meet the deadlines set by the Department for Transport;

4. Report Background

- 4.1 The majority of bus services in Britain (outside London) are operated commercially. This means that like any commercial business, the bus operator decides when and where to run their services and the fares to be charged. However, West Northamptonshire Council still plays an important role in ensuring communities can access bus services, for example by using section 106 money to

help new bus services for developing communities, providing infrastructure for bus services and by administering the concessionary travel scheme.

- 4.2 The Government published Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England (outside London) in March 2021. Backed with transformational funding of £3bn during the current Parliament, the strategy sets out a vision to make buses more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper so that increased passenger numbers lead to reduced congestion, carbon and pollution and encourages motorists to use a bus rather than their cars.
- 4.3 In order to receive this funding, local authorities were required to commit by the end of June 2021 to forming either an Enhanced Partnership or introducing bus franchising across the whole of their area. Cabinet agreed in June 2021 to form an Enhanced Partnership which is a statutory arrangement under the Bus Services Act 2017. The Enhanced Partnership can specify, for example, timetables and multi-operator ticketing, and allows the Local Transport Authority to take over the role of registering bus services from the Traffic Commissioners, the government body responsible for licensing bus and heavy goods vehicle operators.
- 4.4 Having committed to form an Enhanced Partnership, the Council now has to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan, detailing how we propose to use our powers to improve services, by 31 October 2021 and develop an Enhanced Partnerships by April 2022. From that date, the new discretionary forms of bus funding from Government will only be available to services operated, or measures taken, under an Enhanced Partnership or where a franchising scheme has been made.
- 4.5 Discussions are being held with bus operators who serve West Northamptonshire to understand their current issues and future aspirations, and this is feeding into the preparation of the BSIP. A stakeholder consultation has also recently been undertaken to highlight potential areas for bus service improvement, and will feed into the final draft of the BSIP, the Enhanced Partnership and hopefully future work once funding has been obtained

5. Issues and Choices

- 5.1 The challenging timescales, which are not flexible, mean that it has not been possible to provide a full draft BSIP at the time of publication of this Cabinet report. However, an outline is provided in Appendix A, which follows the headings required by the government's guidelines and it is proposed that a final version of the BSIP is agreed under delegated authority to enable it to be submitted by the 31 October deadline.
- 5.2 Key areas that are being developed for inclusion in the BSIP include:
 - The need to return patronage to pre-COVID levels before considering expansion
 - Patronage growth will mainly come from enhancing existing commercial services
 - Filling gaps in evening and Sundays on the most frequent services
 - Reinstating withdrawn services in rural areas, and the need to consider reinstating a bus subsidy budget
 - The need for improved bus priority to improve journey times and reliability

- The need for better roadworks liaison to improve journey time reliability
- Introducing zero-emission buses to tackle air quality and decarbonisation issues
- Improved information for bus passengers
- Publish a Bus Passenger Charter

6. Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

- 6.1.1 As noted in the June 2021 cabinet report, Government had provided an additional £100,000 of capacity funding to the Council in 2021/22 to provide additional resources for preparation of the Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan. Subsequently, a further £173,852 of capacity funding has been provided. We are lining up resources to help with the Enhanced partnership stage of this work, which we think will require legal support to develop the governance arrangements and some external consultancy support.
- 6.1.2 The Bus Service Improvement Plan provides a means for the Council to secure significant additional funding for bus service improvements. However, to maximise the impact of improving our bus services in West Northamptonshire, it is recommended that the Council considers options for match funding, particularly for Manifesto priority areas such as the reinstatement of rural bus services. As such funding would be beyond current budgets, the final BSIP will make clear that options for funding would need to be considered as part of the Council's budget for 2022-23 and beyond, and included in the public consultation thereon. Because of this, delegated authority is sought from the Executive Director and Cabinet Member for Finance, in addition to those with responsibility for Transport.

6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 Forming an Enhanced Partnership will exercise the Council's current powers under the Bus Services Act 2017. The development of the Enhanced Partnership must be undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Act, and Pathfinder Legal Services will be supporting with the drafting of any legal documents.

6.3 Risk

- 6.3.1 The challenging timescales mean that there is a risk the deadlines may not be achieved. However, additional resources are being sought to help with the next stage, in order to mitigate this risk. Obtaining additional resource is challenging because other Local Transport Authorities are also seeking additional resource for similar reasons.
- 6.3.2 There is a risk that the Enhanced Partnership will not be able to proceed due to objections from bus operations. This risk is being mitigated by working with bus operators to develop the proposals which will be included in the Enhanced Partnership.
- 6.3.3 The financial viability of current services is a risk. As explained in the June 2021 cabinet report, there is insufficient funding currently available to sustain all of the Council's current subsidised bus services to the end of the current financial year, and without further funding some of the

services will have to be withdrawn, leading to communities losing their bus service if they are not commercially viable.

- 6.3.4 In the longer-term, there will be risks associated with the implementation of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership should the funding promised by the current Government not be sustained by future administrations.

6.4 Consultation

- 6.4.1 Engagement with stakeholders has recently been undertaken to highlight potential areas for bus service improvement, and will feed into the final draft of the BSIP as well as the development of the Enhanced Partnership. While the short timescales have not made it possible to complete a full consultation on a draft Bus Service Improvement Plan document, consultation with bus operators and other stakeholders must form part of the formation of the Enhanced Partnership, in accordance with the statutory guidance.

6.5 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

- 6.5.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee has not considered this report.
- 6.5.2 It is recommended that Scrutiny establish a task and finish group to input to and review progress on the establishment of the Enhanced Partnership. This group could also review the draft BSIP provided timescales allow, noting that it will need to be finalised and submitted by 31 October 2021.

6.6 Climate Impact

- 6.6.1 There is no direct climate/environmental impact from the recommendations in this report.
- 6.6.2 It is expected that implementation of the Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan would have a positive climate/environmental impact through increasing bus use, reducing car use and potentially the introduction of lower or zero emission buses. These impacts will be further considered in future reports.

6.7 Community Impact

- 6.7.1 The recommendations in this report reduces the risk that communities in West Northamptonshire will lose their bus service, and should help secure an improved bus service in future.

6.8 Communications

- 6.8.1 Communications will play a key role in raising public awareness of the aims and objectives of the Bus Improvement Plan and the related consultation work and keeping all stakeholders engaged and updated as future proposals for improvements are developed and progressed.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 Cabinet paper, 8th June 2021 Agenda No 9, National Bus Strategy
- 7.2 Bus Services Act 2017
- 7.3 Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England, Department for Transport 2021
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980227/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf