

TITLE	Local Bus Services
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 17 February 2022
WARD	None specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Steve Moore
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Highways and Transport - Pauline Jorgensen

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

There is uncertainty around the continuation of central government funding to support local bus services which have significantly been impacted because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

To mitigate the risk of local bus services being withdrawn at short notice without consideration of local impacts and their strategic importance.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) agrees to appropriate S106 funding being made available to support local bus services during 2022/23 for a short period of time, in accordance with details in Part 2 sheet;
- 2) agrees to delegate the authority to draw on the S106 funding as and when required, to the Director of Place in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive/ Director of Resources and Assets and the Executive Members for Highways and Transport and Finance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Coronavirus pandemic has resulted in bus passenger levels reaching no more than 70% of pre-covid levels. The industry expects to recover to no more than 80% before April 2023.

Central Government have supported bus operators and local authorities with additional funding through the Coronavirus Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) and then the Bus Recovery Grant (BRG) since March 2020. There is now no certainty around the continuation of funding beyond April 2022. Similarly, no announcement has been made on the expected Bus Transformational Funding associated with Local Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs).

The lack of clarity on future funding is a national issue and we would anticipate a funding package coming forward from central government to address the issue. In the short-term the lack of clarity on funding creates uncertainty for bus operators. Bus operators nationally are deregistering local bus services under revised Covid timescales which

permit the withdrawal of bus services at short notice. Reading Buses have already suspended bus route 7 and registered its permanent withdrawal thereafter.

Local bus services provide access to key services and amenities within the borough, including health care services, education, employment, and retail. The impact of any bus service withdrawal needs be considered in this context, which a short-notice registration does not permit.

To allow the Council to re-establish a bus service in the Swallowfield and Riseley areas and meet the needs of local communities, which may replicate Service 7, it is proposed that S106 funding is drawn on. Similarly, to mitigate against the impacts of further short-notice withdrawals it is proposed that S106 funding is made available. Any draw on S106 funding will be in accordance with Part 2. Routes which require additional support will be assessed on an individual basis, as and when they are identified. The assessment will seek a value for money solution for a period of up to 6 months to allow for further work to be undertaken, funding to be sort, and collaboration with the relevant Towns and Parish Councils to take place. S106 would only be drawn upon if further funding is not made available by central government.

Permission is sort for S106 to be drawn upon as and when required by the Director of Place in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Resources and Assets and the Executive Members for Highways and Transport and Finance, in accordance with the terms detailed in the Part 2 sheet.

S106 would be required during 2022/23 and is currently unbudgeted for.

BACKGROUND

Local bus operators have raised concerns with the Council about the lack of clarity on the future of government funding and the impact that Coronavirus continues to have on passenger levels. Without further clarity from central government local bus operators will need to take action to protect their financial stability.

The Department for Transport were awarded £3 billion of bus service transformational funding by Treasury. £1.15 billion is understood to be available for allocation to Local Transport Authorities over the next three years. LTAs and local bus operators are still awaiting indicative allocations from this fund with no clear indication of when this will happen. It is however clear that the fund was significantly over subscribed.

BUSINESS CASE

Temporary amendments to the local bus service registration periods means local bus services can currently be withdrawn with only a few weeks' notice. Without any certainty over future funding bus operators will look to use the temporary registration periods to deregister local bus services as necessary from April 2022.

Under 1985 Transport Act LTAs have a duty to: “*secure the provision of such public passenger transport services as the council consider it appropriate to secure to meet any public transport requirements within the county which would not in their view be met apart from any action taken by them for that purpose*”. It is considered that the temporary registration periods do not allow the Council sufficient time to consider the impact of large-scale amendments to or withdrawals of local bus services in the context of the Council's duty under the 1985 Transport Act.

Bus service 7 has recently been withdrawn leaving some residents in Swallowfield and Riseley without sufficient access to alternative transport. The Council will look to re-establish a bus service to these areas that meet the needs of the local community and may replicate service 7.

To mitigate against any further short-notice withdrawal of local bus services, it is proposed S106 funding is drawn upon, as detailed in Part 2. In the short-term each route will be assessed as and when it is identified to ensure a value for money solution. The S106 will allow the Council time to consider a more holistic solution for the borough in the longer-term, as well as time for passenger levels to settle and for a clear idea of central government funding to emerge. The Council will work collaboratively with the relevant Town and Parish Councils and other stakeholders when identifying a longer-term solution. The S106 fund will only be drawn upon where there is a clear case for its need and no other suitable Central Government funding is available for use.

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	n/a	n/a

Next Financial Year (Year 2)	As set out in the Part 2 sheet	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	n/a	n/a

Other Financial Information
None

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
Discussions have been undertaken with key stakeholders and Executive Members

Public Sector Equality Duty
An equalities assessment has been undertaken [note still being drafted @ 02/02/22].

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>
Decision would contribute to tackling climate change and is in accordance with the climate change emergency strategy.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
Detailed financial information to be considered as Part 2 because it is commercially sensitive.

List of Background Papers
None

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