
Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

10 June 2022

Bus Enhanced Partnership Plan Task and Finish Group

Report by the Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

Summary

The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport expressed an intention to support that West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) works in partnership with bus operators through a draft Enhanced Partnership Plan (EPP) from April 2022.

Following discussion by the Business Planning Group, the Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee (CHESC) agreed to establish a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (TFG) to act as a critical friend in the drafting of the Plan, and to consider in particular:

- The draft Enhanced Partnership Plan prior to its submission to the Department for Transport (DfT) at the end of April 2022
- The impact of changes to Department for Transport (DfT) funding for buses – the outcome of WSSCC Bus Services Improvement Plan and the Bus Recovery Grant
- Plans for public consultation on the bus EPP

...and make recommendations directly to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport.

Members of the Committee were invited to volunteer to serve on the TFG in the first instance, membership of which must be cross-party and comprise no more than seven. Group leaders were consulted before the final membership was agreed.

The Committee and members of the TFG agreed that the Group should meet informally, and in person.

This report summarises the discussion that took place during the TFG meeting and the recommendations and observations that were submitted to the Cabinet Member for her consideration.

This report will be updated to include the Cabinet Member's response to the recommendations, and published with the papers for the CHESC meeting on 10 June 2022.

1 Background

- 1.1 The Group met once, on 11 April 2022. Councillors Carson Albury, Andrew Baldwin, John Milne, Simon Oakley, and Brian Quinn attended. Councillor Simon Oakley was appointed as the Chairman of the TFG. Councillor Sarah Payne sent

apologies, but was briefed at a separate meeting, and supported the recommendations of her fellow Group members.

2 Discussion

2.1 Members heard evidence from Andy Ekinsmyth (Head of Transport and Network Operations), Bill Leath (Transport Coordination Manager), Steve Doole (BSIP Project Manager), and Andy Warton (Senior Passenger Transport Planner).

2.2 In particular, the following themes were discussed:

2.3 The Impact of Funding Changes

Members considered a presentation about the impact of changes in the funding arrangements for buses and options for the Enhanced Partnership Plan (EPP), with discussion including the following points:

2.3.1 WSCC's indicative three-year funding arrangement was announced by DfT on 4 April 2022 - £17.4m was earmarked (£12 capital/£5.4m revenue) for the County Council, although the Council's bid was for £90m. DfT gave no reasons for the disparity. Many local authorities will receive no funding, despite having submitted similar Bus Services Improvement Plans (BSIPs).

2.3.2 Receipt of funding depends upon proposals in the Enhanced Partnership Plan

2.3.3 The deadline for submission of new ambitions to DfT (including key priorities from the BSIP) of 2 May 2022.

2.3.4 Bus recovery funding ends in October 2022

2.4 The Draft Enhanced Partnership Plan

Members considered the following documents:

- Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP)
- Draft Bus Enhanced Partnership Plan (EPP)
- Letter from the Department for Transport dated 4 April

Discussion included the following points:

2.4.1 The Government's 'Bus Back Better - A National Bus Strategy for England' requires Local Transport Authorities and bus companies to work in partnership to help recovery and improve bus services.

2.4.2 In June 2021, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport took a [key decision](#) to enter into an Enhanced Partnership with bus operators and, in October 2021, made a further [key decision](#) and submitted a BSIP to the DfT including a bid for funds.

2.4.3 Officers have compiled documents for a draft EPP based on the BSIP, including considerable flexibility to handle separate funding awards for multiple topics e.g. de-carbonisation, reduced fares, more Sunday services, etc as well as Covid recovery impact.

- 2.4.4 Major bus operators have informed the authority that patronage levels are still considerably lower than pre-pandemic, although varying between different bus routes. The lowest patronage currently seems to be 55%, and some are higher than 80%. (Lowest during Covid lockdowns was below 10%).
- 2.4.5 The EPP required redrafting following receipt of the indicative funding arrangements and guidance from DfT. Funding will be dependent on large-scale visible interventions, lower fares on a temporary basis, and decarbonisation of buses. Funding must be spent by March 2025, but this will be challenging for complex capital projects.

2.5 Capital Proposals

The Group considered the proposals and made recommendations and observations set out in section 3 of this report.

2.6 Revenue Proposals

The Group considered the proposals and made recommendations and observations set out in section 3 of this report.

2.7 EPP Public Consultation Plan

EPP statutory consultation will take place in May 2022. Statutory stakeholders include the police, Traffic Commissioners, bus operators, D&Bs, South Downs National Park Authority, Transport Focus, Competition and Markets Authority etc.

The Group considered the Consultation Plan and made recommendations and observations set out in section 3 of this report.

3 Recommendations and Observations

3.1 The Impact of Funding Changes

The Group expresses concerns about:

- a) The Department for Transport's lack of clarity about the priorities for the County Council
- b) The lack of a consistent, countrywide approach to local authority funding
- c) the implications for bus services in the county when bus recovery funding is no longer available (from October 2022)

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

The Department for Transport wrote on 4 April that councils are to prioritise bus priority schemes i.e. those which accord buses a clear advantage over other traffic such as a bus lane. Our proposed Spending Plan reflects this. Unfortunately most bus priority schemes and certainly those that are currently being considered will take more than the 3 years of the current funding period to deliver. Such schemes can therefore only be promoted in this funding period as those under development where at most we may be able to deliver accommodation works such as moving utilities. Elsewhere we will be able to focus on upgrades to traffic

signals (non-bus lane priority), real time bus information and bus stop improvements.

According to the most recent timeline from DfT, officers expect DfT to engage before mid-June to finalise the BSIP Spending plan, and in particular to discuss timeframes for delivery for each spend proposed. It is hoped at this time we will be able to determine whether our suggested priorities match DfT's ambitions.

DfT indicated that funding is unlikely to be allocated to WSCC before September, and should not be used to subsidise the costs of running existing bus services.

3.2 Capital Proposals

The TFG considered the options proposed by officers and recommends to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport that the capital proposals contained within the draft EPP are based on the following priorities and in this order

- 1 **Crawley Bus Station Interchange.** The Bus Station design already exists and much investigative work has been undertaken. Consultation is planned for June/July, with completion due by summer 2025. The Bus Station would be a significant improvement for Crawley and bus lanes would speed up bus journey times.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

The proposed investment will enhance the travel experience of all people using the bus station, particularly when changing between one route and another. As the rebuild is already planned and consultation lead by Crawley Borough Council is expected this summer, it meets DfT criteria for BSIP funds.

- 2 **Bus lane on the A259 Bognor Road** approaching the roundabout (from Drayton roundabout to A27 roundabout). Stagecoach has supported this option for many years as it could significantly improve bus journey times and reliability. It sits on County Council land so would be permitted development. Some further work is required to confirm deliverability. The scheme idea has been outlined over the years and few people live adjacent.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

Consultation has not occurred for this scheme, which unfortunately is likely to take more than the 3 years of the current funding period to deliver.

Recent appraisal suggests that likely cost will be over £10m due to major utility assets underground, and could involve the full DfT major scheme process (including Strategic Outline Case, Outline Business Case, Full Business Case, etc) leading to delivery well beyond the current funding period.

Officers expect DfT to engage in June to discuss the timeframe for delivery for this scheme, and whether DfT will approve the scheme for

funding in this funding period to assist with accommodation works in advance of the main scheme being constructed.

- 3 **Traffic signals** - potential for increased value for money; would improve journey times (as traffic lights would turn green when buses approach). Further work needs to be undertaken to add detail to this proposal.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

Four controller devices for traffic signal junctions in Crawley have had better systems installed, and officers are planning to trial prioritising bus movements through those junctions to target improvements in journey time reliability. Assuming success, another 30 signal controls around the county will be upgraded however it is not yet confirmed which signalised junctions would benefit most from this intervention and hence further work to detail this proposal would commence when the trial is complete. We plan to implement upgrades progressively over the term of the funding period alongside existing signal priority upgrade and maintenance schemes.

- 4 **Real Time Passenger Information (RTPI)** (these are signs at bus stops displaying bus arrival times). The most popular response in the BSIP consultation. Would enable purchase of approx 145 screens. Very deliverable and visible and supported by the bus operators. However, there would be future additional revenue costs

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

RTPI signs were seen as the most useful aid by all age groups during the engagement for BSIP last year, and in research completed by DfT, so I propose spending the amount in the BSIP bid. It is true that additional screens will require more revenue funding to maintain and a further capital investment if they are to be replaced at the end of their useful life (up to 14 years). This revenue maintenance funding will need to be identified as part of the revenue programme albeit officers will discuss the potential of future funding from DfT for this purpose.

Also the **Roadside Infrastructure Audit** - there are approx. 5,200 active bus stops in the county of which 3,500 are flagged. An audit would identify who provides what facilities (eg bus company, County Council, district/borough councils, parish councils etc.) and establish where investment needs to be directed in future years (including RTPI).

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

Bus stop facilities are typically maintained by district / borough and parish / town councils. WSCC typically maintains the pole, hardstand, and RTPI where applicable. It is not our intention to amend this arrangement. Whilst we have record of bus stops we do not have record of their facilities. Therefore an audit of bus stops to determine where many passengers wait for buses, and which bus stops have more than one bus route calling is currently under development. This audit is a first step in determining what facilities and information exists at bus stops. It

may be that BSIP funding is made available to improve facilities at those most in need.
A further audit for those passengers with mobility, sensory or hidden disabilities is proposed next year.

5 **Mobility hubs/interchanges**

- 6 **Hop Oast Roundabout Bus Priority.** Outline designs are in place (lane markings, not segregation). Not identified in the BSIP. The scheme could enable Metrobus to keep buses running frequently. Metrobus see this as a lower priority compared to Crawley bus station.

While the above proposals total more than £12m, all could be presented to the DfT together with risk profiles and, if there is any further opportunity for funding, or if a scheme isn't feasible, further options/projects will be ready to be promoted.

- **CM Response:** Agreed.

Hop Oast bus priority has been removed from the Spend Plan total and relegated to a 'possible' for funding should DfT not approve other schemes.

While the above proposals total more than £12m, all have been presented to the DfT in the draft submission together with risk profiles and, if there is any further opportunity for funding, or if a scheme isn't feasible, further options/projects will be ready to be promoted.

3.3 **Revenue proposals**

The TFG considered the options proposed by officers and recommends to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport that the following revenue proposals be contained within the draft EPP.

- a) **Short-term and targeted fare reduction trials** with an emphasis on supporting young people with schemes that are clear and simple.

- **CM Response:** Agreed.

Officers have proposed to DfT that we will work alongside East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove City Council to develop in so much as is possible, a Sussex-wide reduced fare price offer for 16- to 19-year-olds.

- b) **A new service** - 55x Littlehampton to Chi Express, subject to it becoming commercially viable in the longer term. This route extension would benefit new housing developments in Arun and provide a link to rail hubs. Prior to the pandemic, Stagecoach indicated that it wished to run this service commercially.

- **CM Response:** Agreed. This proposal has been put forward to DfT in our draft spending plan.

c) **Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT)**

- DDRT pilots - DRT (community transport) schemes have been operating for many years for people who cannot use conventional transport (for example, people with disabilities). Now they can be used by anyone who is socially isolated. DfT has indicated its support for DDRT. Flexibility is inherent, a mixture of vehicle types/services being possible, and deviation from fixed routes permitted. Pilots schemes will be operated from mobile phones/tablets/laptops.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

This proposal has been put forward to DfT in our draft spending plan.

- In Barnham, Eastergate, Westergate - where settlements aren't connected by bus services to train stations/schools etc, creation of pilot Test and Learn schemes, which could ultimately replace conventional buses.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

- The number 54 service, serving north-west Chichester, was previously operated by a bus company, but the County Council now funds the service. Discussions are underway with Stagecoach and Community Transport Sussex regarding its future. Could be a flexible on-demand service or linked with school minibuses.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

- Employment of a project manager jointly with East Sussex County Council to link all the above and run a flexible service which is unlikely to have the potential to operate on a commercial basis.

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

3.4 Public Consultation Plan

EPP statutory consultation will take place in May 2022. Statutory stakeholders include the police, traffic commissioners, bus operators, district and borough councils, South Downs National Park Authority, Transport Focus, Competition and Markets Authority etc. The TFG agrees the following position:

- a) That there is no requirement to undertake a further public consultation exercise (an extensive public consultation had been undertaken to inform the BSIP) due to the short timescale allowed by the DfT and officer capacity. Ongoing public engagement will be undertaken via #WestSussBus

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

- b) That officers should discuss opportunities for engaging with parish councils (recognising that not all the County has parish/town councils) with the West Sussex Association of Local Councils

➤ **CM Response:** Agreed.

4 Further Work

- 4.1 Members agreed that a further meeting may be required towards the end of May, in case:
- a) of significant developments which affect the priorities supported above. The meeting could be in-person/virtual or an update could be circulated via email.
 - b) a redesign of the network is under consideration
- 4.2 Members will look at the proposals in the EPP and return any comments to officers.

5 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 5.1 Given the timing of the decision, the establishment of a scrutiny TFG was deemed to be the most effective means of undertaking scrutiny of the decision before it was required to be taken.

6 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 6.1 Highways Officers delivered a presentation during the TFG and also assisted members with responses and information to all queries.

7 Finance

- 7.1 The cost of the TFG was met from existing service budgets.

Cllr Simon Oakley

Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

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Background papers

None