

Report of the Corporate Director of Place

York Bus Service Improvement Plan

Summary

1. The Scrutiny Committee have requested an update on the progress of the Bus Service Improvement Plan as the scheme moves towards delivery.
2. The paper sets out the Governments development of National Bus Strategy and the Councils response of developing an Enhanced Partnership and then preparing a Bus Service Improvement Plan which secured £17.3 million pounds of funding for the cities bus services which was received in November 2022.
3. The report details the progress towards delivery, the primary focus of which has been on safeguard current services.

Recommendations

4. The Economy and Place Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the Bus Service Improvement Plan and consider any recommendations for future reviews

Reasons: to aid future policy development of Bus Service Improvement Plan.

Background

5. In September 2019, the government set out how it would launch a revolution in bus services – delivering a better deal for bus users and committing to publishing a National Bus Strategy.
6. In February 2020, the Prime Minister announced that bus services across the country would be transformed with simpler fares, thousands of new buses, improved routes and higher frequencies.
7. The National Bus Strategy was launched in March 2021. It sets out the vision and opportunity to deliver better bus services for passengers across England,

through ambitious and far-reaching reform of how services are planned and delivered.

Enhanced Partnership

8. On 20th May 2021, the Executive endorsed a decision for the council to pursue an Enhanced Bus Partnership (EP) in preference to establishing bus franchising arrangements. In their report, titled “York’s response to the National Bus Strategy”, officers were of the opinion that the challenges of bus franchising outweighed the benefits in comparison to an EP.
9. An Enhanced Bus Partnership is an agreement that enables local authorities with operators to set a shared aims with regard to improving bus services. The Bus Services Improvement Plans (BSIPs) are how LTAs, working closely with their local bus operators, address this - setting out their vision for delivering the step-change in bus services that are required by the Strategy. York “MADE” its
10. The structure for an Enhanced Partnership was laid out by Government and built upon the best practice in York of a Better Bus Partnership that brought together the council, local bus operators and other organisations representing bus passenger interests.
11. There are a number of task-specific groups consisting of a wide range of stakeholders. These groups are being established to monitor, report and advise on the following areas;
 - a) Bus performance and reliability
 - b) Bus infrastructure improvements
 - c) Ticketing and commercial issues,
 - d) Passenger and stakeholder engagement
 - e) Marketing of bus services
12. Operational Delivery of the BSIP is be led by an operational delivery group consisting of council officers and local bus operators
13. York’s bus operators were engaged in devising the BSIP, through a regular programme of meetings. We also had regular meetings with North Yorkshire County Council, recognising the joint work done by the two authorities on some aspects of the bus service (e.g. concessionary fares) and the high number of bus routes that cross the boundary between York and North Yorkshire. East Riding of Yorkshire Council and West Yorkshire Combined Authority have also been engaged at various points in the process.
14. York Bus Forum were asked to outline their priorities for developing the bus network and York Civic Trust have also produced a policy paper on developing the bus network, both of which have informed the BSIP.

15. Consultation for Phase One of the Local Transport Plan, through the “Our Big Conversation” joint consultation on carbon/ climate change, transport and the local economy has also informed the BSIP.

Bus Service Improvement Plan

16. The BSIP was prepared and the programme was approved at the Executive Member for Transport's Decision Session in October 2021. The documents set out City of York Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in response to the National Bus Strategy (NBS).
17. The BSIP sets out how York will continue its long standing programme to improve bus services in York to encourage greater use of York's buses – in support of the city's local transport and environmental policies, and to recover service use to levels seen before the covid pandemic – indeed higher than that.
18. Although this plan is responding to NBS, the bus has always been very important in York's transport. The Bus Service Improvement Plan explains why:
 - a) bus services are important because they combat congestion - one of the biggest destroyers of time and productivity in modern urban economies. In York, pre-covid, the buses carried a lot of trips – nearly 16 million in 2018/19, 4 million of those on York's park and ride network. This represents a growth of 60% over the Year 2000 total of 10 million trips. Also, 8% of journeys to work in York are on the bus, compared to 3% nationally.
 - b) because the bus is an efficient user of limited road space (a double decker bus is the length of 2 cars, but can carry up to 80 people) it always makes sense to support further use of the bus with the objective of managing congestion in York. Secondly bus services support York's economy.
 - c) Policies to grow York's economy require a flexible local labour market – allowing employees to travel easily to a range of job opportunities, and giving employers access to a pool of labour spread over a wide area.
 - d) The University of York, York College and York St John University are all on high frequency bus routes, and the city centre is at the heart of many high frequency routes, making bus an important means for people to access jobs, training opportunities, further and higher education.
 - e) Bus services also support York's city centre. Research has shown that 25% of people in the centre of York got there by bus; meanwhile other

research has shown that bus passengers are responsible for between 25% and 33% of expenditure in city centres, with an average spend per trip of £54. If these figures were applied to the number of visitor trips to York each year (approximately 8 million), a spend of around £100 million per year is implied, with spending by residents of York, who use the bus to get into the city centre, additional to this figure. As such, improving bus services is essential to CYC's wider ambitions to develop the city centre and assist in its recovery from the economic downturn brought by covid.

- f) Effective bus services are also a key component in the City Council's programmes to reduce poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion in York. The original work by the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit made it clear that availability of reliable and affordable public transport allows people without access to cars to reach training, healthcare, childcare, a range of job opportunities and simply allows people to visit, and be visited by, their friends and relatives, and this link is re-emphasised in the National Bus Strategy and correspondence from Baroness Vere more recently. As such, effective bus services can be key to promoting not just economic growth, but also improving health and wellbeing and reducing mental illness, particularly in a city like York, with a relatively low rate of car ownership. Furthermore, bus services have a key role in complementing York's policies to encourage walking and cycling.

- g) Studies of travel behaviour have shown that people are more likely to adopt walking and cycling as their main means of getting around if a good bus service is also available – even if they only use it when the weather is poor or they have something heavy to carry. In this way, this BSIP is complementary to, not in tension with, York's investment in active travel through the Active Travel Fund and the city's own walking and cycling project pipeline.

- h) York's bus services have been the focus of much energy and investment, dating back to at least the establishment of the city's first park and ride site in the 1980s. As a result of this activity, bus services in York have not suffered the gradual loss of passengers seen in many places and the number of bus passengers in York is around 65% higher than it was twenty years ago and York has one of the highest levels of bus use in the UK.

19. The BSIP sets out a vision for York in which bus services are:

- Inclusive - minimising social exclusion by offering easy, comprehensive and cheap transport around the city.
- Accessible to all – easy to use by everyone in the city, including people with impaired mobility or senses
- Efficient – punctual, reliable, frequent and a fast way to travel around York
- Complementary to our strategies to reduce carbon emissions in York and develop our economy
- Attractive – enough to mean driving is not the default option for many trips in York
- Welcoming – to our many visitors, whether they are coming to York for a day at the races or a four year degree course
- A source of pride for the city and its residents
- We also want York’s bus network to be just one of a number of excellent bus networks in the wider Yorkshire Region, and we want seamless travel between the buses in York and trains and buses outside the York administrative area.

20. There are six strands to our strategy, these are:

- i. Maintaining our assets to get the best use of our existing highways capacity
- ii. Actively managing traffic to keep buses running to time
- iii. Tackling bottlenecks
- iv. Improving whole corridors to make bus services faster
- v. Managing services in the city centre
- vi. Other strategies which can reduce bus journey times (for example, ticketing strategies which minimize boarding times).

21. To support this we made “asks” of the Department for Transport these have been prioritised into one or more of the following categories:

- Bus Recovery from covid and its consequences
- Stabilisation of the network in the medium term
- Reduce social exclusion (by improving the network)
- Improving the offer for customers.

22. Bus Service Improvement Plans are living documents and will be reviewed.

Funding Award

23. In April 2022 it was announced that York was one 31 Transport Authorities across the country to receive Bus Service Improvement Funding, with an award of £17.36 million in Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in April 2022.
24. The council has now provided the information to the Department for Transport to secure the first £4.48million in November 2022 and a further £6.69 million will be paid in April 2023.
25. The table below summaries the allocations per priority area.

		22/23	23/24	24/25
Bus Priority Infrastructure	Bus priorities on key radial routes into York	500,000	1,250,000	1,250,000
	City centre and approaches bus priority package	500,000	750,000	750,000
Other Infrastructure	Park and ride interchange package	500,000	1,750,000	1,750,000
	Bus stop upgrades	50,000	100,000	100,000
	Additional real time information screens	800,000	490,000	
	Tactical small scale bus priority schemes	25,000	50,000	50,000
Fares Support	Young persons fare reductions	800,000	1,100,000	1,460,000
Ticketing Reform	Development of tap on tap off fares	150,000	50,000	50,000
Bus Service Support	Development of core network including city centre shuttle	800,000	500,000	235,000
	Restart of Poppleton Bar park and ride	250,000	350,000	150,000
Marketing	Travel Behaviour Change campaign	200,000	300,000	300,000

26. It is important to note that the time taken between the funding submission and award was longer than anticipated, so there will have to be flexibility in the timescales for delivery.

COVID Impact

27. Bus service operation has been extremely challenged nationally during and since the covid pandemic. Levels of patronage as well as significant rises in operating costs and national driver shortage have all impacted the operations since the pandemic. Whilst this continues to be evident in York, the impact has not been as severe as many other places.
28. The government has provided significant financial support in response to COVID to the bus industry, also recently announcing the latest short term extension to that support to June 2023. This however is likely to only provide short term relief to the immediate pressure facing the bus network.
29. Even with this support these pressures manifest themselves as challenges in the commercial viability of services.
30. The work with the Enhanced Partnership identified these pressures. Through negotiation with the Department for Transport officers ensured that York's BSIP included support for existing services as well as enhancement of the services.

Progress

31. In order to develop the programme we have appointed a Programme Manager Officer. We are also seeking to appoint an Enhanced Partnership Officer, we currently have a part-time appointment, and two Senior Project Managers to deliver the programme. We have developed a detail programme to deliver the objectives within the funding profile. A summary of the programme is attached to the Enhanced Partnership is attached.
32. Officers have completed all actions in relation to securing the DfT BSIP funding for 2022/23 and 2023/24
33. A number of studies have been commissioned to kick start projects:
 - a) City Centre Bus Priority Study
 - b) Fulford Road and Tadcaster Road Traffic Modelling
 - c) City Centre Bus Shuttle Study
34. The process of purchasing additional real time information screens has commenced and engagement with Councillors and the public on potential locations has also started.
35. Tap on tap off work is underway and ticketing reform support is being provided by Transport for the North.

36. We are working with ITS Leeds University on a detailed monitoring programme to support the outputs required by the DfT.

Bus Support

37. As detailed earlier a key part of the BSIP funding is the support to the existing network in light of the challenges the bus industry faces with the significant rise in operating costs and a national driver shortage is creating an extremely challenging context for bus service operation. By stabilising the network and supporting the bus industry through driver recruitment etc it sets a foundation to encourage people to return and use public transport.
38. The Council has worked with bus operators on recruitment campaigns, and operators reports this is an improving situation.
39. But these challenges have seen operators submit multiple notifications of service withdrawals or changes.
40. The remaining risk is that the withdrawal of government funding support which runs out in June 2023 will have further impacts.
41. The bus industry pre COVID in York was worth £24 million pounds and the council funded approximately £0.72 million of this through bus subsidy as well as funding the concessionary fares on the basis of operators being no better or worse off.
42. As a result of COVID the industry has shrunk to 80% of pre covid levels with 20% fewer passengers.
43. Whilst York is in a fortunate position to have funding through BSIP it is highly unlikely to be enough funding to be able to preserve both the frequency of bus services and all the bus services often described as the extent of the network.
44. In December Executive considered this challenge. Within the context of York's BSIP and building bus patronage back it was decided that it was better to safeguard bus services to ensure people still had access to the bus even if that was at a reduced frequency. Its relatively easy to increase frequency as patronage returns. It's a bigger challenge to persuade people to use the bus once they have started using alternatives.
45. By stabilising the network against this challenging backdrop, it sets a foundation to grow patronage, grow the network and maintain the objective to enhance the network within York's Bus Service Improvement Plan. City of York Council has been working with a range of stakeholders in the bus industry to develop services in the city in the longer term.
46. In December 2022 Executive made decisions to support local bus services in the short term, by approving emergency subsidy in a bid to maintain the numbers 12, 13 and 412 and longer term arrangements are being procured.

47. Poppleton Park and ride was closed during COVID and became a COVID testing site. The challenges around drivers and bus patronage have made opening a challenge. Reopening Poppleton Park and ride was a project in BSIP and Executive asked that officers negotiate this with the operator for Easter 2023. The relaunch of Poppleton is to be funded by support from the BSIP package – it is therefore important that it is done in a sustainable way. Poppleton Park and Ride will open at the start of the school Easter Holidays on the 1st of April.

Electric Buses

48. Cyc and First have been successful in securing ZEBRA (Zero Emission Bus Region Area) funding from the Department for Transport (DfT) to move more busses to electric.
49. This transition to electric is obviously a significant step forward in terms of its carbon reduction journey. Whilst not part of BSIP new busses also make the services more attractive.
50. The DfT grant does not cover the full cost of the buses, but 75% of the difference between the cost of an electric bus and its diesel equivalent – and the operator puts in the rest. So the £11.2m won by CYC from DfT is matched by about £15m from First. First also have substantial costs at the depot (sub-station etc) which will be on top of the vehicle costs. So whilst the city massively benefits from the electric buses there is very little “CYC” funding involved in the project.

New Mayoral Combined Authority

51. City of York Council worked closely with North Yorkshire on the development of its own BSIP and supported North Yorkshire on the development of their BSIP. Upon the creation of a Combined Authority the council will still have the right to subsidise bus services if it wishes and scrutinise their performance and will retain control of its budgets. The current arrangements of Enhanced Partnership will continue and the during the current BSIP funding cycle. Future funding of BSIP could be allocated to the two unitary authorities or to the new Mayoral Combined Authority. The new Mayoral Combined Authority reserves the right to establish future franchising arrangements.

Department for Transport Visit

52. In February 2023 the Department for Transport's Bus team visited from London as part of their work to develop best practice guidance. They visited First's bus depot in the city to see the transformation of a depot away from fossil fuels. They discussed with officers and the Executive Member for Transport the way transport policy and bus policy supported wider adopted corporate policies. They were very complimentary of the work York was doing and to work with York to become a Centre of Excellence.

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Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Annexes

Annex A: - BSIP programme

Background Papers

Executive, 20 May 2021 - "York's response to the National Bus Strategy"
<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=733&MId=12511&Ver=4>

Decision Session Executive Member for Transport, 19 October 2021 – "Bus Service Improvement Plan"
<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=738&MId=12730&Ver=4>

Executive, 15 December 2022, "Bus Network Review"
<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=733&MId=13293>