

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE		
DATE:	30 JUNE 2021		
TITLE:	NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY - NEXT STEPS		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING & TRANSPORT
SERVICE:	PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND REGULATORY SERVICES	WARDS:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to set out the Council's proposed next steps following publication of the National Bus Strategy 'Bus Back Better' by Central Government in March 2021 (the Strategy), and the subsequent guidance for Local Authorities and bus operators published in May 2021. The Strategy includes the requirement for Local Transport Authorities to prepare of a Bus Service Improvement Plan in their area, and to establish Enhanced Partnership arrangements with local bus operators.

1.2 Appendix A - National Bus Strategy - Reading Buses Case Study

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the opportunities and requirements resulting from the National Bus Strategy.
- 2.2 That the Committee authorises officers to prepare a Bus Service Improvement Plan for Reading, and to establish Enhanced Partnership arrangements with local bus operators, in line with the requirements and timetable as set out within the National Bus Strategy.
- 2.3 That the Committee approves publication on the Council's website of the 'Notice of Intent to Prepare an Enhanced Partnership Plan and Schemes' as set out at para 4.7 of this report.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Strategy ‘Bus Back Better’ was published on 15th March 2021 as part of a £3 billion funding package aimed at building back Britain’s bus services. The Strategy sets out how the Government intends to deliver on its commitment to achieve ambitious and far-reaching reform of the bus services sector, including: how bus services are planned and delivered through the introduction of new zero emission buses; simpler fares; improved routes; and higher frequencies.
- 3.2 Key elements and objectives in the Strategy include:
- More frequent ‘turn up and go’ services on key corridors being such that reference to a timetable is not needed.
 - Cheaper fares, daily capped fares and local ‘all operator’ fares that lower the cost of bus use and increase interchange options with other public transport services.
 - Support for economically as well as socially necessary services, e.g. connecting areas of inequality to employment, education and training.
 - Hundreds of miles of more bus lanes which need to be operational 24 hours a day to improve bus journey times and reliability.
 - Extensions to bus rapid transit schemes to deliver light rail style service improvements at a fraction of the cost.
 - Bus gates to exclude other traffic if insufficient space is available, and a presumption against on street non-residential parking on bus corridors.
 - 4,000 new zero emission (battery electric or hydrogen powered) buses to improve air quality and reduce carbon emissions, with changes to the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) scheme to reward mileage operated by zero emission vehicles.
- 3.3 A core focus of the Strategy is the need for greater cooperation between bus operators and Local Transport Authorities (LTAs). In order to achieve this improved partnership working, the Strategy requires LTAs to produce a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) for their area, and to either establish Enhanced Partnerships with local bus operators or to implement a franchise system to manage the provision of local bus services.
- 3.4 The Strategy sets out the following timetable for LTAs to adhere to:
- By the end of June 2021, LTAs will need to commit to establishing Enhanced Partnerships under the Bus Services Act 2017 or, in the alternative, begin the statutory process of franchising their bus services. Bus operators in such areas are required to co-operate with the LTAs in this process.
 - By the end of October 2021, each LTA will need to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). Each BSIP will need to be updated annually and the contents reflected in the local authority’s Local

Transport Plan and other relevant local plans such as the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs).

- From April 2022, in order to access the new discretionary streams of bus funding, LTAs will need to have in place an Enhanced Partnership or have commenced the statutory process to decide whether to implement a franchising scheme. Only those bus services operating under either an Enhanced Partnership or through a franchising scheme will be eligible to receive the new funding streams from the government.
- 3.5 Reading is highlighted as an example of best practice in the Strategy (included as Appendix A of this report) due to high levels of bus patronage and existing partnership working between the Council and Reading Buses. However, the Strategy is set in the context of reduced patronage levels as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is made clear that only LTAs and bus operators who comply with the BSIP and the new partnership arrangements will be eligible for both continued support from the Covid Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) and any new opportunities from the £3 billion transformational funding. A key overarching objective of the Strategy is to create the conditions needed for bus patronage to not only return to the pre-pandemic levels, but to ultimately grow beyond these levels.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 In line with the requirements as set out in Strategy, it is proposed that officers commence work on the development of a BSIP and begin engagement with local bus operators to establish Enhanced Partnerships arrangements. The DfT has provided the Council with £100k to support the development of its BSIP and local partnership arrangements.
- 4.2 The BSIP is required to cover the full borough area and all local bus services operating within it. A number of key elements will need to be contained within the BSIP, including:
- Set out how the BSIP will achieve the objectives of the Strategy locally to grow bus use, with a detailed plan for delivery.
 - Consider the strengths, weaknesses and requirements across the whole local bus network, including the differing needs of any parts of that area (e.g. urban and more rural elements).
 - Set out a coordinated and coherent target network, including Bus Rapid Transport networks for key high-density corridors.
 - 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 existing bus services.
 - Set out ambitions for coordinated scheduling to support bus-to-bus and multi-modal interchange, including integration with other forms of public transport.

- Consider demand responsive transport, especially in more rural areas or to support shift work, industrial estates and other locations not easily accessed on scheduled services.
 - Identify locations where bus priority measures are needed (bus lanes, traffic management, or - more ambitiously - Bus Rapid Transport networks) with plans to put these in place.
 - State the benefits expected from new buses for air quality and decarbonisation, with actions to decarbonise the existing bus fleet.
 - Include targets for journey time and reliability improvements, patronage growth and passenger satisfaction.
 - Establish a bus passenger charter with rights and redress.
- 4.3 The BSIP will be developed in collaboration with all local bus operators and community transport providers in Reading. It will be important to ensure that the BSIP reflects the existing business plans of local bus operators including Reading Transport Limited (RTL), and identifies opportunities to maximise benefits such as reducing journey times and therefore achieving operational efficiencies through the introduction of bus priority measures.
- 4.4 The initial BSIP document is required to be published by the end of October 2021, and thereafter be updated annually and reflected in the local authority's Local Transport Plan. It is made clear in the Strategy that the quality of the BSIP will be a key factor in determining future funding awards from the £3 billion transformation funding to be made available nationally.
- 4.5 In addition to the preparation of the improvement plan, it is proposed that officers instigate the establishment of Enhanced Partnerships with all operators in the borough. Due to the nature of the local bus market being heavily dominated by services provided by RTL, it is not considered necessary to pursue a franchise system at the current time which would be a resource intensive process to establish and maintain.
- 4.6 Establishing closer partnership arrangements with all local bus operators will provide an opportunity for the Council to have a greater influence over coordination of services, for instance in Caversham where services are currently provided by RTL, Arriva and Thames Travel (part of the Go Ahead bus group). It will also provide the ability to specify, for example, timetables and multi-operator ticketing, and could allow the Council to take over the role of registering bus services from the Traffic Commissioners if this is considered desirable.
- 4.7 As stated above, the Council is required to publicly commit to progressing Enhanced Partnership arrangements, therefore it is proposed that the following statement is published on the Council's website which is in line with the Model Notice of Intent included within the guidance for Local Authorities published by the DfT:

"Notice of Intent to Prepare an Enhanced Partnership Plan and Schemes

At its meeting of the Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 30th June 2021, Reading Borough Council gave approval to proceed with the development of an Enhanced Partnership. The commencement of this is confirmed through this notice of the intention to prepare an Enhanced Partnership Plan and accompanying Enhanced Partnership Schemes, as required and set out in section 138F of the Transport Act 2000.”

- 4.8 For both the BSIP and Enhanced Partnership arrangements to be effective a key consideration will be the provision of cross-boundary services, particularly within the Reading urban area. Therefore, officers propose to engage with all neighbouring authorities to identify opportunities to ensure our respective plans and arrangements are joined-up and consistent, building on our existing close partnership working arrangements.
- 4.9 Overall, the Strategy and associated future funding opportunities present a significant opportunity for both the Council and RTL to deliver a thriving public transport network in the town, which had the second highest bus use per head of population in England (outside of London) prior to the pandemic. This would support the post-pandemic economic recovery, help to achieve overarching objectives relating to air quality and Climate Change, and reduce inequalities in Reading by providing affordable access to education, training and employment.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The proposals as set out within this report will help to deliver the following service priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan:
 - Healthy Environment
 - Thriving Communities
 - Inclusive Economy

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Transport is the biggest greenhouse gas emitting sector in the UK accounting for around 27% of total carbon emissions. As set out in the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy, this figure is lower in Reading with transport accounting for around 20% of carbon emissions. However, significant investment in sustainable transport solutions is vital in order to respond to the Climate Emergency declared by the Council in February 2019 and to help achieve our target of a carbon neutral Reading by 2030. Reading Climate Change Partnership's Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 and the new RBC corporate Carbon Plan 2020-25 were both adopted in November 2020.
- 6.2 Our transport strategy is focused on encouraging the use of sustainable transport, walking and cycling as attractive alternatives to the private car. This includes managing congestion and improving air quality by providing a more efficient network and suitable alternatives for vehicular traffic, which will enable existing highway capacity to be reallocated for the use of sustainable

modes. The delivery of the BSIP and Enhanced Partnership arrangements as set out within this report form part of this overall strategy, which has achieved considerable success in recent years including bus usage in Reading being the third highest in the country outside of London, having increased by 23% since 2010, and around 35% of trips into Reading town centre being made by pedestrians and cyclists.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 As set out within the report, the Bus Service Improvement Plan will be developed in collaboration with all local bus operators and community transport providers in Reading.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken at the appropriate time to ensure the proposals set out within the Bus Service Improvement Plan provide improved access, services and facilities for local residents.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 It is proposed that the Council establishes Enhanced Partnership arrangements with all local bus operators serving Reading Borough, which is a statutory arrangement termed ‘enhanced partnership arrangements’ under the 2017 Bus Services Act.
- 9.2 It is envisaged that an element of internal legal support will be required to assist with the preparation of documentation required to formalise the Enhanced Partnership arrangements with each bus operator, alongside legal resource provided by the bus operators themselves.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The Department for Transport has provided the Council with £100k grant funding to assist with the development of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and establishing Enhanced Partnerships with local operators.
- 10.2 It is made clear in the National Bus Strategy that only Local Transport Authorities and bus operators who comply with the Bus Service Improvement Plan and new partnership arrangements will be eligible for both continued support from the Covid Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) and any opportunities from the £3 billion transformational funding.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Further details regarding the National Bus Strategy are available here - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-back-better>

APPENDIX A - NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY - READING BUSES CASE STUDY

Reading Buses

Reading Buses is owned by Reading Borough Council and has been transporting passengers for over one hundred years. It has one of the youngest and most environmentally friendly fleets in the UK, and in the Autumn 2019 Transport Focus Bus Passenger Survey, Reading Buses' passenger satisfaction score was 92%¹⁸.

Bus usage has grown through consistent partnership working between the Council and bus company, resulting in Reading having the second highest bus use in England, outside London, per head of population in 2019/20 – with an average of 137.5 annual bus trips per person¹⁹. Total bus use in Reading borough had grown to over 22m journeys in 2018/19 before the pandemic, an increase of almost 40% in the last 6 years²⁰.



Picture: Reading Buses