

Forward Plan reference number: FP/107/04/24

Report title: Review of the Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024 to 2034	
Report to: Councillor Tom Cunningham, Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport.	
Report author: Tom Blackburn-Maze, Director, Highways and Transportation	
Date: 28 th August 2024	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 A strong bus network helps support everyone in Essex. It helps key workers get to work; children get to school; older people to access shops and healthcare; reduces congestion; improves air quality; and helps mitigate climate change. It supports diverse communities; brings people together; links families; and allows independent travel for those who don't drive. It supports our high streets; local employment; and those accessing training and looking for work. It is an important contributor to our drive to level up the county and address climate change.
- 1.2 This report asks the Cabinet Member for Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport to approve the Review of the Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) for 2024 which we have been asked to produce by the Government as part of the Government's national bus strategy. The review summarises progress in implementing BSIP 2021 to 2026 and sets out some aspirational proposals for the period to 2034.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree to publish the Annual Review of the Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024 to 2034 as attached in Appendix A to this report.

3 Background and Proposal

- 3.1 In March 2021 the Government launched its new National Bus Strategy, 'Bus Back Better'. It is designed to:
 - Recast the bus sector to allow it to not only recover from the impact of the Covid 19 crisis.
 - Reverse the long-term decline in bus passenger numbers.
 - Help meet national emission, pollution and health goals.
 - Help meet economic regeneration goals by reducing congestion.

- 3.2 Essex County Council (ECC) is the local transport authority (LTA) for Essex. This makes it responsible for delivering concessionary fares and for addressing market failure by commissioning bus routes.
- 3.3 The Bus Back Better National Bus Strategy states that an LTAs council's performance in developing its strategy for improving bus services in its area will be taken into account by the Department for Transport (DfT) in considering applications for both bus and all other transport funding. The BSIP sets out the ECC's assessment of the current state of its bus network; the opportunities; and risks; and also sets out its vision for the future and the strategy for delivery. Given the importance of the BSIP for future funding ECC considers it crucial that it has an ambitious BSIP to show the DfT that ECC has strong ambitions and has schemes worthy of funding.
- 3.4 The Bus Back Better Strategy also requires each LTA to publish an annual review of its BSIP, assessing the state of the bus market and setting out progress toward meeting its stated goals and targets by the end of November each year. ECC have a Bus Service Improvement Plan in place and an annual review of this was undertaken and was published in 2022. There was not a requirement for a review of this in November 2023.
- 3.5 In March 2024 the DfT issued new guidance requiring each LTA to submit a revised BSIP, following a different template and setting out both their immediate progress to date, their near future programme showing how funding delivered through the BSIP and BSIP+ grants and their aspirational approach to developing the bus network to 2030.
- 3.6 The document included as Appendix A to this report is the result of ECC's review of the existing BSIP, using the new template and follows the template set out by the DfT. It covers:
- The current position of the commercial network, including patronage, congestion and traffic levels and changes to service levels.
 - Changes to ECC's contracted bus network.
 - A summary of the progress made in delivering ECC's BSIP commitments, including the delivery of 12 comprehensive Area Reviews, the successful Zero Emission Bus Regional Area 2 (ZEBRA 2) bid to introduce zero emission electric buses in Basildon, the establishment of a county wide Enhanced Partnership with bus operators, and progress toward developing district based partnerships, progress on our six transformational projects and an update on progress toward reviewing ECC policy supporting the bus network.
- 3.7 The review does not alter the existing goals or aims of the BSIP and nor does it add any additional policy or financial commitments beyond those already agreed for in the Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2022 to 2026 in November 2021 or subsequently through specifically funded grant programmes such as ZEBRA 2. It does fine tune some of our policy approaches in light of our experience to date. These include:

- A revised approach to stakeholder consultation for future BSIP emendations, giving the public a better opportunity to have their say.
- Some changes to the structure of the district based Enhanced Partnerships, designed to lower the administrative burden of creating and managing them.
- As requested by DfT some aspirational longer-term goal for improving the bus network, including approaches which are not currently funded and would depend on future external funding coming forward to be achievable.

3.8 Once the decision to approve the revised Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024 to 2034 is taken it will be submitted to the DfT and published on Essex's website. It will then supersede the current version of the Essex BSIP to act as the basis for ECC strategic approach to bus services going forward. It is expected, based on current requirements from the DfT that a further review will be needed in 2025.

4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1 This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision

- Enjoy life into old age
- Provide an equal foundation for every child
- Strengthen communities through participation
- Develop our County sustainably
- Connect us to each other and the world
- Share prosperity with everyone

4.2 This links to our organisational strategy 'Everyone's Essex' which was adopted in 2021, in particular the strategic priority of High-Quality Environment and the following two aims:

- Net Zero: Ensuring that the Council significantly reduces its carbon footprint whilst also supporting an acceleration in the progress towards sustainable housing and energy, and active and alternative forms of travel across the county
- Transport and built environment: we will deliver a step change in sustainable travel across the county, by growing passenger transport and active travel and supporting the move towards net zero, climate resilient developments including our new garden communities, by delivering sustainable and healthy neighbourhoods for the future.

4.3 This report links to the following strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':

- A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy
- A high-quality environment
- Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
- A good place for children and families to grow

5 Options

Option 1 (recommended): Adopt the revised the BSIP as set out in Appendix A

- 5.1 Authorise the publication of the revised Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2024 to 2034 as set out in the document attached in Appendix A.
- 5.2 This will allow the County Council to meet its obligation under the National Bus Strategy to publish an annual update, set out the County Councils progress over the last year in meeting its goals and set out our aims for 2024 to 2034 and beyond.
- 5.3 This is the recommended option.

Option 2 (not recommended): do nothing.

- 5.4 Do nothing. The BSIP review will not be published, and Essex will not meet the expectations placed upon it by the national bus strategy. This could negatively impact the success of further funding bids to Department for Transport projects and delay the transfer of BSIP+ funding from DfT.
- 5.5 This is **not** the recommended option.

6 Issues for consideration

6.1 Financial implications

- 6.1.1 To secure the release of ECC's Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus (BSIP+) 2024/25 allocation of £4.9m the Local Transport Authority should produce a 2024 BSIP as per the National Bus Strategy: 2024 Bus Service Improvement Plans paragraph 12. The 2024 BSIP paper does not propose any additional spending above that already agreed for the current BSIP and associated projects.
- 6.1.2 The publication of this annual review, including any aspirational proposals may not result in any additional financial commitment by the authority unless appropriate external funding is provided.

6.2 Legal implications

- 6.2.1 There are no significant legal implications arising from the publication of the BSIP Review 2024. Any measures considered or recommended for implementation as a result of the BSIP must be considered in line with applicable ECC duties as well as competition and state aid requirements.

7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

- 7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

7.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

7.3 The Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

8 List of Appendices

Appendix A: Annual review of the Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2022 to 2034

Appendix B: The ECIA

9 List of Background papers

The Essex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2021 to 2026

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	
Councillor Tom Cunningham, Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport.	30.09.2024

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Mark Ash Executive Director for Climate, Environment and Customer	05.09.2024
Executive Director, Corporate Services (S151 Officer)	28.8.2024

Stephanie Mitchener (on behalf of Nicole Wood)	
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)	07.08.2024
Laura Edwards on behalf of Paul Turner	