

Local Members Interest
N/A

Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thursday 16 September 2021

National Bus Strategy – Bus Service Improvement Plan Development

Recommendations

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Note the aims of the National Bus Strategy and observe that the Council has committed to an Enhanced Partnership, working with all bus companies who operate bus services in Staffordshire.
- b. Comment on the emerging themes which are likely to be the focus of the Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan submission at the end of October 2021.
- c. Consider whether there are any elements that are missing that should be considered in the BSIP prior to formal sign off in October 2021 noting that DfT is asking for ambitious submissions and that there is a risk to future non-public transport funding without one.

Report of Cllr David Williams, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

1. Department for Transport (DfT) recently published the National Bus Strategy (NBS) outlining their ambition to improve bus services in England. 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.
2. 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.
3. Committee Members are asked to comment on the emerging priorities for the Staffordshire BSIP and to consider whether there are any omissions which would prevent the BSIP submission being ambitious and fit for purpose.

Background

4. 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.
5. “[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.
6. 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.
7. Having committed to an EP there is now a requirement to develop and submit a BSIP by the 31 October 2021. This is currently being developed with operators and will be formally signed off by Cabinet on the 20th October 2021.
8. Customer insight has been gained which is currently being evaluated, this together with previous customer feedback from the Transport Focus Bus Passenger Survey carried out in Staffordshire will be used to shape the final BSIP.

Current Staffordshire Bus Market

9. During 2018/19, local buses in Staffordshire carried 13.7m million passenger journeys, making the bus our most important means of public transport. For context, in the same year, 8.8m million passenger journeys were made to/from railway stations in the County. Notwithstanding this, the bus network in Staffordshire has seen a notable decline in patronage over the preceding decade, from 22 million passenger journeys made in 2009/10. The National Bus Strategy aims to reverse this decline and ensure a sustainable bus network remains in place, with the majority of services being able to operate on a commercial basis.
10. Prior to the pandemic it is important to note that the majority of bus routes operated in Staffordshire were provided commercially with minimal financial support from the County Council. In common with many Local Transport Authorities the supported bus network in Staffordshire has reduced over the last six years. Available funds

have been used to support daytime journeys to allow access to key destinations where subsidy per trip remains within reasonable bounds.

11. The reduction in bus passenger numbers over the last decade has also seen changes in the bus market as individual operators alter their market presence. Today there are 16 individual companies that operate bus routes and an indicative current passenger market share of the main providers is as follows:
 - a. D&G Buses – 33%
 - b. Arriva Midland – 19%
 - c. First Potteries -16%
 - d. Midland Classic – 13%
 - e. Trent Barton – 9%
 - f. Select Bus – 5%
 - g. TWM (National Express) – 3%
 - h. Taxico – 1%
 - i. Others – 1%
12. The publication of the national bus strategy was delayed due to the Covid-19 global pandemic with the original £3b funding announcement being made in February 2020, just one month before the nation entered its first national lockdown.
13. The implications of restricted travel due to the pandemic during 2020/21 has had profound impact on the public transport sector across England with patronage levels on bus and rail greatly reduced from pre-covid-19 levels. In 2020/21 there were c4m passenger journeys on the Staffordshire bus network and an estimated 1.8m passenger journeys on the rail network (note actual rail figures will not be available until later in 2021). The reduction in fare revenue has required financial intervention at a national level for both bus and rail in order that core public networks were maintained for essential workers. The County Council has, at the request of national government, provided financial support to the local bus industry by maintaining concessionary reimbursement at pre-covid-19 levels and continuing with supported bus network payments. This financial support continues as the sector transitions to the 'new normal'.
14. The emerging BSIP and the ambitions of the National Bus Strategy therefore need to be considered alongside the current fragile state of the local public bus network and any long lasting implications to travel patterns that may emerge both in the short, medium and long term.

Intended Approach to the BSIP

15. Since the publication of the NBS in March this year, DfT have issued extensive guidance on their expectations on what should be included in a BSIP and they have asked Local Transport Authorities to be ambitious in their asks of government. DfT have also stated that the quality and scale of ambition of our BSIP will have a direct effect on future non-public transport DfT funding allocations.
16. The guidance issued by DfT suggests that Bus Service Improvement Plans could include the following elements:

- a. Targets for journey times and reliability, at both County and city/town level. A progress report is required every 6 months.
 - b. Identify where bus priority measures are needed.
 - c. Set out pressures on the road network including air quality and carbon reduction.
 - d. Passenger growth targets
 - e. Plans for a fare strategy to support growth, including multi operator ticketing.
 - f. Impact of roadside infrastructure – stops, shelters, real time information displays
 - g. How the bus network should serve key destinations such as schools, health, employment etc.
 - h. Local consultation
 - i. Commitment to bus passenger charter.
 - j. Implementation of bus priority schemes to reduce bus journey times.
 - k. More services expected to operate evenings / weekends / night and to smaller towns/villages.
 - l. Higher frequency core services.
 - m. Promotion and marketing significantly expanded.
 - n. Bus Stations should be protected from closure and redevelopment and improved.
 - o. Railway stations should be hubs for connecting services – including high quality stops close to station entrances.
 - p. Better services to out of town employment
 - q. Working with bus operators and energy providers to decarbonise the local bus fleet.
17. The existing Staffordshire Bus Operators' Forum (SBOF) has formed the basis of our partnership working in recent years. An Enhanced Partnership would build on the work of the SBOF and provide a formal basis on which to expand collaborative working with our local operators.
18. Within Staffordshire, a BSIP could have wide ranging benefits for our urban and rural areas alike. It offers the opportunity to reverse the long-term decline in bus passenger numbers that have occurred over the past decade. As we come out of the Covid 19 pandemic, robust measures will be needed to restore the public transport network to a strong and sustainable footing.
19. The following list represents an early outline of the elements that could make up our BSIP. Many of these are stipulated within the national guidance and the nature of their implementation would be guided by baseline data analysis and stakeholder consultation.
- a. **Multi operator ticketing** – network wide, always offering the best value option for journeys with more than 1 operator. Inclusion of “tap on/tap off” or equivalent technology to capture proper origin/destination data would provide significant intelligence to inform network planning.
 - b. **Bus priority** – reliability is key to attracting passengers, we will identify hotspots for delays to buses and implement priority where space allows.
 - c. **“Whole route” audits** – identify all causes of delay on core routes and implement measures to address them. These may be individually small but can add considerably to schedules across routes – e.g. parked cars, bus stops difficult to get out of, junctions difficult to turn out of.

- d. **High quality bus stop infrastructure** – improvements to roadside information and infrastructure, including real time passenger information, bus flags, bus shelters and operation of town centre bus stands / stations.
 - e. **Bus network** – build on core network of direct, frequent, high quality inter-urban services linking key settlements and consider network of evening and Sunday services to support employment, retail and leisure.
 - f. **Patronage growth** – seeking to stop declining patronage and see sustainable growth, including through modal shift.
 - g. **Customer satisfaction** – targets for satisfaction with journey experience, information, waiting facilities, personal security.
 - h. **Emissions** – define emission standards, linking with air quality strategy. Modal shift of itself generates significant environmental benefit.
 - i. **Development standards** – consider how design standards and developer contributions could be utilised to increase penetration and sustainability of local bus services.
 - j. **Marketing** – co-ordinated, consistent, sustained high profile marketing campaign to promote the network and support patronage growth.
20. As noted in paragraph 10 above there is limited County Council funding available to provide a network of supported bus services in the long term and therefore it is considered that any ask of government funding to enhance the bus network in e) above (**Bus Network**) will only be done if there is a reasonable chance of the service becoming commercial in the medium term (by April 2024).
21. It should be noted that many bus services in Staffordshire are not contained to the geographic boundary of Staffordshire County Council's administrative area. It is intended that as the Staffordshire EP is developed, close corporation will be gained from neighbouring LTA's so that opportunities can be taken to have consistent measures on route corridors that cross LTA boundaries.

Summary

22. The Government's National Bus Strategy offers this authority an opportunity to work with operators to bid for money to update old vehicles, improve passenger facilities and encourage bus companies to innovate for the future.
23. 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.
24. The exact allocation of funds from government is not certain at this time and as the BSIP is a competitive process this will be subject to DfT's view of the content in our submission.

Link to Strategic Plan

25. The information in this report has a direct link to the Council's Strategic Plan and is linked to several of the outcomes, priorities and core principles including:
- a. Have access to more good jobs and share the benefits of economic growth.

- b. Help Staffordshire's economy to grow and generate more good jobs
- c. Think climate change in all we do to limit our impact on the planet.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

26. There is a link between this report and the Climate Change report which has been considered by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 7 September 2021. A strong, successful bus network in Staffordshire will help encourage a modal shift from car to bus reducing traffic congestion and carbon emissions. In the short-term moving to low emission buses will improve air quality whilst in the longer term, zero carbon buses will support the decarbonization of the transport sector.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

- Bus Back Better – National Bus Strategy for England” - [Bus back better - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100212/bus-back-better-national-bus-strategy-for-england.pdf)
- “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/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642123/the-bus-services-act-2017-enhanced-partnerships-guidance.pdf)
- 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.org/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.local.gov.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/100212/strategic-plan-2018-to-2022-full-updated.pdf)

Contact Details

Assistant Director: Clive Thomson, Assistant Director for Connectivity and Sustainability

Report Author: Louise Clayton
Job Title: Head of Transport Operations and Future Connectivity
Telephone No.: 07855 336910
E-Mail Address: louise.clayton@staffordshire.gov.uk