

Improving Gloucestershire's Bus Services Scrutiny Task Group Report January 2024

1. Introduction

- 1.1. In July 2022, a motion was carried at Gloucestershire County Council's (GCC) full Council as follows:

Council expresses its disappointment that 70% of county councils were awarded no additional funding for their Bus Service Improvement Plans by the Department for Transport in the recent funding round.

Bus services have not yet recovered to pre-covid levels, commercial services have been cut by operators leaving communities in our towns and villages lacking regular services. Further deterioration is a risk when the Bus Recovery Grant ends in October.

At the budget meeting it was announced that the expectation of BSIP funding had been £30-40 million whereas the amount allocated has been nil.

This clearly reduces the scope for the improvements that we all want to see to our bus network to reduce traffic on our roads, improve connectivity between and within our communities, and help us achieve our transport decarbonisation targets whilst encouraging active travel.

Council therefore calls on cabinet to continue exploring in year proposals to address the loss of the Bus Recovery Grant and the lack of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding and to work with the County Council Network colleagues to ensure rural councils get a fair shot in any further funding opportunities.

Council further resolves to call on the Environment Scrutiny Committee to establish a Task and Finish Scrutiny Group to examine and make recommendations on how bus services improvements can be achieved.

- 1.2 Following this, in November 2022, Environment Scrutiny Committee approved a one-page strategy request from Cllrs John Bloxsom and Wendy Thomas to establish a task group. The ambitions for the task group review were as follows:

- To understand the role and responsibilities of Gloucestershire County Council (as the Local Transport Authority) in the planning, commissioning and delivery of local public transport services, and the role of district and parish councils.
- To understand the long-term strategic aims objectives and targets for Gloucestershire's local bus services and relationship with the Council's other transport and corporate policy objectives, including decarbonisation and the Gloucestershire 2050 vision.
- To understand what can still be achieved over the 3-year period of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) to improve Gloucestershire bus services without the additional funding allocation from the DfT and the basis on which a future BSIP bid or similar could be successful.
- To understand how customer experience and expectations and accessibility to essential services are taken into consideration in decision making processes.
- To understand how GCC's contracting processes can support transport decarbonisation and air quality targets.

(Copy of the full one-page strategy at Annex 1)

1.3 Membership

Councillors Terry Hale, Stephen Hirst, Beki Hoyland, Alan Preest, Lisa Spivey, Wendy Thomas, Brian Tipper, Roger Whyborn, Sue Williams.

Substitutes: Councillors Paul Baker and Gill Moseley.

Councillor Wendy Thomas was elected Chair of the task group.

1.4 Meetings of the Task Group

The task group held a series of meetings throughout the period January 2023 to September 2023. At these meetings the task group considered information on the national and local context; the role and responsibilities of Gloucestershire County Council (as the Local Transport Authority) and the role of district councils; Gloucestershire's BSIP; and the decarbonisation of Gloucestershire's transport system. The Group also heard from officers on how customer experience and expectations and accessibility to essential services are taken into consideration in decision making processes, and how the Council's contracting processes can support transport decarbonisation and air quality targets.

1.5 Evidence Gathering Sessions

The task group held three evidence gathering sessions during which members met with the representatives outlined below. The evidence gathering sessions were invaluable in providing a real insight into the fundamental issues affecting bus services in Gloucestershire and assisted members in identifying opportunities for improvements.

25 July 2023

Bus Operators:

- Rachel Geliamassi and James Heaney from Stagecoach West.
- Luke Marion and Glenn De Sousa from the Oxford Bus Company (the Oxford Bus Company has taken over Pulhams).

1 August 2023

Community transport providers:

- Lyndon Biddle - Newent Community Transport Providers.
- Paul Riddick – Community Connexions.

District Council representatives:

- Cllr Richard Cook – Leader, and Adam Gooch - Planning Policy Manager from Gloucester City Council.
- Cllr Mark Topping – Leader, and Nigel Gibbons – Forward Planning Manager, from the Forest of Dean District Council.
- Cllr Catherine Braun – Leader, and Mark Russell - Head of Planning Strategy and Economic Development, from Stroud District Council.
- Cllr Rowena Hay – Leader, and Louise Forey - Programme and Engagement Officer, from Cheltenham Borough Council.
- James Brain - Forward Planning Manager from Cotswold District Council.
- Kerrin Cocks – Strategic Support Officer from Gloucestershire Association of Town and Parish Councils.

8 August 2023 - DfT:

- Ben Kempner, Senior Policy Advisor, Bus Recovery and Reform Division at the DfT.

What have we learned?

2. Passenger Numbers

- 2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on bus patronage in Gloucestershire. In 2022 data on passenger numbers showed levels to be only at 70-75% when compared to 2019 levels. Fewer concessionary pass holders have returned to using buses in comparison to fare payers, and as working from home evolved into an on-going alternative to commuting to a regular office, this had a significant impact on travel behaviour.

- 2.2. The task group has noted that whilst there has been an increase in bus patronage levels in recent months, this recovery has not been even across the local network. For example, recovery has varied in different parts of the county and depending on the type of bus service. In addition (and in line with national evidence) older bus riders in Gloucestershire have not fully returned to bus transport post-pandemic.
- 2.3 The task group is aware that the Government's Bus Fare Cap Grant Scheme has had a positive impact on increasing bus usage in the county, with Stagecoach reporting a significant increase in the number of journeys being made since its introduction. The scheme was rolled out in England in January 2023 capping single bus journeys at £2; originally due to end on 30 June 2023, the scheme has been extended until 31 December 2024 to help passengers with the cost of living.

3. Bus Driver Recruitment and Retention

- 3.1 The national shortage of bus drivers has had a significant impact on the commercial bus network leaving Gloucestershire's largest bus operator, Stagecoach, unable to reliably operate their services. The situation in Gloucestershire now appears to be much less severe compared to how it has been previously. However, representatives from Stagecoach and the Oxford Bus Company informed the task group of the on-going challenges of competing with other industries within the job market to recruit drivers, particularly the road haulage industry.
- 3.2 Both companies have been trialling and implementing different initiatives to attract and retain drivers, and representatives indicated that these measures have been successful in identifying new drivers and therefore reducing the shortage. This provides a degree of confidence that the issues related to bus driver shortages within the commercial network in Gloucestershire, such as reduced frequency, cancelled journeys and abandoned services, will continue to ease over the coming months/years.

4. Subsidised Bus Services

- 4.1 One of the key responsibilities of the County Council as the Local Transport Authority for Gloucestershire is managing the subsidised bus network. The aim is to secure the provision of services to meet key public transport requirements which would otherwise not be met by the open commercial market.
- 4.2 The Council manages the contract for each individual subsidised service and is responsible for administering timetable changes and carrying out licencing and safety checks. Officers have estimated that subsidised services make up approximately 10% of the county's overall bus transport network.
- 4.3 Recognising the importance of the subsidised routes to a number of communities, the task group felt that the Council should continue to review its subsidised bus routes. There should be a clear strategic direction for the Council's subsidised bus services network, and routes should be evaluated against appropriate criteria to determine whether they are working, not working or missing all together and to recommend which routes should be secured. Where there is no realistic prospect of sustaining a bus route, alternatives should be considered.

(See recommendation 1)

5. Community Transport

- 5.1 Community transport is part of the voluntary sector run by charities and volunteer groups. It provides invaluable flexible and accessible community-led solutions in response to unmet local transport needs and often represents the only means of transport for many vulnerable and isolated people, often older people or people with disabilities.
- 5.2 The Council provides approximately £600k of funding to the community transport sector per year. As they are charity organisations, providers can bid for funds from the commercial sector and private companies who contribute to organisations delivering real social value.

- 5.3 The Council has a role in making sure that there is good oversight of the accounts of the main community transport providers operating in the county to ensure that services remain viable. Due to the current economic climate, coupled with the impact of the Covid pandemic, the stability of the community transport market is precarious. Over the past decade a number of providers have ceased to operate.
- 5.4 There are three main community transport providers in Gloucestershire: Lydney Dial a Ride; Community Connexions; and Newent Community Transport. There are also smaller schemes in operation and volunteers offering lifts to local residents. These non-profit-making or social enterprise teams involve a mixture of volunteers and paid staff.
- 5.5 The community transport sector is experiencing significant challenges around the recruitment and retention of volunteer drivers. At the evidence gathering session representatives of community transport providers informed the task group that approximately one third of drivers had not returned to the sector following the pandemic. Recent recruitment drives have only identified a small number of additional drivers.
- 5.6 The representatives explained that volunteer drivers can claim a mileage allowance of 45p per mile which is set by HM Revenue and Customs. Whilst there are some drivers who do not claim back their mileage allowance, for others, this reimbursement represents an important factor in them being able to undertake the role. Costs, in particular fuel costs, have increased significantly in recent times. Consequently, 45p per mile is not always sufficient to cover the cost of volunteer drivers using their own vehicle.
- 5.7 The community transport representatives informed members of how the demands on the services are increasing due to an ageing population as more people look to use community transport to meet their travel needs. However, resources remain static, meaning that the sector is often not able to meet demand. The task group has learned that Community Connexions are having to turn down around 10% of requests for transport. This can be especially difficult to manage as in some cases, community transport is asked to provide a service as a last resort.
- 5.8 The task group is of the view that the Council should examine the role of community transport in Gloucestershire and its service level provision, to determine whether the best use is being made of this valuable service in serving Gloucestershire's communities, especially in isolated communities without other transport.
- 5.9 In addition, the task group would welcome the development of a Community Transport Strategy to set out an action plan on what the Council can do to assist our partners to ensure that the county has a range of community transport available to our residents.
- 5.10 The task group learned of an example of 'best practice' from the Department for Transport, who cited Lincolnshire, where they link NHS patient transport with community transport providers by 'batching' NHS appointments, to better optimise hospital transport. Applying this model to Gloucestershire should be investigated.

(See recommendation 2)

6. Improving Bus Service Reliability and Frequency

- 6.1 The task group has heard from district council representatives that the main barriers to increasing bus usage are poor routes, poor connectivity between routes and other transport modes, lack of communication and information about the services, punctuality/reliability of buses and insufficient service frequency.
- 6.2 It is clear that for many public transport users, service reliability is a key attribute of the travel experience and is high on people's preferences about what is important. Congestion disproportionately impacts on bus travel by imposing substantial increases in journey times and reducing service reliability.

- 6.3 The task group has learned that operators are having to put more resources into services to maintain the same level of frequency. For example, the Stagecoach Service 10 (Gloucester to Cheltenham) is 19% slower than 20 years ago - chronic congestion has resulted in Stagecoach having to operate 10-12 extra vehicles within the network when compared to 20 years ago.
- 6.4 The task group has noted that Gloucestershire's BSIP sets a target to reduce journey times across the county by 10%. The aim is to create the right environment for the bus network, through the implementation of bus priority and traffic management measures. The task group has acknowledged the importance of the implementation of bus priority measures in areas within the urban core of the county, which suffer significant congestion. Bus priority measures will enable the services to provide additional routes and higher frequencies making buses more attractive, which will help to reduce transport carbon emissions as more people choose to use buses over private car journeys.
- 6.5 The task group has also noted that reducing bus journey times will unlock efficiencies and provide opportunities for the Council and transport providers to support the expansion of the bus network through further investment.
- 6.6 Members have acknowledged that Gloucestershire's BSIP sets a target to improve bus reliability by 5%. To achieve this, the Council will work with bus operators through the Gloucestershire Bus Board and Bus Forum as set out in the Enhanced Partnership. The focus will be on building on the journey time improvement interventions and ensuring that bus services are protected from the adverse impacts of congestion and high traffic levels wherever possible and feasible.
- 6.7 Increased bus frequency was the most popular improvement noted in the engagement process undertaken for the BSIP development; and the need for increased frequency outside of the core business hours was a key issue highlighted by the district council representatives at the evidence gathering session.
- 6.8 Members are aware that travel provision in the county is not always sufficiently flexible to cater for the range of travel demands outside of the 9:00am to 5:00pm day. This does not just affect rural areas but is also an issue for the main urban areas in the county. There is recognition that buses are the best way to access town centres while being environmentally friendly, affordable and convenient. The task group has emphasised however that better services are needed in the evenings and weekends, to reflect people's 24- hour lives and to provide safe, reliable transport for shift workers and evening hour hospital access. Good transport infrastructure is also a key factor in Gloucestershire maintaining a healthy nighttime economy.
- 6.9 In rural areas it is often the case that bus services not only do not cater to travel outside of the 9-5 day but also do not enable residents to commute to work in larger nearby towns if arriving before 9:00am or leaving after 5:00pm is required.
- 6.10 The task group has welcomed the news that a proportion of the BSIP+ funding settlement (see paragraph 13.6) will be allocated to the enhancement of evening and weekend services on several routes in the county.
- 6.11 The rural areas of the county are particularly vulnerable to bus service cuts and residents affected are at high risk of isolation. The task group has noted that approximately 80% of the Council's subsidised bus service budget is allocated to provide services in rural areas.
- 6.12 In cases where the Council is unable to keep funding heavily underused bus routes in rural areas, the implementation of a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) option could provide a lifeline for affected residents. Members have emphasised that the withdrawal of services in rural areas should be avoided whenever possible; however, following the positive feedback received on the Robin during the evidence gathering session with district council representatives, it is clear that DRT can be an effective alternative to a regular bus service.
- 6.13 The task group has welcomed the news that the BSIP+ funding settlement offers an opportunity to expand the geographic scope of the Robin Demand Responsive service, including this to three more rural areas of the county, including the Tewkesbury area, south of Stroud area, and the

south Cotswolds. The task group has noted that these areas have the lowest level of conventional timetabled bus services which makes them suitable for expansion of the Robin demand-responsive transport service.

7. Connections, Hubs, and Integration with Rail

- 7.1 Co-ordinated timetables for bus-bus connections and bus connections with rail services are important for travellers as they reduce wait times and make services more attractive. The need for improved integration between bus and rail was raised as a key issue by district council representatives at the evidence gathering session.
- 7.2 The task group is of the view that there is scope for improved integration in Gloucestershire, particularly regarding links to railway stations by bus which need to be improved significantly. The task group is also aware that there are connectivity hub deficiencies in Cheltenham, Dursley and Stroud where bus stops are in the wrong place, reducing journey quality.
- 7.3 The task group is of the view that there is ample potential for growth in Gloucestershire's bus network, especially travel to tourism destinations such as the Cotswolds and the Forest of Dean, and the development of cross-county services to connect Gloucestershire with towns and cities in other counties.
- 7.4 The task group therefore recommends that the Council should establish a "one team approach" initiative, to link up councillors from across all political parties, bus operators, Council officers, bus action groups and community transport providers, to meet regularly to discuss improving integration, helping to support the work of the Cabinet Member. This should include a particular focus on the timetabling of buses especially regarding services that travel to schools and when connecting with rail. Whilst acknowledging that local authorities have no control over train services, the task group is of the view that it would be of value to invite the local rail operator representatives to engage in this initiative. Ben Kempner from the DfT, highlighted the importance of local authorities developing a one team approach initiative, and the task group is aware that it has been successfully implemented in other local authority areas.

(See recommendation 3)

- 7.5 In addition, the task group is of the view that the County Council in consultation with local councillors and bus operators should consider what measures are needed, including changes to routes, timetables and highways/transport infrastructure, to improve service punctuality/reliability and increase active travel, and then recommend or take appropriate actions. One important point identified by the task group is the need for secure bike racks at bus stops.

(See recommendation 4)

- 7.6 The task group also encourages the Council to ensure that there is regular engagement with district council colleagues around improvements to bus services particularly regarding all aspects of integration, and importantly around the development of the local neighbourhood plans. The evidence gathering session with district council representatives demonstrated the valuable insights they can provide about the key issues in local areas.

(See recommendation 4)

- 7.7 The task group has noted that one of the key aims in the BSIP is to integrate Gloucestershire's bus network with demand responsive services in rural areas, through the provision of interchange hubs, where people can change from a demand responsive option to more mainstream bus services.
- 7.8 Members have emphasised the importance of the Council consulting with local councillors during the planning and development stage of the project to deliver Gloucestershire's interchange model, specifically around the potential site locations of the Strategic Transport Interchange hubs and local interchange hub facilities.

(See recommendation 4)

- 7.9 The task group would like to acknowledge the opportunities of the mass rapid transit scheme being developed to transform public transport journey time and reliability in Gloucestershire's urban core, and the three Park and Ride facilities in Gloucester and Cheltenham in terms of supporting bus services as part of the wider integration of services. Similarly, the task group acknowledges that express coach services (though outside of its remit) are a vital part of the wider integration of public transport services.

8. Integration between Transport Planning and Land Use Planning

- 8.1 Under the two-tier system of local government in Gloucestershire, district councils, as the planning authorities, are responsible for the planning process of new developments, and the County Council is responsible for the traffic and highway management of new housing developments, including the planning of public transport services. As they are completely interdependent, the County Council works with the district councils to ensure that the right conditions are created for public transport services.
- 8.2 One of the key issues arising from the evidence gathering session with district council representatives is the need for closer integration between transport planning and land use planning. This is essential to improve the liveability of Gloucestershire, by reducing dependence on private cars and increasing opportunities to walk, cycle and take public transport for daily travel. New residential and commercial centres need to be located on or close to the existing bus network as possible, such that they support and strengthen the commercial network, rather than dilute it.
- 8.3 The task group has emphasised the importance of the County Council working closely with the district councils to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the transport considerations needed for new developments and that this is given due regard as part of the planning process.

(See recommendation 4)

9. Transport Decarbonisation and Increasing Bus Use

- 9.1 Through Climate Leadership Gloucestershire, the Council works with partners to take forward Gloucestershire's response to the climate emergency. The Council is leading on decarbonising transport.
- 9.2 The Council has committed to reducing carbon emissions from all sources in the county to net zero by 2045 and to reduce emissions by 80% by 2030. Transport accounts for 34% of all carbon emissions per person in Gloucestershire. This proportion rises to 43% if emissions associated with motorways and railways are included.
- 9.3 The Council in partnership with UK1001 held the Gloucestershire Decarbonising Transport Forum 2022 - Journey to Net Zero in July 2022. The Forum's aim was to bring together key stakeholders and experts to discuss Gloucestershire's journey to net zero. The task group received the presentation slides from this event. In total 102 delegates from key stakeholder organisations across Gloucestershire attended, including representatives from local planning authorities, National Highways, Network Rail, and transport operators. When stakeholders at the event were asked about potential interventions to incentivise a shift to more sustainable modes of transport, the need for excellent public transport provision came through clearly as the highest priority amongst all workshop groups.
- 9.4 In terms of looking at what is important to people in making buses more attractive, to increase usage and therefore have a positive impact on reducing carbon emissions, the task group has noted that the key findings of the Council's BSIP 2021 bus passenger survey are that the push for modern vehicles is important, but it is less valued by survey respondents, if compared to other topics like frequency, reliability and better hours. This data provided the Council with a focus for the interventions and improvements, and clarified the direction that the BSIP needed to focus on as being frequency and reliability, backed up with the right routes for the county.

- 9.5 The task group has noted that the current modal split for Gloucestershire (method of travel to work) demonstrates that bus use is currently low - below 5%, compared to the national average of 8%, and has scope for significant increase (data is from the 2021 census). When considering greenhouse gas emissions, national data in 2018 showed that buses accounted for just 2.5% of emissions, as opposed to cars which caused 55%. The task group has recognised that one of the key areas of opportunity to contribute to emission saving targets in Gloucestershire is promoting public transport (regardless of the engine emission standard) to drive up usage.
- 9.6 The task group is of the view that the Council should undertake a promotional campaign to raise awareness amongst staff, councillors and, most importantly, the wider community of the economic and environmental benefits of travelling by bus as opposed to the private car; and that this should be set up as soon as possible. The task group is aware that there are many Council employees who live within a relatively short distance of the Council's offices (data from Active Travel Survey). This therefore provides a golden opportunity for the Council to do more to survey and encourage staff and councillors to consider using the bus for travel to work.

(See recommendation 5)

- 9.7 The task group has acknowledged that whilst replacing the county's bus fleet with electric vehicles is desirable, the need to get people out of their cars and onto buses is currently more of a pressing issue. The task group has noted however, that the DfT has very recently announced a second round of the ZEBRA fund (Zero Emission Buses Regional Area) for operators and Councils to bid for. The scheme provides capital funding to local transport authorities to support the introduction of zero emission buses and associated infrastructure. Officers are working on understanding the implications of this fund.
- 9.8 The task group is of the view that a member briefing should take place on the plans to decarbonise bus transport in Gloucestershire, including the development of the infrastructure to support this.

(See recommendation 6)

10. Integrated Transport System with Multi-Modal Ticketing

- 10.1 One of the key ambitions to improve bus services is the implementation of integrated ticketing to provide seamless journeys with one ticket across multiple operators. In order to achieve this, the Council and bus operators will need to work collaboratively to plan and deliver a fully integrated service with simple, multi-modal tickets which can be used across all bus services and in the longer-term some rail services.
- 10.2 Members have recognised that a fully integrated transport system with multi-operator ticketing will bring about significant benefits for public transport users; it will help to increase bus usage and will transform connectivity throughout Gloucestershire.
- 10.3 The task group has noted that there are multiple operators of bus services in the county each with individual fares and ticketing schemes. The main challenge therefore is the complexity of multi-operator ticketing, particularly around revenue proportion to each operator. At present, due to the complexities and resource issues, this type of fully integrated travel system has only been implemented in major metropolitan areas in the UK. In recognition that calculations concerning revenue proportion is a significant barrier to full integration being rolled out more widely across the UK, the DfT is undertaking a project to develop a back-office system (Project Coral) to enable this. The DfT is working with representatives from the bus industry, Transport for the West Midlands and Midlands Connect, to develop a national technology solution to facilitate multi-operator ticketing on buses, focussing on contactless bank card payments, and enabling fares capping.
- 10.4 At present, work is underway on Project Coral to review the national business case, ensuring appropriate resource and governance is in place. Procurement is due to commence this year, and the aim is for the solution to be made available to all local transport authorities nationally by

next year at the earliest. In the meantime, the DfT has encouraged local authorities to identify any 'quick wins'. For example, the task group learned that major strides have been made in Cornwall where a range of day, weekly and monthly rover cards operate across the county and across all operators. Transport for Cornwall have also simplified fare collection under the branding 'Tap & Cap'. Applicability to Gloucestershire should be investigated as a potential 'quick win'. As a first step, the task group would like to encourage the Council to work with bus operators to, at the minimum, ensure that the operators accept both cash and card as payments.

(See recommendation 7)

11. Bus Fares

- 11.1 The task group has noted that as part of the BSIP 2021 bus passenger survey, 7% of people answered "*lower fares*", to the question "*please tell us one main improvement which you would like to see to your bus service?*". Therefore, indications are that fares are a lower priority in terms of views on how bus services can be improved, when compared to more frequent and reliable services. The cost of bus fares does not appear to be a significant barrier to people using buses and feedback received from the bus operators indicates that the cost is usually only an issue for young people travelling to and from work/college, and job seekers.
- 11.2 However, the task group is of the view that caution should be exercised in regard to establishing satisfaction rates around the cost of fares and indeed some bus services, as any feedback collected would not necessarily reflect the views of some key groups who do not use bus services at all.
- 11.3 The task group encourages the Council to investigate and identify the key factors in why non-bus users in the county do not use public transport, for example leisure travel by families where costs may be an issue, and the post-Covid low take-up of the concessionary fare scheme in the county. Members are of the view that this will help to identify opportunities for bus operators and the Council to attract more passengers onboard.

(See recommendation 8)

12. Information, Communications, Publicity and Transparency

The task group has concerns that there appears to be a lack of information on bus services and how they are delivered, and that this is having an adverse impact on bus patronage levels. In addition, members are of the view that there is a need for more granular bus usage data which will enable accurate assessments on how services can be improved. Members have therefore identified the following aspects of information which they feel would benefit from further consideration:

12.1 Real-Time Information (RTI):

- 12.1.1 The task group has noted that a third-party supplier (JMW) is contracted to deliver real-time information predictions on bus services through several channels; whilst not a statutory requirement, RTI is expected of all areas and 100% of the UK is covered. In partnership with the bus operators, the Council provides a feed of GPS data from the electronic ticket machine of each bus in operation to JMW, who then translate this location data into a real time prediction which is then fed back into the system. This process powers both on-street displays and all website/app-based systems. This system essentially means all bus services are tracked. The Council uses this data to investigate delays, monitor performance, review congestion hotspots, all alongside the core use of providing arrival predictions at bus stops.
- 12.1.2 The task group is aware however, that RTI is not updating in certain instances including when buses have not left the depot or when drivers have not signed in, which in both cases result in the system reverting to only providing the scheduled bus service information. Members have acknowledged the importance of ensuring that real-time information is providing the most up to date information as this can have significant benefits for bus users such as reduced wait/travel times. The task group therefore encourages the Integrated Transport Team to continue their

efforts with operators in looking at how processes could be improved to ensure that bus users are provided with reliable and up to date RTI.

(See recommendation 9)

12.2 The Council's role as the Local Transport Authority for Gloucestershire:

The task group is of the view that there is a need for improved communication on the Council's role and responsibilities as the Local Transport Authority for Gloucestershire, and how bus services are delivered. Members therefore encourage the Council to look at how this information can be shared more widely, and it is suggested that a Frequently Asked Questions document published on the Council's website would be helpful.

(See recommendation 10)

12.3 Information on Subsidised Bus Routes:

The task group is aware that there is a lack of knowledge around the subsidised bus routes in the county; this is evidenced by frequent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for route information being received by the Council. The task group is of the view that information on the county's subsidised bus routes should be published on the Council's website for transparency purposes and to prevent information having to be sought through FOI requests.

(See recommendation 11)

12.4 Data on Bus Usage:

12.4.1 The task group has noted that as part of the contract terms and conditions for each Council funded bus service, the supplier is required to send monthly passenger usage data to the Integrated Transport Unit. This data is recorded alongside financial information to assess overall value for money of bus services. Whilst this data is effective in being able to check the overall health of any bus service, it does not allow for analysis at a more granular level. To do this the Council works with operators and their respective ticket machine supplier to run more targeted reports. However, there are three fundamental limitations in being able to analyse the data at a more granular level, these are:

- Fare zones – the use of fare zones mean it is not possible to identify how many people board at a specific stop. If this type of data is required, the only way to capture it is through usage recorded by the drivers.
- Destination data - passengers do not have to “tap off” or scan their ticket to exit a station or stop, this means there is no individual journey data.
- Commercial services – operators are not required to share any data with the Council beyond what is required for the concessionary travel scheme process.

12.4.2 The route, timetable, and real-time data provide the Council with a rich dataset that is used both internally and externally in a number of ways. However, the passenger usage data has its limitations due to Council's underlying systems and the position of the Council regarding commercial bus services.

12.4.3 The task group has acknowledged the significant amount of data that the Council holds on bus usage and data from surveys. Members encourage the Council to continue to review this information to drive forward improvements and where possible, to also share this information publicly for transparency purposes.

(See recommendation 12)

12.4.4 The task group has acknowledged that there are fundamental limitations in the Council being able to analyse the passenger usage data at a more granular level, as outlined in paragraph 12.4.1 above. However, the task group encourages the Council to work with operators to look at ways of how to expand the data it receives, particularly data on the individual journeys taken so that the Council can make an accurate assessment of how bus services are used in the county, and consequently how services can be improved.

(See recommendation 13)

12.5 Multi-Modal Map for Gloucestershire:

12.5.1 The commercial and subsidised bus network, community transport and DRT are all components in the way people travel around the county.

12.5.2 The task group is of the view that the creation of a multi-modal map showing all the various bus travel options in the county, would be of huge benefit to public transport users in the county. It will provide a valuable source of information, enabling bus users to increase the efficiency of their journeys through better planning. This will help to make bus travel more competitive compared to private car journeys and would have a positive impact on reducing congestion and carbon transport emissions.

12.5.3 Stagecoach representatives indicated at the evidence gathering session that they would be willing to work with the Council to develop a multi-modal map. The task group therefore encourages the Council to work with bus operators to look at how this can be progressed. The task group is also of the view that the map should be expanded to cover rail services, and the Council should look into working with rail operators to achieve this.

(See recommendation 14)

13. Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

13.1 Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) are the agreed vision for why, what, when and how local services will be improved. Gloucestershire's BSIP sets out the Council's ambition for the county regarding bus services, an ambition that will be jointly delivered through the Enhanced Partnership.

13.2 The DfT has provided feedback on what the Council's BSIP should be/contain:

- Be decisive and clear.
- Have high level support.
- Consider geographical requirements of the county.
- Be evidence-based.
- Reflect current market and needs for transport.
- Clearly state our strengths and weaknesses in bus provision.
- Emphasise how we engage with stakeholders.
- Include performance targets (e.g. punctuality, reliability).
- Detail what resources we have/need and what we will deliver.
- Be a living document and kept up to date.

13.3 70% of county councils, including this Council, were awarded no funding for their BSIPs by the DfT in the first-year funding round. One of the feedback recommendations from this bidding process was that the DfT identified the following three areas of Gloucestershire's plan which needed further review:

- Further development of the bus priority measures.
- The use of data – using it to prove some of the concepts set out in the plan.
- Integrated ticketing – to develop a clear framework of how this could be rolled out with operators.

13.4 The task group has noted that despite the Council not receiving any BSIP funding in the first-year funding round, Gloucestershire's BSIP's targets continue to be the main areas of focus for improvement works. In summary, the targets for the BSIP are related to:

- Journey times – 10% reduction on all journey times across the county.
- Reliability – 5% improvement in reliability.
- Passenger numbers – 10% increase from pre-COVID-19 levels by 2025 – when considering that current bus patronage is 30% down due to COVID, this represents a 40% (30% + 10%) increase from current levels.
- Average passenger satisfaction – 10% increase in overall passenger satisfaction by 2025 (Transport Focus Survey).

- 13.5 The task group has acknowledged the importance of [Gloucestershire's Enhanced Partnership](#). This partnership between the Council and local bus operators was made on 20th October 2023; the agreement sets out how they will work together to deliver the BSIP outcomes in Gloucestershire. The Enhanced Partnership Plan summarises the main themes of the BSIP in setting out an analysis of local bus services in Gloucestershire, the objectives for the quality and effectiveness of bus services and how the Enhanced Partnership Scheme or Schemes are intended to achieve these objectives. The Enhanced Partnership Scheme describes the Facilities, Measures and Requirements that will be implemented to meet those objectives, and how the partnership is constituted and operates.
- 13.6 It is clear that additional BSIP funding is needed to ensure that the Council continues to make progress in delivering the aims stated in the BSIP. The task group has therefore welcomed the news that the Government has recently announced that supplementary funding (BSIP+) would be awarded to local authorities, with an instruction that this funding must be used as revenue support for local bus services. This could be in the form of support for improved bus services, new services, replacement services or for fares initiatives, all with the aim of stimulating additional bus patronage and securing the future viability of bus services.
- 13.7 The DfT has provided Gloucestershire County Council with a grant of £2,209,623 in 2023/24 with a further £2,209,623 to come in 2024/25, with 50% of year 1 and 100% of year 2 funding subject to the Enhanced Partnership being in place. Members have acknowledged that part of this grant will be used to avoid a potential overspend, due to inflationary pressure and re-procurement costs, in the base public transport budget (forecast at £344k in 23/24, and £207k in 24/25), thus securing public transport services which might otherwise be lost through a network review process. The remaining £1.865M of year 1 BSIP+ funding will be used to improve bus services in Gloucestershire. The full details, including the approved list of improvements to bus services in Gloucestershire, and the list of services for re-procurement are available in the [Cabinet Report \(20.09.23\) - Bus Service Improvement Plan \(BSIP+\) funding and update on Dynamic Purchasing System](#).
- 13.8 The task group emphasises the importance of the Council continuing to work collaboratively with partners on the implementation of the BSIP through the Enhanced Partnership to ensure that the Council can meet the terms of the BSIP+ funding, and such that the Council is in the best position possible to secure funding in any future rounds.
- 13.9 The task group is of the view that it would be of value to receive regular updates on the progress of the implementation of the BSIP, progress measured against the recommendations of this report, and the work of the Enhanced Partnership at meetings of the Environment Scrutiny Committee. As part of this, there should be an update on the progress of the development of the national back-office system by the DfT to facilitate multi-operator ticketing on buses (see paragraph 10.3).

(See recommendation 15)

14. The Wider Picture

- 14.1 The task group has a vision for an attractive and affordable network of bus services which have close interchange with other modes of transport including foot, cycle, rail, coach and the private car, through effective transport hubs – and with low and no emission vehicles. This is essential if we are to achieve modal shift away from the private car to public transport and active travel, and hence decarbonisation of transport which is presently 43% of all carbon emissions in Gloucestershire. For this to become a reality these services must improve dramatically on the present ones in terms of punctuality, reliability, frequency, journey time, connectivity, and (arguably) cost. This will not be a one size fits all approach, but will also include on the one hand demand responsive transport and community transport feeding into faster services, as well as more conventional bus services. However, the task group's starting point was the BSIP, and its terms of reference were very much focused on looking at what can be achieved for buses over the 3 years of the BSIP.

14.2 The task group is very much aware of the distinction between commercial and subsidised services, and we refer to this in places. At present, franchising powers are only automatically available under the Act to Mayoral Combined Authorities. Other authorities can apply to the Secretary of State if they wish to pursue franchising. In 2021 each local authority was asked to confirm whether they wished to pursue the franchising or Enhanced Partnership model for local bus services. Like all other 'shire' authorities, Gloucestershire County Council chose the Enhanced Partnership model. However, it would be remiss not to mention this subject given the national debate to the effect that such powers could be introduced, at some point in the future. The Council should therefore be considering to what extent, if at all, it could and should embrace these possibilities, noting also that in the meantime it will have opportunities to intervene in the market through the Enhanced Partnership.

(See recommendation 15)

15. Conclusion and Recommendations

15.1 Gloucestershire's BSIP represents the high-level vision for bus service improvements in the county and the drive towards achieving net zero transport carbon emissions. It is critical that the County Council and bus operators work collaboratively to deliver the important actions needed to achieve the goal of increasing bus use within our local communities.

15.2 The task group has noted that collaborative working with bus operators is especially important to ensure that Gloucestershire meets the terms of its BSIP+ funding and has a convincing case for partnership funding in any future BSIP funding rounds. Future funding is critical to ensure that Gloucestershire's ambitious BSIP can be delivered in full.

15.3 The key findings of the evidence gathering sessions (i.e. the need for improved bus punctuality and reliability, increased frequency (particularly in rural areas), increased operating hours, better co-ordination between bus and rail timetables and between bus routes, and improved integration between transport planning and land use planning) are all identified in the BSIP as target areas. The task group is in agreement that Gloucestershire's BSIP reflects the focus for the interventions and improvements, which are necessary to make bus services more attractive and a practical alternative to using private cars.

15.4 Members would like to suggest that Gloucestershire's BSIP include a statement on the support and work of this task group, as recommended by the DfT.

(See recommendation 16)

15.5 The task group has concluded to make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1 (Subsidised Bus Services):

Recognising the importance of the subsidised routes to a number of communities, the task group is of the view that the Council should review its subsidised bus routes. There should be a clear strategic direction for the Council's subsidised bus services network, and routes should be evaluated against appropriate criteria to determine whether they are working, not working or missing all together and to recommend which routes should be secured. Where there is no realistic prospect of sustaining a bus route, alternatives should be considered.

Recommendation 2 (Community Transport):

- That the Council should examine the role of community transport in Gloucestershire and its service level provision, to determine whether the best use is being made of this valuable service in serving Gloucestershire's communities, especially in isolated communities without other transport.
- In addition, the task group would welcome the development of a Community Transport Strategy to set out an action plan on what the Council can do to assist our partners to ensure that the county has a range of community transport available to our residents.

- The task group learned of an example of ‘best practice’ from the Department for Transport, who cited Lincolnshire, where they link NHS patient transport with community transport providers by ‘batching’ NHS appointments, to better optimise hospital transport. Applying this model to Gloucestershire should be investigated.

Recommendation 3 (One Team Approach Initiative):

That the Council should establish a “one team approach” initiative, to link up councillors from across all political parties, bus operators, Council officers, bus action groups and community transport providers to meet regularly to discuss improving integration, helping to support the work of the Cabinet Member. This should include a particular focus on better timetabling of buses especially regarding services that travel to schools and when connecting with rail. Whilst acknowledging that local authorities have no control over train services, the task group is of the view that it would be of value to invite the local rail operator representatives to engage in this initiative.

Recommendation 4 (Engagement with district council colleagues/local councillors):

- That the County Council in consultation with local councillors and bus operators should consider what measures are needed, including changes to routes, timetables and highways/transport infrastructure to improve service punctuality/reliability and increase active travel, and then recommend or take appropriate actions.
- That the Council should ensure there is regular engagement with district council colleagues around improvements to bus services particularly regarding all aspects of integration and importantly around the development of the local neighbourhood plans.
- That the Council should consult with local councillors during the planning and development stage of the project to deliver Gloucestershire’s interchange model, specifically around the potential site locations of the Strategic Transport Interchange hubs and local interchange hub facilities.
- That the County Council should work closely with the district councils to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the transport considerations needed for new developments and that this is given due regard as part of the planning process.

Recommendation 5 (Promotional Campaign):

That the Council should undertake a promotional campaign to raise awareness amongst staff, councillors and most importantly the wider community of the economic and environmental benefits of travelling by bus as opposed to the private car. A ‘quick win’ could be surveying staff and members regarding the suitability of bus travel to work/member meetings early in 2024.

Recommendation 6 (Member Briefing – Decarbonisation of Bus Transport):

That a member briefing should take place on the plans to decarbonise bus transport in Gloucestershire, including the development of the infrastructure to support this.

Recommendation 7 (Multi-Operator Ticketing):

That the Council should investigate comparable areas, e.g. Transport for Cornwall, where there has been significant integrated transport progress with multi-operator ticketing. Applicability to Gloucestershire should be investigated as a potential ‘quick win’. As a first step, the Council should work with bus operators to, at the minimum, ensure that the operators accept both cash and card as payments.

Recommendation 8 (Investigation into why non-bus users in the county do not use public transport):

That the Council should investigate and identify the key factors in why non-bus users in the county do not use public transport. Including but not limited to whether there are groups for whom cost of travel is a barrier. Members are of the view that this will help to identify opportunities for bus operators and the Council to attract more passengers onboard.

Recommendation 9 (Real-Time Information):

The task group has acknowledged the importance of ensuring that real-time information is providing the most up to date information as this can have significant benefits for bus users such as reduced wait/travel times. The task group therefore recommends that the Council's Integrated Transport Team should continue their efforts with operators in looking at how processes could be improved so that bus users are provided with reliable and up to date real-time information.

Recommendation 10 (FAQ on the Council's Role as the Local Transport Authority for Gloucestershire):

That consideration is given to how information on the role and responsibilities of the Council as the Local Transport Authority for Gloucestershire, and how bus services are delivered, can be shared more widely. The task group has suggested that a Frequently Asked Questions document is published on the Council's website.

Recommendation 11 (Publication of Information on subsidised bus routes):

The task group is aware that there is a lack of knowledge around the subsidised bus routes in the county; this is evidenced by frequent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for route information being received by the Council. The task group therefore recommends that information on the County's subsidised bus routes be published on the Council's website for transparency purposes and to prevent information having to be sought through FOI requests.

Recommendation 12 (Data on Bus Usage):

That the Council should continue to review the information it holds on bus usage and data from surveys to drive bus service improvements and where possible, to also share this information publicly for transparency purposes, whilst respecting the commercial confidentiality of operators.

Recommendation 13 (Data on Bus Usage):

That the Council should work with operators to look at ways of how to expand the data it receives, particularly the data on the individual journeys taken so that the Council can make an accurate assessment of how bus services are used in the county, and consequently how services can be improved.

Recommendation 14 (Multi-Modal Map):

The task group is of the view that the creation of a multi-modal map showing all the various bus travel options in the county, would be of huge benefit to public transport users in the county. It will provide a valuable source of information, enabling bus users to increase the efficiency of their journeys through better planning. This will help to make bus travel more competitive compared to private car journeys and would have a positive impact on reducing congestion and carbon transport emissions. The task group therefore recommends that the Council should work with bus operators to look at how to progress the development of a multi-modal bus travel map. The task group is also of the view that the map should be expanded to cover rail services, and the Council should look into working with rail operators to achieve this.

Recommendation 15 (On-going Scrutiny):

That the Environment Scrutiny Committee receive regular updates on the progress of the implementation of Gloucestershire's BSIP, progress measured against the recommendations of this report, and the work and effectiveness of the Enhanced Partnership. This should include an update on the progress of the development of the national back-office system by the DfT to facilitate multi-operator ticketing on buses.

Recommendation 16 (BSIP document):

That Gloucestershire's BSIP include a statement on the support and work of this task group, as recommended by the DfT.

Councillors:

**Terry Hale,
Stephen Hirst,
Beki Hoyland,
Alan Preest,
Lisa Spivey,
Wendy Thomas (Chair),
Brian Tipper,
Roger Whyborn,
Sue Williams.**

Ends.