

CABINET

3 AUGUST 2021

NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY, ENHANCED PARTNERSHIPS AND BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLANS

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Phil Filmer, Portfolio Holder for Front Line Services

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Summary

This report sets out Medway Council's proposed response to the publication of the Government's National Bus Strategy, including the development of a Bus Service Improvement Plan for Medway.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. The content of this report aligns with the Council's Local Transport Plan. It also has links with the Council's established priorities for a clean and green environment and putting Medway on the map as a smart and sustainable waterfront university city.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Department for Transport (DfT) published its National Bus Strategy in March 2021. The Strategy changes the regulatory framework under which buses have operated for the past 35 years and will be supported by £3 billion of investment across England, along with a commitment to repurpose current funding. The main objective of the Strategy is to provide passengers with more frequent, more reliable, easier to use, better coordinated and cheaper bus services. This new approach acknowledges the role the bus can play in achieving a net zero emission society and serves as a commitment to supporting bus and bus rapid transit schemes.
- 2.2. The National Bus Strategy expects all Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) to set up an Enhanced Partnership (EP). An EP is a statutory arrangement under the 2017 Bus Services Act whereby the LTA and local bus operators work together to improve local bus services. It needs to include a clear vision of the improvements that the EP is aiming for and actions to achieve them.

The LTA has formal responsibility for making the plan, but at set points in the process it can only proceed with proposals with the support of a defined proportion of local bus operators.

- 2.3. From 1 July 2021, only LTAs and operators that have confirmed their intention to develop an EP will continue to receive the COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG). Medway Council has advised the Department for Transport (DfT) of its intention to develop an EP and will therefore continue to receive this funding. The developed EP and accompanying documentation must be published by 31 March 2022. From April 2022, only areas operating under an EP will be eligible to receive the new funding streams from the Government's £3billion budget.
- 2.4. By the end of October 2021, Government expects all LTAs to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This must set out how LTAs will use their EP to deliver an ambitious vision for bus travel, meeting the overarching goal of the National Bus Strategy to grow back patronage after the pandemic and then to increase it and raise the mode share of the bus.

3. Options

- 3.1. The following options are available to the Cabinet:
- 3.2. Option 1 - To note the work currently being undertaken to develop a BSIP, including the key areas for consideration set out in the draft BSIP attached at Appendix 1 to this report, and the intention to report a developed BSIP to Cabinet ahead of the Government's publication deadline of 31 October 2021. **This is the recommended option.**
- 3.3. Option 2 - To not progress with the development of a BSIP. This option is not advised as it may prevent the Council accessing central Government funding and would not demonstrate a commitment to the principles outlined in the National Bus Strategy.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1. The National Bus Strategy expects BSIPs to do the following:
 - Set targets for journey times and reliability improvements.
 - Identify where bus priority measures are needed, including potential bus lanes and Bus Rapid Transit routes to transform key corridors.
 - Consider how traffic management can be improved to benefit buses through traffic signal priority, bus gates and enforcement of traffic restrictions that can benefit buses through reduced congestion.
 - Set out pressures on the road network, air quality issues and carbon reduction targets that improved bus services could address, and joint actions to transform the local bus fleet to zero emission.
 - Drive improvements for passengers by setting targets for passenger growth and customer satisfaction, producing plans and costs for lower

and simpler tickets (including multi-operator ticketing) and modal integration.

- Consider the impact of roadside infrastructure and how a coherent and integrated network should serve schools, health, social care, employment, and other services.
- Consider network design and the provision of more comprehensive socially necessary bus services, including demand-responsive services.
- Consider the views of local people and commit to a Bus Passenger Charter that sets out what passengers can expect from bus operators delivering local bus services across their area.

4.2. Section 4 of the draft BSIP (attached at Appendix 1) outlines ways in which the Council could meet these expectations. These include exploring opportunities for bus priority measures and traffic signal improvements to reduce congestion, and improved integration with other modes of travel. Working with operators as part of the EP, the potential for increasing service frequencies on key corridors could be considered, along with the introduction of an all-operator ticket and a simpler zonal fare structure. Measures to improve the passenger experience, such as enhanced bus specifications and more accessible and inclusive services, are likely to form part of the BSIP, along with proposals to enhance the personal safety of users.

4.3. Given the short timescale, the BSIP will be in outline; the DfT will not regard the content as definitive or any commitments within it as binding. The main purpose is to focus on the issues that need to be addressed, to explore possible answers and provide an early basis for Government funding decisions in preparation for 2022/23, when transformational funding begins.

5. Diversity Impact Assessment

5.1. It is proposed that the developed BSIP will be reported to Cabinet ahead of the Government's publication deadline of 31 October 2021. A Diversity Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of this work.

6. Risk management

6.1. Risks associated with the recommendations set out in this report are summarised below:

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Failure to adopt a BSIP by 31 October 2021, or adopting BSIP policies that do not address the overarching	Government will assess BSIPs when making decisions about future public transport funding allocations. Government will also consider an LTA's performance in	The National Bus Strategy confirms that progressing the steps set out in the strategy on time will ensure access to existing and new funding streams. This risk can	B2

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
aspirations of the National Bus Strategy, resulting in reduced levels of existing funding, and limited future funding opportunities	relation to their BSIP policies when determining funding allocations for wider, non-bus local transport schemes. This could include LTP funding allocations	therefore be mitigated by progressing the necessary actions to the prescribed timescales.	
Failure to adopt a BSIP by 31 October 2021, or adopting BSIP policies that do not address the overarching aspirations of the National Bus Strategy, resulting in reputational damage and compromising agreed Climate Change Action Plan objectives	The National Bus Strategy requires BSIPs to set out the Council's commitment to the principles outlined in the National Bus Strategy. It is therefore likely to have a political impact and generate significant local interest.	Progress the development of the Council's BSIP for publication by 31 October 2021, incorporating the key elements set down by Government, and demonstrating a commitment to modal shift and climate change objectives set out in the National Bus Strategy.	B2

7. Consultation

7.1. Local authorities are required to report the views of passengers and third parties during the establishment and development of the BSIP. This will initially be achieved through a review of existing evidence and data, including the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) National Travel survey data. This is set out in section 3 of the draft BSIP document appended to this report. Further engagement with key stakeholders on the Council's emerging proposals, including local MPs, would take place later in the summer. This is likely to take the form of a short online response form/survey.

8. Climate change implications

8.1. The Council declared a climate change emergency in April 2019 and has set a target for Medway to become carbon neutral by 2050.

8.2. Medway's Climate Change Strategy includes the following actions, which will be embedded in Medway's BSIP:

- *Continue to deliver bus infrastructure improvements, and explore opportunities to facilitate the use of ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEV) on bus routes in Medway.*

- *Maintain productive relationships with local bus operators with a view to establishing a 'Bus Improvement Plan' and introduce data reporting to include fleet comparison and journey time information.*
- *Explore opportunities for phased uptake of ULEV on supported bus routes.*
- *Work with local bus operators to develop a strategy that facilitates the introduction of electric buses in Medway, including the identification of funding opportunities at national level.*
- *Tackle congestion hotspots through Variable Message Signs (VMS), traffic signal infrastructure and programming upgrades and smart cities initiatives.*
- *Improvements to the operation of traffic signal-controlled junctions and crossings through programming changes or upgraded equipment.*
- *Continue with our proactive and dedicated approach to improving air quality across Medway through the delivery of the Air Quality Action Plan.*

9. Financial implications

- 9.1. Progressing the development of the Council's BSIP does not have any resource implications for existing council budgets. The actions will be progressed and funded by a £100k revenue grant made available from DfT for this purpose.
- 9.2. Objectives set out in the emerging BSIP and EP would be fully costed and the implications of this presented in further reports. Implementation of the objectives and commitment to the necessary expenditure would only be progressed if approved and would be aligned to the promise of £3billion of national funding over five years set out by Government in the National Bus Strategy.
- 9.3. It is stated within the BSIP Guidance that: "Government will also consider an LTA's performance in relation to their BSIP policies when determining funding allocations for wider, non-bus local transport schemes."

10. Legal implications

- 10.1. The Bus Services Act 2017 amended the Transport Act 2000 to make provision for EP schemes and plans. There are no legal implications for the development of the BSIP at this stage.

11. Recommendation

- 11.1. The Cabinet is requested to note the work currently being undertaken to develop a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and the intention to undertake further engagement on emerging proposals during the summer prior to reporting the completed plan to Cabinet in October 2021.

12. Suggested reasons for decision

- 12.1. To ensure Medway Council demonstrates its commitment to the principles outlined in the National Bus Strategy, securing existing funding allocations, and putting the Council in a position where it can bid for future funding to improve public transport in Medway.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Medway BSIP

Background papers

DfT, Bus Back Better: National Bus Strategy for England
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-back-better>

National bus strategy: bus service improvement plans – guidance to local authorities and bus operators
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-service-improvement-plan>

Bus Services Act 2017: Enhanced Partnership creation
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-services-act-2017-enhanced-partnership-creation>