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## **Highways and Transport Committee**

**20 June 2024**

### **Bus Service Improvement Plan Refresh & 2024/25 Delivery Programme**

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**Report of: Tom Moody, Director of Highways and Infrastructure**

**Report Reference No: HTC/17/24-25**

**Ward(s) Affected: All Wards**

#### **Purpose of Report**

- 1 The report presents the Cheshire East Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) refresh for approval. The new BSIP builds on the previous plan prepared in 2021 and reflects the recovery of the bus market post-pandemic. The plan updates the vision, delivery programme, ambition to 2030, targets and performance monitoring framework.
- 2 The report also confirms the funding from central government for 2024/25 and sets out an indicative delivery programme for approval. A significant step forward since 2021 is the formation of the Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators, which enables much closer collaboration in the delivery of our improvement programme.
- 3 The BSIP refresh was submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) as a draft document on 12 June 2024, in line with guidance published in January 2024. Any amendments required by Committee will be incorporated and a final version submitted to DfT by the end of June 2024 to release the 2024/25 funding allocation for Cheshire East.

#### **Executive Summary**

- 4 The bus network in Cheshire East plays a key role in providing access to jobs and services and connecting people and places. Buses are an essential component of an integrated transport network. They have a vital role in delivering key Council policy priorities for the economy, social cohesion, public health and environmental sustainability, including decarbonisation.

- 5 The 2024 BSIP for Cheshire East includes:
  - a. the bus vision – the shared vision for the borough, linked to corporate strategic priorities and the Local Transport Plan (LTP).
  - b. summary of the current offer to bus passengers – key facts and insights about current bus services and updated metrics for measuring progress against targets.
  - c. outline of the improvements programme in 2024/25 – delivery programme for bus improvements within known funding envelope available from BSIP grants and all other budget sources.
  - d. ambitions and proposals for 2025-2035 – the bus vision translated into specific ambitions and proposals for post-2025.
  - e. targets, performance monitoring and reporting – summary of performance against 2021 BSIP targets.
  
- 6 Engagement to inform the 2024 BSIP has been carried out as part of the Enhanced Partnership (EP), including the operator working group (25 April), EP Forum (8 May) and EP Board (16 May) to seek the views of bus operators, service users, local businesses and town and parish councils. The plan also builds on themes identified as part of previous engagement with residents on the 2021 BSIP.
  
- 7 The 2024 BSIP sets out a realistic and attractive plan. It explains clearly what was delivered in 2023/24, what is programmed for delivery by the end of 2024/25 and the ambitions and proposals till 2030 (subject to funding).
  
- 8 The following themes are reflected in the 2024 BSIP:
  - a. Bus network planning and improvements to bus services: service levels and network coverage.
  - b. Bus priority: delivering faster and more reliable services on priority routes/corridors.
  - c. Improvements to fares and ticketing – simpler and more affordable fares.
  - d. Improvements to the bus passenger experience:
    - Improved bus stops, bus stations and interchanges
    - Improved bus information and network identity
    - Accessibility, inclusiveness, personal safety and security
    - Implementing the Bus Passenger Charter
  - e. Improvements to the bus fleet.
  - f. Longer term transformation of the network.
  
- 9 Every local transport authority needs to produce a 2024 BSIP to secure the release of DfT funding for 2024/25. BSIPs should be comprehensive and authoritative, whilst also being concise and accessible to the public. It is a requirement that the final 2024 BSIP is made publicly available

and published on the Council's website. A draft version of the BSIP refresh 2024 is attached as Appendix 1.

- 10 To support the delivery of BSIP proposals, DfT have allocated funding to local transport authorities. Cheshire East has been awarded a further round of BSIP+ funding (value £1,187,596) for 2024/25. In addition, in April 2024 BSIP phase 3 funding was confirmed (value £2,268,000).
- 11 Cheshire East Council therefore has a total BSIP allocation of £3,455,596 for the 2024/25 financial year. The indicative delivery programme is set out at Appendix 2.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Highways and Transport Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the draft Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) refresh 2024 for submission to the Department for Transport (DfT) and publication on the Council's website (see Appendix 1) by the end of June 2024.
2. Approve the proposals for spending the Council's allocation of BSIP+ funding (value £1,187,596) and the BSIP phase 3 funding (£2,268,000) for the current financial year 2024/25 (see Appendix 2) and delegate the authority to spend the funding to the Director of Infrastructure and Highways, in consultation with the Enhanced Partnership Board.

## Background

- 12 The local bus network is made up of 37 bus services, of which 21 services are fully supported by the Council (57%), a further 8 are partially supported by the Council (22%), such as evening journeys. 8 services (22%) operate on a fully commercial basis. The Council currently spends £2.5m supporting bus services, which are not commercially viable but are deemed important and socially necessary.
- 13 The timescales set by Government for the development of the 2024 BSIP were challenging. The Council had already started developing the data and evidence base to support the refreshed BSIP, with guidance provided in January 2024. This evidence base is also feeding into the ongoing Bus Service Review, ensuring that a joined-up approach is being adopted for fixed (commercial and supported) and flexible transport (i.e. FlexiLink and Go-Too) within the borough.

## Consultation and Engagement

- 14 In developing the 2024 BSIP there has been engagement with local bus operators, user groups, stakeholders, businesses and town and parish councils as part of the Enhanced Partnership (EP). The following meetings have enabled partners to inform and influence the BSIP:
- Operator Working Group – 25 April 2024
  - Enhanced Partnership Forum – 8 May 2024
  - Enhanced Partnership Board – 16 May 2024
- 15 Local bus operators have inputted to the development of the BSIP to ensure a collaborative approach, as we work in partnership to deliver the schemes and initiatives included in the BSIP.

## Reasons for Recommendations

- 16 The BSIP will guide future investment and ensure our approach is in accordance with published guidance, including the National Bus Strategy (Bus Back Better) and latest Bus Service Improvement Plans – Guidance to local authorities and bus operators (January 2024).
- 17 The BSIP refresh has been produced after extensive analysis of the evidence base; a thorough review of the latest transport policy; and through engagement with bus operators, bus users and key stakeholders, including town and parish councils. Updating the BSIP ensures we place Cheshire East in the strongest possible position to attract future funding from central government.

## Other Options Considered

- 18 The alternative option is to do nothing and retain the 2021 BSIP. However, DfT would not release BSIP funding, as the submission of a 2024 BSIP is a condition of the 2024/25 funding allocations.

Option	Impact	Risk
Do Nothing	Remain with the existing 2021 BSIP for Cheshire East.	DfT would not release BSIP funding allocations for 2024/25 to the Council.

## Implications and Comments

### *Monitoring Officer/Legal*

- 19 In developing and implementing a BSIP, the Council must have regard to the transport needs of all of the residents in the borough, which may include disabled persons, persons who are elderly or have mobility problems and mothers with young children. Development of plans will need to be in accordance with statutory and legal requirements for Community Engagement and Equalities Impact Assessment.
- 20 Before implementing the outcomes of the BSIP, the Council should consult with local bus operators, various organisations including the chief of police for the area to seek their views on the planned proposals. The Secretary of State may issue secondary legislation and additional guidance in relation to the BSIP outcomes that feed into future Enhanced Partnership plans and schemes, the Council must have regard to the guidance.
- 21 In implementing the refreshed BSIP the Council must have regard to its adopted Enhanced Partnership and ensure that the BSIP proposals meet the aims of the Enhanced Partnership.

### *Section 151 Officer/Finance*

- 22 In 2023/24, the Council was awarded £1,187,596 BSIP+ (phase 2) funding from central government and Committee approved an indicative delivery programme in November 2023. The delivery of these measures is progressing, and Appendix 3 provides an update on each initiative.
- 23 For the 2024/25 financial year, the DfT have confirmed a further round of £1,187,596 BSIP+ (phase 2) funding and a new allocation of BSIP phase 3 funding of £2,268,000. The total BSIP allocation for 2024/25 is £3,455,596 (see table below).

	2023/24	2024/25
BSIP + (Phase 2)	£1,187,596	£1,187,596
BSIP (Phase 3)	0	£2,268,000
Total	£1,187,596	£3,455,596

- 24 DfT make clear in the associated Memorandum of Understanding that to be eligible for future funding, the overall authority budget must be maintained at least at the same level. DfT expect the grant funding to be

spent within a reasonable timeframe and outputs delivered within 12 months of funding receipt.

*Policy*

- 25 Cheshire East’s corporate plan recognises the importance of the bus network in supporting key strategic objectives such as reducing carbon emissions, reducing health inequalities, enabling employment and housing growth and improving quality of place.
- 26 The Local Transport Plan (2019-2024) outlines the role transport will play in supporting the long-term goals to improve the economy, protect the environment, improve health and wellbeing and the quality of place.
- 27 The BSIP 2024 sets out the ambition for the bus network to improve the speed, reliability and quality of public transport, to encourage more residents to choose bus, make fewer car journeys and contribute to carbon reduction.

<b>An open and enabling organisation</b>	<b>A council which empowers and cares about people</b>	<b>A thriving and sustainable place</b>
<p>Ensure that there is transparency in all aspects of council decision making.</p> <p>Support a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation.</p> <p>Promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.</p>	<p>Work together with our residents and partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient.</p> <p>Reduce health inequalities across the borough.</p>	<p>A great place for people to live, work and visit.</p> <p>To reduce the impact on our environment.</p> <p>A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel.</p> <p>Thriving urban and rural economies with opportunities for all.</p> <p>To be carbon neutral by 2025.</p>

*Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

- 28 The Council has fully evaluated the equality implications of the BSIP refresh through an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA). The EqIA incorporates Transport Focus data and engagement with user groups and stakeholders through the Enhanced Partnership. The vision to grow bus patronage in Cheshire East will benefit protected equality groups,

particularly young people, older people and people with disabilities. An EqlA is included at Appendix 4.

### *Human Resources*

29 There are no direct implications for Human Resources.

### *Risk Management*

30 Every local transport authority is required to produce a 2024 BSIP to secure the release of DfT funding for 2024/25. A draft was submitted to DfT by their deadline of 12 June 2024 and the intention is to submit a final version, approved by committee, by the end of June. Any delay in submitting and publishing a final version will delay the release of BSIP funding, which is a risk to the delivery programme.

31 In terms of governance and corporate oversight, a Bus Strategy Programme Board has been established including key enabling services, such as legal, finance, procurement, research & consultation, and communications. This has ensured that the development of the BSIP 2024 has been robust. A detailed risk register for the BSIP delivery programme will continue to be maintained and updated throughout the life of the project.

### *Rural Communities*

32 The Corporate Plan outlines targets to reduce areas of the borough not served by public transport. The Council has already demonstrated a commitment to this through its successful bid to DfT funding as part of the Rural Mobility Fund, subsequent operations of the Go-Too service and continued delivery of the boroughwide FlexiLink service.

33 The Corporate Plan also identifies the desire for thriving and active rural communities by 2025. The importance of local buses for rural communities has been reflected in the BSIP 2024 through the theme on rural communities and demand responsive transport.

### *Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*

34 The Corporate Plan outlines the significant pressures in Children's Services, particularly placements for looked after children and services for children with special educational needs, including home to school transport. A significant number of school children across the borough use buses to access educational establishments and this is considered in the BSIP 2024.

## *Public Health*

- 35 There are pockets of deprivation in Cheshire East related to income, health and life chances. Bus services enable a greater proportion of residents to access important services such as health care facilities. The continued delivery of these services therefore helps to address the Corporate Plan target to reduce health inequalities across the borough. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is used to prioritise services based on their ability to serve highly deprived areas.

## *Climate Change*

- 36 Cheshire East Council have committed to be carbon neutral by 2025 and to influence carbon reduction across the borough in order to become a carbon neutral borough by 2045 – the decarbonisation of the transport network is a key component of this programme of work.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Richard Hibbert <a href="mailto:Richard.Hibbert@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Richard.Hibbert@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Draft BSIP 2024</li><li>2. 2024/25 BSIP Delivery Programme</li><li>3. 2023/24 BSIP Progress Update</li><li>4. Equality Impact Assessment</li></ol>
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Cheshire East BSIP 2021</a>