

Cabinet

13 October 2021

The National Bus Strategy, Enhanced Partnerships and Bus Service Improvement Plan update



Ordinary Decision

Report of Corporate Management Team

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Councillor Elizabeth Scott, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To advise Cabinet of the role the County Council is playing in responding to the Government's National Bus Strategy and associated activity for the process of implementing an Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan for the region.
- 2 This report sets out the potential impact this may have in our County.
- 3 It updates Cabinet of progress to date, our commitment to ensure the best possible outcome for the County and advises on the timescale for the implementation of the Enhanced Partnership.

Executive summary

- 4 The National Bus Strategy (NBS) was launched during March 2021, setting out Government's vision for the future of bus services including the requirement for all Local Transport Authorities (LTA) to commit to working with bus operators to develop an Enhanced Partnership (EP).
- 5 An EP is a statutory partnership between one or more LTAs and their local bus operators that sets out how they will work together to deliver a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).

- 6 The BSIP will need to set out how current arrangements meet our aspirations, and highlight what improvements need to be delivered through the EP and the investment plans of LTAs and bus operators.
- 7 The Government expects Bus Service Improvement Plans to include:
 - targets for journey times and reliability improvements,
 - identify where bus priority measures are needed,
 - set out pressures on the road network, air quality issues and carbon reduction targets which improved bus services could address; and
 - drive improvements for passengers by:
 - setting targets for passenger growth and customer satisfaction;
 - setting out plans and costs for fares, ticketing and modal integration;
 - considering the impact of roadside infrastructure.
- 8 While the responsibility and power to make an EP lies with the North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC), the County Council, while not the Local Transport Authority, has a key role to play in the process with both its delegated transport functions and as Highway Authority as well as being a constituted member of the NEJTC.
- 9 The publication of a BSIP is a key milestone in the process of development and implementation of an EP and it will be key that this plan reflects the needs of people in County Durham.
- 10 As an enabler to engagement, a 'Vision for Buses' document has been compiled collaboratively with North East bus operators and members of the NEJTC and will provide evidence that engagement has been undertaken with the public and other key stakeholders.
- 11 To extend this engagement, Local Bus Boards are also proposed, allowing local representatives to meet with bus representatives to increase understanding between the parties involved.
- 12 While detail of funding is pending further clarity from Central Government, it is anticipated that the BSIP will act as a bidding document to influence the share of the £3 billion of transformation funding the region will receive from Central Government.

Recommendation

13 Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) note and endorse the role of the County Council within the Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan process and the progress to date;
- (b) note and endorse the commitment for the County Council to play a proactive role to ensure that the County receives the best possible deal from the potential funding settlement.

Background

The National Bus Strategy

- 14 The National Bus Strategy (NBS) was launched during March 2021, setting out Government's vision for the future of bus services outside London. It follows the announcement in February 2020 of a £3 billion transformational fund to help level up buses across England towards London standards.
- 15 The strategy is wide ranging and ambitious in its aims to avoid a car led recovery by making buses cheaper and more attractive; to not only get overall patronage back to its pre-Covid-19 level, but then to exceed it.
- 16 The NBS sets out a requirement for all Local Transport Authorities (LTA) to commit to working with bus operators to develop an Enhanced Partnership (EP), except where they have already started the Franchising process.

Enhanced Partnership

- 17 An EP is a statutory partnership between one or more LTAs and their local bus operators that sets out how they will work together to deliver BSIP (see below) outcomes in the defined geographical area(s) set out in the EP. It is in two parts:
 - an EP Plan - a clear vision of the improvements to bus services that the EP is aiming to deliver, mirroring the BSIP;
 - one or more EP schemes – an accompanying document that sets out the requirements that need to be met by local services that stop in the geographical area defined in the EP scheme, to achieve BSIP outcomes.
- 18 A key element of creating an EP is the requirement for each LTA to prepare a BSIP.
- 19 Further details on the types of measures referred to in the NBS and what this may mean to the NEJTC area are set out in Appendix 2.

Bus Service Improvement Plan

- 20 The BSIP will need to set out how current arrangements meet our aspirations, and highlight what improvements need to be delivered through the EP and the investment plans of LTAs and bus operators. It is likely that the BSIP will become a bidding document for future DfT investment in bus services.

21 **Bus Service Improvement Plans will:**

- be developed by LTAs in collaboration with local bus operators, community transport bodies and local businesses, services and people;
- cover the LTA's full area, all local bus services within it, and the differing needs of any parts of that area (e.g., urban and rural elements);
- focus on delivering the bus network that LTAs (in consultation with operators) want to see, including how to address the under provision and overprovision of bus services and buses integrating with other modes;
- set out how they will achieve the objectives in this strategy, including growing bus use, and include a detailed plan for delivery;
- be updated annually and reflected in the Authority's Local Transport Plan;
- influence the share of the £3 billion of transformation funding each LTA receives.

22 **Government expect Bus Service Improvement Plans to:**

- set targets for journey times and reliability improvements (for the LTA as a whole and in each of the largest cities and towns in its area) – to be reported against, publicly, at least every six months;
- identify where bus priority measures are needed, including consideration of Bus Rapid Transit routes to transform key corridors and how traffic management can be improved to benefit buses;
- set out pressures on the road network, air quality issues and carbon reduction targets which improved bus services could address and set out actions working with operators to transform the local bus fleet to zero emission;
- drive improvements for passengers by:
 - setting targets for passenger growth and customer satisfaction (to be reported against, publicly, at least every six months);

- setting out plans and costs for fares, ticketing and modal integration. Initially, Government expect LTAs and bus operators to develop plans to enable multi-operator ticketing, where plans do not exist. Over time it is expected LTAs to work across transport modes towards enabling a multi-modal ticketing scheme;
- considering the impact of roadside infrastructure (e.g., bus stops and shelters) on passenger safety, security and accessibility;
- considering how a coherent and integrated network should serve schools, health, social care, employment and other services;
- taking into account the views of local people;
- committing to a Bus Passenger Charter (BPC) that sets out what passengers can expect from bus operators delivering local bus services across their area. BPCs should include commitments on the accessibility of bus services.

The Role of the North East Joint Transport Committee, NEbus and Durham County Council

- 23 In April 2014, the new North East Combined Authority (NECA) took over the role of Local Transport Authority from Durham County Council, Nexus (in Tyne and Wear) and Northumberland County Council (NCC).
- 24 In 2018, the responsibility for transport functions became vested in a statutory Joint Committee comprising of representatives of the new North of Tyne Combined Authority and NECA.
- 25 NECA, in approving its constitution in 2014, delegated to Durham County Council (and Nexus and NCC) transport functions contained in Parts 4 and 5 of the Transport Act 1985 and Part 2 of the Transport Act 2000 (primarily relating to securing socially necessary bus services, concessionary travel, and ticketing on local passenger transport services). There were no changes to these delegated functions when the new Joint Committee was vested in 2018.
- 26 Despite these delegated functions, the overall role of LTA continues to lie with the North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC). Therefore, it is NEJTC that is responsible for and has the power to make an EP and BSIP.
- 27 NEbus is the new name for the bus operators' association encompassing the providers of services across the North East. NEbus

and its members are key stakeholders in the development and delivery of an EP and BSIP.

- 28 The aims of the NBS are complementary to the NEJTC's own vision and objectives set out in the region's transport plan; and the concept of EPs builds on the work already undertaken within the region to deliver benefits to bus users through collaborative working between the NEJTC and bus operators, both individually and through NEbus.
- 29 At its meeting on 15 June 2021, the NEJTC approved that a Statutory Notice should be issued stating the NEJTC's intention to enter into Enhanced Partnerships with bus operators. This Statutory Notice has been duly issued which now compels NEJTC to follow the process towards an Enhanced Partnership.
- 30 Local Highway Authorities will play a key role in ensuring the success of the EP. Extensive priority will need to be given to buses on our area's roads, particularly on the approaches to centres of population, in order to speed up bus journeys and make them more reliable. Parking charges and policies will need to be appraised to make sure that buses are a competitive and attractive way to travel for both work and leisure.
- 31 The County Council's role in developing the EP is, therefore, threefold; as a constituted member of the NEJTC, as the organisation responsible for those functions relating to the 1985 and 2000 Transport Acts, delegated by the NEJTC, and as the Local Highway Authority for County Durham. Indeed, the County Council was encouraged, in its role as Highway Authority, in a letter from the chair of the NEJTC, to proactively feed ideas into the development of the BSIP.

North East Vision for Buses

- 32 The publication of a BSIP is a key milestone in the process of developing and implementing an EP. The BSIP should be data led and should include evidence that engagement has been undertaken with the public and other key stakeholders as part of its formulation.
- 33 As an enabler to engagement, a 'Vision for Buses' document has been compiled collaboratively with North East bus operators and members of the NEJTC. The document sets out what NEJTC wishes to see from the region's bus network and why.
- 34 Ten key solutions are included within the document summarising NEJTC's vision:
 - an enhanced network that is simple and easy to understand;
 - faster and more reliable journey times;

- a simple and flexible fares structure;
- better integration between modes;
- more early morning and evening services;
- clear and consistent information that is easy to access;
- improved safety and security;
- cleaner and greener vehicles;
- improved connectivity beyond our boundaries;
- a first-class customer experience.

35 Whilst all of the aspects above are important to the residents of County Durham, given the nature of our highly rural network and current inequalities in the region, there are four main areas that we would wish the BSIP to address, specifically:

- (i) **Protect the current bus service network** – funding to underpin the lost revenue caused as a consequence of the fall in patronage due to the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent slow recovery rates;
- (ii) **Young People’s fares** – introduce a fares regime that allows under 19s to travel by bus at a more affordable and inclusive cost;
- (iii) **Adult fares cap** – starting April 2022, a transformative £4 per day, regionwide, cap on adult fares on all operators’ services, supported by funding;
- (iv) **An enhanced public transport network** – a series of measures to improve the customer experience including reliability and punctuality, improved infrastructure, enhanced standard of vehicles, and enhanced services including more Sunday and later evening services.

36 The period of public engagement began in July and will extend through to September this year and will encompass discussions with a diverse range of stakeholders including businesses, community groups, bus users and passenger groups.

37 A variety of approaches will be used in the engagement process, ranging from digital focus groups through to face-to-face meetings.

Care will be taken to ensure the full diversity of the region is represented, including consideration of specific rural and urban needs.

Local Bus Board

- 38 In June 2021, a report relating to governance of the bus partnership, NEJTC proposed that local bus boards be set up to ensure their needs are considered within the project.
- 39 The overarching aim of each local bus board is to allow local representatives to meet with NEbus representatives to increase understanding between the parties involved, specifically, but not limited to, reporting and discussion of forthcoming bus service changes in the Council area.
- 40 Specific terms of reference are still to be finalised, but it is likely that a single board is set up for County Durham, chaired by the cabinet portfolio holder for Economy and Partnerships, and including a representative from each AAP and representation from NEbus.

Funding

- 41 Further clarity on the availability of funding is awaited from central government but it is understood that allocation of the £3 billion transformation funding from central government will be in two parts:
- a formula-based allocation to each LTA; and
 - a bidding process where the BSIP will act as the bidding document and will influence the further share of the £3 billion of transformation funding each LTA receives.

Risks

- 42 As referred to previously, it is anticipated that the quality of the BSIP will determine the level of funding afforded to the region and subsequently to County Durham.
- 43 Therefore, it is essential that an ambitious BSIP is submitted to maximise the opportunities for improvement of the public transport experience for the residents of and visitors to County Durham.
- 44 Currently our public transport network has not recovered from a significant reduction in passengers as a result of Covid and has been supported by Central Government funding which is coming to an end. Whilst replacement funding will be available through the BSIP process there is a significant risk that a lower-than-expected settlement could lead to a reduction in bus services in parts of the county and that the current fares inequalities across the region will persist.

- 45 A lost opportunity to improve the bus network as described above, both in terms of modal shift and vehicle standards, will have a wider impact and place additional risk on the ability to deliver many of the key measures addressing the climate emergency and decarbonisation agendas.
- 46 Equally, step changes in the provision of bus priority measures, parking policy and charges, to ensure that the bus is a competitive and attractive alternative to the car, is likely to bring the risk of challenge from other parts of the community.

Timescales and next steps

47 Below details the key milestones in the making of an Enhanced Partnership. Council officers will continue to develop the BSIP and EP with regional and TNE colleagues:

- a notice of intent to produce a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and enter into an Enhanced Partnership (EP) was made on 30 June 2021;
- on 26 October 2021, the North East Joint Transport Committee (NEJTC) will be asked to agree the final version of the BSIP to allow its submission to the DfT;
- on 14 December, the NEJTC will be asked to agree a draft version of the EP for public consultation;
- on 12 January 2022, the Statutory formal consultation will commence on the EP;
- on 15 March, the NEJTC will be asked to formally enter into an Enhanced Partnership which will then come into effect on the 1 April 2022.

Conclusion

- 48 The Government clearly has high expectations of Local Transport Authorities in improving the role of buses in recovering from the coronavirus pandemic and beyond, as demonstrated in its new, ambitious National Bus Strategy “Bus Back Better”.
- 49 The County Council, as part of Transport North East, has a key role to play in the development of an Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan both as public transport specialist and Highway Authority.

Background papers

- None.

Other useful documents

- The National Bus Strategy “Bus Back Better”
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980227/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf
- Your Vision for Buses
<https://www.transportnortheast.gov.uk/assets/AST008%20North%20East%20Vision%20for%20Buses-A4-HR.pdf>

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None related to this report.

Finance

None related to this report.

Consultation

None related to this report.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None related to this report.

Climate Change

The content on a Bus Service Improvement Plan and the implementation of future schemes contribute to many of the aims of the Climate Emergency by maintaining and encouraging the public to use a comprehensive passenger transport network across County Durham and beyond.

Human Rights

None related to this report.

Crime and Disorder

None related to this report.

Staffing

None related to this report.

Accommodation

None related to this report.

Risk

None related to this report.

Procurement

None related to this report.

Appendix 2: National Bus Strategy - minimum requirements for Bus Service Improvement Plan

Minimum requirements for BSIP / EP	Key issues for JTC / NEbus partnership
Cover the full LTA area, addressing differing needs (e.g., rural and urban)	<p>The BSIP/EP Plan needs to set out a clear vision for bus service improvements and must cover the whole JTC area</p> <p>Accompanying actions to achieve the vision can be set out in one or more EP Scheme(s). This could facilitate a different focus between say; urban and rural areas, or between each highway authority for infrastructure schemes</p>
Focus on delivering a bus network that LTAs want, addressing current under and over provision and integration with other modes	<p>The BSIP should include Service Level Policy, setting out the daytime, evening and Sunday service levels that different communities need</p> <p>The BSIP should consider high frequency radial routes, superbuss networks, expanded use of park & ride, and demand responsive transport for rural areas</p> <p>The partnership can help to facilitate the removal of duplication between operators on over-provided routes. The NBS suggests that this resource could boost under provision elsewhere</p>
Set targets for journey times and reliability improvements	<p>Sharing of data will help inform improvement measures (alongside data sharing agreements re confidentiality issues / aggregating etc)</p> <p>Implementation of traffic management policies and highway</p>

	<p>schemes will improve bus journey times and will encourage patronage growth / modal shift</p>
<p>Identify bus priority measures, including consideration of Bus Rapid Transit</p>	<p>Build on the work undertaken for Transforming Cities Fund, which identified key bus corridors across the region that would benefit from infrastructure to speed up bus services through congested areas</p> <p>Link bus real time locational data with UTMC / traffic signal control</p> <p>Explore options for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes</p>
<p>Set out pressure on the road network, air quality issues and carbon reduction targets that improved bus services could help to address</p>	<p>The EP scheme can specify vehicle requirements to reflect air quality and carbon reduction targets and actions</p> <p>Government expects improved bus services to be part of the solution to address air quality / carbon reduction through modal shift</p>
<p>Set targets for passenger growth and customer satisfaction</p>	<p>Build on Transport Focus annual passenger survey to target areas for improvement</p> <p>Monitoring of patronage recovery post-covid</p> <p>Sharing of patronage data and customer information will help develop greater understanding of the network and better target interventions</p>
<p>Set out plans and costs for fares, ticketing and modal integration</p>	<p>Fully smart, multi-operator, multi-modal ticketing options across the JTC area, with maximum fares and daily price cap</p> <p>Alignment of fares zones across all operators</p>

	<p>Lower fares and flat fares to attract passengers and speed up boarding</p>
<p>Consider the impact of roadside infrastructure on safety, security and accessibility</p>	<p>Review safety and security around bus stops and interchange points – e.g., lighting and CCTV</p> <p>Work with local disability groups to address accessibility issues</p>
<p>Consider the views of local people and commit to a Bus Passenger Charter</p>	<p>Develop Bus Passenger Charter for NE</p> <p>Use of Local Bus Boards in network planning process and development of BSIP options</p> <p>Consultation strategy to be developed</p>