

## CABINET

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Tuesday 19 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
<b>Report Subject</b>	The Welsh Government Bus Emergency Scheme.
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Strategic

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Bus travel has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Passenger numbers have plummeted, whilst social distancing and additional cleansing requirements have placed added burdens and costs on operators.

Welsh Government (WG) and Councils have stepped in to support the sector with substantial financial assistance through the Bus Emergency Scheme (BES). There has also been an excellent, ongoing dialogue between all parties to discuss and agree on support arrangements going forward. Due to the large amount of public funding that goes into bus services from both WG and Councils, WG would like to see the public sector having greater influence over areas such as network coverage, ticketing and integration with rail services. It also sees a greater role in bus management for Transport for Wales (TFW), to add to their responsibilities for rail services in Wales.

This raises two issues, the short term survival of operators and the longer term reform of the sector and WG believes that these two can be linked. It is proposed therefore that future funding, being provided by the Bus Emergency Scheme 2 (BES2), which is designed to keep operators afloat beyond April 2021, is provided with a number of conditions attached. This is to incentivise operators to engage in planned changes that are in line with WGs longer-term ambitions to reform the bus service in Wales.

This report seeks approval to sign up to the Bus Emergency Scheme 2 (BES2) which will support operators through the next phase of the pandemic on this basis.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Cabinet approves that the Council should sign up to the BES 2 agreement (Appendix 1) as regional lead authority, in order to secure (conditional) WG financial support for the bus sector and to allow WG to establish a relationship with their constituent local authorities that ensures the ongoing emergency funding meets those authorities' priorities and is delivered on their behalf.
2	That Cabinet request a further report on bus reform proposals relating to the future management of bus services in Wales.

## REPORT DETAILS

<b>1.00</b>	<b>BACKGROUND</b>
1.01	<p>Bus travel has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Passenger numbers have plummeted, whilst social distancing and additional cleansing requirements have placed added burdens and costs on operators.</p> <p>Welsh Government (WG) and Local Authorities (LAs) have stepped in to support the sector with substantial financial assistance. There has also been an excellent, ongoing dialogue between all parties to discuss and agree on support arrangements.</p>
1.02	<p>Prior to the pandemic, WG had consulted on a range of proposed changes to the way bus services are delivered in Wales. A Bus Bill was due to have been brought forward during the current Senedd term. Pressures associated with not only Covid but also the large volume of legal work generated by Brexit and the transition period forced WG to postpone the planned legislation.</p>
1.03	<p>Due to the large amount of public funding that goes into bus services from WG and LAs, WG would like to see the public sector having greater influence over areas such as the networks of services provided, ticketing and integration with rail services. It also sees a greater role for Transport for Wales, which is now responsible for rail services in Wales.</p> <p>This raises two issues: (i) short term survival of operators and (ii) longer term reform of the sector. WG believes that these two can be linked. In the short term, the funding being provided to keep operators afloat is therefore being provided with a number of conditions attached. These are to incentivise operators to engage in planned changes that are in line with their longer-term ambitions for reform.</p>
1.04	<p>The Minister of Economy and Transport and North Wales, Ken Skates MS, has met with Leaders of all 22 LAs, along with his officials, to outline Welsh Government's direction of travel. Further details have been included in the Wales Transport Strategy (WTS) which has been the subject of consultation. More recently, the Deputy Minister, Lee Waters MS, met with all Leaders to discuss the WTS but also to encourage LAs to sign up to the Bus Emergency Scheme 2 (BES2). This is the latest phase of financial</p>

	<p>support to help operators through the period of the pandemic (more details on BES 2 below).</p> <p>Leaders have agreed to establish a WLGA Bus Member Group, with a focus on the longer-term proposals to reform the sector's operations. That group includes the WLGA Leader (who is also the WLGA's Transport Spokesperson), the deputy Transport Spokesperson, the chairs of the four regional transport bodies and the co-chairs of the WLGA Rural Forum. That Member Group is due to meet with Lee Waters on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2021.</p>
1.05	<p>The problems facing operators were recognised at an early stage of the pandemic. Looking ahead, to secure their services for the future, Local Authorities agreed to continue making payments for contracted services even though many services were initially suspended.</p> <p>Alongside this, WG stepped in to help operators deal with reduced income on commercially operated routes and the additional costs being incurred. Initially, WG made £29m available from a Hardship Fund, which operated from April 2020 for three months. This Fund was assembled from monies that would otherwise have been paid via Bus Services Support Grant, Mandatory Concessionary Fare reimbursement and the 'My Travel Pass' scheme.</p> <p>The Bus Emergency Scheme was then introduced in July to provide ongoing support. This became known as 'BES 1' and it continued to maintain operators' income at historic levels, based on what was being paid to them under previous grant schemes. In return for this financial support Welsh Government signalled that it expected operators to contribute to a reshaping of bus services in Wales – to include improved regional networks with greater integration with rail services, smart ticketing and timetabling.</p> <p>'BES 1.5' was introduced in August, administered by the lead authorities, through whom BSSG had been paid since 2013. It provided £10m of so-called 'ramp up funding' to support the reopening of schools and economic activity. This funding helped to cover the cost of reinstating services suspended when travel restrictions associated with the pandemic were introduced, and which were needed to meet increasing demand, given capacity constraints of social distancing. BES 1.5 was then extended to the end of March 2021 following the announcement of a further support package in September 2020. Operators were once again asked to sign up to a range of terms and conditions to access the BES funding.</p> <p>WG, working with Transport for Wales (TfW), are now proposing to enter into a longer-term BES 2 agreement with operators and Local Authorities to protect services. It will operate for an initial maximum term of up to 2 years from the date BES 1.5 commenced (i.e. up until 31 July 2022, unless market conditions recover sufficiently for an operator to no longer require BES support for any of its services whether they be contracted or commercial).</p>

1.06

## KEY FEATURES OF BES2

BES 2 will continue to address the loss of farebox revenue and the additional costs associated with responding to the pandemic. Under BES 2 the WG funding will sit alongside local authority funding provided through the Concessionary Travel Scheme and via Revenue Support Grant and the Bus Services Support Grant to make up the shortfall.

Welsh Government will be a co-signatory to the BES 2 agreement with bus operators, along with Transport for Wales. Local Authorities retain legal responsibilities for bus services and therefore remain central to determining which local services receive this support. They need to sign up to the principle of the agreement and the relationship with their Lead Authority, in ensuring that the ongoing emergency funding meets their priorities and is delivered on their behalf. This will provide the legal basis for WG to make payments to the operators. **In this way, WG can use its powers to support operators, whereas the additional funding would breach Local Authorities' de minimis limits for direct award contracts** (further details in the briefing note in Appendix 1 and the full proposed Agreement is in Appendix 2). Local Authorities will remain responsible for those services which they currently contract directly with bus operators. Local Authorities will need to consider planning for contingencies, such as if the BES2 agreement is not signed or the level of funding for BES2 is reduced during the period of the agreement.

Key features of BES 2 will be as follows:

- Maximum term until 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022 or until operators enter into an embedded partnership agreement;
- development and delivery of a Reference Network, intended to provide a range of benefits to communities; multi-operator ticketing; and operator sign-up to an Economic Contract at the heart of WG's Economic Action Plan (and its principles of fair work, health, decarbonisation, skills and learning etc.);
- long term co-operation and co-ordination across TfW, LAs and operators by entering into partnerships with a clear set of obligations and shared standards;
- one agreement per operator in each of the regions that they work in, signed by Welsh Government, TfW, a lead authority and the operator;
- operators will be allowed to make a (capped) profit on services that has not been possible under emergency funding to date.

Given that the agreement is under discussion between Welsh Government, operators and Transport for Wales as well as Local Authorities, and must be approved by all parties, it may be subject to some changes before it is finalised. The reference network will need to be designed and agreed collectively by WG, TfW and LAs and discussed with operators. An All-Wales Bus Network officer group has been established to progress the thinking around this.

1.07	<p><b>BEYOND BES 2</b></p> <p>Discussions are starting to take place in relation to the planning of future networks<sup>1</sup> and the respective roles of WG, Tfw, LAs and operators. It is important to note that these are not the prime focus of BES2 agreement. It will be vitally important for further detailed discussions to take place with Members on these matters. However, this is not a reason to delay the signing of the BES 2 agreement. WG does believe that the BES2 offer will help to engage operators in the discussions about the future at a time when their income is more dependent that ever on public sector support. In signing up to BES 2, though, LAs are agreeing to financial support being provided to the sector. They are not committing themselves to any specific, future model of bus service management as that will be the subject of further debate.</p>
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<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>	
2.01	<p>The lead authority acts as a conduit for BSSG funding from Welsh Government to operators. Current lead authorities are Monmouthshire (for South East Wales); Flintshire (for North Wales); Swansea (for South West Wales), Ceredigion and Powys. Within each LA, transport staff play an important role liaising with operators on a range of issues to meet local Members' requirements. The roles include administration of Concessionary Fares reimbursement and provision of support for contracted journeys on non-profitable routes.</p>	
2.02	<p>Overall, an additional £45m has been provided by WG to support the bus sector this financial year including the £10m ramp up funding an extra £35m from September to the end of the year.</p>	

<b>3.00</b>	<b>IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT</b>	
3.01	Long-term	<b>Positive</b> – Provides security for operators and users
	Prevention	<b>Positive</b> – Provides long term security for operators against liquidation.
	Integration	<b>Positive</b> – Allows the bus service to integrate with other modes of transport
	Collaboration	<b>Positive</b> – Ensures consistency across all Councils in Wales
	Involvement	<b>Positive</b> – The process allows local choice to be considered for future bus routes and local transport needs will be considered when the new routes are designed.

**Well-being Goals Impact**

Prosperous Wales	<b>Positive</b> – The continual development of sustainable bus transport options within a fit for purpose Integrated Transport Strategy (as defined within the WTS) will boost the Council’s status as a ‘key player’ within the region thus reducing the risk of public abandonment in terms of tourism, residential and business growth.
Resilient Wales	<b>Positive</b> – Adoption of the BES 2 will help ensure the future of bus services in the County
Healthier Wales	<b>Positive</b> – The promotion and utilisation of active and sustainable transport modes will provide obvious benefits to air quality through the reduction of Co2 emissions. This will also greatly assist the Council to achieve decarbonisation targets set within Central and WG legislation.
More Equal Wales	<b>Positive</b> – Improved connectivity through the implementation of required infrastructure (as defined within the WTS) will benefit tourism, residential and business growth. Health benefits obtained from improved air quality and increased levels of exercise will benefit the Council’s most deprived communities, often associated with densely populated areas.
Cohesive Wales	<b>Positive</b> – The visible presence of public transport options within the County will have a positive effect on public awareness whilst displaying the Council’s outward commitment to climate change.
Vibrant Wales	<b>Positive</b> – The development of bus services will improve the quality and sustainability of the natural environment whilst providing benefits to the local and regional economy in terms of tourism, residential and business growth.
Globally Responsible Wales	<b>Positive</b> – The development of the public bus services will reinforce the Councils commitment to climate change whilst also striving to achieve a zero carbon future as defined within Central and WG legislation.

<b>4.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT</b>
4.01	With Cabinet Member (Streetscene and Countryside).
4.02	With Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>
5.01	Appendix 1 – Welsh Government Briefing Note Appendix 2 – Formal BES2 Agreement

<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
6.01	None

<b>7.00</b>	<b>CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS</b>
7.01	<b>Contact Officer:</b> Stephen O Jones, Chief Officer, Streetscene and Transportation <b>Telephone:</b> 01352 704700 <b>E-mail:</b> <a href="mailto:stephen.o.jones@flintshire.gov.uk">stephen.o.jones@flintshire.gov.uk</a>

<b>8.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
8.01	<b>BES:</b> Bus Emergency Scheme. Welsh Government interim proposals to protect the public services in Wales  <b>Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:</b> This act is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It requires public bodies listed in the Act think more about the long-term; work better with people, communities and each other; look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach.  <b>WTS:</b> Wales Transport Strategy. Currently out to public consultation.