

## **Report to Councillor Joy Dennis, Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport**

**October 2021**

### **Bus Back Better – Bus Service Improvement Plan**

#### **Report by Director of Highways, Transport and Planning**

**Electoral division(s): All**

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#### **Summary**

Following the launch of the [Bus Back Better](#) bus strategy for England in March 2021 the County Council and local bus operators committed to form an Enhanced Partnership from April 2022. The Partnership will deliver the West Sussex Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) that outlines its ambitions to assist post pandemic recovery and thereafter improved bus services for West Sussex. The BSIP must be submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) by the end of October 2021 for evaluation.

#### **Recommendation**

That the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport approves:

1. The West Sussex Bus Service Improvement Plan (which will replace the West Sussex Bus Strategy 2018-2026) as set out in Appendix 1, including a bid to the DfT for additional funding of £138.29m over a four-year period, as set out in section 5 of the report; and
2. That a public consultation exercise will be undertaken about the Bus Service Improvement Plan.

#### **Proposal**

##### **1 Background and context**

- 1.1 West Sussex County Council (WSCC) [agreed](#) to enter into an Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators from April 2022. The partnership is being established to deliver countywide bus service recovery and improvements in line with the [Bus Back Better](#) National Bus Strategy for England.
- 1.2 Whilst bus services had flourished notably in the north of the county with a pre-pandemic thriving economy the impact of the pandemic on Gatwick Airport and Crawley has been dramatic. Services across the rest of the county had mixed success with the key Portsmouth to Brighton 'Coastliner' corridor a notable success. However, with smaller towns and a sizeable rural area, bus services had been retreating with a lack of commercial investment. This presented

ongoing challenges to improve the bus offer to residents as a viable alternative to the car and to assist carbon emission reductions.

- 1.3 In the light of national documents such as Gear Change, Bus Back Better, the need to make progress on decarbonising transport and WSCC's own [Climate Change Strategy](#), it is expected that the revised West Sussex Transport Plan (subject to approval in early 2022) will seek to prioritise active travel (walking and cycling) and shared / mixed (including buses) travel solutions within the existing funding envelope.
- 1.4 The current [WSCC Bus Strategy](#) mirrors the thrust of the national strategy that was adopted by the Council in 2018. The BSIP (Appendix 1) will replace that strategy as the plan to deliver bus improvements in the future.
- 1.5 The DfT requires Local Transport Authorities and their partners to deliver their draft BSIPs for evaluation by end of October 2021. The evaluation is expected to inform future funding levels from the £3bn of extra funding in the current national spending cycle (2022-2025) and inform possible funding for future cycles.
- 1.6 The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State has advised that BSIPs should show clear ambition in improving bus services for residents based on their needs. This includes ambitious targets for the partners to achieve.
- 1.7 The key priority requested by the bus operators was to improve journey speeds through bus priority measures to reduce running costs that should lead to greater patronage through increased modal shift.
- 1.8 Priorities set out by residents in a recent Bus Engagement exercise varied by age group. Notably younger people, people in rural areas and families want lower fares seeing them as a barrier to taking up the bus as a modal choice. All age groups, including older people, want more frequent bus services (notably evenings and on Sundays) as well as improved information through real time screens across the county.
- 1.9 Other organisations such as Crawley Borough Council see buses as a critical part of their local transport network and a facilitator to their local economic recovery and to build on the success of the Fastway Rapid Bus Transport (BRT) solution.
- 1.10 The Enhanced Partnership will be required to submit, through the County Council, annual bids to the DfT for funding in advance each year. This will be part of the Enhanced Partnership Plan (EPP) that will be subject to the County Council's decision-making processes.
- 1.11 The Government has outlined that Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) will be required to undertake consultation exercises of their BSIPs once they are submitted to inform the EPP.

## **2 Proposal details**

- 2.1 The BSIP will be submitted to the DfT for evaluation by end of October 2021.
- 2.2 The BSIP includes various bus service improvement ambitions together with seeking continued recovery funding to allow the Partnership to review and recast the commercial and supported bus network in 2022/23. This will allow planning

for future improvements such as bus priorities on key corridors and better roadside infrastructure and information to facilitate greater modal shift benefits.

- 2.3 In response to residents' requests the BSIP includes a major ambition to work with neighbouring LTAs to develop a Young Persons discounted fare scheme to help generate a bus culture among young residents to provide a viable choice to the car. In addition, to create a pan-Sussex Demand Responsive Transport solution allowing bus operators to reduce expensive fares for people in rural areas, for family groups and for short hop urban journeys.
- 2.4 The BSIP includes an ambition to work with partners on a roadmap to a zero-emission fleet by creating a fund to assist towards vehicle replacement and investment in depot and fuelling infrastructure. The latter will be explored with partners including District/Borough and neighbouring councils as well as the bus operators. In addition, funding will be sought to upgrade existing buses to the cleanest EU6 emission standard (that is cleaner than the equivalent EU6 car) prioritising urban areas especially where there are Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs). The partnership will also work together on future bids for Government grants for zero emission buses as the solutions improve to deliver vehicles that can accommodate the ranges required for all day and evening operations.

### **3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)**

- 3.1 The alternative of not submitting the BSIP is discounted as it would lead to the withdrawal of COVID-19 recovery funding and the Bus Services Operator Grant that, together, could lead to most bus services in the county being discontinued.
- 3.2 The alternative of a less ambitious BSIP would likely not meet the DfT's ambition or be accepted by the partners of the DfT. This would negatively impact future funding opportunities.

### **4 Consultation, engagement and advice**

- 4.1 The bus operators were consulted on the network issues and challenges they face coming out of the pandemic and how bus services could improve in the future. They provided extensive detail on congestion hotspots as well as opportunities where the County Council could provide bus priority solutions. They also provided data to assist in evidencing impacts on patronage arising from the pandemic and bus running times/delays.
- 4.2 WSCC, East Sussex County Council (ESCC), Surrey County Council, Hampshire County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council officers and Members have discussed their respective approaches and content of their BSIPs. This is to ensure they will work together to deliver BSIPs that cover cross border locations such as across the Gatwick Airport area. Officers met with Gatwick Airport Limited.
- 4.3 A public engagement exercise was carried out during September to understand how buses are used, barriers to use and other ways services could be improved. This included online and paper surveys that received 3074 responses from residents, District, Borough and Town/Parish Councils, businesses, and bus user representatives/groups. A summary highlighting the responses is appended to this report at Appendix 2. Responses helped officers and bus operators to identify the key areas that could be improved.

- 4.4 WSCC and Surrey County Council Officers jointly met with Gatwick Airports Ltd to understand the impacts of the pandemic on the airport as a major transport interchange and the economy of surrounding area. This allowed exploration of potential service and infrastructure improvements to aid recovery and for the airport to flourish again and work towards a carbon neutral status.
- 4.5 WSCC and ESCC worked closely together sharing the same Transport Consultants.
- 4.6 A public consultation exercise is required of LTAs once their BSIPs have been submitted to inform the Enhanced Partnerships for their future EPPs.

## 5 Finance

- 5.1 The BSIP requests additional funding of £138.29m from the DfT over a four-year period to enable the Enhanced Partnership to deliver the proposals included. This includes capital investment of £52.66m and revenue funding of £85.63m, as set out in the costing table in Appendix 3.
- 5.2 The first three years will be considered for approval initially, which equates to £29.26m capital and £68.93m revenue funding. The fourth-year figures are to inform the DfT of the level of funding LTAs will require for consideration as part of the next central government spending cycle.
- 5.3 The County Council will require additional officer resource to deliver the BSIP. It is anticipated that 4 FTE additional public transport staff will be needed to work with the bus operators to review the network and oversee the delivery of the Programme of proposed improvements. The cost of this resource is included in the funding requested from the DfT.
- 5.4 The ability to deliver the BSIP will depend upon the level of funding awarded by the DfT. In the event this is less than requested the proposals will be reviewed and prioritised for delivery within the funding available.
- 5.5 There is no additional capital borrowing requirement arising from the proposed BSIP. Any match funding provided by the County Council will be identified from within existing approved budgets.

## 6 Risk implications and mitigations

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating Action (in place or planned)</b>
Loss of COVID-19 recovery funding (Bus Recovery Grant) from April 2022	Depending on outcome BSIP the supported bus network will need to be reviewed
Loss of Bus Services Operators Grant (BSOG) currently valued at £0.374m to WSCC	Review and recast of bus network where needed to reduce overhead  Establishment of regional discount fares scheme with other LTAs and DfT funding in BSIP to generate patronage from young people and foster bus culture
Possible loss of central Government funding	Ambitious BSIP to achieve good score in DfT evaluation and future funding towards highways improvement schemes

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating Action (in place or planned)</b>
towards highways improvement schemes	All future highways improvements schemes to include prioritising active and bus (sustainable) travel solutions
Bus recovery not sufficiently contributing to Climate Change Strategy	Enhanced Partnership to develop 'roadmap' to zero carbon emissions  BSIP includes ambition to reduce all buses to EU6 low emission buses to allow time to develop infrastructure required for zero emission fleet by 2035
People with protected characteristics views taken in account	Bus engagement survey included opportunity to identify people with protected characteristics and Equalities Impact Report (EIR) completed (Appendix 4)
DfT funding is less than the required amount to deliver all of the bus service improvements	All improvements are to be prioritised for funding allowing some to be dropped if funding levels falls below the ask.

## **7 Policy alignment and compliance**

- 7.1 The proposal addresses the Government's expectations of establishing a statutory Enhanced Partnership to continue to receive funding to support local bus services. The setting up of the Partnership is not a statutory duty as such but it bestows statutory requirements upon the Council to deliver on its requirements set out in Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs).
- 7.2 The existing statutory duty of reimbursing free off-peak bus travel for entitled older or disabled people on timetabled local bus services is not affected. However, there is a risk that not establishing an Enhanced Partnership will lead to bus services being withdrawn due to reductions in Government funding. This would impact some people with protected characteristics.
- 7.3 The Government has been clear that the establishment of Enhanced Partnerships to deliver BSIPs will form a vehicle for future funding bids for zero emission vehicles. This will, in turn help to achieve climate change targets. In addition, improvements in bus services will help to improve public health outcomes with increased use of local buses over cars.
- 7.4 The BSIP contributes to outcomes in the Council Plan, notably A Sustainable and Prosperous Economy improving access for residents and visitors. In addition, it will contribute to the delivery of the County Reset Plan supporting new and existing businesses and those sectors hit hard by COVID-19. It will also positively contribute to climate change and the environment that will underpin the economy reset approach through the creation of a Zero Emission Bus Fund and EU6 retrofit fund.
- 7.5 There may be positive Crime and Disorder implications if the BSIP is implemented. These could arise from buses being more readily accessible (more routes, better frequencies, lower fares) making it easier for residents to access learning and/or paid employment reducing social deprivation that is known to reduce crime.

- 7.6 There are a number of Social Value related opportunities including the use of the Social Value Framework when procuring additional services. This could enable the better outcomes for residents and businesses the use of local employment and the opportunities though partnering with bus operators and community transport organisations to create further supply chain benefits.
- 7.7 The proposal aligns with the sustainable and prosperous economy priority in Our Council Plan. The Bus Back Better strategy can enable better access to learning and employment opportunities, as well as help support local businesses with cost effective travel solutions for employees and customers.

Matt Davey

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### **Appendices**

1. West Sussex Bus Service Improvement Plan
2. West Sussex Bus Back Better Survey Results
3. Table of costings
4. West Sussex Bus Back Better Survey Equalities Impact Report (EIR)

### **Background papers**

None