

National Bus Strategy: Formation of Enhanced Partnership And Bus Service Improvement Plan Refresh

09 February 2023



1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 On 15 March 2021 the Government published the National Bus Strategy (NBS) for England 'Bus Back Better'. The Strategy set out an ambitious vision to dramatically improve bus services across England (outside London) to first reverse the long term decline in the number of journeys made by bus and secondly to encourage passengers back to the bus, post the Covid-19 pandemic. It is intended that the Strategy will deliver cheaper, more frequent and more reliable bus services for passengers.

1.2 The Strategy requires the establishment of a formal, statutory, partnership arrangement, led by Plymouth City Council as the Local Transport Authority (LTA), for all local bus services operated within the city boundary. Partnership arrangements can take the form of either a franchise or an Enhanced Partnership, with the Council approving the development of an Enhanced Partnership (EP). The EP Plan and Scheme must be established and 'made' in order for the Council to be eligible for future Government funding to support bus services.

1.3 The NBS also required the Council to lead the preparation of a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in collaboration with bus operators, which was approved by Cabinet on 12 October 2021 and subsequently submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT), with an annual review undertaken in October 2022. The BSIP outlines the vision, aspirations, objectives and interventions that Plymouth City Council and bus operators will take to improve the local bus network.

1.4 This report explains the context for the formation of the Enhanced Partnership, and the future development of the BSIP, setting out the vision for Plymouth's bus services which will deliver a step-change in Plymouth's bus network.

2.0 Enhanced Partnership

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 The vision for Plymouth's bus services, delivered through the measures set out in the Plymouth BSIP, is for buses to be more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper.

2.1.2 The Enhanced Partnership is the forum that will work together to deliver this, through a statutory Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme which must be formed in accordance with Section 138G(l) of the Transport Act 2000.

2.1.3 The Enhanced Partnership Plan sets out the objectives in meeting this vision whilst the Enhanced Partnership Scheme describes the measures taken forward by the Council and bus operators to meet some of the objectives.

2.1.4 The EP Plan sets out the improvements to bus services that the Enhanced Partnership will deliver, mirroring the objectives in the BSIP. An annual review of the BSIP was undertaken in October 2022 in accordance with the legislation, and a full refresh of the document will be undertaken by 30 June 2023 following feedback received from the DfT on the Council's original submission, leading to a further update of the EP Plan.

2.1.5 The EP Scheme is an accompanying document setting out the requirements that need to be met by the Council and local bus operators to achieve the BSIP and EP Plan outcomes. Formation of

the EP demonstrates the Council's commitment to developing an attractive public transport offer that encourages long-term changes in travel behaviour in Plymouth.

2.1.6 Buses play an important role in keeping people and places connected. Plymouth City Council and the local bus operators wish to further improve public transport, by delivering a reliable, resilient transport system, which supports a thriving economy and growth for everyone. The Plymouth Enhanced Partnership wants Plymouth's buses to be both tools of inclusion and the transport of choice and therefore, the vision is for local buses to be more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper. It is hoped that improving service reliability, frequency, integration, co-ordination, infrastructure and quality will help overcome the setbacks of the lost patronage suffered during the Covid-19 pandemic and re-establish the growth and development that was underway before the pandemic.

2.1.7 The EP Plan has been aligned with the Plymouth Plan which sets out the city's spatial strategy, incorporating the Plymouth-specific elements of the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan [PCC, 2019] which is the development plan for the city. The EP Plan therefore closely aligns with the transport strategies outlined in these plans.

2.1.8 Drawing on the BSIP, this document fulfils the statutory requirements set out by the Bus Services Act 2017 of an Enhanced Partnership (EP) Plan for Plymouth. Initially, this will facilitate the introduction of an EP Scheme designed to support and develop bus services across Plymouth, with the aim of starting to achieve the objectives set out in the BSIP.

2.2 Process for Development of the EP Plan and Scheme

2.2.1 In accordance with the statutory requirements for an EP Plan, this document must include:

- Overview and map of the geographical area covered (Plymouth)
- Factors affecting the local bus market
- Summary of passengers' experiences in using bus services and the priorities of users and non-users for improvements
- Trends in bus journey speeds and the impact of congestion on bus services
- Objectives that are sought for bus service provision
- Interventions needed to achieve the desired outcomes
- Governance arrangements
- Competition test

2.2.2 The EP Scheme must include:

- The scope of the Scheme and commencement date
- Obligations on the LTA
- Obligations on the bus operators
- Governance arrangements

2.2.3 The LTA is required to draft the EP Plan and Scheme, setting out all of the above factors, and where appropriate, how they will be achieved. This is followed by a 28 day consultation period with the city's bus operators, providing them with an opportunity to object to any aspect of the EP Plan and Scheme.

2.2.4 Given that the Council's original BSIP submission was unsuccessful in securing any funding through "Bus Back Better", the current draft documents set out commitments on both the LTA and the operators which can be achieved without the funding, and build upon interventions that are already in place, in construction or already funded.

2.2.5 The obligations on the LTA within the proposed EP Plan and Scheme are:

- Provision, maintenance and enforcement of bus lanes
- Provision and maintenance of Park and Ride sites

- Management of roadworks in the EP Scheme area

2.2.6 The obligations on the bus operators within the proposed EP Plan and Scheme are:

- To provide a co-ordinated network map detailing all bus services within the EP Plan and Scheme area
- To provide a link to a single source of bus service information for all bus services within the EP Plan and Scheme area
- To promote contactless payments
- To continue to deliver an enhanced cleaning regime on buses as developed during the Covid-19 pandemic
- To participate in a citywide Bus Passenger Charter
- To reinvest any operating cost savings from any new bus priority in the future into the delivery of improvements set out in the BSIP

2.2.7 Further detailed requirements of these obligations are set out in the attached EP Plan and EP Scheme documents.

2.2.8 Should any objections be received from bus operators, these must be considered and acted upon where appropriate. Where changes are made to either the EP Plan or Scheme as a result of the objections raised, a further 28 day consultation period must be entered into with the bus operators.

2.2.9 If no objections are raised by operators, a further period of consultation must follow with a wider statutory stakeholder group which must include the following:

- Organisations representing passengers
- Traffic Commissioner
- Chief of Police
- Transport Focus
- Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)
- Others as required

2.2.10 Consultation with these groups must take place for a maximum of 28 days, however, this period can be shortened if deemed appropriate by the LTA. Given that the Council was unsuccessful in its original BSIP submission and therefore the content of its EP Plan and Scheme does not include new measures that could be controversial and given that the consultation period took place outside of normal holiday times (January 2022), a 21 day consultation period was allowed for the wider stakeholder group on this occasions.

2.2.11 Any objections received must be considered, and if accepted the consultation period must commence again with the operators for 28 days followed by the wider stakeholder group.

2.2.12 On this occasion no objections were received and the Council are therefore in a position to form its Enhanced Partnership.

2.3 Next Steps

2.3.1 The next steps in this process are:

- To legally form the EP Partnership
- To enact the governance arrangements

2.3.2 Any future changes must be made in accordance with the governance arrangements set out in the attached Enhanced Partnership Plan.

3.0 Bus Service Improvement Plan

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The BSIP has been designed to deliver a reformed bus network, which will improve public confidence and address misconceptions, to encourage passengers back. The Council want buses to be both tools of inclusion and the transport of choice and therefore, the partnership of the Council and public and community transport providers want to make Plymouth's buses more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper.

3.1.2 Through the Bus Service Improvement Plan the ambition is:

- To make the buses the natural choice for everyone, not just those without cars
- For buses to be a practical and attractive alternative to the car for more people
- For main road services to run so often that you don't need to refer to a timetable
- More frequent services and better coverage in the evening and at the weekend
- More demand responsive services (such as Dial-A-Ride) using smaller vehicles for areas of the city unserved, or barely served, by conventional buses on fixed routes and timetables
- Simple, cheap, fares that you can pay with a contactless card
- To introduce technology to allow daily and weekly price capping across all operators to give passengers the best price for their journeys
- A network that feels like a network, with
 - Easy to understand and coordinated services
 - Consistent high standards
 - Comprehensive information
- Greener buses, both directly and indirectly improving air quality, reducing carbon emissions, tackling traffic congestion and supporting Plymouth's sustainable growth
- Faster and more reliable services

3.1.3 The Bus Service Improvement Plan covers the city of Plymouth. The justification for the BSIP purely relating to the city boundary is that approximately 77% of registered bus routes serving Plymouth, operate entirely within this boundary. Furthermore, ONS data relating to commuting patterns indicates that Plymouth is relatively self-contained in terms of employment, with 67 per cent of all workers usually resident in the city also working here.

3.1.4 However, the Council recognises that the travel to work area goes beyond the Council's administrative boundary and, in order to make buses the natural choice for everyone not just those without cars and reduce the number of cars crossing the city boundary every day, boosting bus patronage in the longer term, cross boundary bus routes into and out of the city are also important. During the development of our BSIP the Council worked closely with neighbouring Local Transport Authorities Cornwall Council, Devon County Council and Torbay Council and will continue to work with neighbouring authorities as the Council further develop the BSIP.

3.1.5 Our BSIP will span the period through to 2034, aligning with the ending of the current Plymouth Plan period, a ground-breaking plan which sets a shared direction of travel for the long-term future of Plymouth and bringing together a number of strategic planning processes under a single umbrella plan document.

3.1.6 Alignment with the Plymouth Plan has been chosen because, since 2017, Plymouth's Local Transport Plan, and hence transport policies, has been integrated within the Plymouth Plan. The BSIP will be a delivery plan of the Plymouth Plan and hence through working to the same timescales as the Plymouth Plan it will help ensure the guiding transport strategies and the delivery plans, are aligned.

3.1.7 The BSIP must be reviewed annually, and it is envisaged that this will take place in October of each year.

3.2 Progress to Date

3.2.1 Our BSIP, setting out an ambitious plan for the transformation of bus travel in Plymouth, was submitted to the DfT in October 2021. Plymouth was one of 79 authorities to submit a bid, but unfortunately, was unsuccessful in securing a funding allocation at that time. Given the demand, only 31 authorities received either some of all of the funding requested. However, the BSIP remains a bidding document for future rounds of Government funding for transport.

3.2.3 In October 2022, the DfT provided constructive feedback as to why they felt our BSIP was not funded in the first round of BSIP funding. This was predominantly around the use of language within the document, which in places lacked positivity and assertiveness, and the targets not being sufficiently ambitious had the funding been awarded. The DfT stressed that this document would remain the bidding document for future rounds of funding and provided constructive comments around improvements that could be made to maximise our chances of receiving future funding.

3.2.4 The required annual update of the document was undertaken in October 2022, summarising the changes that have happened to the bus network over the previous 12 months and this has now been published on the Council's [National Bus Strategy webpage](#).

3.3 Next Steps

3.3.1 To ensure the Council is in the best possible position for future funding and following the feedback from DfT, a more detailed review and refresh of the BSIP is necessary, particularly around the setting of passenger growth targets and measures for achieving growth. The Council will also build upon the aspirations and themes included in the original BSIP, as well as considering any new interventions, which may not have been relevant at the time of our original submission.

3.3.2 This exercise will therefore take place early in 2023 for completion by the 30 June 2023. The Council will continue to work with our bus operators and other key stakeholders in the development of the BSIP.

4.0 Financial Implications

4.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report. The Government has currently made £395,418 available to the Council, through the Bus Capacity Fund, to support the development of the Enhanced Partnership and associated Bus Service Improvement Plan. The Enhanced Partnership must be in place by 1 April 2023. This funding was awarded to the Council, as the LTA, by the DfT because Plymouth did not receive an indicative BSIP funding allocation. The purpose of the grant is to ensure that the Council has the ongoing internal capacity and capability to dedicate to the continued development and delivery of bus interventions, especially through Plymouth's BSIP and EP over the next three years. The funding has been calculated to enable the recruitment and retention of at least one EP Officer (EPO) or equivalent internal capacity for bus delivery within the LTA.

4.2 Delivery of an Enhanced Partnership, and associated Bus Service Improvement Plan, will require funding. The Bus Service Improvement Plan is a bidding document. The proposals set out in the Plan must be ambitious. They must demonstrate delivery of the objectives of the National Bus Strategy and a vision for delivering a step-change in bus services through an Enhanced Partnership.

4.3 The Bus Service Improvement Plan must also be accompanied by a presentation of funding requirements, including alternative sources of funding available to support delivery of BSIPs such as operator or Local Transport Authority contributions. However, there are no financial commitments on the part of the Government, Council or public transport operators associated with the submission of the Bus Service Improvement Plan and the Department for Transport explicitly state that they 'do not expect BSIPs to provide detailed, definitive costings.'

4.4 The indicative 'ask' from the Department for Transport for the delivery of the proposals within the original Plymouth Bus Service Improvement Plan was circa £118M for the period 2022/23 – 2029/30. This figure may change as the refresh of the Plan is progressed.

4.5 There is no direct financial risk from the recommendations of this report, as the funding received to date from the Department for Transport covers the development of the Enhanced Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan.

4.6 However, should approval not be granted for a refresh of the Bus Service Improvement Plan, this will significantly impact on the Council's ability to secure funding for the bus service improvements the Council is seeking in order to improve the city's public transport network, which aims to generate modal shift and growth in the future.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:

1. Approve the formation of a statutory Enhanced Partnership with the city's bus operators from 1 April 2023.

Reason: To ensure the Council comply with our statutory duty as Local Transport Authority.

2. Approve the process of refreshing the Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan by 30 June 2023.

Reason: To ensure that Plymouth remains best placed to receive future rounds of Government funding for bus services, as it is the BSIP that will determine the allocation of funding.

3. To give delegated authority to the Service Director for Strategic Planning and Infrastructure, in association with the Cabinet Member for Transport, to approve the publication of the updated Bus Service Improvement Plan.

Reason: To allow the publication of an updated BSIP by 30 June 2023, to ensure the Council is ready to respond to invitations to bid for funding when the next opportunity arises.