

TO: THE EXECUTIVE
DATE: 15 MARCH 2022

BUS OPERATOR ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP – NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY

Executive Director of Place, Planning and Regeneration

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To seek approval to enter into an Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme with local bus operators in accordance with the National Bus Strategy objectives.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the proposed Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme is adopted, as detailed in Appendix 1;**
- 2.2 That authority is delegated to the Executive Director for Place, Planning and Regeneration, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Transport, to amend and implement the Enhanced Partnership Scheme to accord with future Government funding allocations.**

3 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1** The National Bus Strategy was published in March 2021 and sets out a number of requirements to improve bus services and aid operator recovery from the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic. A key obligation for Local Traffic Authorities is to enter into an Enhanced Partnership (EP) Plan with local bus operators, including an accompany EP Scheme which identifies the supportive actions which future Government funding allocations could deliver.
- 3.2** Establishing an EP Plan and Scheme with local bus operators will facilitate improved transport services in line with the Council's adopted Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3).

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Whilst it is not mandatory for Authorities to enter into an EP with local bus operators, the Government has stated that receipt of future grant funding for maintaining or improving bus services is dependent on EP's being in place. As such, alternative options have not been considered.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1** The National Bus Strategy aims to improve bus services across the country and grow passenger numbers by encouraging bus operators and Local Authorities to work more collaboratively for the benefit of bus users. In many parts of the country, travel patterns and individual choice does not translate into bus patronage and so user numbers have been declining nationally for some years. The far-reaching impacts of the COVID19 pandemic are likely to add further long lasting, and potentially permanent, impacts on bus travel.

- 5.2 The Government's recently launched National Bus Strategy includes aspirations to increase service frequencies, simplify ticketing, improve bus journey times and reliability, and reduce fares. The purpose of EPs is to set out how Councils and operators will work together to meet these aspirations.
- 5.3 In Summer 2021, the Department for Transport (DfT) required Local Transport Authorities (LTA's) across the UK to submit a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which outlined a high level vision for improving local bus services. At the same time, the DfT announced that BSIPs would form the basis for future EP Plans and Schemes which would provide greater detail on delivery and be key to accessing future Government funding. BSIP submissions were required by 31 October 2021 and the BFC submission was based upon the bus policies within the current LTP3 which already supports the principles included within the Government's National Bus Strategy.
- 5.4 Through collaboration with local bus operators LTAs are required to establish an EP Plan and Scheme by end April 2022 and the BFC proposal is attached at **Appendix 1**. Whilst it is not mandatory for Authorities to enter into an EP with operators, the DfT has stated that receipt of future grant funding for maintaining or improving bus services is dependent on EPs being in place.
- 5.5 The proposed measures within all EPs are currently unfunded as further detail is awaited from the DfT as to how the national £3billion transformational funding announced in the new National Bus Strategy will be allocated from April 2022. Therefore, with uncertainty over the scale and continuity of local funding, the current actions within the Council's proposed EP Scheme cannot not timetabled. It will be necessary to review and programme these actions accordingly when Government funding is announced. However, measures which support and promote bus travel as an attractive alternative and which create opportunities to build increased patronage levels should be a priority for any early funding.
- 5.6 The DfT have acknowledged the very tight deadlines which LTAs are working under to deliver an EP. In their latest EP guidance, the DfT recommend focussing on broad principles without committing either the LTA or bus operators to specific or onerous actions at this early stage. LTA's have also been encouraged to include bespoke variation arrangements within their EPs so that adjustments can be made without the need for further lengthy consultation once funding levels are announced.
- 5.7 Section 5 of the appended EP contains details of the proposed measures, with a summary provided in Table 5.1. These are subject to Government funding, but seek to:
- Maintain good frequencies on both supported and commercial routes through further support funding.
 - Identify targeted free or discounted travel opportunities by working with operators on the introduction of specific promotions.
 - Introduce inter-operable tickets by working with operators to gain agreement on accepting one another's tickets for travel.
 - Improve the real time information displays at key locations including town/village centres and community hubs.
 - Introduce an on-line portal providing information on travel by all sustainable modes.
 - Address pinch-points on the highway network that impact on bus journey times.

- Implement bus priority at traffic signals where feasibility study shows there is benefit.
 - Introduce an on-going programme of bus stop improvements, providing consistent facilities including information displays, lighting and seating where appropriate.
 - Investigate the most appropriate Demand Responsive Transport model.
 - Conduct feasibility studies to look at Bus Rapid Transport options for the Bracknell/Wokingham and the Bracknell/Blackwater Valley corridors.
- 5.8 No fixed end date is sought within the national EP process at this stage. The EP Plan and Scheme will be reviewed by the Bracknell Forest Bus Partnership (established with operators for the EP process) annually with updates and progress against actions made available on the Council's website.

6 CONSULTATION

- 6.1 Following individual discussions with each of the local bus operators, it was agreed to establish a Bracknell Forest Bus Partnership to oversee the development of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and the EP Plan and Scheme. The group consists of local authority transport officers and representatives of each of the local operators that provide services in the area.
- 6.2 The tight deadlines set by the DfT are expected to assist early bus recovery from the pandemic. As such, opportunities for wide-scale consultation have been limited. Alongside operator engagement, telephone surveys of residents (both bus users and non-users) have also been used to underpin which aspects of services require improvement. Discussions have also been held with the Business Improvement District (BID) and representatives from JobCentre, alongside analysis of local resident feedback from the most recent NHT (National Highways and Transport) survey which included additional questions on public transport. A DfT mandated list of stakeholders has also been consulted which includes local MPs and neighbouring Local Authorities. No formal objections to the proposed EP have been received.
- 6.3 In addition, the EP reflects the bus policies with the current LTP3 which was subject to full public consultation prior to its adoption.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Council's EP Plan and Scheme are currently unfunded. The earlier BSIP submission process has provided the DfT with the indicative costs for the bus improvement activities featured within the proposed EP. Whilst fully dependent on future Government funding allocations over successive years, and subject to further detailed work, the package of measures totals approximately £5.8million. Once the scale and profile of future local funding is known, further detail work and costing can commence on the actions which can be accommodated.
- 7.2 Were the Council to choose not to implement an EP as set out within the National Bus Strategy, it would not receive any future Bus Service Recovery funding. During the pandemic, the Government has provided Covid Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) funding to provide for the loss of revenue caused by lower passenger numbers. This includes payments toward the Council's supported bus services in order to keep services running. In addition, the DfT has stated that "Government will also take into account an LTAs performance with respect to the policies set out in the National Bus Strategy when considering funding allocations for wider, non-bus local transport schemes".

8 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Treasurer

As stated within the report, from 2022 Local Authorities with BSIPs/EPs will be invited to submit bids for funding from the overall £3bn pool to support related schemes. Failure to enter into an EP will impact on the availability of future government grant funding. The proposal is that schemes will not be progressed until Government funding is known. There is currently no council or S106 funding to support the schemes, although there could be future consideration for partially funding appropriate schemes through S106. Any staffing resource required to manage the ongoing demands of the partnership are expected to be met from existing resources.

Borough Solicitor

The Bus Services Act 2017 amended the Transport Act 2000 and provides a new legislative framework to help bus operators and local authorities to improve local bus services. Competition Act considerations have been dealt with within the partnership scheme. There are no direct procurement implications for Enhanced Partnerships. Any works identified through Bus Service Improvement Plans or to support the development of the plans will be subject to standard procurement procedures.

9 EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The proposed EP reflects the bus policies with the current LTP3 which was subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment and public consultation prior to its adoption. There are no direct negative equality/diversity impacts arising from the actions proposed in this report as the EP seeks to improve bus transport accessibility for all users.

10 STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

There are no Strategic Risk Management issues arising from this report.

11 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

The EP process seek to increase the use and availability of bus transport. In turn, this provides opportunities for a reduction in CO2 due to the transfer of individual journeys undertaken by low occupancy motor vehicles, typically the car.

12 HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES

Bus services improve access to education, employment, healthcare and other amenities. Alongside a reduction in the risk of social isolation, they can make it easier to incorporate walking as part of the journey which in-turn makes a positive contribution to health. Increasing patronage can deliver air quality benefits.

Background papers

None.

Contacts for further information

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