

# Wiltshire Council

## Cabinet

6 February 2024

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**Subject:** Public Transport Strategy

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Caroline Thomas - Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene and Flooding

**Key Decision:** Key

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### Executive Summary

Bus usage at both the national and local level has struggled to return to pre-covid levels and only in some limited areas of the county is bus patronage returning to levels seen before the pandemic.

The Department for Transport have been working hard to support the bus market since the pandemic with initiatives such as the £2 single fare and more recently Bus Service Improvement Plan + (BSIP +) funding given to many Local Transport Authorities (LTA's), intended to restimulate and support the market by funding improvements in the provision of public transport.

Contract prices for supported local bus services have also increased significantly since 2021, as the costs of operation have risen. This has been exacerbated by the national shortage of bus drivers with operators having to raise wages to attract more drivers to the bus sector. The reduction in the amount of travel by bus and associated loss of fare income has caused financial difficulties for bus operators, while the cost to the council for tendered services has increased significantly.

Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) is currently in development and once finalised, this strategy will also be incorporated into the LTP4 as the bus Public Transport Strategy. As such, both the challenges and objectives being developed as part of the LTP4 are reflected in this strategy document, particularly with regard to future-proofing transport, rurality, decarbonisation, economic growth and tackling social inequalities.

Following a similar process to the last review of the public transport strategy in 2017, 163 responses were received during June 2023 from key stakeholders. This informed the wider public consultation conducted in September and November of 2023, where 1565 responses were received, the detail of which can be found at **Appendix 2**.

The Environment Select Committee have considered the approach to this work and concluded its validity at its meeting of the 11 January 2024.

**Proposal**

That Cabinet approve the revised Public Transport Strategy as described at **Appendix 1**.

**Reason for Proposals**

To ensure that Wiltshire Councils supported public transport continues to deliver appropriately for Wiltshire residents and its visitors, considering changing travel habits and a challenging operational and financial market.

**Parvis Khansari**  
**Corporate Director, Place**

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### Purpose of Report

1. To update members on the results of the public consultation on a revised Public Transport Strategy and seek authorisation to adopt the Strategy as part of the existing Local Transport Plan.

### Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

*Mission 1: The people of Wiltshire are encouraged to live full, healthy and enriched lives.*

2. The public transport Strategy can:
  - Encourage the use of public transport which typically involves a walking trip at the start and/or end of journeys by working with operators to provide frequent, reliable and affordable bus services.
  - Enable local groups to operate community and voluntary transport schemes particularly to provide local access and safety net transport services to meet needs that cannot be effectively provided by other means such as Link and Community Minibus Schemes).
  - Help support community rail partnerships to improve stations and train services.
  - Provide access to key services and facilities for Protected Characteristics groups (as defined by the Equality Act 2010) by providing travel opportunities for younger and older people who often do not have access to a car.

*Mission 2: Our communities continue to be beautiful and exciting places to live.*

3. The public transport Strategy can:
  - Provide access to the wider Wiltshire area for both its residents and visitors for leisure purposes through evening and weekend bus services.

*Mission 3: Our local economy thrives and is supported by a skilled workforce.*

4. The public transport Strategy can:
  - Support the local economy by making it easier for workers, shoppers and visitors to access local centres and facilitate development growth by helping to

facilitate the planned housing and employment growth set out in the Wiltshire Core Strategy.

- Facilitate access to educational establishments in order to improve the skill of the local workforce
- Improve journey time reliability for road users by removing some car trips from the highway network and therefore reducing congestion and delays.

*Mission 4: We lead the way in how councils and counties mitigate the climate challenge ahead.*

5. The public transport Strategy can:

- Enhance the built and natural environment by removing some car trips from the highway network and therefore reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air quality pollutants.
- Encourage providers to invest in zero emission buses and work towards all buses in Wiltshire being zero emission

### **Background**

6. The current Strategy no longer fully represents the travelling habits of passengers. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people travel, and we need to review our strategy to ensure it is valid for the LTP4 period 2026 – 2038.
7. Bus usage at both the national and local level has struggled to return to pre-covid levels and only in some limited areas of the country is bus patronage returning to levels seen before the pandemic.
8. The Department for Transport have been working hard to support the bus market since the pandemic with initiatives such as the £2 single fare and more recently BSIP+ funding given to many LTAs, intended to restimulate the market by funding improvements in the provision of public transport.

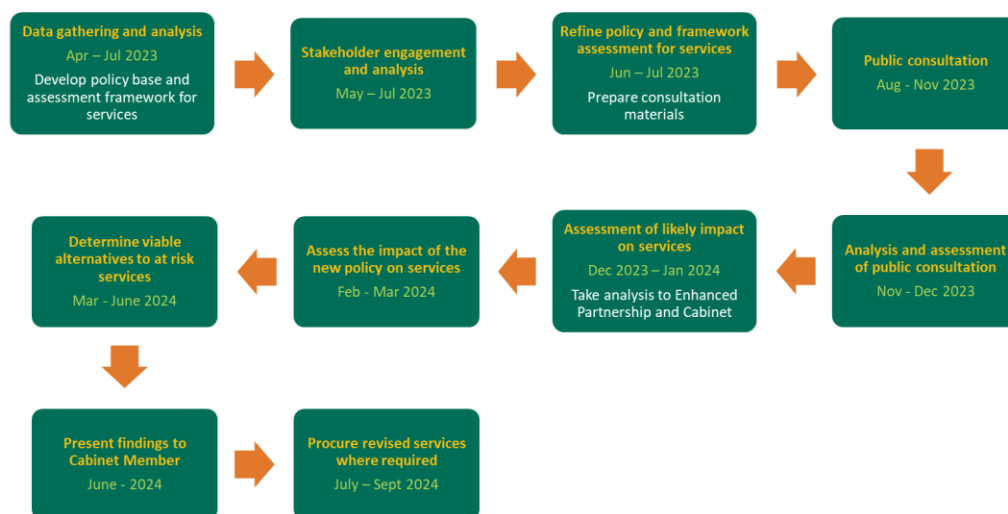
### **Main Considerations for the Council**

9. Wiltshire Council are currently working in partnership with consultants Integrated Transport Planning (ITP) to undertake an evidence-based review of Wiltshire's bus strategy and its supported bus network. The aim is to have a new Strategy and proposed revised bus network for implementation from June 2024 onwards whilst providing a framework within which evidence-led decisions can be made regarding investment in the bus network.
10. The new Strategy will seek to ensure we are providing value for money to the public purse whilst delivering on our Business Plan priorities and working towards the objectives of the National Bus Strategy. It will also seek to achieve objectives set out in our Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme and Bus Service Improvement Plan with the key aim being to increase bus patronage. The Strategy will also be incorporated into LTP4 when this is produced later this year.
11. A nationwide shortage of bus drivers has been a contributing factor to declining bus usage, as many bus services have had to be cancelled, or scaled back, over

the past 2 to 3 years as a result. This has caused considerable uncertainty for bus users and has further reduced passenger numbers.

12. Contract prices for supported local bus services have also increased significantly since 2021, as the costs of operation have risen. This has been exacerbated by the national shortage of bus drivers with operators having to raise wages to attract more drivers to the bus sector. The reduction in the amount of travel by bus and associated loss of fare income has caused financial difficulties for bus operators, while the cost to the council for tendered services has increased significantly.

13. The review of the Public Transport strategy was conducted in a number of stages which are as follows and shown here as **Figure 1**:



- Data gathering – passenger usage, types of places served (employers, colleges, rail stations etc), population statistics (deprivation, car ownership etc) and subsidy cost.
- Create a model/assessment tool with the data above which helps to prioritise where to invest in supported bus services
- Stakeholder engagement on a revised strategy– we received 163 responses to our engagement survey in June 2023.
- Refine strategy and framework assessment for services to enable us to focus on questions for the public consultation
- Public consultation – ran for six weeks and closed on 10 November. There were 1565 responses, the majority of whom replied online.
- Analysis and assessment of public consultation responses Oct – Dec 2023 (current stage).

14. The council will then proceed to:

- Assess the impact of the new policy on services - Feb – Mar 2024

- Determine viable alternatives to “at risk” services – Mar – June 2024
- Present findings to Cabinet Member – June 2024
- Procure revised services, where required – July – Sept 2024

**Stakeholder Consultation Results**

15. A stakeholder consultation was undertaken prior to the public consultation to help define the Strategies that should be taken forward. 163 responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders. The results showed that there was universal recognition of the importance of the bus (now and in 10 years) and 96% of respondents agreed that WC should continue support for buses. 69% also felt the levels of financial support should increase.
16. In terms of Strategy priorities for supported bus services, it was felt that providing travel opportunities for those with no alternative means of transport was crucial as well as being able to offer a sustainable mode of transport that is better for the environment. In terms of bus strategy priorities overall, stakeholders felt that the key objectives of providing bus services should be to provide transport for those with no alternative available, to enable access to key services such as education, employment and healthcare services and to tackle congestion.

**Public consultation results**

17. **Figure 2** represents a summary of the policies that the public were asked to consider.

Strategies	
P01 The Council will encourage public transport operators to meet the access needs of the county on a commercial basis	P07 - The Council will work to improve interchange between transport modes (such as rail and bus) to increase travel by public transport
P02 The Council will encourage residents and visitors to use public transport whenever possible	P08 – The Council will encourage the use of low and zero emission vehicles on commercial public transport services (and move towards low emission vehicles on supported services) to improve air quality across the county

<p>P03 The Council will work to ensure that long-term, cost-effective access by public transport is planned into new developments and financial contributions are secured from developers to support that provision</p>	<p>P09 The Council will promote concessionary travel to encourage elderly and disabled customers to access local facilities and services by bus</p>
<p>P04 – The Council will consider the role of demand responsive transport services, financially supporting and promoting them as appropriate to complement mainline public transport services</p>	<p>P10 Where residents are not able to access public transport services, the Council will champion independent living among residents by encouraging use of community transport</p>
<p>P05 –The Council will work with bus operators to ensure that public transport information is up to date, clear and accurate, and available via a wide range of printed and digital sources, including the Council’s sustainable travel website <a href="http://www.connectingwiltshire.co.uk">www.connectingwiltshire.co.uk</a></p>	<p>P11 The Council will prioritise support for public transport which provides access to employment and training, education, essential shopping and healthcare</p>
<p>P06 – The Council will explore options for implementing high frequency, high quality bus services on key corridors in the county</p>	<p>P12 The Council will ensure that the public transport it supports offers value for money for the county’s taxpayers</p> <p>P13 The Council will ensure that cross-boundary services form an important element of the county’s public transport network</p>

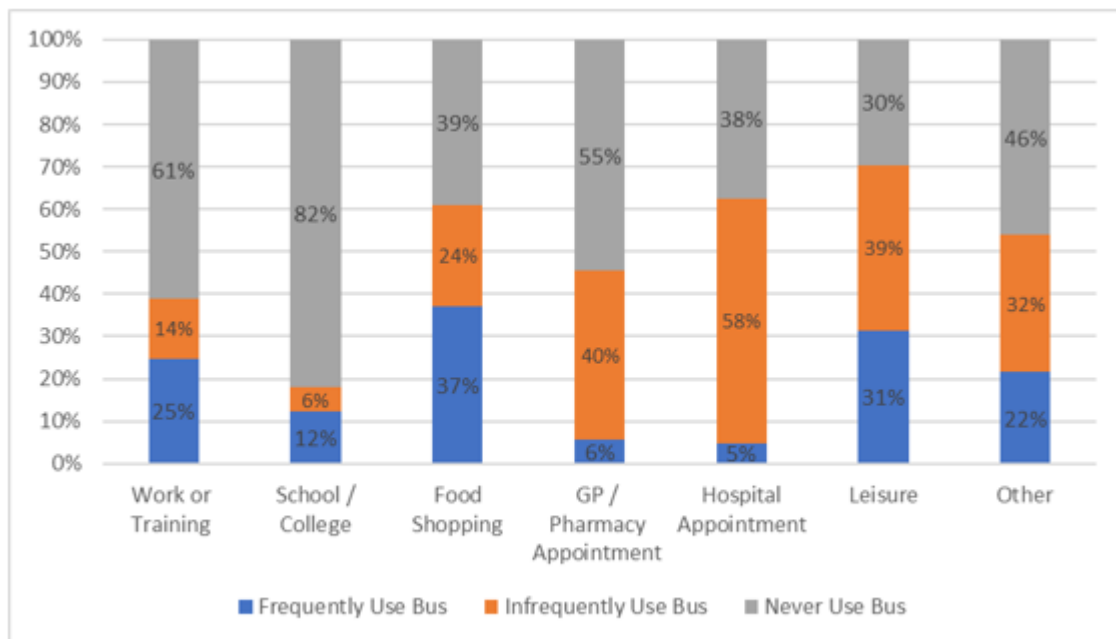
18. A public consultation survey ran for 6 weeks from September until the end of October 2023. 1565 responses were received; people mainly responded online although approximately 100 respondents returned a hard copy of the questionnaire.

19. 87% of respondents were Wiltshire residents and included town/parish councillors whilst others were mainly visitors. 64% of respondents were regular bus users while 36% used a bus less than once a week.

20. 69% of respondents thought the Council should increase the amount spent on buses and 23% thought the amount should stay the same. Other key results included:

- 48% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with bus services in Wiltshire whilst 33% gave a neutral response, with the remaining proportion providing a negative response.
- Respondents were asked how easy they would find it to complete particular journeys if they did not have access to any bus services. The journeys which respondents would find 'not at all easy' to make were hospital appointments and school / college journeys. 'Other' journeys included a combination of the journey types listed, as well as visiting friends and travelling to other towns.
- Respondents were asked how often they use a bus for a range of purposes (**Figure 3**). 37% of respondents frequently used the bus to go food shopping, while 31% frequently used the bus to make leisure journeys and 25% frequently used the bus to access work or training.

**Figure 3:** How often respondents use the bus for different journeys



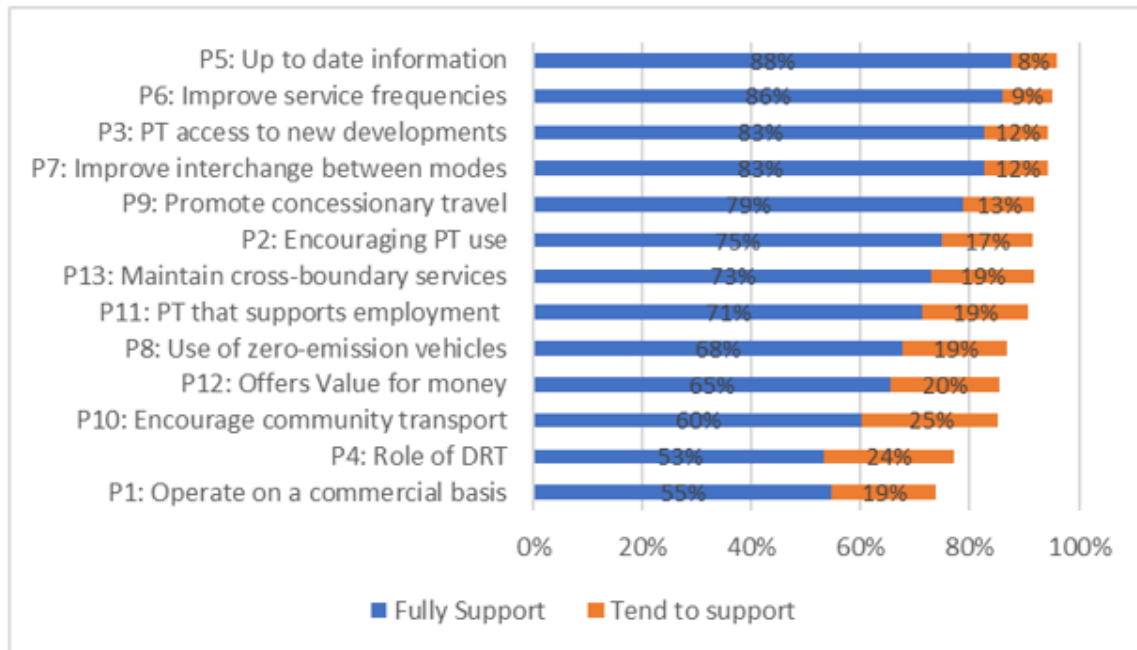
21. There was broad support for the majority of strategies proposed, as shown in **Figure 2**. The strategies are set out in full in paragraph 6 of **Appendix 1**. Respondents were asked to explain their reasoning for not supporting any particular Strategies. The Strategies with the least support were:

- Strategy one - 'The Council will encourage public transport operators to meet the access needs of the county on a commercial basis' - respondents were concerned about the focus on commercial needs and value for money rather than necessity of service or any associated social benefits.
- Strategy four – 'The Council will consider the role of demand responsive transport services, financially supporting and promoting them as appropriate to complement mainline public transport services' - as they felt DRT offered poor value for money, had failed in other areas, and was not a viable alternative to car travel.
- Strategy 10 – 'Where residents are not able to access public transport services the Council will champion independent living among residents by encouraging use of community transport'. It was felt that community transport could not



necessarily meet the needs of many residents, with a preference for regular, scheduled public transport services.

**Figure 4: Strategy support**



22. Just over 50% of respondents agreed that the Public Transport Strategy will provide an efficient bus network that meets user needs for **priority journeys**, although only 15% strongly agreed with this. 'Priority journeys' were defined as those for employment and training, education, essential shopping and healthcare. The most popular reasons amongst respondents who agreed were that public transport is essential to those without alternative means of travel; and that it is important to encourage public transport use as an alternative to car travel. Among those who disagreed, the most popular reasons were that they were not convinced the strategy would be delivered/be successful based on the state of current bus services; they felt there was a need for a higher frequency of services, as well as better coverage across the whole county; and they felt services need to stop being terminated.

23. Almost half of respondents (48%) considered that young people should be eligible for cheaper travel up to the age of 18, while 17% of respondents considered travel should be cheaper up to the age of 16. With regard to the level of discount that should be applied to young people's fares, the majority of respondents (60%) considered it should be half the adult fare.

24. Respondents were asked what else the Council could do to provide value for money public transport services. The most popular response was to improve service frequencies. There was also support for:

- continuing the current £2 single fare (42 respondents)
- improving service coverage across the county (39 respondents)
- improving service reliability (38 respondents)
- provision of real time information, at bus stops and/or through an app (29 respondents)

- Availability of through tickets for different operators and modes (21 respondents)
- Cheaper fares (20 respondents)

25. Respondents were asked if they had any other comments, including on other elements of the Public Transport Strategy. 382 respondents answered this question. There was some duplication with responses to Question 12 (above) for example, the most common response was to increase bus frequencies, raised by 63 respondents. Other responses were:

- Increase rural service frequencies (32 respondents)
- Improve overall service reliability (26 respondents)
- Provide more frequent off-peak services (23 respondents)

26. As there was broad support for the Strategies, it is felt there is no need to amend them and that Wiltshire Council should now adopt these and begin to develop the strategy for implementation.

27. In accordance with the process set out in Figure 1, the next steps will involve assessing the likely impact of the new Strategies on bus services, then developing bus service specifications in line with these new Strategies.

28. In addition, it is useful to note that improving bus frequencies is continually cited as one of the most popular responses on many questions. As such, it needs to be a priority consideration how this can be incorporated into new or amended service specifications going forward.

29. Up to date public transport information was also the most fully supported Strategy, suggesting that much could still be done by Wiltshire Council and our Enhanced Partnership to improve transport information provided to the travelling public.

### **Safeguarding Implications**

30. There are no safeguarding implications as a direct result of this proposal. However, a well-supported public transport network can provide a lifeline for the elderly and vulnerable in being able to access essential services in order to maintain their wellbeing for longer.

### **Public Health Implications**

31. A well-supported public transport network reduces the number of car journeys made and therefore reduces the amount of Nitrogen Oxide in the air. A reduction in car journeys will contribute to the improvement of air quality throughout Wiltshire, particularly in its Air Quality Management Areas. It should be noted that much of the bus fleet operating in Wiltshire is done so using Euro 5 and 6 emission bus engines which are considered very efficient in their emission of Nitrogen Oxide.

32. Maintaining a comprehensive bus network will ensure a positive impact for the Wiltshire populace. Access to essential services such as shopping, health care facilities will support independent living for longer and supports the viability of

our local communities. There is also strong evidence nationally that a strong public transport network contributes towards improved social mobility ensuring that those residents living in areas of deprivation have access to essential services to improve their health, wellbeing and employment prospects.

### **Procurement Implications**

33. There are no procurement implications as a direct result of this proposal.

### **Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

34. The following protected characteristics have been identified in an Equality Evidence Analysis:

- Age
- Disability
- Low Incomes
- Rurality
- People with no access to private transport
- Military status
- Pregnancy and Maternity
- Race
- Religion and Belief
- Sex
- Shift / Part-time workers
- Carers

35. The first six characteristics are likely to be most impacted and the following is a short summary for each of these six protected characteristics:

- *Age* - Younger and older people are more reliant on bus services and less likely to have access to a car. Also, fewer young people now hold driving licences and we live in an increasingly 'ageing society'. Younger people need affordable bus services to enable them to take up opportunities in education and work, and to increase their independence. Research has shown that many older people place particular value on 'local' and 'daytime' travel and predominantly travel for shopping, to access key services (notably healthcare) or to visit family and friends. Both groups also benefit from the health benefits of using public transport through encouraging outside activity and mobility. Adoption of the Strategies set out should provide better access to key services, therefore benefitting this group.
- *Disability* - People with disabilities are less likely to drive and therefore could become marginalized from the wider community and more reliant upon support services without independent travel options, such as supported bus services, to provide them access to employment opportunities and essential services or to visit friends and family. Some disabilities are also likely to need more trips to GPs and hospitals for regular medical appointments. Again, the Strategies should ensure better access to key services that are used by this group.
- *Low incomes* - People on low incomes are particularly reliant upon local public transport services and a lack of available and adequate services can be a significant barrier to accessing employment opportunities and essential services. Public transport can also provide health benefits (as people walk

more and drive less) which can be particularly beneficial for people from socio-economically deprived areas which typically have lower levels of health. The Strategy looks to address value for money in relation to bus fares so there may be some benefits for lower income groups.

- *Rurality* - In rural areas, settlements are dispersed, and homes, jobs and services are scattered – access to everyday opportunities and services can therefore be challenging. Rural bus services can help combat social exclusion by enabling non-drivers to access shops, education, training, and essential services. They are also important for the local economy; small businesses in rural areas need good accessibility for their employees and rural buses can encourage visitors and tourists. The Strategy looks at the alternatives available, such as DRT, to service rural communities.
- *People with no access to private transport* - are particularly reliant upon local public transport services and a lack of available and adequate bus services can be a significant barrier to accessing employment opportunities and essential services. The key Strategy priority is helping to provide services for those with no access to private transport.

### **Environmental and Climate Change Considerations**

36. Wiltshire Council has declared a climate emergency, and it is imperative that the new bus Strategy reflects the objectives of the Council's new climate strategy. Buses are an environmentally friendly way to travel. Effective public transport services are necessary to encourage a modal shift away from individuals travelling in cars and if achieved, can see an improvement in air quality as well as reduced carbon emissions; Increasing the number of passenger trips made by public transport will contribute significantly to the Council's overall pledge for Wiltshire Councils operations to be carbon neutral and in doing so will demonstrate how other large employers in Wiltshire could do the same to be carbon neutral as buses save millions of tonnes of carbon and pollutants and help reduce traffic congestion.

37. The revised Public Transport Strategy will help to achieve air quality improvements by delivering attractive public transport services that offer a viable alternative to travel by car. The Council will encourage the use of low and zero emission vehicles on commercial public transport services (and move towards low emission vehicles on supported services) to improve air quality across the county, to support the aims of the Air Quality Action Plan.

38. This Public Transport Strategy aligns with the Wiltshire Climate Strategy and Delivery Plans

### **Workforce Implications**

39. There are no workforce implications to this proposal.

### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken**

40. Without the introduction of a revised public transport strategy it will be difficult to allocate revenue funding to the correct services that now require some change to reflect revised travel habits.

## **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks**

41. None

### **Financial Implications**

42. The Passenger Transport services continue to be under significant inflationary pressure when tendering contracts. The Council has been awarded a BSIP+ grant of £2.1m per year for 2023/24 and 2024/25. This funding is to improve, enhance and support bus services and assist contractors facing commercial failure to ensure services are maintained. For public transport contracts it is possible to use the BSIP+ grant to cover the inflationary increases, however this funding is only confirmed for 2023/24 and 2024/25. A review of the Public Transport Strategy will help to ensure a sustainable and financially viable network for 2025/26.

### **Legal Implications**

43. Section 63 (1) (a) of the Transport Act 1985 provides that local transport authorities must *secure the provision of such public passenger transport services as the council consider it appropriate to secure to meet any public transport requirements within the county which would not in their view be met apart from any action taken by them for that purpose.*

44. The Strategy has been the subject of Public Consultation and comments provided in that consultation have been taken into accounts in finalising this Strategy ((refer paragraphs 17 to 29 of this report).

45. This Strategy provides a framework in which the Council can ensure that such public transport is secured, as far as is reasonably possible, in a way that meets the needs of its residents and the Council.

46. This Strategy is also consistent with the Council's Local Transport Plan 2011 – 2026 (LTP3) developed and adopted by Full Council under the Transport Act 2000. This Strategy has also been developed in anticipation of a review of that LTP and with the intention that it will be incorporated within any reviewed LTP (LT4).

47. It is also consistent with the Council's Business Plan and Climate Strategy and Delivery Plans.

### **Overview and Scrutiny Engagement**

48. The Environment Select Committee considered the report at its meeting of the 11 January 2024.

### **Options Considered**

49. None

## **Conclusions**

50. That Cabinet approve the revised public transport Strategy as described at **Appendix 1**.

### **Samantha Howell, Director of Highways & Transport**

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## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Public Transport Strategy

Appendix 2 – Results of Public Consultation

## **Background Papers**

None