

North Somerset Council

Report to the Executive

Date of Meeting: 24/04/2024

Subject of Report: Bus Service Improvement Plan Refresh 2024

Town or Parish:

Officer/Member Presenting: Hannah Young, Executive Member for Highways and Transport

Key Decision : Yes

Reason:

To be significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area compromising two or more wards in the area of the Local Authority.

Recommendations

1. To approve the arrangements for refresh of the adopted North Somerset Council / West of England Combined Authority joint Bus Service Improvement Plan in accordance with the DfT guidance
2. To bring the final draft to a special meeting of the Executive Committee on 19 June 2024 to seek approval, rather than request delegation of this decision to the Executive Member for Highways and Transport, noting that we have agreed an extension to the submission timetable with the Department for Transport to enable this.

1. Summary of Report

- 1.1 The National Bus Strategy (NBS) was published March 2021. It sets out an ambitious vision and a comprehensive strategy to make bus services more attractive, convenient, good value and popular for all to use. It required all local transport authorities (LTAs) to adopt and publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by 31 October 2021, setting out the vision, objectives and delivery plans of LTAs and their local partners to meet the National Bus Strategy. Guidance on the structure and content of BSIPs was published in May 2021. BSIPs were to be refreshed annually, with progress towards targets reported and published every six months. LTAs were required to set up enhanced partnerships or franchising schemes in their areas.
- 1.2 The BSIP formed part of a bid to Government for funding. North Somerset Council opted to submit a joint BSIP with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), creating a unique arrangement under which a local transport authority partnered a mayoral combined authority.
- 1.3 The BSIP was successful in attracting £105m, of which £48m was capital funding directly awarded to NSC, effectively levelling up NSC with the City Region Sustainable Transport Scheme (CRSTS) award to the West of England Combined Authority, to

enable substantial improvements to be made to bus priorities across the whole sub-region.

- 1.4 The DfT have mandated that in order to release the BSIP revenue and capital funding awarded for 2024-25, Bus Service Improvement Plans must be refreshed and submitted to the DfT by the 12th June 2024 in accordance with the new guidance issued in January 2024 (See background papers). The timescales of the BSIP Refresh mean we will need either a special meeting of the Executive or delegation to the Executive Member for Transport to approve the final document which is being produced at pace with our partners in WECA.
- 1.5 In order to enable formal approvals via both the WECA Committee on 14th June and the NSC Executive Committee on 19th June an extension has been agreed with the Department for Transport. The draft report is to be submitted on 12th June to DfT, with the final approved report incorporating any changes or updates required by the Committees to be submitted by 21st June to Department for Transport.

2. Policy

- 2.1 The BSIP is a key local policy setting out the shared vision of NSC and WECA for the future bus network, linking in with other key strategic policies including the Joint Local Transport Plan, West of England Bus Strategy, Local Plan, and the NSC Climate Emergency Action Plan 2022. Having an adopted BSIP is mandatory for any authority wishing to bid for DfT funding for future transport projects. Delivery of the BSIP must either be through a franchising scheme (as is being implemented in Greater Manchester) or an enhanced partnership (EP) that contains legally binding commitments from the LTA and bus operators. The thrust of the National Bus Strategy is to move away from a completely deregulated bus market to one that has much more influence by LTAs and their residents.

3. Details

- 3.1 The refreshed document will not be a bid for new funding but will help Government and policymakers understand the level of funding needed to bring the bus network up to the standard laid out in the National Bus Strategy at a local and national level. It will form a resource to assist local negotiations with developers and other potential funders.
- 3.2 The refreshed BSIP must be comprehensive and authoritative but also concise and accessible to the public. Detailed supporting evidence can be put in an appendix.
- 3.3 The timescales of the Refresh do not fully correspond with the regular NSC democratic schedule for review and submission of the final document, hence the requirement to extend the final submission to the Department for Transport to 21st June (beyond the national 12th June deadline). The final draft will be circulated to the Executive for consideration and regular presentations will be provided as the document evolves prior to submission. This report includes an initial working draft 'Appendix 1' of the work to date, the format of the review is limited to 6 key sections.
- 3.4 The BSIP refresh needs to align with the Joint Local Plan and West of England's adopted Joint Bus Strategy (2020). It will also reflect the status of the adopted Enhanced Partnership in our area.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Despite the short timescales, the council is reaching out to all key partners and stakeholders to provide input to the future bus network. The outline engagement plan includes.
- Town and Parish council engagement meeting
 - Cllr Engagement session
 - Executive engagement meetings
 - Snap surveys to bus champions and councillors
 - Engagement with key local businesses
 - Meetings with local bus operators
- 4.2 Engagement meetings have already commenced due to the short timescale to develop this document. From this engagement a long-list of aspirations is emerging. All inputs will be reviewed and considered in the development of the final document. A brief summary of engagement inputs to date includes:
- Extension of £2 national fare & low, simple fares
 - Tap On Tap Off ticketing on all registered bus services with multi operator acceptance.
 - Additional bus fleet decarbonisation packages
 - Integrated network - rural links, town circulars, corridors
 - Missing network links: J21 bus bypass, Airfield Bridge Link
 - Multi modal ticketing
 - Bus shelter and stop improvements (NSC & Town and Parish Councils)
 - Expanded accurate Real Time Information (RTI)
 - Sustainable Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service for rural communities
 - Leveraging the opportunities of the Banwell Bypass & A38 MRN delivery
 - Focus on housing growth areas (Local Plan)
 - More bus frequency (peaks), spread (evenings/nights) and reliability improvements
 - Minor improvements to the road network to improve bus journey times – parking restrictions, traffic signals
 - Weston interchange driver welfare and passenger information facilities
 - Improved pedestrian access to bus stops and healthy streets
 - Programme pace of delivery needs to be less challenging
- 4.3 Concepts will be given an outline cost estimate where relevant. Any concepts included in the BSIP Refresh will require formal permission from the council for inclusion in any bid to the DfT at the appropriate time.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Failure to produce a BSIP refresh within the deadline, will result in a delay of the 2024/25 BSIP funding grant draw down. There are no financial implications for future BSIP proposals as this refresh is not a bidding document. We are being asked to identify a range of outline costed improvement for a future round of BSIP funding beyond March 2025/2026.

6. Costs

- 6.1 The estimated costs for the refresh across the West of England is £70,000, consisting of staff time and some external resources to support the short-term project.

7. Funding

- 7.1 The funding for the BSIP Refresh is allocated from the current BSIP grant. Completion of the BSIP Refresh is mandatory to release the current BSIP programme funding for 2024/2025. Failure to update the BSIP as per the guidelines has the potential to delay grant funding for 2024/25.

8. Legal Powers and Implications

- 8.1 The BSIP is a policy document, it is reflected in the Enhanced Partnership as the legally binding delivery mechanism for the BSIP and local bus strategy. Future BSIP bids and successful award of funding will be reflected as new EP schemes. The Enhanced Partnership Plan Review will follow process set out in legislation, the next update will incorporate any changes or updates required as a result of the BSIP Refresh.

9. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

- 9.1 The bus network is essential to the council and region in meeting its transport decarbonisation programme and helps our goal of becoming net zero by 2030. The BSIP program is successfully leveraging early investment from the local bus companies and the DfT in fleet decarbonisation by 2025.

10. Risk Management

- 10.1 The risk of not completing the refresh as per the DfT guidance is the withholding of the current BSIP programme grant. Failure to engage stakeholders and outline future ambitions and potential improvements at this stage will damage our future bus network, as it is directly linked to the scoping of future bus funding by HMG treasury. The Current BSIP programme has been advantageous to NSC by helping to quickly recover the local bus network from the effects of the pandemic, preserving and growing our commercial bus network, mitigating the future need to identify revenue funding to support socially necessary services in competition for other essential services. The network was at an existential risk of collapse without this funding.
- 10.2 North Somerset and the CA have a joint project management team including risk management monitoring. Additional resource has been deployed to ensure the project remains on track.

11. Equality Implications

- 11.1 Continued availability of accessible public transport options is critical to the independence of some disabled people and those on lower incomes who cannot afford a private vehicle. The BSIP refresh has no direct impact on services or residents at this stage, future improvements and aspirations will require EI assessments as they are developed at future bidding stages.

12. Corporate Implications

12.1 The update of the BSIP policy has no immediate corporate implications on the existing BSIP programme, it does however provide critical pathway to identify the needs of a sustainable bus service in North Somerset, and the opportunity to obtain resources through future bids for funding. The BSIP is integral to Decarbonisation workstream, external investment from bus companies, and the sustainable development of North Somerset through the JLTP 5, and local plan amongst other key policies.

13. Options Considered

13.1 The alternative would be to create a standalone NSC BSIP, however this is distinctly discouraged under the BSIP refresh guidance, as its principal aims are to create a future pipeline of improvements. The current BSIP programme and associated Enhanced Partnership plan and schemes are also explicitly tied to the current geography.

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Appendices :

Appendix 1 'BSIP Refresh 2024 Draft V1'

Background Papers:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a6becf96a5ec00d731aa9/bus-service-improvement-plans-guidance-to-local-authorities-and-bus-operators-2024.pdf>