

Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 20 October 2021

Staffordshire Bus Strategy – Bus Service Improvement Plan



Cllr David Williams, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport said,

"This is an opportunity to bid for funding over a fixed period to support local bus operators in making their services more attractive.

Working with operators, and listening to bus users, this is an opportunity to modernise bus fleets, improve stops and incorporate real-time information, as well as using technology to make tickets and payment so much easier.

A reliable, comfortable bus service can support town centres, give students more choice and help people get to work."

Report Summary:

Department for Transport (DfT) published the National Bus Strategy (NBS) outlining its ambition to improve bus services in England earlier this year. The County Council, as the Local Transport Authority (LTA), needed to consider whether it wished to form an Enhanced Partnership or Franchise model by end of June 2021.

The Council agreed to commit to developing an Enhanced Partnership at the Cabinet meeting held on the 16 June 2021. As a consequence of this, the Council is required to submit a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) to DfT by the 31 October 2021.

This report seeks approval of the key elements of the Staffordshire BSIP which has been developed in partnership with the public bus providers operating in Staffordshire. The BSIP is ambitious and represents an ask of government of some £113m to deliver outcomes which have been shaped by a recent public engagement exercise and comments from the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the meeting held on the 16 September 2021.

Recommendations

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Note the comments and suggestions of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee when they reviewed the emerging priorities of the BSIP at their meeting held on the 16 September 2021.
- b. Note the key issues highlighted by the BSIP public engagement exercise.
- c. Approve the key asks of Staffordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) as outlined in this report and to authorise Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport to finalise the required documentation and make any final minor changes prior to the 31 October 2021 deadline.
- d. Authorise the Director of Economy, Infrastructure and Skills to submit the final BSIP to the Department of Transport by the deadline of the 31 October 2021.



Local Members Interest
N/A

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Staffordshire Bus Strategy – Bus Service Improvement Plan

Recommendations of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Note the comments and suggestions of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee when they reviewed the emerging priorities of the BSIP at their meeting held on the 16 September 2021.
- b. Note the key issues highlighted by the BSIP public engagement exercise.
- c. Approve the key asks of Staffordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) as outlined in this report and to authorise Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport to finalise the required documentation and make any final minor changes prior to the 31 October 2021 deadline.
- d. Authorise the Director of Economy, Infrastructure and Skills to submit the final BSIP to the Department of Transport by the deadline of the 31 October 2021.

Report of the Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills

Reasons for Recommendations:

Background

1. On 15th March 2021, the government published its National Bus Strategy for England “Bus Back Better”, announcing £3b transformational funding for those authorities that engage in the strategy.
2. “[Bus Back Better](#)” sets out a significant step change in the government’s approach to funding and delivering the bus network. Whilst the market remains deregulated, it suggests that a more co-ordinated partnership approach between operators and local authorities is now required. The Strategy makes clear that there is a commitment to long term increased funding for bus services, both for local authorities and bus operators alike. However, access to funding streams is contingent on the Council having a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and entering into either

an Enhanced Partnership (EP) or franchising arrangement to deliver the objectives set out in the BSIP.

3. At the Council's Cabinet meeting held on the 16 June 2021 it was agreed that the Council would commit to an Enhanced Partnership (EP). An EP is a formal agreement between the local authority and bus operators setting out what is expected of each party, and the standards that will be met. The basis for an EP is set out in the Bus Services Act 2017 and associated guidance. Cabinet agreed that a franchising model was not necessary for Staffordshire as it would have been resource intensive and it was felt that the required improvement could be delivered by adopting the EP model which retains the ability for our local bus operators to innovate without the significant market intervention that franchising entails.
4. Having committed to an EP there is now a requirement to submit a BSIP by the 31 October 2021 to the Department for Transport (DfT).
5. The emerging themes of the BSIP were discussed by the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 16 September 2021.
6. In line with DfT requirements and guidance, a survey exercise has been undertaken to seek Staffordshire residents' views on the current bus network in Staffordshire and highlight potential priorities for the future. The survey opened on the 19 August 2021 and ran until 17 September 2021 (four weeks).

Feedback from Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7. The Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members received a report on the National Bus Strategy on the 16 September 2021.
8. Members were given details of the current challenging conditions of the Staffordshire bus market together with the intended approach to the development of the BSIP. Members asked that the following considerations should be given for potential inclusion in the BSIP or in any partnership working that is to follow:
 - a. Improvements be made to Roadside Information and Infrastructure, including bus shelters, bus stops, timetable information and real time passenger information, to provide consistent and accurate information at all locations.
 - b. Improvements to the timing and reliability of local bus services.
 - c. Linkage should be made to other strategic agendas and policy areas, including climate change and access to education.

- d. Continued engagement with bus users and local communities as the BSIP and EP are developed, particularly in the most rural areas of the county.
- e. Encourage more people to use local bus services to increase the financial viability and sustainability of services.
- f. Acknowledgement that a Staffordshire BSIP will focus on supporting commercial bus operators to maintain and build on existing services, that will remain financially sustainable in the longer term.

Key Issues from the Public BSIP Survey

9. The four-week engagement exercise resulted in 1,900 responses being received by the close of survey on 17 September 2021. Full analysis of the survey results is presented in Appendix 1. 65% of respondents were current bus users and 35% were not. Bus usage was higher amongst younger age groups, those without a car and concessionary bus pass holders.
10. The key themes highlighted by the members of the public, that responded to the survey, that should be considered in a BSIP are:
 - a. The most frequent reasons for travelling by bus were shopping (55%), socialising (54%), travel to work (37%), health/medical appointments (34%), leisure (19%) and education (17%). This indicates the importance of bus services to our town centres, economy, access to employment, independent living and access to education.
 - b. Both current and non bus users placed importance on availability of real time information, improved reliability, better connections, better waiting facilities and easier access to service information. (note that our bus operators have identified priorities around bus stop infrastructure and service information).
 - c. Fare initiatives were supported by both current and non-bus users, in particular lowering fares to encourage use. This is consistent with the emphasis placed by DfT in addressing fare structures. (note that our bus operators have also identified a young persons' concessionary scheme as being a priority item for the BSIP). In turn this links to the importance of bus services for younger age groups.
 - d. Both current and non-bus users placed importance on screens at bus stops/stations and being able to track the location of buses.
 - e. The open questions allowing free text responses attracted detailed and constructive feedback. These mostly related to service provision and network coverage, both also emphasised as key considerations for a BSIP. The most common themes were:
 - i. Requests for services to run earlier/later in the day, with some respondents citing that lack of these prevented access to employment and services.

- ii. Requests for more frequent services, which in turn would facilitate better connections.
 - iii. More routes – to create new links and to cover specific areas.
 - iv. Improved reliability
 - v. Non-bus users overwhelmingly cited no bus service in their area, generally relating to villages around the County. Additionally, some non-users cited frequency and earlier / later / Sunday services as being barriers to use.
11. 85% of non-bus users and 83% of bus users said they would use the bus or use the bus more if the improvements listed in the survey were introduced.

Development of BSIP

12. Following the comments provided by Members of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee and analysis of the results from the four-week engagement exercise, discussions have taken place with the Staffordshire bus operators on the development of the BSIP.
13. Using external support, funded by DfT, the required DfT documentation is currently being finalised. The financial ask of the BSIP is some £106m which will be delivered over 3 years and a further £7m to cover lifetime costs.
14. The key items of note in the BSIP together with the funding ask are as follows:
- a. Financial support for the introduction of zero emission buses in Staffordshire on core routes (with willing operators) combined with a strategy to increase frequencies to make the services more attractive – c£33m.
 - b. Financial support for implementation of bus priority measures to improve journey time reliability -c£7.5m.
 - c. Financial support for improving and maintaining on-street bus infrastructure including passenger information – c£21m.
 - d. Financial support for improvements at key bus station hubs across Staffordshire – c£23m.
 - e. Financial support for the introduction of a discounted fare structure for younger people leading to a long term new commercial product for younger bus users – c£11m.

- f. Financial Support to help the Staffordshire bus industry and community transport sector recover from the global covid 19 pandemic and assistance in shaping the new urban and rural Staffordshire bus network to ensure it is fit for the future. This will include targeted pump priming new evening and weekend services that are expected to become self-sustaining (commercial) - £16.5m.
 - g. Financial support to development skills in the sector ensure delivery of aspirations of the Staffordshire BSIP and provide a coordinated approach to marketing and ticketing -£1m.
15. It should be recognised that the submission of the BSIP at the end of October to DfT will be the start of the journey to improve the bus network in Staffordshire working in partnership with the bus companies and community transport providers operating in our area.

Legal Implications

16. The following legal implications are relevant to the submission of the BSIP:
- a. Development of Enhanced Partnerships are governed by Bus Services Act 2017, which amended the Transport Act 2000. Under an EP, the Council is legally obliged to deliver those measures it commits to.
 - b. Multi Operator Ticketing Schemes are governed by the Competition Act 1998 (Public Transport Ticketing Schemes Block Exemption) Order 2001 (as amended) and the Transport Act 2000.
 - c. DfT intend to review the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) 2000, by the end of 2023 (this will have a bearing on our Vacant Seat Policy in home to school transport).
 - d. Traffic Management Act 2004 - Statutory traffic management guidance will be updated to "expect enhanced bus reliability as an integral part of the highway authorities' Network Management Duty".

Resource and Value for Money Implications

17. The government has committed significant funding (£3b) to the development and delivery of BSIP's across England in an effort to improve bus public transport recognising that a strong, successful, low emission bus network will help support the decarbonization of the transport sector, support the economy and minimise traffic congestion.

18. The exact allocation of DfT funds from government to support Staffordshire's BSIP is not certain at this time since the BSIP is a competitive process. It is anticipated that funding awards will be made in Spring 2022 once DfT have had the opportunity to review all the submissions from the Local Transport Authorities.
19. Staffing resource will be required across a number of key teams to support the development and implementation of our BSIP / EP. The DfT has provided us with £100,000 towards the development costs of the BSIP and a further £ 438,538 has been provided for capacity funding following the Council's commitment to an Enhanced Partnership earlier this year.

Risks Identified

20. The development of a Bus Service Improvement Plan does bring some risks. However, these can be managed and mitigated with the right approach.
21. The key risks and mitigating measures that have been identified at this stage include:
 - a. Team capacity – our current teams do not have sufficient capacity to develop and implement a BSIP / EP. In the short term this can be mitigated by utilising external support. However, beyond this additional capacity will be needed to ensure effective delivery. With the award of the capacity funding additional resources are currently being recruited.
 - b. Loss of funding – if the Council is successful in the BSIP submission it is likely that significant funds could be available to improve the bus network in Staffordshire. At the present time it is unclear what funding will be available after May 2024 and therefore careful consideration has been given to ensuring that our BSIP recognises the risk of funding being withdrawn within two years.

Conclusion

22. The Staffordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan offers a great opportunity for Staffordshire. Improving the bus network could play an important role in delivering our key priorities including access to employment and key services, town centre regeneration and contributing towards achieving net carbon zero.

Community Impact Assessment

Full CIA – Following the recent completion of a public engagement exercise and consultation with all Staffordshire Bus Operators, a full CIA will be developed and published once the BSIP funding allocations are known. The publication of the CIA will be linked to the approval of the Enhanced Partnership (EP) documentation and will set out the community impact implications of the BSIP once funding is known.

(Note - The BSIP is a high level aspirational document, and implementation of any schemes is reliant on funding being made available and will be agreed through the enhanced partnership due to be established by March 2022.)

List of Background Documents:

- Bus Back Better – National Bus Strategy for England” - [Bus back better - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/bus-back-better)
- “The Bus Services Act 2017: Enhanced Partnerships Guidance” - [Bus Services Act 2017: Enhanced Partnership creation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-bus-services-act-2017-enhanced-partnerships-guidance)
- Greener Journeys – A Roadmap to Growth - [greener-journeys-a-roadmap-to-growth.pdf \(cpt-uk.org\)](https://www.cpt-uk.org/greener-journeys-a-roadmap-to-growth.pdf)
- Cross Sector Benefits of Backing the Bus - [The cross-sector benefits of backing the bus | URBAN TRANSPORT GROUP](https://www.urbantransportgroup.com/cross-sector-benefits-of-backing-the-bus)
- Local Government Association – Decarbonising Transport – The Role of Buses [Decarbonising transport - The role of buses | Local Government Association](https://www.localgovernmentassociation.org.uk/decarbonising-transport-the-role-of-buses)
- Staffordshire County Council – Connected Staffordshire Strategic Plan 2018-2022: Update [Strategic-Plan-2018-to-2022-full-Updated.pdf \(staffordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/media/10000/Strategic-Plan-2018-to-2022-full-Updated.pdf)

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Staffordshire County Council – Bus Service Improvement Plan Survey Results

Contact Details

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