

Report to Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

9 March 2023

Subject:	West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan and related matters
Director:	Director of Regeneration and Growth Tony McGovern
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1 Recommendations




- 1.1 That the Board notes the content and implications of the West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The Board requested an update on the West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan and supporting measures.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Strong resilient communities: Successful communities need access to jobs, services and facilities to enable them to remain healthy and vibrant. The public transport network, of which bus services are the major part, is an important enabler of this.</p>
	<p>Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods: Both new and existing residential developments rely on good quality access and links to shops, services and leisure facilities in order for them to be successful. The public transport network, of which bus services are the major part, is an important enabler of this.</p>
	<p>A connected and accessible Sandwell: The provision of a high quality public transport network will enable Sandwell residents to access jobs, education and services both within and beyond the Borough's boundaries.</p> <p>Bus services are a key component of the public transport network. The Bus Service Improvement plan backed by the enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme will underpin the provision of a comprehensive and integrated bus network throughout Sandwell.</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

The state of the bus network in the West Midlands

4.1 Four out of five of all public transport trips in the West Midlands are made by bus. The West Midlands network is the largest outside of London with over 248 million passenger boardings in 2019/20. There are over 300 routes served by 2,000 buses. Twenty-four operators provide these routes but the largest, with 89% of all scheduled mileage, is National Express West Midlands. Diamond Bus (Rotala) is the next largest within the WMCA area whilst many cross-boundary services are operated by the other major national operators, Arriva, Stagecoach and First.



- 4.2 However, bus patronage has been falling steadily since the 1980s. Services which are not commercially viable but are socially necessary are subsidised through a tender process. There are currently 159 such contracts covering 219 routes. The cost of these subsidies has risen consistently for a number of years and in 2020/21 amounted to £9.8m. This funding comes from the transport levy that each of the seven West Midlands local authorities pays to fund TfWM. The levy also funds the statutory English National Concessionary Travel Scheme which provides free travel for qualifying groups.
- 4.3 The steady decline in bus usage was exacerbated by the Covid19 pandemic. Patronage is currently at around 82% of pre-Covid levels and the network has required significant public subsidy to remain viable. DfT funding remains in place until the end of March which has enabled a network equivalent to 90% of the pre-Covid network to be maintained. However, operators have recently made it known that a further 10% of the network is at risk without further support.
- 4.4 It is against this backdrop that the various strategies, both national and regional, have been adopted to support the bus network. This report covers the Bus Service Improvement Plan, the Enhanced Partnership and infrastructure proposals being developed to support it. It also gives an update on the Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) network review.
- 4.5 In March 2021, The Department for Transport published a new national strategy for bus services in England ('Bus Back Better') in an attempt to reform bus service provision across the country. The strategy set out an ambition for every local transport authority (LTA) and bus operator in England to be in a statutory enhanced partnership (EP) or franchising arrangement by April 2022, using existing powers within the Bus Services Act 2017.
- 4.6 In response to this, TfWM, in partnership with its constituent authorities, developed the West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) published in November 2021.



Bus Service Improvement Plan

4.7 The BSIP complements the existing Strategic Vision for Bus (see Appendix A). This set out four key objectives for bus service improvement in the metropolitan area:

- a) A more sustainable and attractive service offer
- b) A consistent, good delivery of the service offer
- c) Ensuring a good passenger experience for all
- d) Reducing environmental impacts

The BSIP document is contained at Appendix B.

4.8 The central plank of the objective to deliver consistently good service delivery is a core network of 'turn up and go' services with enhanced frequencies which is easy for passengers to understand and navigate. This core network will then be fed by a network of local and supporting services.

4.9 The aim is for service frequencies on the core network to meet the following standards;

Monday to Saturday

- 12 to 15 mins between 0500 to 0700
- 8 to 10 mins between 0700 and 1830
- 12 to 15 mins between 1830 and 2330

Sunday

- 15 mins 0630 to 0830
- 10 to 12 mins 0830 to 1700
- 15 mins 1700 to 2200

4.10 The core network will be supported with comprehensive bus priority measures, improved waiting facilities, branding, information and integrated ticketing. It is envisaged this investment coupled with the stated frequency levels will give this core network the best chance to be commercially viable in the medium term.



- 4.11 The Core Bus Network includes the following corridors in Sandwell;
- Birmingham to Walsall via Great Barr (Route 51 and SPRINT)
 - Birmingham to Hamstead (Route 16)
 - Birmingham to Dudley via West Bromwich (Route 74)
 - Birmingham to Dudley via Smethwick & Oldbury (Route 87)
 - Birmingham to Dudley via Bearwood (Route
 - Birmingham to Dudley via Bearwood and Blackheath (Route x)
 - Birmingham to Stourbridge via Bearwood (Route 9)
 - Birmingham Outer Circle (through Bearwood) (Route 11)
 - Sutton Coldfield to West Bromwich (Route 5)
 - Walsall to Hayley Green/Merry Hill via West Bromwich, Oldbury and Blackheath (Route 4)
 - West Bromwich to Wolverhampton via Wednesbury (Route 79)
 - Walsall to Merry hill via Wednesbury, Tipton and Dudley (Route x)

The Core Bus Network is shown at page 33 of the BSIP. Many of these corridors are intended to be joined to other corridors that feed into Birmingham city centre to form ‘cross-city’ routes. This will enable a greater range of single journey options throughout the conurbation.

- 4.12 The first of these cross-city routes, the Birmingham to Dudley via Oldbury corridor joined to the Birmingham to Druids Heath corridor, is already seeing investment in bus priority measures funded through a £24.2m grant from the DfT’s “A Better deal for Bus users” funding. This will include some works with Sandwell at Burnt Tree and in Oldbury.

- 4.13 The BSIP proposes a 200% increase in the length of bus priority lanes in the West Midlands. 106km of new bus lanes are proposed by 2025 of which the following identified routes run through Sandwell;

- Birmingham to Dudley via West Bromwich (currently Route 74)
- Birmingham to Dudley via Smethwick and Oldbury (currently route 87)
- Birmingham to Halesowen (currently Route 9)
- Birmingham Outer Circle (Route 11)



The remaining Sandwell corridors would be in the post 2025 programme.

- 4.14 Much of Sandwell's highway network is single-carriageway and thus unsuitable for bus lanes. Nonetheless, the overall increase in bus priority on these routes will benefit Sandwell residents who use them.
- 4.15 The BSIP is not, however, solely about physical infrastructure to support buses. A key deliverable within the BSIP is for an extensive ticket incentivisation programme, intended to provide free or reduced priced travel for a wide range of groups in order to promote bus use, grow patronage and reduce reliance on cars.
- 4.16 Bus ticketing is currently complex, and each operator has their own suite of tickets. The multi-operator 'nBus' ticket enables passengers to use all operators' services in the region but has an associated price-premium, so usage is limited. The complexity of ticketing can lead to difficulties in promoting clear, consistent messaging about bus fares to users and this acts as a barrier to use, particularly for those not currently familiar with bus use which the incentivisation schemes will primarily be aimed at.
- 4.17 In order to address this, the BSIP commits to the removal of the price-premium on the multi-operator nBus ticket, such that the price will be reduced to mirror that of single-operator tickets. As a result, this is likely to result in the removal of many operators' individual ticket products and simplify ticketing across the region significantly. Effectively nBus will replace the majority of operators' own day tickets and season tickets and allow for much clearer messaging. It is proposed to implement this in during 2023.
- 4.18 The BSIP includes further commitments around improved real-time information at stops, stop infrastructure and improvements to bus stations. There is also a major drive to modernise and decarbonise the bus fleet through the introduction of electric and hydrogen powered buses, and the retro-fitting of diesel buses to Euro VI standard. The overall aim is for the bus fleet to be carbon-neutral by 2041.



4.19 Finally, the BSIP includes details of how the Safer Travel Plan will operate to reduce the levels of crime on the network and improve both the reality and perceptions of public safety on buses. This work is being done in partnership with operators, West Midlands Police and British Transport Police. Further detail is contained at page 19 of the BSIP document.

4.20 All BSIPs were assessed by the DfT. In February 2022 TfWM advised that it was one of 31 Authorities who's plans would be funded by Government, with £87.858m of revenue funding secured to support delivery. This funding was confirmed in August 2022 and TfWM advised this would be phased over three years between April 2022 and March 2025. The allocations will be dependent upon TfWM demonstrating to the DfT that it has made effective progress in delivery against BSIP commitments.

Enhanced Partnership

4.21 The West Midlands Enhanced Partnership (EP) was made in June 2021 to enable formal partnership working arrangements between bus operators, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and the seven West Midlands councils that act as Local Highway Authorities.

4.22 The EP consists of a strategic document which sets out a clear vision of improvements that are envisaged to bus services known as an Enhanced Partnership Plan (EP Plan). The EP Plan includes a commitment to such things as;

- Transition to a low emission bus fleet,
- Simpler payment methods,
- Faster journeys,
- Safer services,
- Better passenger information and concessions tailored to excluded groups.

4.1 The EP Plan must be accompanied by one or more Enhanced Partnership Schemes (EP Schemes) which set out the actions and commitments to achieve the improvements in the EP Plan. An EP places a legal duty on



all signatories of the EP including the local authorities to deliver against the actions and commitments made in an EP Scheme.

- 4.23 The EP is used to deliver on the themes and objectives set out in the Strategic Vision for Bus and BSIP. The EP Plan covers the entire West Midlands metropolitan area, setting out an overarching strategic roadmap for bus service improvement across the urban area. To complement this, an associated, more detailed, EP Scheme was developed covering the cross-city A34(N)/A45/B425 'SPRINT' corridor. The initial EP scheme was therefore geographically limited to this corridor and to highways that are the responsibility of Birmingham, Sandwell, Solihull and Walsall councils.
- 4.24 Sandwell's Cabinet approved the EP Plan and Scheme in February 2021. To meet the objectives set out in the BSIP, a variation was made to the EP Scheme in November 2022 so that it covers the same geography as the EP Plan, i.e. the whole of the West Midlands Combined Authority area. This allows for more detailed planning and specified actions across the urban area to deliver improvements to bus services as outlined in the EP Plan and Bus Service Improvement Plan.
- 4.25 A further variation is being prepared which will reduce the number of ticket options chargeable by bus operators, creating a simpler fare structure for bus users. Additionally, this variation will also introduce maximum service frequencies on certain routes to ensure that bus operators do not overprovide on the most profitable corridors but spread their services to meet passenger demand.
- 4.26 The current version of the EP Plan and Scheme are contained at Appendix C.

Bus Network Review

- 4.27 As previously stated, local bus services are suffering from reduced passengers and revenues, significantly increasing costs and driver shortages. A number of bus services are no longer viable to operate without public sector support. This leads to a significant increase in the



costs of providing the subsidised network. Taken collectively TfWM reports a £6m budget pressure to maintain a network equivalent to 90% of mileage operated prior to the pandemic.

- 4.28 To address this, and in response to a DfT requirement, an operator-led Network Review was carried out during Autumn 2022. The key outcome of the review was for operators to implement a network they believe is sustainable in the longer term and for TfWM to then assess the implications of those commercial changes and seek to mitigate the impact as far as possible within the policy framework and budget available to the Authority.
- 4.29 Following the review of the commercial networks and the impact on the subsidised services, TfWM identified 39 services that were potentially ‘at risk’ against the access standards policy framework and the forecast outcome of the competitive tendering exercise.
- 4.30 The review results in changes to a number of services and the withdrawal of some. Details are contained in the report to TfWM’s Transport Delivery Committee contained at Appendix D. Of the withdrawn services, only one, route 22 (Tipton to Wednesbury) is in Sandwell.
- 4.31 Subsequent to this report further commercial services have been proposed for withdrawal by operators including route 45 by Diamond Bus.

Infrastructure improvements to support bus

- 4.32 New or improved transport infrastructure in the West Midlands, except for projects costing in £50m or more, is now predominantly funded through the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS). CRSTS draws under one heading a number of transport former funding streams including Transforming Cities Fund (TCF), the Integrated Transport Block (ITB), and Highways Maintenance Block (HMB).
- 4.33 Government announced allocations to Local Authorities and Mayoral Combined Authorities in April 2022. This confirmed the previously



announced provisional allocation of £1.05bn for the WMCA area. Decision making on the projects included in the submitted programmes is devolved to WMCA, with the exception of a small number of projects (none in Sandwell) in which DfT wishes to retain a role. In confirming this allocation, DfT indicated that LTAs in receipt of CRSTS funding would not receive any additional capital funding to support their BSIPs. Therefore, CRSTS is, for the time being, the only other source of funding for infrastructure to support bus beyond the £24m of Better Deal For Bus Users funding being used to implement the cross-city route between Druids Heath and Dudley.

4.34 The West Midlands CRSTS programme for 2022-27 includes the following projects in Sandwell;

- A34/A45 SPRINT Corridor (Phase 2) (£56.60m) – Completion of the SPRINT route including a small amount of further bus priority in Sandwell around M6 Junction 7.
- A4123 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor (£29.00m) – A package of measures to provide segregated cycle lanes and bus priority measures between Wolverhampton and Hagley Road.
- A461 Walk, Cycle and Bus Corridor, Sandwell (£12.00m) - A package of measures to provide segregated cycle lanes and bus priority measures between Burnt Tree and Great Bridge.
- Dudley Port Integrated Transport Hub (Phase 1) (£2.40m) – First phase of improvements at Dudley Port station to provide interchange between bus, rail and metro.
- Smethwick to Birmingham Inclusive Growth Corridor Transport Package (£19.00m) - A package of measures to provide segregated cycle lanes and bus priority measures to support the regeneration of the area around the new Midland Metropolitan University Hospital.

Franchising

4.35 As stated in paragraph 4.5 above, the national strategy for bus services in England, 'Bus Back Better', sets out an ambition for every LTA and bus operator in England to be in either an EP or franchising arrangement by April 2022.



4.36 Whilst at present the West Midlands has chosen to follow the enhanced partnership route, TfWM is investigating the strategic benefits and potential business case for franchising in order that the full range of options remains on the table for future consideration.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 The report is for information and comment. Therefore, there are no alternative options for consideration.

6 Implications

Resources:	There are no resource implications arising from this report. The report contains details of the resources allocated to supporting bus services and the provision of infrastructure.
Legal and Governance:	The Transport Act 2000 and the Bus Services Act 2017 confer a range of powers on Local Transport Authorities in relation to bus services/ In the West Midlands metropolitan area the functions of the LTA rest with the West Midlands Combined Authority.
Risk:	As this report is for information and comments, there are no risks associated with its recommendations.
Equality:	There are no direct Equality implications resulting from the course of action recommended in this report.
Health and Wellbeing:	There are no direct Health and Wellbeing implications resulting from the course of action recommended in this report.
Social Value	There are no direct Social Value implications resulting from the course of action recommended in this report.
Implications for Climate change	Decarbonisation of the transport system is central to the government's aims and objectives. It is also a principle theme within the West Midlands Local Transport Plan. The provision of a high-quality bus network, operated by low/zero emission buses is a major element of the move to reduce car dependency, improve air quality and a move towards net zero carbon.



7. Appendices

- A. West Midlands Strategic Vision for Bus (2020)
- B. West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan (2021)
- C. Enhanced Partnership Plan (2020) and Scheme (2022)
- D. Report to West Midlands Transport Delivery Committee 09:01:23

8. Background Papers

Report to West Midlands Combined Authority Board 10:06:22

Report to Cabinet 16:11:22

