

TITLE OF REPORT: North East Enhanced Partnership for Buses

REPORT OF: Peter Udall, Strategic Director, Economy, Innovation and Growth

Purpose of the Report

1. This report updates Cabinet on the progress towards the development of an Enhanced Partnership (EP) for buses in the North East and the Council's potential role and responsibilities within that process. It seeks approval for delegation to the appropriate officers and Portfolio Holders to progress the development and adoption of the EP's Plan and Scheme(s) in order to meet the associated tight deadlines.

Background

2. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent Government advice to stay at home and avoid unnecessary travel has had a profound effect on bus travel since March 2020. Reduced bus patronage has meant that, in common with other regions, the North East's bus network is now being heavily supported by Government funding.
3. The Government announced in March 2021 that funding for bus services would be dependent on authorities' and bus operators' participation in new arrangements. The National Bus Strategy set out the Government's requirement for each area to publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by 31 October 2021, and to have an EP with bus operators in place by 1 April 2022. This is a requirement of Government in order to receive ongoing future funding support. Noting that the National Bus Strategy and funding support provide an opportunity to start delivering the objectives set out in the North East Transport Plan, the North East Joint Transport Committee (JTC) issued formal notice of its intent to prepare an EP Plan and Schemes for bus services and began working with local bus operators to pursue this.
4. Public engagement, billed as the 'Big Bus Conversation', was carried out over the Summer on the JTC's Vision for Buses, and feedback from this engagement was used to prepare the region's BSIP, approved by the JTC on 26th October 2021. The plan shows how transport bodies and bus operators will work with local

highway authorities and local communities to plan and deliver a bus network where buses are better coordinated and easier to understand and use.

5. The BSIP sets out a far-reaching programme of potential measures to improve bus services in the North East and makes an ambitious request for Government funding of £804m to deliver the measures over three financial years from 2022/23 to 2024/25. A Government announcement is awaited on the level of funding which will be provided to the region. The BSIP also provides the basis for the development of the more detailed proposals required as part of an EP.

Proposal

6. The development of an EP represents the only route for securing continued support for the bus network as it continues to recover from the pandemic and further develops into the future supporting the Council's own objectives as well as those of the wider region.
7. This report seeks to provide the necessary delegations for the development and adoption of the EP within the timescales necessary to meet Government deadlines.

Recommendations

8. It is recommended that Cabinet:
 - (i) Fully supports and endorses the creation by the North East Joint Transport Committee of an Enhanced Partnership for the region in accordance with the National Bus Strategy;
 - (ii) Authorises the Strategic Director, Economy, Innovation and Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Transport, the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance, the Strategic Director, Housing, Environment and Healthy Communities and the Strategic Director, Resources and Digital, to negotiate and agree the draft Enhanced Partnership's Plan and Scheme(s) insofar as they relate to the Authority's highway authority functions, which are to be the subject of a statutory consultation in accordance with the requirements of the Transport Act 2000 and to negotiate and agree on behalf of the Authority any amendments to the Enhanced Partnership's Plan and Scheme(s) arising from the consultation.
 - (iii) Authorises the Strategic Director, Economy, Innovation and Growth, in consultation with the Portfolio holder for Environment & Transport, the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance, the Strategic Director, Housing, Environment and Healthy Communities and the Strategic Director, Resources and Digital, to enter into an Enhanced Partnership Plan

and Scheme(s) on behalf of the Authority and to take all other steps necessary to implement these proposals.

For the following reason:

To enable the implementation of a regional Enhanced Partnership in support of the North East Transport Plan and the Council's policy objectives.

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APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The Enhanced Partnership (EP) would support the pledges within Gateshead Council's 'Thrive Agenda'. It will also support the Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan and the aims and objectives of the North East Transport Plan (which was approved in March 2021). The Partnership will be aligned with the Council's initiatives to tackle the climate emergency.

Background

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3. The Government announced in March 2021 that funding for bus services would be dependent on authorities' and bus operators' participation in new arrangements. The National Bus Strategy set out the Government's requirement for each area to publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by 31 October 2021, and to have an EP with bus operators in place by 1 April 2022. This is a requirement of Government in order to receive ongoing future funding support. Noting that the National Bus Strategy and funding support provide an opportunity to start delivering the objectives set out in the North East Transport Plan, the North East Joint Transport Committee (JTC) issued formal notice of its intent to prepare an Enhanced Partnership Plan and Schemes for bus services and began working with local bus operators to pursue this.
4. Public engagement, billed as the 'Big Bus Conversation', was carried out over the Summer on the JTC's Vision for Buses, and feedback from this engagement was used to prepare the region's BSIP, approved by the JTC on 26th October 2021. The plan shows how transport bodies and bus operators will work with local highway authorities and local communities to plan and deliver a bus network where buses are better coordinated and easier to understand and use.
5. The BSIP sets out a far-reaching programme of potential measures to improve bus services in the North East and makes an ambitious request for Government funding of £804m, which covers both revenue and capital costs in order to deliver the measures over three financial years from 2022/23 to 2024/25. The amount of funding available for the North East is yet to be announced by Government. The BSIP also provides the basis for the development of the more detailed proposals required as part of an EP.

What is an Enhanced Partnership?

6. The Department for Transport defines an Enhanced Partnership as follows:

“An Enhanced Partnership (EP) is an agreement between a local transport authority (LTA) and local bus operators to work together to improve local bus services. It includes a clear vision of the improvements that the EP is aiming for (known as an EP plan) and accompanying actions to achieve them (set out in one or more EP schemes). The local transport authority has formal responsibility for making the scheme, but at set points in the process they can only proceed with their proposals if they have the support of a defined proportion of local bus operators.”

7. The JTC discharges certain LTA functions on behalf of the two combined authorities and is responsible for the preparation of the statutory transport plan and has various responsibilities with respect to public transport. However, aspects of the EP Plan and Scheme(s) will relate to powers held by the Council, as the highway authority for the borough, such as the delivery of measures on the highway which require a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO).

8. As the highway authority for the borough, it is important that the Council has a full understanding of the requirements of the EP Plan and Scheme(s) as they relate to highway authority powers. Once the EP takes effect, there will be an obligation on the Council to implement facilities and measures in accordance with the identified EP Scheme(s). EP schemes will be determined in consultation with the Council, which means that undue financial pressures should be avoidable.

Enhanced Partnership Plan

9. The EP must have a Plan. This is not a statutory commitment but the Partnership's statement of ambition, which mirrors the BSIP. This will include the various initiatives set out in the BSIP on fares, frequencies etc, and will also include proposals for bus priority and Park & Ride etc.

Enhanced Partnership Scheme(s)

10. The EP must have at least one 'Scheme'. In this sense, the 'Scheme' would bring together a number of initiatives and be agreed with all the Partners. It could involve bus priority measures but not necessarily. Each Scheme is a statutory commitment for those responsible for delivering any parts of the Scheme. Put simply, the EP Scheme is the mechanism by which the commitments made in the BSIP and the EP Plan are delivered.

11. Any bus priority measures included in the first Scheme would need to carry confidence of delivery within the initial years of the Partnership. The measures would need to be effectively 'shovel-ready' in terms of design, costing and consultation. On that basis,

and while they would still require some work, the two schemes best placed to be included in the first EP Scheme would be:

- In August 2021, the Council committed to retaining the current bus lane arrangement on West Central Route, Askew Road and Quaysgate for an extended period. Rather than retain the current temporary traffic management measures (e.g. water-filled barriers) over this extended period, the environment of the area would be improved by the introduction of longer-term measures such as kerbing. This would effectively be done through the delivery of existing proposals funded by the Active Travel Fund and the Transforming Cities Fund. These works would not affect the commitment to review the arrangements after two years.
- Introducing bus lanes on the A195 New Road at Follingsby. This is a proposal previously considered as part of the Transforming Cities Fund bid

Progress towards an EP

12. An EP Plan and Scheme(s) are currently being developed by Transport North East, working with Local Authorities, Nexus and bus operators, in accordance with Government guidance. These must first be subject to a period of bus industry stakeholder engagement, known as the 'Operator Objection Mechanism'. Following this, a period of statutory consultation is required.

13. The main next steps in the process (including indicative dates) are as follows:

14 December 2021	JTC approval sought for consultation versions of EP Plan and Scheme(s)
16 December 2021	Operator Objection period to begin
13 January 2022	Statutory consultation to commence
15 March 2022	JTC approval sought for final EP Plan and Scheme(s)
1 April 2022	EP to commence

Consultation

14. Extensive consultation across the North East was carried out during the preparation of the North East Transport Plan. This included an eight-week public consultation involving regional authorities, the business community, individuals, and community organisations. Virtual consultation events were held (equivalent to local meetings in town and village halls), as well as additional forums with businesses and other interest groups. The outcome from the consultation has helped shape the direction of transport strategy in the region.

15. The Big Bus Conversation was carried out by Transport North East in Summer 2021, and further external engagement and formal consultation are proposed to be carried out by Transport North East, as described in paragraphs 12 and 13.

16. Individual bus priority schemes that become part of the EP will continue to be subject to local and stakeholder consultation as appropriate.

17. Cabinet Members for Environment and Transport and the Leader and Deputy Leader were also consulted in preparing this report.

Alternative Options

18. No alternative has been considered due to the EP being the only option to continue to support the regional bus network and meet regional policy objectives while supporting more local priorities.

Implications of Recommended Option

24. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** – The North East’s BSIP set out an ambitious request for Government funding for the delivery of measures relevant to bus services: a Government announcement is awaited on the level of funding which will be provided to the region. Entering into an EP is a requirement in order to receive ongoing Government funding for bus services.

The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital confirms that there are no direct financial implications arising from entering into the EP. Future reports will be brought to Cabinet for decision making where the EP requires any financial support from the Council for specific schemes.

- b) **Human Resources Implications** – There are no human resources implications.

- c) **Property Implications** - No property implications have been identified.

25. Risk Management Implication - The main risk associated with the programme is that any significant underspend or failure to deliver schemes that have external funding linked to them may lead to a loss of that funding, and jeopardise the potential to secure additional funding in future years. The development of the programmes takes into account risks relating to safety, delay and longer-term issues such as growth, pollution and health in determining priorities.

26. Equality and Diversity Implications - Implementation of the EP will assist in reducing social exclusion by improving access for the young, elderly, unemployed/low waged and people with disabilities.

27. Crime and Disorder Implications – Proposals within the BSIP, to be developed through the EP, will assist in improving safety and security for the travelling public.

28. Health Implications – Improving opportunities for sustainable travel through improved bus services will encourage more activity and also benefit health by improving air quality.

29. Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications - The EP will be an important element in providing a sustainable transport system capable of supporting Gateshead's environmental, social and economic objectives. It seeks to reduce car dependence and increase sustainable travel, thereby contributing to the reduction of carbon emissions.

30. Human Rights Implications - The construction of transport facilities can have an effect on the amenities of some residents. Consultation on specific proposals will be held with residents, ward members and relevant stakeholders.

31. Ward Implications - All wards will be affected.

Background Information

32. Further background information is contained in: