



REPORT TITLE: Bus Back Better – Gloucestershire’s Bus Service Improvement Plan

Cabinet Date	22/09/21
Cabinet Member	Cllr Philip Robinson, Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills
Key Decision	No
Purpose of Report	To note progress to date on developing the Gloucestershire Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and to agree the areas of focus to be included in the plan.
Recommendations	<p>That Cabinet:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. notes the update and progress to date on the Gloucestershire BSIP;2. approves the areas of focus in 1.8 of this report; and3. delegates authority to the Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure to:<ol style="list-style-type: none">(a) further develop and finalise the BSIP in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills, and(b) submit this to the DfT no later than its deadline of 31 October 2021.
Reasons for recommendations	<p>The BSIP forms an integral part of the long term strategy for public transport as part of the Department for Transport (DfT) ‘Bus Back Better’ strategy. Councils will need to have a BSIP in order to receive future DfT funding and support to invest in public transport in the long term. This report considers stage one of a two stage process: an Enhanced Partnership document will need to be agreed with bus service operators prior to 31 March 2022. This will be subject to public consultation before it is taken to Cabinet for approval prior to submission.</p>

Resource Implications	<p>As instructed by the DfT, the BSIP is a high level strategy document that doesn't commit the council to any investment obligations or other commitments at this stage of the process, but rather it outlines the areas the council will focus on in partnership with the Gloucestershire transport service operators, in consultation with the public, in order to include the outcome of such input and consultation process in an Enhanced Partnership agreement. Such Enhanced Partnership agreement will include details of estimated costs for any transport development schemes to be included.</p> <p>The development of the BSIP to date, the planned development of the Enhanced Partnership and the consultancy provided by Atkins have been funded using a DfT grant of £385,000 provided explicitly to help with such capacity costs. All development costs will be met with this grant.</p>
Background Documents	<p>DfT – Bus Back Better – National Bus Strategy for England Local Transport Plan 2020-2041</p> <p>Gloucestershire ULEV Strategy - June 2021</p> <p>Gloucestershire Climate Change Strategy – December 2019</p>
Statutory Authority	<p>Gloucestershire County Council is the Local Transport Authority and Local Highway Authority</p>
Divisional Councillor(s)	<p>All</p>
Officer	<p>Name: Tom Main Tel. no: 01452 425999 Email: tom.main@gloucestershire.gov.uk</p>
Timeline	<p>22/09/21 – Cabinet approval</p> <p>31/10/21 – Submit BSIP to the DfT</p> <p>01/11/21 to 31/03/22 – develop, consult and seek Cabinet approval of the Enhanced Partnership document</p> <p>31/03/22 – Submit Enhanced Partnership to the DfT</p> <p>01/05/22 onwards - Implementation</p>

Background

1.1 In May 2021 the Department for Transport (DfT) published guidance on National Bus Strategy: Bus Service Improvement Plans. This is a key part of the government's Bus Back Better strategy to support Local Authorities to improve public transport services in partnership with transport service operators. The development of this strategy can be broken down into two steps:

STEP 1: The development of a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This will be a high level strategic document that states the aims of the Council and its transport service operators, the areas of focus to improve the local bus services in the county in order to; (a) aid the bus industry in its recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic; (b) improve passenger access; (c) grow the number of passengers using the Gloucestershire local bus network.

STEP 2: The development of an Enhanced Partnership agreement. This is a detailed agreement between the council and our transport service operators that states how the council and the transport service operators in Gloucestershire are going to develop and implement specific schemes and provide high quality services to achieve the aims stated in the BSIP.

The purpose of this Cabinet report is to update on progress and to gain approval for the first of these steps. The BSIP is the first document that is required by the DfT whose submission deadline is 31 October 2021. Following publication of the BSIP there will be a period of public consultation, discussion with the transport service operators and drafting of the Enhanced Partnership agreement. This Enhanced Partnership agreement will then be brought to Cabinet before the DfT deadline of 31 March 2022 in order to gain consent from Cabinet to proceed with the actions and schemes contained within.

Together these two documents will form the wider strategy to invest, improve and expand the public transport (local bus) network in the county giving residents greater ability to travel for employment, education, health appointments and leisure activities. An improved public transport network is a key enabler of the economic recovery and growth strategy of the county.

1.2 The public transport offer in Gloucestershire can be broadly split into two parts; a) the commercial network that operates without direct Local Authority subsidy, and b) the publicly subsidised network. Currently the council invests approximately £3.5m annually in direct subsidy of public and community transport services focused on mainly rural areas where a bus service is not commercially viable and off peak services in urban areas. We also spend over £6m annually reimbursing bus service operators for their acceptance of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), a free bus pass scheme for those who qualify on the grounds of age or disability.

1.3 The council is aware of the many challenges in securing a bus service network fit for the future, and meeting these requires a multi-faceted approach. The tailoring of the future bus service network needs to be focused on aims and objectives that are stated within the BSIP. The challenges are linked to a number of key policy documents, and specifically focussed on the carbon agenda and making the bus services as accessible and attractive

to as many potential customers as possible, with a spotlight on enabling the less socially mobile and younger population to access both education and employment.

1.4 This year a critical new challenge is managing the detrimental impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the height of government restrictions on movement and social distancing bus service operators saw an average of a 90% drop in passenger numbers, impacting on fare income across commercial and subsidised services. This revenue shortfall has been temporarily bridged by the DfT's Coronavirus Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) to bus service operators, and by GCC maintaining our ENCTS reimbursement payments at 90-100% of pre-pandemic levels. This was done to avoid large scale reductions in bus services. However it is recognised that such support cannot continue indefinitely and while passenger numbers have generally recovered to around 60-70% of pre-pandemic levels, a strategy is required to assist the public transport network to ensure it both survives and thrives in a post-pandemic county.

1.5 Climate change is of course another leading issue to be considered and integrated into the long term transport strategy. This is being looked at in two ways:

- Vehicles – the current fleet of vehicles on the Gloucestershire public transport network are diesel fuelled, ranging from older Euro 3 emission standard engine vehicles to newer Euro 6 which emit far fewer pollutants (e.g. nitrogen oxide and particulates). Discussions with transport service operators as part of the ULEV Strategy and BSIP work are vital to understanding ways to upgrade our public transport vehicles not just to the higher standard of engine, but to alternative fuels like electricity, compressed natural gas and bio-fuel.
- Public transport use – it is estimated that public transport vehicles in the county contribute around 1% to the total vehicle emissions in Gloucestershire; whereas private cars contribute around 55%. Whilst emissions can be reduced by upgrading the public transport vehicles operating on the network, the greatest scope to contribute to emission saving targets will be by encouraging people to use public transport more.

Contributing to the reduction in Gloucestershire's emissions in both ways is a key aim of improving the transport offer and improving access for residents of the county.

1.6 DfT guidance provides that the BSIP should complement and incorporate existing transport projects and development strategies. In Gloucestershire these include the Arle Court Transport Hub (part of the Junction 10 works); a potential mass-rapid transit scheme in the Cheltenham-Gloucester urban area; the Joint Core Strategy; and the Local Transport Plan.

The Local Transport Plan (LTP) provides detail on the council's existing strategy and policies with regards to the bus network, service quality, bus priority, community transport, information, climate change impact, investment, land use, behaviour change and many more aspects of travel. The aim of the BSIP and Enhanced Partnership is to integrate with this policy and build on these already agreed goals.

1.7 Following the government's Bus Back Better announcement, a team of council officers has been working with its term consultant, Atkins Global (part of the SNC-Lavalin Group), to develop the BSIP strategy, consult with key stakeholders, analyse the current public transport network and work with partner Local Authorities and the DfT to ensure the council's approach aligns with the guidance set out by the DfT. The council have met with all transport service operators in the county to discuss the Bus Back Better strategy, the BSIP and its role in public transport going forward, and most of all to discuss their ideas as to what barriers exist to growing the use of public transport, what areas we should be jointly focusing on to secure a sustainable future for bus services and what opportunities are available to include in this strategy work.

1.8 The aim of the meetings to date has been to identify a number of key areas for continued focus and work, agree them with the transport service operators and the public following a full consultation later in 2021, and use this to form the basis of the more detailed and outcome orientated Enhanced Partnership due to be completed by the end of March 2022. The key areas of focus for the council in its BSIP can be summarised as follows:

- **Information** – high quality information is key to giving both existing and potential passengers confidence in the public transport network. It is also an opportunity to market bus services to the public. There is a universal desire to improve the quality and consistency of information at the roadside via timetable displays and real time passenger information (RTPI), and online via the numerous journey planning websites and apps, all of which use data that is maintained by the council.
- **Infrastructure** – the locations where passengers wait for transport services are a key area of interest. Passengers require a comfortable, safe environment with ready access to high quality information. The council has outlined development of a Transport Interchange Hub strategy in the current LTP, this involves identifying key transport interchanges and ensuring they have the correct infrastructure such as bus shelters, real time timetable information, lighting, and access to other features where appropriate such as bicycle parking and e-scooter rental. The continued roll-out of real time displays at strategic, targeted locations and the potential development of audio announcements are an aim of the BSIP.
- **Vehicles** – the current public transport fleet can be split into those provided by Stagecoach West Ltd (the largest bus service operator in the county); the vehicles provided by smaller operators; and lastly the Community Transport fleet. Stagecoach are committed to progressing towards Euro 6 standard on all of their routes (where currently of 200 vehicles 83% are Euro 5 or higher, and 31% of those are Euro 6). They are also exploring other options for fuel in the future, including Bio-Methane and Compressed Natural Gas (CNG). At present the high cost of electric vehicles means that investment is dependent upon Government funding and the technology behind hydrogen vehicles is unproven. The BSIP is an opportunity to have a strategy in place for expected future DfT funding opportunities and to introduce changes to phase in lower emission vehicles in the council's public transport contracts. There is an aim to make all

public transport vehicles and therefore public transport services carbon neutral by 2030.

- **Bus Priority** – journey time and bus service reliability have come up repeatedly in bus service operator consultation processes as the main barriers to growth. Congestion in urban areas can severely impact the reliability of bus services; it extends journey times and means commercial investment tends to be an attempt to maintain service frequency in the face of increasing congestion rather than improving the service. In order to develop the ‘spoke and hub’ model further, where the demand responsive and less frequent services feed in to the core commercial network, the core bus routes need to have significantly improved journey times and reliability. This can be done with a mixture of measures, key areas of focus and research will be in physical bus priority at notable congestion points in and around urban areas, continued roll-out of the Traffic Light Priority (TLP) scheme, and continued scoping of a potential mass-transit corridor in the Cheltenham-Gloucester urban area. Faster journey times and a more reliable journey are a key aim of bus service operators and the council for the BSIP, schemes will be scoped and costed for review in the Enhanced Partnership.
- **Ticketing and Fares** – this can be a confusing area for passengers. There are multiple operators of bus services in the county each with individual fares and ticketing schemes. This is again complicated when other modes of transport, such as rail have a separate fare structure. The DfT are aware of the complexity of multi-operator and multi-modal ticketing arrangements so they have committed to investing in a revenue sharing IT system that will then be available to Local Authorities. It is important that the BSIP reflects this aim and provides a basis for further exploration. The BSIP and Enhanced Partnership agreement will aim to work towards a simplified fare structure with the potential for capped fares on expensive routes, these tend to be in rural areas that suffer from low passenger numbers and high mileage therefore impacting those who are marginalised by limited access to transport services. Through ticketing (i.e. a single ticket being accepted on multiple services in order to make complex trips easier) is a major aim of the BSIP work.

Contactless payments for bus tickets are available on the Stagecoach network and it is increasingly expected that all bus services should offer this payment method. A clear aim of all other bus service operators is to investigate the roll-out of contactless payment to their services in order to address this expectation.

Young people are a particular area of focus. They present a significant opportunity for long term passenger growth and are a group who suffer from a lack of transport options if they are under the age for driving or if they are unable to afford a licence, or decline the opportunity to drive in order to reduce their carbon footprint, or do not drive for any other reason. They are also a group significantly impacted by the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and will require significant support to access education and training opportunities and employment.

- **Multi-modal integration** – bus services are a major part of the mobility offer to residents of Gloucestershire, however there are areas where they are not

suitable or optimal. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) is already in place in the county and following the council's successful bid for £1.3m in the DfT's Rural Mobility Fund we are planning to expand the DRT offer in the county with a view to it becoming an integral part of rural transport delivery. How well these DRT services integrate with the core bus network will be key to the success of both types of transport.

Demand for bus service integration with rail services is also high - it is important to consider the rail network for external trips in and out of the County, including London, Birmingham, Bristol and Cardiff. The route in from the west (South Wales) does provide some internal Gloucestershire trips, but as a whole the rail network is not a competitor to the bus services.

It is however critical that the links to the railway stations by bus are improved. Important stations for bus/rail links are Cheltenham, Gloucester, Kemble (for Cirencester and links between the two), Stroud, Stonehouse, Lydney, Moreton-in-Marsh and Ashchurch (for Tewkesbury).

- **Bus Service provision** – the challenge for the council as the local transport authority and local highway authority is to create the right conditions to support both the core commercial services (mainly provided by Stagecoach), provide opportunity for further commercial investment in transport services and to stimulate demand for rural services (both commercial and subsidised) which includes Demand Responsive Services, Dial-a-ride and Community Transport.

The Bus Back Better project as a whole is an opportunity for the council to work with the transport service operators and the public to identify the most appropriate way of delivering better public transport in each area, and to provide a strategic foundation for a pipeline of future investment and development. It is expected that future funding will be made available by the DfT and that funds will go to Local Authorities who have both (a) agreed a BSIP and Enhanced Partnership agreement with transport service operators in their area; and (b) have a sound strategy for successful investment in local public transport.

In the council's LTP it has set itself a target of achieving at least an hourly frequency of bus service timetable on public transport services on key strategic corridors, and improving access for less frequent bus services alongside Demand Responsive Transport in sparsely populated rural areas, some of which currently have only one timetabled trip a week.

- **Marketing and Engagement** – as the main commercial bus service operator in Gloucestershire, Stagecoach have commented that they would like a joined up approach with the council around marketing and engagement. This would make use of the reach of both organisations to engage with the public and achieve growth in passenger numbers and therefore revenue. Smaller operators have stated that they would appreciate assistance from the council with marketing and council officers are aware of opportunities to raise the profile of the council when public funding is used to provide subsidised services.

Linked with this is engagement with the public. As part of the Bus Back Better project the council will fully consult with the public around the proposed strategy, this will be a first step towards continued engagement beyond the initial consultation phase to ensure all parties are aware of barriers to use and access of public transport and opportunities for growth. The DfT guidance states that an on-going engagement should be a key part of this.

Marketing and engagement will be targeted at all residents of the county and particular focus will be made on younger people who are almost always under-represented in the past.

Options

2.1 To agree the recommendations set out in this report.

2.2 To decline the opportunity to take part in the national Bus Back Better scheme.

Risks

1.1 The lack of an agreed BSIP and subsequent Enhanced Partnership agreement would leave Gloucestershire at significant risk of missing out on future funding streams from the DfT and other sources. The DfT have stated that they require all Local Authorities to engage in the Bus Back Better project given that funding will likely be conditional on their participation. It also carries a large reputational risk of being viewed by the public as missing out on a chance to be part of this national effort to improve local transport.

1.2 As stated in paragraph 1.4 of this report, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on bus passenger numbers and therefore revenue. Recovery from such an impact in the medium and long term will depend on a successful BSIP and Enhanced Partnership agreement as a means of coordinating future public and private sector investment and development. Without this there is an extremely high risk that many bus services in the county will fail once government revenue support ends and, as a consequence, many residents will be left without a viable means of accessing education, employment, leisure activities and vital local services.

Financial implications

4.1 The BSIP does not commit GCC to any investment obligations at this stage, as it is a high level strategy document that states the areas the council wishes to pursue as part of the Bus Back Better project and will form the basis of the Enhanced Partnership agreement document. This Enhanced Partnership agreement document will contain detail on how the council will achieve the aims set out in the BSIP, including estimated financial implications. This will be brought to Cabinet at a later date for consideration and approval before it is submitted to the DfT prior to the deadline of 31 March 2022.

4.3 The development of the BSIP to date, the planned development of the Enhanced Partnership and the consultancy provided by Atkins have been funded using a DfT grant of £385,000 which was provided explicitly to help with such capacity costs. All development costs will be met from this grant.

Climate change implications

5.1 Increased use of public transport, regardless of the vehicle fuel type, is a net benefit to the county in terms of the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases and local air pollutants. Public transport vehicles in the county currently contribute around 1% to the total vehicle carbon dioxide emissions of Gloucestershire. By comparison, private cars contribute around 55%. Improving use of the existing public transport network will contribute enormously to meeting the council's net zero emission savings target. Improvements to this network, giving more Gloucestershire residents more opportunity to travel and to more destinations, will make an even greater contribution.

5.2 Moving from fossil fuelled vehicles to renewable sources is a key aim in the medium term for public transport, as set out in the ULEV Strategy. As part of the BSIP consultation with bus service operators so far, the council has discussed in detail electric buses, compressed natural gas solutions and also bio-methane. The BSIP will contain a commitment to further investigating alternative fuelled vehicles and ensure we are prepared with an agreed strategy when funding rounds are opened by the government which is committed to helping Local Authorities and transport service operators with the high cost of migrating to such vehicles.

5.3 One short term measure the council wishes to include in the BSIP is a commitment to raise the vehicle emission standards of its subsidised bus network. Currently the council does not specify any minimum engine requirements (see paragraph 1.5 of this report for more information on these engine standards) as part of its contract tender process. The council aims to provide a phased approach first to specify Euro 5 engines to operate GCC contracts, then to Euro 6. It is important to do this in a measured way to avoid spikes in contract costs and to give providers the opportunity to assess their fleet and plan a replacement strategy to meet this requirement.

Equality implications

6.1 At this time, no Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken due to the strategic nature of the work so far. However a full assessment will be performed as part of the Cabinet report for the proposed Enhanced Partnership agreement at the relevant time, as this will contain stated and detailed actions that will have a positive effect on users of public transport, many of whom are expected to fall within the protected characteristic groups.

6.2 The council is acutely aware that some of the most vulnerable residents in the county rely on public transport to move around and access services. There are many aspects of public transport that are in place to improve access to vulnerable residents, such as high kerbs/low floor buses, improved access to information, the ENCTS pass offers unlimited travel for eligible pass holders, improved training for bus drivers and continued

engagement with local disability groups. The more sustainable bus services we can maintain, the better access we will give to all residents of the county including those with protected characteristics.

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) implications

7.1 There is no current impact of this work with regards to Data Protection as no personal data is used. However, this may need to be considered in future once details are confirmed.

Social value implications

8.1 The majority of bus service operators who provide transport in Gloucestershire are Gloucestershire-based SME companies who put a significant amount of time and resource into the local economy by employing drivers, passenger assistants, office staff and managers. They also invest significantly in training and development of their staff, all drivers of larger vehicles will have to undertake and pass the professional CPC qualification. Many such operators also work with and contribute to local charities, and most of our Community Transport operators are charities in their own right due to the exceptional service they offer to their local area, areas that often lack regular transport services due to their extremely rural nature.

8.2 Transport services also contribute significantly to the economy by offering residents opportunities to move around the county for training, education and employment. A healthy transport network is vital to a growing local economy and also to give people a chance to socialise. Many younger, older and disabled residents do not have access to a car so the only way they can travel to meet family and friends, access health appointments and take part in leisure activities is by using the public transport network.

Consultation feedback

9.1 Council Officers and Atkins Global have met and consulted with all bus service operators in the county during the period 01/05/21-20/08/21, in order to advise them of the BSIP and the impact it will have on public transport, and also gather their feedback around any issues arising therefrom. It also gave such operators a chance to raise any issues they considered important, and in many cases shape a significant part of the council's BSIP. Partnership working is at the heart of the Bus Back Better project and the BSIP is the first stage towards a fully agreed Enhanced Partnership with all transport service operators.

9.2 It is a requirement for the council to go out to full public consultation prior to the submission of the Enhanced Partnership in March 2022. This will be done in full in a timely manner to both assess the responses, consider them for inclusion in the agreement, and enable Cabinet to consider this feedback prior to the council's submission of the Enhanced Partnership agreement to the DfT.

The council is currently gathering public feedback in other ways, i.e. via the Transport Focus passenger representative group, comments made to transport service operators

and Councillors, engagement sessions and the existing knowledge of Officers who have years of experience engaging with the public regarding transport.

9.3 After the BSIP and Enhanced Partnership agreement are agreed and finalised, public engagement will form a key part of the council's public transport strategy going forward. The council aims to include a mechanism for the public to pro-actively engage with it both with regular events and an electronic reporting system.

Officer recommendations

10.1 That Cabinet note the update on progress so far on the GCC BSIP, that they approve the areas of focus in detailed in paragraph 1.8 of this report and delegate authority to the Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills to develop and submit the final version of the BSIP to meet the DfT deadline of 31 October 2021.

Performance management/follow-up

11.1 The Bus Service Improvement Plan will be published by 31 October 2021 and the Enhanced Partnership will enter force on 1 April 2022. GCC will publish a review of the BSIP by 31 October of each subsequent year for as long as the Enhanced Partnership is in force.

Appendix 1 – BSIP Logic Map

A logic map for the BSIP to summarise the context, challenges, possible interventions/implementations and outcomes is included below. This provides a framework for the rest of the BSIP.

