



CABINET – 13 SEPTEMBER 2024

IMPROVING PASSENGER TRANSPORT THROUGH A REFRESHED BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Cabinet with an update on work associated with the refresh of the Leicestershire Bus Service Improvement Plan (LBSIP 24) and to seek approval of the Plan, attached as Appendix A to this report.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet:
 - a) Notes the financial implications and ongoing funding requirements arising from implementing the National Bus Strategy (NBS) and associated Leicestershire Bus Service Improvement Plan, and the County Council's longer-term Bus Service Improvement Plan funding requirement;
 - b) Approves the Leicestershire Bus Service Improvement Plan (LBSIP 24), attached as Appendix A to this report;
 - c) Notes that, pending any changes in legislation/guidance from the Government, implementation of the LBSIP 24 will proceed as planned.

Reasons for Recommendation

3. To comply with the requirements of the NBS and the updated Department for Transport (DfT) BSIP guidance, which required the County Council to publish a refreshed BSIP in 2024. This will ensure that the Council is eligible for NBS support funding.
4. As outlined in the 'Improving Passenger Transport Through Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus and Network North' Cabinet report (December 2023), the recent funding awards from the Government provide a unique opportunity to explore how the Council, working closely with local bus operators through its Enhanced Partnership (EP), might take a different approach to providing supported passenger transport services across Leicestershire and, therefore,

enable a more resilient and secure commercial network. The updated BSIP document outlines the resources now available to the Council and the outcomes that are expected to be achieved.

5. The new Government on 17 July 2024 announced proposals to submit a 'Better Buses Bill' through Parliament, indicating a change in approach. Should new legislation be passed, or significant guidance be received from the DfT, it may be necessary to review the LBSIP 24. The LBSIP 24 has been drafted to enable a measure of flexibility and the Director of Environment and Transport has delegated authority (following consultation with the Chief Executive) to make such consequential amendments to plans/policies/strategies agreed by members as is considered necessary to reflect changes in legislation and good practice. Any significant changes would be the subject of a further report to the Cabinet.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

6. The DfT published an updated BSIP guidance in January 2024, which requested that all Local Transport Authorities publish a refreshed BSIP by 12 June 2024. Working in collaboration with the DfT, a working draft of the LBSIP 24 was submitted by this date. This was to enable further opportunity for stakeholders (bus operators, district councils and Leicester City Council) to help develop proposals within the LBSIP 24 and to seek formal approval through the County Council's democratic process. The DfT has confirmed that it supports this approach, and it will have no direct impact on programme funding.
7. A report on the refreshed LBSIP 24 will be considered by the Highways and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5 September 2024 and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet.
8. Subject to the Cabinet's approval, the LBSIP 24 will be formally submitted to the DfT and published after 13 September 2024.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

9. In November 2020, the Cabinet approved the Leicester and Leicestershire Strategic Transport Priorities (2020-2050), which highlights where the County Council and Leicester City Council will work together to deliver common transport aims and objectives. Its principal aims include supporting the transition to a low-carbon and circular economy; adapting to climate change; improving connectivity; supporting and driving the economy to unlock growth; and supporting the efficient movement of both people and goods around and through the County.
10. In March 2021, the Government published its priorities and ambitions for road-based passenger transport in the DfT publication 'Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England'. This required the Council to establish an Enhanced Partnership (EP) with operators as a condition to receiving future funding. It also required the Council to develop the BSIP, which sets out the vision, targets, and initiatives to improve passenger transport in Leicestershire.

11. In June 2021, the Cabinet considered a report on the NBS and BSIP guidance and agreed the Council's approach to improving bus services, noting that a further report would be submitted in autumn 2021, setting out proposals for an Enhanced Partnership Scheme (EPS) and a BSIP for Leicestershire, and identifying implications for the Council's Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS).
12. In October 2021, the Cabinet considered a report on the implementation of the NBS and resolved that the Council's PTPS be reviewed, to take account of the formal establishment of the EP and the delivery of the BSIP. The Director of Environment and Transport emphasised that the extent of the delivery of the ambitious plans would be dependent on the level of funding made available from the Government and added that the existing PTPS would be used to assess the need for support where bus services were no longer commercially viable.
13. In March 2022, the Cabinet noted the outcome of a consultation on the EPS. It approved the establishment of the EPS with bus service operators and that registrations for local bus service changes and requests for funding to support local bus services would continue to be assessed in line with the PTPS, pending a review of the PTPS once the EP was in place.
14. In March 2022, the Cabinet also considered a report on challenges to local bus services including a review of the PTPS to establish if it was still fit for purpose, and a wider network review of its contracted services. The Cabinet authorised the Director of Environment and Transport, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member, and the Director of Corporate Resources, to take such action as necessary to ensure the continued provision of services in line with the PTPS.
15. In February 2023, the Cabinet noted the recommencement of the review of supported passenger transport services in line with the PTPS and approved a proposed programme of local focussed engagement and consultation to inform affected communities on the review outcomes and intended course of action.
16. In May 2023, the DfT announced that the Council would receive approximately £1.79m funding in the financial year 2023/24 and the same amount in 2024/25 known as 'BSIP+' funding. Following this announcement, the review of subsidised services was halted again, and services were maintained at their existing level.
17. In October 2023, the DfT announced further one-off revenue funding of £4.05m, specific for public transport for the financial year 2024/25. This funding represented a share of the Government's saving made from cancelling the second leg of HS2 and the redistribution of those monies as set out in the associated 'Network North' funding document.

18. In December 2023, the Cabinet considered a report regarding the award of grant funding as detailed above for passenger transport services. The Cabinet approved the revised PTPS and authorised the Director of Environment and Transport to use the grant funding to develop a reshaped Leicestershire supported transport network.

Resource Implications

19. The time-limited funding available to the Council provides an unprecedented opportunity to transform the Leicestershire subsidised public transport network and enhance the resilience and stability of the commercial public transport network. However, the short-term, one-off, nature of the funding is not helpful, and the Council must ensure that there are no legacy costs once the funding ends.
20. It is anticipated that additional resource and expertise will be required to deliver the initiatives and any reshaped network proposals, and these will be funded through the BSIP+ and 'Network North' funding as necessary.
21. In February 2023, prior to the recent funding announcements from the DfT, the Council's subsidised bus services budget was facing a £1m shortfall in the 2023/24 financial year. There was also a requirement in the 2023-27 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to make savings of an additional £200,000 per year with effect from 2024/25.
22. As outlined in paragraph 34, the BSIP+ funding is subject to a number of terms and conditions, with the 'Network North' public transport funding following the same restrictions. One of these conditions stipulated that recipients must retain existing funding levels for the duration of the funding, such as 2023-2025, therefore, it has been necessary to defer the MTFS saving requirement to 2025/26. The £1m shortfall, although covered by the funding for 2023-2025, must still be addressed in the medium-term, as it is not part of the existing budget levels.
23. It must be noted, however, that funding post-2024/25 is still uncertain. If sufficient funding from the Government of an appropriate mix of capital and revenue is not forthcoming, the Council's passenger transport budget could face significant funding challenges with resultant service reductions, as was reported to the Cabinet in December 2023. Beyond 2025, any delivery of the LBSIP 24 will be completely dependent on additional funding from the Government.
24. The Director of Corporate Resources has been consulted on the content of this report.

Legal Implications

25. A refreshed LBSIP 24 would support the Council's responsibilities as the Local Transport Authority. The County Council has a statutory duty to secure the provision of local transport solutions which the private sector is unable or

unwilling to provide. However, its duty under the Transport Act 1985 is not absolute but simply requires transport provision so far as the Council considers it appropriate to meet any public transport requirements which would not otherwise be met.

26. Section 109(1) of the Transport Act 2000 requires transport authorities to keep their local transport plan under review and alter it if they consider it appropriate to do so.
27. Furthermore, as a 'best value authority', the Council is under a statutory duty to secure continuous improvement in the way in which it exercises its functions, having regard to a combination of factors, including economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.
28. On 17 July 2024, an announcement was made in the King's Speech that a 'Better Buses Bill' will be introduced. It is acknowledged that this could change the Council's approach to passenger transport significantly in coming years. Prior to any further clarity on what the Bill entails and timescales for its progress through Parliament, or any interim guidance from the DfT, it is advised that the Council continues with the ambitions in the proposed BSIP.
29. Potential changes arising from the proposed 'Better Buses Bill' would likely require separate legal consideration, once known.
30. The Director of Law and Governance has been consulted on the content of this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

31. This report will be circulated to all members.

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PART B

Background

Government priorities and funding

32. In 2021, the Government's priorities and ambitions for road-based passenger transport were set out in the DfT publication, 'Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England'. This required the Council to establish the EP with operators as a condition to receiving future funding. It also required the Council to develop a BSIP which sets out the vision, targets and initiatives to improve passenger transport in Leicestershire. The County Council, as the Local Transport Authority, submitted its first BSIP in October 2021.
33. The two tranches of £1.79m BSIP+ funding that the Council has been allocated (as outlined in paragraph 16) are intended to target actions that the Council and its EP expect will deliver the best overall outcomes in growing long-term patronage, revenues and thus maintaining service levels, whilst providing essential social and economic connectivity for local communities.
34. The terms of this funding were set out in a Memorandum of Understanding that the Council was required to sign in order for the funds to be released. Specific terms to note are that this is revenue-based funding (not to be spent on physical infrastructure measures); the Council must maintain its existing bus budgets from all sources and demonstrate that the BSIP+ funding is additional to previously agreed budgets and that the DfT expects it to be spent within a reasonable timeframe with outputs delivered within 12 months of receipt. There may be flexibility around some of these terms, but this would be subject to the submission of a project access request form by the Council and its subsequent review and approval by the DfT.
35. The one-off £4.05m 'Network North' public transport funding for 2024/25 (as outlined in paragraph 17) will be subject to the same terms and conditions as those set for the BSIP+ funding. This means there is a total of £5.84m for the 2024/25 financial year. The Government at the time also advised of a further four-year funding settlement, which was expected to be a mix of capital and revenue and that an announcement would be made on this. This could provide an opportunity to carry out improvement schemes that may not be eligible under the current funding restrictions. It is not yet known if the newly elected Government will continue with this funding plan.
36. Following the general election, and at the King's Speech on 17 July 2024, the Government proposed a 'Better Buses Bill' for the next session of Parliament. Although there is little detail at this stage, it is clear that the Government has an ambition for passenger transport, likely to include:
 - a) Empowering Local Transport Authorities and reforming funding;
 - b) Allowing every community to take back control of their buses;
 - c) Accelerating the bus franchising process;

- d) Stepping in to safeguard local bus networks;
 - e) Supporting public-sector ownership.
37. It is considered likely, however, that the majority of the ambitions described in the LBSIP 24 would remain valid, as they share a common desire to improve passenger transport provision, viability, access and the passenger experience. It is therefore considered that the proposed LBSIP 24 remains fit for purpose pending any new legislation or interim guidance being issued. On this basis, the remainder of this report and the BSIP itself largely does not refer further to the 'Better Buses Bill'.

LBSIP 24

38. Following the publication of a new BSIP guidance by the DfT in January 2024, the County Council, in collaboration with the EP, undertook a refresh of its BSIP. The refreshed LBSIP 24 is attached as Appendix A.
39. The County Council has a long-held vision for a 'best in class' sustainable and green passenger transport network. It would seamlessly connect people with employment locations, education and training opportunities, key services, other transport modes, leisure destinations and each other; in a way that is reliable, affordable, environmentally friendly, easy-to-use, safe, and inclusive. Across Leicestershire, including rural areas, passenger transport would be seen as the travel method of choice for the people living and working in the County, enhanced by links to rail, walking and cycling routes. Leicestershire's communities would enjoy enhanced connections, making the County a more attractive place to live, work, and play.
40. The LBSIP 24 aims to make the passenger transport vision a reality as much as possible, within the financial context described in paragraphs 19-23. The overall aim of the Plan is to increase bus usage (compared with the pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels) across the County through improved, financially sustainable, higher standard services that better meet the needs of Leicestershire's residents, employees, and visitors – making bus travel a preferred choice for travel around the County and to Leicester.

Objectives

41. The principal objectives of the LBSIP 24 remain unchanged from the previous BSIP and that is to make the Leicestershire Bus Network:
- a) A single system – a high-quality integrated and efficient system, with:
 - i. a clearer brand identity and a more holistic approach to marketing;
 - ii. greater coordination between operators' timetables;
 - iii. integration with other travel modes such as rail, cycling, walking and e-mobility; and
 - iv. the use of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) to provide greater availability, particular in rural areas of the County.

- b) Reliable – quicker journey times delivered more reliably and where possible, more frequently.
- c) Affordable – particularly for young people, who are the potential core bus market for the future.
- d) Easy to use – with the customer experience much easier in terms of getting information, using different operators' services, and paying fares.
- e) More attractive and greener – through moving towards use of modern, lower emission (and ultimately zero emission) vehicles across the network.

Challenges

42. The LBSIP 24 provides context for the environment in which the EP has been working in to achieve the objectives and the significant challenges faced in delivering passenger transport in a rural County, since the initial publication of the BSIP in 2021. The most significant challenges being:
- a) The limited funding to enable the Council to step in and support commercial services (for instance, when operators seek support to continue services or register to withdraw/reduce provision) over a longer period.
 - b) That rural provision is restricted to minimal DRT provision, offering one to two journeys a week to one local centre.
 - c) The provision of passenger transport for access to essential services (food shopping, healthcare) only.
 - d) The significant savings pressures to offset the Council's decreasing bottom line.
 - e) The limited resources for bus promotions.
 - f) The limited budget to introduce bus infrastructure improvements, such as real time information or shelters.
 - g) At best, managing a decline in passenger numbers through a number of factors (such as the impact of a lack of funding from the Government, the cost of living crisis, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic).

Successful delivery

43. Since the initial BSIP in 2021, the Council has:
- a) Established the EP with key stakeholders collaborating on the delivery of the BSIP.
 - b) Delivered initial EP schemes. A Bus Charter has been approved, Bus Infrastructure Standards have been set, and Euro VI standard vehicles are in operation on Leicestershire's roads.
 - c) Maintained the supported bus network, ensuring access to essential services for residents.
 - d) Established a Passenger Transport User Group, providing critical support to the EP Board.
 - e) Made a successful bid to the Rural Mobility Fund, which has seen the delivery of the Fox Connect DRT service in the south of the County. This

will be used as a guide for future DRT roll-out across Leicestershire, subject to future funding.

- f) Upgraded stops within central Leicestershire with support from Leicester City Council, demonstrating the ability to work and deliver with a neighbouring Local Transport Authority.
- g) Made a successful Zero Emission Bus Regional Area funding bid, securing £8.8m from the DfT, contributing to a total investment of over £23m for the introduction of 46 new electric vehicles and associated charging infrastructure.

LBSIP 24 delivery plan for 2024/25

44. Through the combined BSIP+ and 'Network North' funding, the LBSIP 24 sets out an ambitious programme for delivery in 2024/25 to meet the objectives set out in paragraph 41. This consists of the following:
- a) A complete refresh of the BSIP to reflect the funding available in the short-term.
 - b) Assisting operators to stabilise and strengthen the commercial network.
 - c) Working with operators to review and reshape the passenger transport network (both commercial and supported) across Leicestershire and enhance access to opportunities for people.
 - d) Working with operators to trial discounted travel for younger people.
 - e) Working with operators to standardise youth fares.
 - f) Exploring and developing appropriate ticketing schemes, for example, multi-operator / tap-on-tap-off with operators.
 - g) Developing rail interchange marketing and information.
 - h) Exploring the feasibility of using Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) and to connect at more hubs across the County, which would enable greater connectivity and journey choice.
 - i) Developing scheme designs for the identified pinch points for buses on the Leicestershire highway network, in preparation for the potential award of capital grants in future years.
 - j) Working with operators to support the adoption of electric vehicles and other greener technologies.
 - k) Developing Leicestershire buses branding.
 - l) Procuring a contract management system and introducing a data portal to increase efficiency and improve data accuracy.
 - m) Maintaining Park and Ride provision.
 - n) Seeking the appropriate specialist resource and advice where required including financial, procurement, and legal.
45. As part of this funding boost, the Council is also in a position to consider a different approach to the supported bus service network. This would involve working with operators directly and through the EP to redesign a passenger transport network for Leicestershire based around existing commercial services; providing more direct, attractive routes by bus; making better use of Flexibus models and DDRT (similar to Fox Connect); and providing services to more communities. However, given the limited spending window for the

funding, this may only be possible in areas where other funding such as that from developers, is available.

46. Consideration could also be given to enhancing existing commercial services where appropriate, such as longer operating hours to facilitate shift work at a major employment centre. In addition, officers would seek to extend the current Park and Ride contract to ensure continuation while a full procurement exercise is carried out.
47. The benefits of this approach are expected to be:
 - a) Alignment with the NBS.
 - b) Increased stability and sustainability of the local commercial network.
 - c) Enhanced viability of supported passenger transport network with greater commercial potential.
 - d) Greater access to public transport in Leicestershire as well as improved journey choice.
 - e) Better value for money for the investment in passenger transport services.
 - f) The ability to provide operators with greater confidence to invest in new vehicle stock (bringing environmental benefits).
48. However, it should be noted that while this short-term funding enables the ability to enhance part of the County's network and realise the above benefits, if the further indicated funding settlements as highlighted in paragraph 35, or greater flexibility over spending windows, do not materialise, then there would be a need to scale the supported network back by enacting notice clauses on some contracts to ensure provision is managed within the budget envelope available.

Ambitions and Proposals 2025 to 2035

49. As part of the updated BSIP guidance, the DfT has requested that Local Transport Authorities provide an indicative programme of proposals that a BSIP could deliver from 2025 to 2029. The LBSIP 24 provides an indicative costed programme for this period of £100m to support the ongoing delivery of the Plan. This would have to complement the existing expenditure by both the County Council and local operators. It should be stressed that beyond 2025 delivery of the LBSIP 24 will be completely dependent on additional funding from the Government.
50. Subject to funding coming forward, the types of schemes that could be delivered are:
 - a) Expanded DDRT services.
 - b) Further investment in County bus network branding.
 - c) Development of the youth travel offer.
 - d) Enhancement of sustainable travel opportunities, such as utilising the Choose How You Move programme to encourage behaviour change.
 - e) Improved publicity/promotion and education, such as investing in information provision to promote the bus network.
 - f) Investment in provision of bus stops and infrastructure.

- g) Improvements to fares and ticketing, through working with partners to increase the range of ticketing offers.

Targets and Monitoring

- 51. The LBSIP 24 has set out challenging but realistic targets covering the key performance metrics of passenger growth, customer satisfaction, journey times and reliability. Due to the current sporadic nature of funding opportunities to support the passenger transport network, these targets will be kept under review to assess if they are the most appropriate mechanisms for monitoring what is a relatively volatile service area.

Consultation

- 52. Engagement with the EP, and collaboration with the DfT, has continued to take place on the development of the LBSIP 24.
- 53. As set out in paragraph 6, the Council has worked in collaboration with the DfT to submit a working draft of the LBSIP 24 by the June 2024 deadline. This has enabled further opportunity for EP members to support the development of the proposals set out within the LBSIP 24.
- 54. The Highways and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee will consider a report on 5 September and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet.

Conclusion

- 55. The funding from the DfT for the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25 provides a unique opportunity to make real improvements to the passenger transport network and services over the next two years. The position after this funded period is less certain and it is, therefore, necessary to ensure that the Council is able to adapt its support to services according to the prevailing budget situation.
- 56. The refreshed LBSIP 24 supports the Council in targeting limited funds to provide efficient passenger transport services that represent value for money, and in keeping Leicestershire communities connected to the high priority services and facilities they need.

Equality Implications

- 57. An Equality Impact Assessment on the refreshed LBSIP 24 has been undertaken. It found that, whilst the BSIP will result in some changes to passenger transport provision, these changes should have a positive impact. In essence, access to high priority services should be enhanced, particularly so with the funding that has been awarded by the Government. It recognises that should funding, and therefore budgets, be reduced in the longer-term, then the subsequent need to reduce provision would have a negative impact on older people, people with disabilities and people living in rural or deprived areas.

58. A full Equality Impact Assessment is attached at Appendix B.

Human Rights Implications

59. There are no human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Environmental Implications

60. Providing and promoting a sustainable public transport network, resulting in increased passenger usage, should have a positive impact on the Council's net zero county commitment.
61. The environmental implications of this proposal are outlined in paragraph 39 of this report.

Health Implications

62. Providing and promoting a sustainable public transport network and improving access to key services and opportunities, including healthcare and social interaction, should have a positive impact on health inequality, and help to prevent isolation and social exclusion.
63. The health implications of this proposal are outlined in paragraph 41 of this report.

Partnership Working and Associated Issues

64. The delivery of the LBSIP 24 (to the extent possible within funding constraints) is driven by a formal EP between the Council and Leicestershire bus operators. The EP also includes opportunity through a broad 'Enhanced Partnership Forum' for a wide range of other stakeholders to provide input and suggestions on how the LBSIP 24 should best be implemented.
65. The Council works closely with, and receives guidance and funding from, the DfT in implementing passenger transport initiatives. Relationships are also maintained with neighbouring authorities to address cross-border matters.
66. More detail regarding partnership working can be found in paragraph 43 of this report.

Risk Assessment

67. Although there is funding for the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25, funding is not guaranteed beyond 2024/25. If funding is not forthcoming, the Council's ability to continue supporting passenger transport services would be limited, resulting in reductions or withdrawal of support. Further funding would also not address the current budget shortfall or upcoming MTFS commitments which will still need to be mitigated.

68. There are risks around operators' ongoing viability and interest in tendering for supported services. This could lead to some services being left without an operator, or unsustainably high contract costs.

Background Papers

Report to the Cabinet on 26 October 2021, 'National Bus Strategy':

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=6447&Ver=4>

Report to the Cabinet on 29 March 2022, 'National Bus Strategy – Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme and Bus Service Improvement Plan':

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=6774&Ver=4>

Report to the Cabinet on 29 March 2022, 'Local Bus Service Challenge and Impacts':

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=6774&Ver=4>

Report to the Cabinet on 19 December 2023 'Improving Passenger Transport Through Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus and Network North Funding':

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7081&Ver=4>

Current Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS) (2023):

- Policy:
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/passenger-transport-policy.pdf>
- Strategy:
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/passenger-transport-strategy.pdf>

Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP):

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/buses-and-public-transport/bus-service-improvement-plan-bsip>

Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme:

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/buses-and-public-transport/enhanced-partnership-plan-and-scheme>

Report to the Highways and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 November 2023, Passenger Transport Update:

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1293&MId=7176&Ver=4>

Appendices

Appendix A – Draft Refreshed Leicestershire Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024

Appendix B – Equality Impact Assessment

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