

TITLE	Bus Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee on 18 th July 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Georgio Framallicco

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Improved bus services which better meet the local needs of our residents by improving access to jobs, health care and other services and amenities. The wider benefits will be reduced congestion, improved air quality and reduced carbon emissions.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) Review the Draft Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme
- 2) Provide relevant comments on the Draft Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The National Bus Strategy published in March 2021 required all Local Transport Authorities (LTA) in England and outside of London, to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and agree an Enhanced Partnership (EP). An EP is a legal partnership agreement which is agreed following the publication of the BSIP.

The aim of the BSIP and EP is to raise the standards of local bus services and ensure that local bus services meet local needs. The Levelling-Up white paper (February 2022) highlights the important role of bus services for access to jobs, retail, and services, as well as for business-to-business connectivity and achieving positive health outcomes. The Council's second BSIP was published on 27th January 2023 and is available here: <https://myjourneywokingham.com/bus-travel/enhanced-partnership/> All LTAs are required to review their BSIPs on an annual basis.

Wokingham Borough Council had been unsuccessful in achieving any BSIP grant funding but have recently been allocated £400,000 for year 2023/4. It is understood that to receive the full funding that an Enhanced Partnership would need to be adopted by the end of September. Additional funding, of a similar value, is expected in year 2024/5, subject to the making of the EP.

The Enhanced Partnership aims to create a close relationship with the operators who have already input to the document and are in agreement with the contents. It now necessary to contact key organisations who have a right to object to the contents.

The next steps to publishing a making an Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme are:

- 28-day statutory objection period from 20th July 2023
- 21-day consultation with statutory consultees from 18th August 2023
- Executive Committee approval – 28th September 2023
- Publish Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme – 29th September 2023

Background

Enhanced Partnership Agreement

The Enhanced Partnership (EP) Agreement, once formally made, forms a legal agreement between Wokingham Borough Council and local bus operators who operate qualifying local bus services. Qualifying local bus services are all registered local bus services, with the exceptions set out in 2.3.1.

If the EP Agreement is approved at the Council's Executive Committee on 28th September 2023, the Agreement will be formally made on 29th September 2023 and commence 70 calendar days after this date.

The EP Agreement is formed of two key components, the Enhanced Partnership Plan (EPP) and the Enhanced Partnership Scheme (EPS). The EPP sets out the Council's vision for local bus services and the key objectives and outcomes for improvements to local bus services. The EPP aligns with the Council's adopted Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which was adopted in January 2023. The EPP has no end date and will be reviewed every 5 years.

EPS form the basis of the EP Agreement and provide details of which party will deliver which improvements and by when for local bus services. As the delivery of improvements to local bus services in the borough is subject to funding being provided by the Department for Transport (DfT), the EP Agreement presented for approval at this stage is a "shell agreement" which consists of headings, which can later be varied to include appropriate facilities, measures, routes or operational requirements as funding becomes available.

Once made the Enhanced Partnership Agreement can only be varied using either the powers adopted under powers at s.138E of the Transport Act 2000 or the bespoke variation arrangement, as detailed in Section 5 of the EP Agreement.

Governance Arrangements

The governance arrangements are detailed in Section 5 of the EPS. An EP Forum will be set-up to oversee and direct the work of the EP Scheme. The members of the EP Forum are detailed in Section 5.1.1 and can include:

- Wokingham Borough Council Officers
- Local Bus Operators
- Representatives of key stakeholders, including businesses, anchor institutions, community transport operators, Towns and Parish Councils and passenger focus groups.

The EP Forum will be chaired by The Executive Member for Active Travel Transport & Highways. The EP Forum will meet every 6 months and decisions will be taken on a simple majority basis. The votes will be allocated as followed:

- 1) All bus operators who run qualifying bus services (1 vote per operator that exceed 20% of bus mileage and **2 votes** for an operator that runs more than 50% of the bus mileage. Operators which function as more than one company but are part of the same financial entity will be treated as a single operator).

- 2) A bus Operator and any of its Group Companies that operate less than 20% of the aggregate miles operated by all Bus Operators in respect of Qualifying Bus Services within the Scheme Area, **1 vote** in total to represent all of those Operators interests.
- 3) Wokingham Borough Council Executive Member for Active Travel Transport & Highways (chair, **1 vote** and **casting vote**).
- 4) Wokingham Borough Council Officers (Highways and Transport) (1 vote each up to **2 votes**).

All other members of the EP Forum would be non-voting members. All decisions made by the EP Forum are subject to any relevant approvals which are required by Wokingham Borough Council's Constitution or any legislation, regulation, or statutory guidance.

Funding

The DfT have recently indicated that they will provide £400,000 towards facilities, measures, routes, or operational requirements which could be included in any EPS. The DfT expects Councils to include existing funding for local bus services in an EP.

The Council also has available S106 funding associated with new development sites. The S106 funding could be used to support bus services. Similarly, S106 funding has been secured for the provision of bus infrastructure associated with the new development sites.

Further developer funding forms part of the My Journey programme and can be used to contribute towards the promotion and marketing of local bus services.

Local bus operators are expected to contribute any planned expenditure which they have for the purpose of fleet upgrades, fleet renewals or route improvements.

Any suggestions made by the committee for measures, facilities, route requirements or operational requirements must be accompanied by a costed proposal. The costed proposal must demonstrate sufficient funding is available to allow their implementation and to achieve the desired outcomes.

Next Steps

- **20th July to 16th August 2023** – 28 days operator objection period
- **18th August 2023 to 8th September 2023** – 21 days consultation with statutory consultees.
- **28th September 2023** Executive Committee Approval
- **29th September 2023** Publish Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and 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)	Potential loss of £200,000 of grant funding	n/a	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Potential loss of £400,000 of grant funding	n/a	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	n/a	n/a	n/a

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The Department for Transport have recently stated that £400,000 will be made available to support the implementation and delivery of the BSIP and an Enhanced Partnership Agreement. Subject to receiving formal terms and conditions, the DfT have indicated that 50% of the funding will be provided before the EP is made, the remaining 50% will be provided the month following the making of the EP. The DfT have also suggested a similar amount of funding will be awarded for 2024/25, subject to the making of the EP.

It should be noted that local bus services have been supported by Department for Transport funding throughout the pandemic. Local bus services are currently at 84% recovery levels.

Cross-Council Implications

Local bus services plan an important part in allowing residents access to employment, education, health care and wider local amenities including leisure opportunities. Improving local bus services will have a positive impact on young people, older people, those with mobility impairments and residents with low-income. On this basis positive benefits may be seen for team working in the areas to social isolation, adult social care, childrens services, economic development, air quality, public health, behaviour change and congestion.

Public Sector Equality Duty

The BSIP and EP allow the Council an opportunity to improve local bus services, which will have a positive impact on those residents with protected characteristics. A Stage 1 Equalities Impact Assessment will accompany the Executive Report.

Climate Emergency – 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

The EP Agreement will oversee and govern local bus service improvements which contribute reducing the number of miles driven, reducing carbon emissions and reducing congestion on local roads.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
None

List of Background Papers
Draft Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme September 2023 BSIP2 January 2023 Bus back better available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-back-better

Contact Rebecca Brooks	Service Place
Telephone No Tel: 0118 908 8302	Email rebecca.brooks@wokingham.gov.uk

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