

Divisions Affected - ALL

CABINET - 18 JUNE 2024

OXFORDSHIRE BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (BSIP) – Update for 2024

Report by Corporate Director for Environment & Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - (i) approve adoption of the updated Oxfordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan .
 - (ii) delegate authority for sign off on future updates of the Oxfordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan to the Director of Transport and Infrastructure in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Transport Management.

Executive Summary

2. The County Council is required by the Department for Transport (DfT) to publish an updated Oxfordshire BSIP in June 2024 in line with issued guidance. It is a condition for release of the third and final instalment of the existing BSIP funding allocation for Oxfordshire for 2024/25, approximately £7m (almost half of the overall allocation of £14.6m).
3. In accordance with the issued Guidance, the BSIP was submitted to DfT by 12 June 2024 subject to approval by Cabinet at its meeting on 18 June 2024. BSIP funding for the financial year 2024/2025 will not be released to the Council until the BSIP has been approved by Cabinet.
4. The key changes when compared with the existing BSIP approved in October 2021, are:
 - (a) General change in structure
 - (b) updating the baseline (current bus offer) to 2023/24; and
 - (c) setting out ambitions and proposals for 2025 to 2030.
5. Unlike last time the updated BSIP is not a bidding document, and no further BSIP funding has been announced, although the document *may* be used as a factor by Government to determine future levels of funding. At this stage

therefore there is no requirement to deliver any proposed schemes beyond March 2025.

6. The County Council and bus operators formed an Enhanced Partnership in January 2023, formalising a commitment to work together with regards to improving bus services. It is under this arrangement that the updated BSIP has been produced. (It is not solely a County Council document, it is a BSIP for Oxfordshire).

Key information regarding the updated BSIP

7. The updated BSIP content and structure follows guidance by the DfT. It has been produced in collaboration with bus operators taking into account public and stakeholder views particularly with relation to proposed improvements.
8. The strategic direction and priorities largely remain the same focusing on:
 - keeping buses at the heart of decision-making;
 - making buses faster and more reliable;
 - upgrading and improving bus infrastructure;
 - transforming the image of buses; and
 - making buses easier to access and understand.
9. The BSIP features a new section 'Ambitions and Proposals 2025 – 2030' which brings together existing plans for bus improvement schemes as well as a number of new proposals. Given that this is not a bidding document, these proposals will not be assessed by DfT and there is no commitment on the county council to deliver these. They do however demonstrate the continued ambition for further investment in bus in keeping with strategic priorities of the Local transport and connectivity plan (LTCP) and the County Council.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

10. The BSIP vision, aims and proposals all share the central objective of improving and growing the local bus network. This includes breaking down the barriers (real or perceived) to bus use, encouraging people to travel in a more sustainable way and enabling people to access important services (healthcare, shopping, education, employment, training). Therefore, the BSIP is closely aligned with, and directly supports, County Council priorities for an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network and to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county.

Financial Implications

11. There are no additional commitments on spend by the Council as a direct result of adopting the updated BSIP. The BSIP is proposed to form the basis of the Council's bus strategy for the next 5 years and the intention is that funding sources would be secured to take these projects forward at an appropriate time.
12. There are financial implications if an updated BSIP is not approved in June 2024 as doing so is a requirement to release the third (and final) instalment of BSIP funding, accounting for £4.1m of capital and £2.9m of revenue funds. Not receiving this funding will result in either failure to deliver existing BSIP funded schemes or will mean that the County Council must cover the deficit.

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Legal Implications

13. The BSIP is a public facing strategy document owned by the County Council (although it is a BSIP for Oxfordshire and not for the County Council) and therefore the usual reputational risks may apply.
14. Section 63(1) of the Transport Act 1985 places a duty on the Council to secure the provision of 'such passenger transport services as the Council considers appropriate to meet any public transport requirement within Oxfordshire which would not, in its view, be met, apart from any action taken by them for that purpose'.
15. At this stage, Cabinet is not required to approve the procurement process for any contracts involving use of BSIP funding. However, the Council will comply with all applicable legislation including the Public Contract Regulations 2015 ("PCR 2015"), the Transport Act 1985 and the Subsidy Control Act 2022 when procuring any bus related services using BSIP funding.
16. In procuring bus services, the Council utilises a mixture of competitive tenders through a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) procured under PCR 2015 and direct awards pursuant to the Council's powers to subsidise passenger transport services under the Transport Act 1985 (as amended), all of which comply with applicable legislation and result in best value for the Council.

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Staff Implications

17. The existing level of staff resources for bus within the County Council are thought to be sufficient for continuation of existing BSIP schemes and to develop and progress a good number of new improvement schemes for beyond

March 2025. Should further funding become available, particularly for large scale capital schemes, then staff resource capacities will be reviewed.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

18. An EIA has been completed and concluded that this would have a positive impact on individuals and communities more broadly. The following groups would benefit in particular: younger and older people, women, those with protected characteristics of disability, race, pregnancy and maternity, people in rural locations, and those on lower incomes.

Sustainability Implications

19. A Climate Impact Assessment (CIA) has been completed and concluded that there is a positive impact. This is due to encouraging modal shift away from private car use to more sustainable means, and in proposals to further decarbonise the bus network.

Risk Management

20. There are no significant risks identified with adopting the updated BSIP, and the proposals contained within are in line with wider Council strategies and policies. There is no commitment on the County Council to deliver any unfunded schemes. There may be some risks inherent in delivery of specific projects and programmes proposed in the BSIP. As and when funding is identified to deliver schemes, work will need to be undertaken to develop the detail. Any risks would be managed and mitigated as appropriate during this stage.
21. There is a significant financial risk to the County Council if an updated BSIP *is not* published/approved in June 2024 as outlined in the Financial Implications section above.

Consultations

22. Due to the exceptionally tight timescales associated with production of the BSIP, the level of engagement has been proportional to the time available. It has also been carefully conducted to manage expectations - because if there is no further BSIP funding then there is a limit to what can be delivered.
23. A series of stakeholder engagement meetings were conducted in March 2024, accompanied by a public survey held online via *Let's Talk* between 19 March and 14 April 2024 which received 1149 responses. Results from the most recent annual bus passenger surveys and the National Highways & Transport network survey (for Oxfordshire) were also considered in developing the BSIP.

24. Similar priorities for bus-related improvements were received from stakeholders and the public, which supported the data from existing surveys. The top 5 priorities for improvements were identified as follows: 1) Faster or more direct buses, 2) more reliable buses, 3) more buses/ services in general, 4) better value fares and 5) better information before you travel. A summary of the results from the online public survey can be found in Annex 2
25. It is notable that 'faster and more reliable buses' has now been identified as the most important factor in encouraging bus use (it was previously the third most important behind 'more frequent buses' and 'new routes').

Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment & Place

Annex 1 The updated **Bus Service Improvement Plan for 2024**

Annex 2 Engagement results and supporting data

Background papers: [National Bus Strategy: 2024 Bus Service Improvement Plans. Guidance to local authorities and bus operators.](#)

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