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| TITLE | Enhanced Partnership |
| FOR CONSIDERATION BY | The Executive on Thursday, 24 June 2021 |
| WARD | None specific |
| LEAD OFFICER | Steve Moore, Director, Place and Growth |
| LEAD MEMBER | Executive Member for Highways and Transport - Pauline Jorgensen |

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

The Executive are being asked to agree to Wokingham Borough Council giving notice to establishing an Enhanced Partnership (EP) under the Bus Services Act 2017 by 30th June 2021.

The Department for Transport (DfT) released the National Bus Strategy (NBS) – Build Back Better on 15th March 2021. The NBS identifies Enhanced Partnerships as an expectation of all LTAs in achieving better bus services which are more locally accountable.

RECOMMENDATION

The Executive agrees to Wokingham Borough Council giving notice to establishing an Enhanced Partnership (EP) under the Bus Services Act 2017.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Bus Strategy for England – Bus Back Better (NBS) was published on 15th March 2021 and sets the expectation that all Local Transport Authorities will take the opportunity to review their local bus networks, produce a local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and agree an Enhanced Partnership (EP) with local bus operators.

The BSIP and EP is an opportunity for local transport authorities to work in partnership with all local transport operators to redesign bus services and community transport provision to better meet local needs. There are three key dates and associated requirements which the NBS sets out, these are:

1. 30th June 2021 – give notice of intent to form an Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators. This is not a legally binding commitment.
2. 31st October 2021 – publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This is not a legally binding document.
3. 1st April 2022 – to have in place an Enhanced Partnership agreement with local transport operators. This is a legally binding agreement.

Local authorities who take the opportunity to give notice to form an EPs will be supported with capacity and capability funding for staff/consultancy support and will continue to receive COVID recovery funding from June 2021 onwards.

The NBS was also accompanied by a £3 billion transitional funding pot. The quality and ambitiousness of the BSIP and the Enhanced Partnership agreement will be directly linked to future levels of local authority funding allocations and bid funding from this transitional funding pot.

The Council has to make a commitment to the Enhanced Partnership by 30th June 2021 and if it does not do so by this date it could have serious financial implications for the Council. The Chief Finance Officer has deemed this decision as “urgent” in accordance with the Constitution and if agreed it is therefore not subject to call-in.

BACKGROUND

The key dates and commitments which local authorities are requested to meet are set out below.

| Key Date | What LTAs are required to do | Commitment |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| 30 th June 2021 | Give notice of an intent to form an Enhanced Partnership. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An agreeing in principle to forming an enhanced partnership. • This is <u>not</u> legally binding. |
| 31 st October 2021 | Publish a Local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is <u>not</u> a legally binding document nor a statutory document. • This document contains the high-level vision of how a Council and bus operators want to improve bus services in the borough. • The quality and ambitiousness of the BSIP will be directly linked to future funding allocations and bid funding. • The BSIP will continue measurable targets which must be reviewed and published every 6 months. It is for Council to identify what the most appropriate targets and outcomes for the BSIP are. |
| 1 st April 2022 | To have in place an Enhanced Partnership agreement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will be a <u>legally binding</u> partnership agreement between the Council and local bus operators. <u>The agreement must be agreed by operators representing 80% of the operated mileage.</u> • The EP agreement must be negotiated and consulted with <u>all</u> local transport operators. Not all operators are obliged to join the agreement, however <u>only services which form part of an EP agreement will continue to receive government funding.</u> • The EP will need to include any measures or facilities which all parties agree to provide to improve bus services. The Council and the operators will then be <u>legally obligated</u> to deliver on these commitments. • DfT guidance suggests commitments should focus on vehicles, marketing, ticketing & fares and the routes in terms of timings and frequencies. |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operators must give an undertaking they will comply with the EP scheme when registering services, or the registration maybe refused and therefore the service cannot be operated. • The EP will include the mechanisms for variation and termination. |
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Next Steps for the next 6 months

1. To give notice to form an Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators.
2. To set-up an internal working group within the Council to agree our key requirements for the bus service improvement plan and EP agreement.
3. To hold discussions with all local transport operators, including the community transport operators and the volunteer driver sector on the operation of transport in Wokingham Borough.
4. To negotiate with local transport providers on detailed measures and facilities which will form part of the schemes in the Enhanced Partnership.
5. Agree a passenger charter with local transport operators as to the level and quality of services our residents can expect.
6. To bring back information to Executive prior to the BSIP being adopted and the EP being made.

Implications

The timescale as defined by the DfT is extremely challenging and will preclude any significant consultation with residents and key stakeholders as it currently stands.

BUSINESS CASE

If we do not issue a notice of intent, then we will lose between £600,000 and £1.5m (full year affect) in 2021/22.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

| | How much will it Cost/ (Save) | Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall | Revenue or Capital? |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Current Financial Year (Year 1) | £0 | £100,000 is allocated from DfT, this is yet to be determined if this sufficient. | Revenue |
| Next Financial Year (Year 2) | TBC | TBC | Revenue |

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|-----------------------------------|-----|-----|---------|
| Following Financial Year (Year 3) | TBC | TBC | Revenue |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-----|---------|

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| Other Financial Information |
| The recommendation will cost £0 if it is agreed and will avoid a revenue loss of approximately £500,000 |

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| Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation |
| Not applicable at this stage – but will be addressed before any binding agreement is reached. |

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| Public Sector Equality Duty |
| Not applicable at this stage – but will be addressed before any binding agreement is reached. |

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| Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i> |
| Not applicable at this stage. |

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| List of Background Papers |
| National Bus Strategy |

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