

THURSDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2021

NEW NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY - BUS BACK BETTER

To inform the committee of the council's obligations in respect of the new National Bus Strategy, 'Bus Back Better', and to seek its views on the Council's proposed approach.

Introduction

1. A new national bus strategy, 'Bus Back Better', was published by government earlier this year. A copy of full document is attached at Annexe 1. In summary, Bus Back Better requires a local authority to consider its role in encouraging more people to travel by bus post-Covid 19 and sets out aspirations for bus services that are more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better-co-ordinated, with understandable fare structures and with high quality information for passengers.
2. To achieve the desired aims of the strategy and to be eligible to access further government Covid 19 support funding for bus services and a share of other new funding from a £3bn national fund, Local Transport Authorities must agree to pursue either bus franchising or to develop an Enhanced Partnership with all local bus operators in their administrative area.
3. The Council issued a formal Notice of Intent to the Department for Transport on 29 June 2021, stating that it will introduce an Enhanced Partnership with bus operators, in accordance with section 138F of the Transport Act 2000.

New National Bus Strategy

4. To address carbon emission levels and to mitigate the national decline in bus patronage, which has been accelerated by the Covid 19 pandemic, government recognises that action is required. It also acknowledges that of all public transport modes, buses are the most adaptable and change can happen relatively quickly.
5. Government aspirations in Bus Back Better include service enhancements, including improved services in the evening and at weekends; faster, more

reliable journeys; bus lanes and other priority measures on roads with frequent services; simpler, lower fare structures; multi-journey multi-operator ticket schemes with contactless payment ability; better information including journey planning websites, apps, roadside and printed information; increased promotion of bus network to non-users; more real time passenger information; and introduction of ultra-low and zero emission buses.

6. In responding to Bus Back Better, there is a challenging requirement for the Council to create a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) by 31 October 2021. A Local Transport Authority's BSIP needs to contain a range of aspirations and ambitions to make the bus travel option more attractive, including the initiatives outlined above.
7. The BSIP needs to be developed in collaboration with bus operators, community transport providers, adjoining Local Transport Authorities and other stakeholders, and it will be guided by issues in connection with bus services that have been identified by residents' feedback. A BSIP will set out the local measures proposed for achieving the objectives of the national strategy and for encouraging greater bus use as part of the county's 'building back better' more sustainably.
8. The BSIP will act as a framework to secure part of the £3bn funding allocated to Bus Back Better by government, with each BSIP to be reviewed at least annually. The share of the funding obtained will depend on the ambition contained in the BSIP, as judged by the Department for Transport.
9. Creating a BSIP will also secure access to proposed new powers for traffic enforcement. A BSIP needs to contain plans for ambitious bus priority schemes on the highway to secure an improvement in bus journey times and reliability, inclusive of target setting to be monitored by Government. It will identify where such priority measures are needed and consider air quality issues and carbon reduction targets that buses could help address.
10. The BSIP will be a prelude to developing and making an Enhanced Partnership Scheme (EP), to be formed by the Council and all local bus operators. An EP is a formal commitment, in accordance with the Transport Act 2000 and the Bus Services Act 2017, to jointly develop and deliver the measures contained in the BSIP and places a formal obligation on both parties to deliver what they agree to contribute. Bus Back Better sets challenging timescales, in that an EP must be established and ready to go-live by 1 April 2022. The EP approach will build on previous and long-standing effective partnership working with Surrey's bus operators, to deliver improvements in a collaborative way.

Bus Back Better - Proposed Response

11. The new National Bus Strategy and the proposed BSIP for Surrey align with several key themes from the new draft Surrey Transport Plan, in particular the proposed hierarchy of modes and the ambition to shift journeys from the private car to other more sustainable modes. Moreover, central to our response to Bus Back Better will be to highlight and cross-references the strong linkages to the aims and ambitions of the council's Greener Futures programme of work and the delivery of the Council's 2030 Community Vision.
12. The Council will be responding strongly, positively and proactively to the challenge set by the Government in the Bus Back Better. Previous joint working with bus operators has seen large and joint investment in many parts of the county, with improvement programmes already being delivered, for example, in Camberley, Guildford and Woking. Other improvements are planned in Redhill, Reigate and the A23 corridor, building upon previous partnership work in these areas. This investment has seen significant improvements in passenger facilities, real time bus information, bus priority measures, joint ticketing schemes and zero emission buses, alongside enhancements to service frequencies and the introduction of some new services.
13. It is important to note that in Surrey, pre-pandemic, three in every four bus passenger journeys were undertaken on commercially operated bus services. The EP approach should have a significant impact, as it enables the Council to influence more effectively all bus services, including the commercial services which dominate in terms of overall passenger numbers.
14. The Council has developed excellent relationships with our bus operator partners over a long period and has already worked extensively with them to deliver a range of improvements of the type the Government now seeks. The Council will therefore be progressing an EP from a strong starting point.
15. Officers are consulting and engaging with bus operators to understand what they could contribute to the BSIP and the future EP, alongside what they would like to see the Council deliver as a result of such an arrangement. There has also been engagement with adjoining local authorities to ensure a common approach for cross-border bus services and initiatives.
16. Resident feedback on what they feel is important will inform the content of the BSIP. This will be based on data derived from previous surveys conducted for Surrey Bus Reviews and Local Transport Review. The main areas of concern expressed by residents in these previous surveys were similar to concerns raised nationally in comparable exercises, and included:

- A desire for more bus priority measures to deliver more reliable services, i.e. make sure the bus turns up when it is supposed to
- A request for better information on times and fares with more real time information
- A desire to see improvements to the overall journey experience and customer service
- Demand for more services in the evenings and at weekends
- A request for simpler, more flexible fares and 'smart ticketing'.

17. A new survey is being conducted with residents on the 'Surrey Says' survey platform. This will likely validate previous Surrey survey results. There will be further engagement with residents in the period leading up to Spring 2022 and beyond, noting the proposal to establish a Stakeholder Reference Group as set out below.

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| <p>Bus Service Improvement Plan – Building on a Solid Existing Partnership</p> |
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18. A full list of ambitions is being developed and enhanced through discussion with bus operators. This will be formed of a mix of improvements already planned that we aim to stretch and expand, alongside a range of new initiatives, which together will deliver enhanced outcomes for residents. Delivery will depend on the amount of funding that the Council is awarded from government's new National Bus Strategy Fund. Overall, a number of key areas have been identified that will improve the bus service offer in Surrey, as summarised below.

19. The relative strategic importance of bus routes will be defined by a route hierarchy. This will inform decisions for selected service frequency enhancements, especially on the primary network of key bus routes. It will include consideration of evening and weekend enhancements.

20. An expansion of demand responsive transport in some rural areas such as Tandridge, Waverley and Guildford is also being developed. A new demand responsive transport offer could replace certain low-frequency conventional bus services with more comprehensive and flexible services, building on the current project in Mole Valley funded by the government's Rural Mobility Fund.

21. Bus priority measures where necessary and deliverable will be proposed, evidenced by operator feedback on congestion pinch points on the highway network. It will be further evidenced through the data available from the Council's real time bus information system. £9m for bus priority measures has already been allocated within the Council's capital pipeline, which will be highlighted to government in our BSIP.

22. There is an ambition to expand the availability of multi-operator, multi-journey ticketing schemes, which offer savings to bus users. This will build on the successful 'Acorn' ticketing scheme introduced by the Council in north Surrey. This initiative would be further enhanced through the introduction of contactless payment for all fares. For individual fares, in the longer term, there would be an ambition to facilitate 'tap in and tap out' technology to improve bus boarding times and give more detailed passenger data.
23. A half-fare scheme and a fare free scheme for young people under 20 years of age, irrespective of whether in full time education is also being costed for potential inclusion in the BSIP.
24. An age limit for buses operating in the county is being considered, the aim being to improve the quality of the bus offer and overall user experience. There is a supporting ambition for all buses to be fitted with an audible and visual 'next stop' announcement facility to help all bus users, including though who maybe visually or hearing impaired.
25. The introduction of ultra-low and zero emission buses and community transport vehicles is being developed to replace older diesel buses. This is part of the Council's Greener Futures programme in response to the declared climate change emergency. £32.3m for ultra-low and zero emission buses alongside £6.3m for ultra-low and zero emission community transport minibuses has been allocated to this initiative from the Council's capital pipeline. This will supplement operator investment to help the Council tackle decarbonisation of the transport sector.
26. A common brand across all buses and services to promote network integration will be developed with bus operator partners.
27. An expansion of the Council's real time information system that gives details of bus arrival times to on-street displays and to journey-planning websites and applications is proposed. £1.4m has been allocated from the Council's capital pipeline to support this work.
28. Enhancements to bus shelter provision and passenger waiting environments, including an increase in accessibility for passengers is also proposed for inclusion in the BSIP.
29. A Passenger Charter will be drafted. This will set out what bus users can reasonably expect from bus operators and the Council in terms of the way services are provided. It will include signposting to pathways for recourse when problems are encountered.
30. Experience of previous bids to government indicate that our chances of success in securing Bus Back Better funding will increase if matched funding can be

used to enhance outcomes and 'do more' in delivering the BSIP, beyond what Bus Back Better funding would deliver alone. The BSIP will therefore set out funding from a range of sources to boost the ask of government, including capital pipeline funding as already referenced, bus operator commitments, our local bus budget revenue, developer and other funding. Together this will facilitate the ambitions in the BSIP, noting that the Council may also choose to allocate funding as part of the implementation of the emerging Surrey Transport Plan.

31. The BSIP will contain measures to support and strengthen the commercially operated bus network to be delivered through positive partnership working. This will minimise future potential need for Council bus service revenue support, especially after the government's Bus Recovery Funding scheme ends in April 2022.

Governance

32. A Surrey Bus Enhanced Partnership Governance Board will be established to oversee and champion the development and introduction of the EP, whilst also prioritising enhancements and improvements based on the funding received from government. A Stakeholder Reference Group will also be established. Both will be established in the Autumn of 2021. It is proposed that membership will be comprised from Members and officers of the County Council, borough and district councils, bus operators, bus users and other key stakeholders. Alongside this, efforts will be made to encourage Bus User Groups representing specific areas of the county to be established, feeding into the Stakeholder Reference Group. However, these have historically proven to be extremely challenging to establish and keep going. In learning from previous experience, we will work with interest groups, residents and bus operators to ensure new Bus User Groups have every opportunity to emerge and flourish.
33. Overall, the BSIP is intended to be a high-level plan and be ambitious in its outlook. The BSIP will outline what the Council sees as success and how that will be measured in terms of targets against baseline data of the existing bus network, inclusive of delivery timescale. Pre- and post-Covid data supplied by bus operators will establish a benchmark for metrics such as mileage operated, passenger numbers, journey time and reliability data. This will enable monitoring and reporting of future improvements, supporting the at least annual review of the BSIP. The detail of the enhancements and improvements outlined in the BSIP will be developed following its submission, with delivery subject to the level of funding received from government. The development of the detail will be overseen by the Surrey Bus Enhanced Partnership Governance Board with reference to the Stakeholder Reference Group and in accordance with the Council's required approval processes.

Conclusion:

34. The provisions of the new National Bus Strategy represent the most significant change in the relationship between local authorities and bus operators since the deregulation of bus services in 1986. Through an Enhanced Partnership Scheme, it formalises the relationship between the County Council and operators, and it strengthens the long-standing informal partnerships that have been very successful in delivering improvements for bus users. However, an Enhanced Partnership places a formal obligation on both parties to deliver what they agree to contribute.
35. The new National Bus Strategy and our response to it is a significant opportunity for the Council. In embracing the challenge and in setting out our high levels of ambition in the BSIP, the Council will put itself in a strong position to deliver wide ranging improvements to facilitate a step change in the bus service offer enabled through securing a share of government's National Bus Strategy funding.

Recommendations:

The Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee agrees to:

- a) Support the County Council's intention to produce a Bus Service Improvement Plan and the creation of an Enhanced Partnership Scheme, both of which are a National Bus Strategy requirement
- b) Comment on the approach, ambition and proposed improvements to assist in drafting the Bus Service Improvement Plan and the subsequent report to Cabinet.

Next steps

The next steps are:

- * Continue to develop and consult on the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)
- * Report to Cabinet for approval of the BSIP on 26 October 2021
- * Submission of BSIP to Department for Transport by 31 October 2021
- * Establish the Surrey Bus Enhanced Partnership Governance Board and Stakeholder Reference Group in autumn 2021
- * Enhanced Partnership Scheme commences 1 April 2022

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Sources/background papers

- Bus, Back, Better – A National Bus Strategy for England
- Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure 29 June 2021 – approval of decision to issue a notice of intent to prepare an Enhanced Partnership Scheme