

5 October 2021		ITEM: 10
Planning, Transport, Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Bus Service Improvement Plan		
Wards and communities affected: All Wards	Key Decision: Non-Key Decision	
Report of: Navtej Tung, Strategic Transport Manager		
Accountable Assistant Director: Leigh Nicholson – Assistant Director, Planning, Transport and Public Protection / Julie Nelder – Assistant Director, Highways, Fleet and Logistics		
Accountable Director: Julie Rogers – Director, Public Realm		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

In March 2021 the Department for Transport published a new National Bus Strategy. The strategy sets out a path for all Local Transport Authorities to develop either an Enhanced Partnership, or the franchising of all bus services. Thurrock Council intends to pursue an Enhanced Partnership.

As part of this process, the Council must develop a Bus Service Improvement Plan, which is to be published on the Council's website, and submitted to the Department for Transport by the end of October 2021. The Bus Service Improvement Plan is a high level plan which identifies where the Council is to seek prioritisation of enhancements to bus service provision within the borough, to enable buses to become more attractive and easier to use by residents for local journeys. The measures within the Bus Service Improvement Plan will be used to seek funding from a pot of £3billion announced by the Government for bus service improvements. This money is comprised of both capital and revenue funding.

Failure to submit the Bus Service Improvement Plan to the DfT by the identified date could result in the loss of bus related grants and subsidies to both bus operators and the Council, potentially affecting bus service provision across the borough. The Council is also unable to seek additional funding for bus services without a Bus Service Improvement Plan.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 To note and endorse the Bus Service Improvement Plan for adoption by Thurrock Council.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 In March 2021, the Department for Transport (DfT), via the Prime Minister's Office, issued a new National Bus Strategy for England. The strategy sets out a desire for local authorities to take a greater role in coordinating bus service provision, with an emphasis on partnership and stakeholder working to implement a full range of measures to grow patronage by making it more attractive to all residents, workers and visitors. Councils are asked to establish an "Enhanced Partnership" – collaborating with bus operators and other stakeholders, or should it wish, to progress with franchising – delivering buses in a similar way to those in London.
- 2.2 To deliver an Enhanced Partnership (EP), the DfT has set out a programme for Local Authorities to follow, with a series of hard deadlines. The Primary deadline was 30 June 2021, where Local Transport Authorities (LTA) had to indicatively inform the DfT whether they were to implement an EP or to pursue franchising and publish this on the Council's website. Thurrock Council is progressing with an Enhanced Partnership, as approved by the Portfolio Holder for Transport.
- 2.3 The next deadline is October 31 2021, where LTA's are required to submit to the DfT a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). The BSIP is a high level evidence base with identification of key measures to help identify where the Council would like to prioritise improvements for bus service improvements, and use this document to bid for funding from Government. This is for both infrastructure funding, and service enhancements.
- 2.4 Following the submission of the BSIP to DfT, the Council must prepare its Enhanced Partnership documentation, which will also include a passenger charter. An EP is an arrangement for all partners with an interest in the delivery of bus services within an LTA area to sign up to, backed up by legislation. The LTA has the co-ordinating responsibility, and is required to engage with no less than all service operators which serve the authority area, even if the route runs across the boundary. Within Thurrock, this means Transport for London services into the west of the Borough, First Bus Services into Basildon (and beyond), Thurrock Council contracted services operated by NIBS, and all Ensign bus services. The Council must complete and publish its Enhanced Partnership by 31 March 2022.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 Following the publication of the intent to develop an Enhanced Partnership in June 21, the Council is required to develop and publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan by 31 October 2021.
- 3.2 This document will set out at a high level the range of measures the LTA is looking to implement as part of its Enhanced Partnership, and will act as the central reference point for submissions to the DfT for a share of £3billion

funding in relation to bus service improvements, both revenue and capital. This will include an understanding of service enhancements which are required, as well as any physical infrastructure improvements which are necessary. The document will also set out an understanding of the existing situation and challenges in bus service delivery within Thurrock, and proposals for a fare charging approach, and targets for service delivery within the borough. Alongside this, a commitment to a Bus Passenger Charter should also be included. The BSIP should be developed in partnership with other key stakeholders, including bus service operators, and key user groups. Bus Service Implementation Plans should have a strong link to an authorities Local Cycling and Walking Implementation Plan (LCWIP), and measures should go hand in hand.

- 3.3 The Thurrock BSIP has been produced through engagement with Local Bus Operators to identify where bus services require infrastructure enhancements to help improve the reliability of services, and through analysis of data and identification of key themes within the National Bus Strategy to provide service enhancements and measures which make bus use more attractive. Additionally, officers have undertaken public engagement to seek the views of residents regarding their experiences and perceptions of bus services within the borough, to help evidence enhancements.
- 3.4 The BSIP acts as a high level bidding document to help the Council seek funding from the DfT. The measures identified within the document, backed up by evidence to show a need, can be eligible for funding from the Department. The Thurrock BSIP has prioritised enhancements to existing services to enable more frequent services, developing taxi based services to support rural communities, integration of bus services with rail, improving the reliability of buses along their route, fare capping and integration, enhancing bus information, and researching new power technologies for buses.
- 3.5 The vast majority of buses within Thurrock are commercially run services, with the exception of three routes funded by the Council. The past decade has seen funding and subsidies for buses cut in half, which has impacted on provision for smaller and more rural communities. Therefore there is a focus on increasing provision of services through enhanced frequencies and additional buses, to make using the bus a realistic and viable choice. Where demand is not projected to make running additional buses a viable endeavour, the Council will explore new solutions to deliver demand responsive transport, using smaller and more cost effective vehicles. Some service enhancement is also being considered for commercial services, either to bring them in line with frequencies of other services, or to provide additional services during evenings and weekends.
- 3.6 Officers are also proposing to seek funds from the Government to investigate how bus services can operate more reliable journeys through the boroughs most high-frequency bus corridor – Lancaster Roundabout to Sockets Heath via Grays Bus Station. Engagement with operators has determined this corridor provides the greatest challenge to maintaining bus services which run

to timetable and provide a reliable service to residents. Additionally, the Council will seek to investigate how fares can be simplified, reduced, and integrated between operators and modes, and also investigate changes in technologies which can power buses in a zero-carbon environment, helping the Council to determine where and how investment is made to best suit the needs of the borough and operators.

- 3.7 These high level measures provide the authority a broad opportunity to seek funding from the new bus services pot of £3bn being made available by the Government. The priorities within the Thurrock BSIP align with the themes within the national bus strategy, with the ultimate aim to make buses more attractive to residents and communities, helping them to become the primary choice for local journeys.
- 3.8 The Thurrock BSIP has been developed in consideration of the emerging local plan and supporting transport strategy.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 The recommendation is put forward for Planning, Transportation and Regeneration Committee to note and endorse, so that the Council can meet its obligation to the Department for Transport for the submission of a Bus Service Improvement Plan by the end of October 2021.
- 4.2 Failure by the Council to adopt the BSIP and submit this document to the DfT by the stated date will have potential financial implications for both the authority and bus operators and services within the borough. Funds and subsidies provided by central government to the authority and bus operators for bus services may be stopped with immediate effect. This could result in the reduction or loss of some services within the borough, especially those being supporting due to reduced passenger trips resulting from the pandemic. For the Council, this could see the loss of funds supporting the subsidised services, and may potentially impact on funding for Home to School Transport.
- 4.3 Failure to submit the BSIP on time would subsequently have a knock on effect on the Council's opportunity to bid for funding from government, and also would impact on the ability for the Council to develop and finalise its Enhanced Partnership by March 2022.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 To support the development of the BSIP, the Council launched a public engagement exercise in early August 2021 to understand more about the views towards bus services by residents. This public engagement is made up of two parts. The first is a survey, developed to identify how residents perceive bus service provision in Thurrock, and their experiences, as well as what seeking to understand what improvements residents would like to see.

This survey allows the Council to build a baseline evidence base of views about buses, and can allow future comparisons to take place.

- 5.2 The second part is a map based tool which allows participants to log where physical improvements may be required, or where there may be issues which need attention. This can include showing where additional bus stops or bus routes are required, where buses become delayed, or where they may experience issues with accessing the bus stop itself. This tool will be utilised as an ongoing log for recoding the need for investment, helping officers to understand where proposals can be put forward should funding opportunities arise. The spatial element of this tool also allows officers to quickly identify where in the borough clusters of issues may exist.
- 5.3 The Public Engagement has been publicised through a number of channels. Posters have been developed which will help to promote the engagement by being posted within buses and on bus stops. Posters include a web link to the survey, or a QR code to easily find the survey, or interested parties could write directly to the Council with their views via email or through the post. The Council has also sought to utilise its Real Time Passenger Information display screens across the borough to promote the survey. Lastly, the public engagement has been promoted through the Council's social media channels. All members were also written to, to inform of the Public Engagement and to make their local communities and residents aware of the survey. The Bus User Group were also written to seek their views.
- 5.4 Due to the time constraints involved in developing a BSIP and its submission to the DfT, there has not been the opportunity to publically consult on the document, however the survey presented an opportunity to inform residents who participated that the document has been completed and published on the website. As a result, the democratic process within the Council is being used to act as the consultation on the BSIP, by submission to PTR O&S Committee and then Cabinet for adoption. The BSIP is intended to be a live document which is updated as required, and this will present an ongoing opportunity to seek feedback for the need to amend details within the document including the consideration for additional measures.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 The Thurrock Bus Service Improvement Plan will have an impact on communities and individuals within Thurrock. An EQIA will be undertaken to identify the impacts and any mitigating measures that should be considered to manage and guide bus service enhancements to enable more people across the borough to access bus services.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Laura Last**
Senior Management Accountant

An operational and staffing budget is required to deliver the BSIP. This is to be funded through the Council's Capability Fund allocation from DfT.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Ian Hunt**
Assistant Director of Law and Governance & Monitoring Officer

The legal implications for the production of a Bus Service Improvement Plan and Bus Strategy are set out within the body of this report. The Council has identified the decision to establish an "Enhanced Partnership" which was published on the Council's website. Thurrock Council is progressing with an Enhanced Partnership, as approved by the Portfolio Holder for Transport.

The deadline to submit the BSIP to the DfT is 31st October 2021 and the Council is on track to meet this.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager

Consultation and engagement exercises have taken place with residents and user groups to inform the development of this BSIP. Results from this feedback will be used to progress a Community Equality Impact Assessment and guide bus service enhancements to enable more people across the borough to access bus services.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder or Impact on Looked After Children

None

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 – BSIP Guidance Assistance - Thurrock Council

Report Author:

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Transport Development