

Divisions Affected - ALL

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 15th June 2022

National Bus Strategy – Draft Enhanced Partnership

Report by Corporate Director for Environment and Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee are RECOMMENDED to**
 - (i) **Provide any comments on the Draft Enhanced Partnership and supporting documents prior to their consideration by Cabinet.**

Executive Summary

2. The purpose of this report is to set out the proposals for the Oxfordshire Bus Enhanced Partnership (EP), reflecting the Council's indicative Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding allocation and the schemes / measures which this is proposed to fund. The draft Partnership document would then be submitted to the Department for Transport (no later than the end of June) and consulted upon, initially with bus operators, with any changes required included in the Final version, due to be submitted later in 2022.

Background

3. We previously engaged with the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6th April 2022 on the National Bus Strategy. It was resolved at the Committee to note the current position regarding the National Bus Strategy and Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in Oxfordshire, and to ask the Infrastructure and Policy Manager to bring a report to a future meeting on the governance of the Enhanced Partnership (EP) Board.
4. The National Bus Strategy (NBS), published in March 2021, required Local Authorities to commit to enter into an Enhanced Partnership (EP) with bus operators, or to pursue Bus Franchising, in order to be able to access all future Government funding for buses. In June 2021, Cabinet agreed to *“commit to establishing an Enhanced Partnership across Oxfordshire and give formal notice of the Council's intention to prepare an Enhanced Partnership and invite all local bus operators to confirm their intention to participate”*.
5. The County Council was only advised in early April on its indicative BSIP funding award, of up to £12.7m, covering the 2022/23 to 2024/25 financial years. A draft EP is now required to be submitted, by 30th June. Statutory consultation with

bus operators would then take place, followed by a separate consultation with Stakeholders and other statutory parties. The Partnership Document would then be revised and updated, in the context of the Council's final confirmed BSIP funding allocation. The deadline for completion of the final EP document has yet to be confirmed, but is expected to be autumn 2022.

What an Enhanced Partnership is and what it includes and covers

6. An EP is a statutory arrangement under the Bus Services Act 2017 which can specify, for example, timetables and multi-operator ticketing. It is important to be clear that an EP is a legally binding commitment between the Local Transport Authority (LTA) and Bus Operators specifying what improvements will be made to bus services that operators (which would remain substantially commercial) would still run. The EP sets out exactly what the County Council and Oxfordshire bus operators must deliver and comply with. Once the EPP and EPS are 'made', as statutory documents, they will need to be formally agreed between the Council and bus operators before the Partnership can come into effect.
7. An EP is therefore a significant step change in joint working and commitment to a shared vision. This will be important to enable Oxfordshire to continue to benefit from the operators' pro-active approach, and to allow them to continue to bring investment and innovation to the Oxfordshire bus market, building upon and supporting the recent 'Zero Emission Buses Regional Areas' (ZEBRA) funding award Oxfordshire has provisionally secured to roll out fully electric buses across the Oxford 'Smartzone' bus operating area.
8. The draft of the overall EP document reflects the Council's BSIP and policies/interventions designed to support buses. It is important to note that, even though the indicative BSIP funding award falls some way short of what was bid for, the Council's BSIP remains its agreed commitment to bus improvement – so it is not the case that a lower level of funding than the Council bid for means schemes being removed from the Plan, more a question of what is prioritised for funding at this time.

Enhanced Partnership Development, Consultation and Governance

9. The process for agreeing an Enhanced Partnership is prescriptive, with a strong emphasis on bus operator support, ensuring there is the opportunity for objections to the proposals to be made and considered. Operators have already been heavily involved in developing the proposals to date, and will be consulted formally on a draft EP once it had been approved and submitted.
10. Consultation on EPPs and EPSs is required by law under the Transport Act 2000. As well as all bus operators (who must be consulted first), statutory consultees include user representatives, the Traffic Commissioner, the Police, affected local authorities, Transport Focus and the Competition & Markets Authority. Best practice also recommends consulting MPs and major local employers. Public consultation is not a requirement and has already been undertaken on the BSIP, informing what is included in the draft EP.

11. It is critical that there is agreement with bus operators and other Stakeholders on our respective commitments. To achieve this, the EPP sets out how the Partnership is proposed to be overseen by a new Board and Governance model, attached as Annex 2. This is an extract from the draft Plan, designed to ensure that the main Board has equally balanced local authority and bus operator representation, and that there is a voice for partner District & City Councils and smaller operators.
12. It should be stressed that involvement of partner organisations is not limited by formal Board membership. For example, there will be opportunities for partners to be involved in the EP working groups also set out in Annex 2, which are being set up feed up to and inform Board decisions. Also, consideration can be given to attendance at EP Board meetings without voting rights, should this add value.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

13. Information on how the EP will achieve the Corporate Policies and Priorities of the Council can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack (Appendix 1)

Climate Impact Assessment

14. An impact assessment has been completed, and can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack (Appendix 1).

Financial Implications

15. Financial Implications of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack (Appendix 1).

Legal Implications

16. Legal Implications of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack (Appendix 1).

Staff Implications

17. Staff Implications of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack (Appendix 1).

Equality & Inclusion Implications

18. Equality and Inclusion Implications of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack.

Sustainability Implications

19. Sustainability Implications of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack.

Risk Management

20. The Risk Management approach of the EP can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack.

Consultations

21. Information on the consultations on the development of the BSIP, and engagement with the bus operators on the EP, can be found in the EP Cabinet Report Pack.

Bill Cotton **Corporate Director for Environment and Place**

Annex 1: EP Cabinet Report Pack
Annex 2: Proposed Governance Model

Background papers: Nil

Contact Officer: John Disley – john.disley@oxfordshire.gov.uk;
07767 006742

May 2022