

Report to Partnership Meeting 2 February 2024

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Bus Partnership Fund

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To provide Members with an update on Bus Partnership Fund projects within the HITRANS area, inform Members of the Transport Scotland's decision to pause the Bus Partnership Fund in 2024/25 and representations made on behalf of the Highland Bus Partnership.

Background

The Bus Partnership Fund was established in 2021 with a commitment to provide long-term investment of over £500m to deliver targeted bus priority measures on local and trunk roads, with Local Authorities invited to submit applications. The funding was aimed at reducing the negative impacts of congestion on bus services and addressing the decline in bus patronage. It was also intended to complement the powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, enabling local authorities to work in partnership with bus operators, to develop and deliver ambitious schemes that incorporate bus priority measures.

Bus Partnership Fund Projects in HITRANS area

Successful applications were made for delivering projects and to establish partnerships in Inverness, Fort William and Oban.

The Highland Bus Partnership employed a dedicated project manager to oversee the implementation of a number of 'quick win' projects and undertake STAG assessments on a number of important bus corridors to identify preferred interventions that best supported the objectives of the Fund.

Since its inception, the Highland Bus Partnership has already delivered a number of improvements that have had a positive impact on bus journey times and reliability including, the Rose St Bus link and enforcement out of Inverness Bus Station, adaptive bus priority at 26 traffic signal sites, and the soon to be completed Raigmore Bus Gate and Torvean Mobility Hub.

It has also established a strong working partnership with representation from The Highland Council, HITRANS, Stagecoach and Shiel Buses. It is chaired by HITRANS Board Member, Robert Andrew.

The Steering Group meets on a fortnightly basis to progress the BPF projects and also acts as an effective forum for discussing and advancing wider issues impacting public transport. Work on establishing a formal Bus Service Improvement Partnership (BSIP) has also developed well and is awaiting secondary legislation to progress.

However, work on several ambitious projects that are looking to progress bus priority interventions on some of the most congested transport corridors in Inverness and Fort William are still at the appraisal stage and the announcement that the BPF fund has been paused for 2024/25 (See Appendix A) means that there is currently no funding route to complete the design and delivery of these projects.

As a result, the Highland Bus Partnership has written collectively (See Appendix B) to both welcome the BPF funding for the improvements that have been delivered to date but also to highlight the deep concern that the pause in funding for the BPF in 2024/25 will have a negative impact on several projects which are at crucial junctures and that the momentum gained on these projects could be lost.

Transport Scotland officials have been supporting both the Highland and Argyll Bus Partnerships to reallocate funding committed in 2023/24 where a case can be made for positive interventions that meet the fund criteria can be completed this financial year.

Highland Bus Service Improvement Partnership - Information & Infrastructure Resource

One of the wider issues which the Highland Bus Partnership has sought to address is an improvement to maintenance of at stop infrastructure and information displays.

The partnership have agreed in principle a proposal to establish the necessary resource to maintain all wayside information infrastructure and displays within the Inverness and Fort William BSIP areas and further afield as resource enables.

Below sets out the proposed input from different BSIP partners:

HITRANS:

- Employ new 1FTE responsible for maintaining assets and keeping at wayside information up to date across the BSIP area
- Provide member of staff with van and cover transport costs
- Provide IT, workshop, materials for printing etc
- Member of staff would work alongside officer responsible for managing and producing timetable information across HITRANS area.

The Highland Council:

- Provide all new / spare parts required by officer to maintain at stop assets
- Contribution from general staff resource where repair may require DLO to assist.

BSIP Bus Operators:

- Pro rata financial contribution based on No of services to meet salary costs
- Provide timetable information via EBSR on all their registered services

The new resource would report to the BSIP steering group with their workload priorities also set through the BSIP.

In addition to the funding of the following items to continue to be funded by HITRANS and THC:

- Public Transport Information Officer
- Timetable Database Software
- RTPi Contract and Management
- RTPi Maintenance

- Printer and materials
- Office costs
- Bus shelter cleaning and maintenance
- Utilities etc

The above model would enable the new resource to work alongside the officer responsible for managing and producing timetable information across HITRANS area. In addition, the Hi-Bike base on Railway Terrace suitable accommodation for the new resource and storage space for any materials they would require to undertake the core responsibilities of the role. They would also be able to utilise the electric van available through the HI-Bike share scheme without adversely impacting on the delivery of either functions.

Recommendation:

Members are invited to:

1. Note the Report
2. Support the concerns raised by the Highland Bus Partnership, with regard to future funding of the projects supported by Bus Partnership Fund, as set out in the letter attached within Appendix B of the report.
3. Approve the proposal to establish a new post to support the maintenance of at stop information and infrastructure based on the proposal outlined with the report.

Risk Register

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – Local bus services support a number of RTS priorities relating to Public Transport and access to employment.

Policy

Impact - Positive

Financial

Impact – moderate

Comment – The outline proposal supported by the members of the Highland Bus Partnership would require HITRANS to employ the staffing resource but the funding of the salary for the new position would be met through a pro-rata contribution from bus operators based on the number of services they operate within the BSIP area.

Costs incurred to provide the new resource with office accommodation and transport can be reduced through the higher utilisation of those used for the operation of the HI-Bike share scheme.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – Local Bus services help improve access to many of the most vulnerable groups within the area. This report includes a proposal to improve the provision of at stop information and infrastructure which is relied upon by many of the most vulnerable users of the service who don't have access to information on the service through any other means.

Report by:

Neil MacRae

Designation:

Partnership Manager

Date:

30th January 2024

Bus, Accessibility & Active Travel
Bettina Sizeland

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Tracey Urry
Head of Roads & Infrastructure
The Highland Council
By e-mail Tracey.Urry@highland.gov.uk

Your ref:
Our ref:
BPF009, BPF011
Date:
15 January 2024

Dear Tracey,

Bus Partnership Fund Update

I am writing to you on behalf of your Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) to provide you with an update on the BPF following the recent budget announcement.

We have provided £26.9 million of funding for bus priority through the BPF through two rounds of funding, the first in June 2021 and subsequent round in February 2022. Through the Partnership working undertaken by yourselves in Local Authorities, in collaboration with Bus Operators and others, this has delivered bus priority improvements on the ground and robust business cases across a number of Partnership areas.

However, I am writing to inform you that given the budgetary constraints faced the BPF will be paused for 2024-25. Please be assured that fund spend will proceed as planned for 2023-24 to complete the delivery of the bus infrastructure underway for the benefit of passengers and operators and conclude business case work planned that could inform future investment.

This pausing presents an opportunity to recast bus priority projects within the wider work to be undertaken to deliver on our vision for the Future of Public Transport. This builds on the Fair Fares Review work that is planned to be published in early 2024.

In this context we will continue to make the case for bus priority projects which could be supported as part of an integrated approach to bus service improvement. This will be assisted by the robust business cases produced through the BPF. As you will be aware this already highlights the opportunities for an integrated place-based approach and in many Partnership areas considers the needs of active travel and bus together to meet shared outcomes.

The multi-modal corridor approach adopted by the Highland Inverness Partnership on Millburn Road may therefore be well placed to draw on other potential 2024-25 funding sources, particularly given the significant active travel elements on some corridors. We are seeking what

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opportunities there may be to progress these and will feedback once we have explored these further.

We have welcomed the Partnership working that is on-going to support the bus priority work undertaken through the BPF to date. In many areas these have provided a valuable forum for discussion and work beyond BPF. We trust that these will continue for the benefit of those involved, and ultimately passengers.

As you are aware the Scottish Government encourages all local transport authorities to consider the full range of tools available to them under the 2019 Act, to ensure that everyone has accessible public transport regardless of where they are in Scotland and we look forward to the continued Partnership working demonstrated through the BPF to support you in this.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to you, your fellow officers and the wider Partnership for the work and dedication that has gone into the BPF supported projects and business cases. The work undertaken will be valuable in informing future investment decisions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "B Sizeland".

Bettina Sizeland
Director, Bus, Accessibility and Active Travel

c.c. Julie Cromarty, Robert Andrew, Neil MacRae, Craig Cameron, Amy Phillips

Bettina Sizeland

Director of Bus, Accessibility and Active Travel
Transport Scotland
2nd Floor George House
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G1 2AD
29th January 2024

Dear Bettina,

**Response to Bus Partnership Fund Update
REF: BPF009, BPF011**

As the Chair of the Highland Bus Service Improvement Partnership (BSIP) Steering Group, I am writing to you in respect of the correspondence received by all Local Authorities on the 16th of January 2024 from Transport Scotland which announced the pausing of the Bus Partnership Funding (BPF) for 2024/25 financial year.

We are deeply concerned that a pause for the 2024/25 funding for BPF will negatively impact some projects that are at crucial junctures and clearly we do not want to see the momentum gained and the work to date resulting in abortive work, so Transport Scotland's comments on the potential to draw down on other funding sources for some of our existing BPF Projects such as the Millburn Corridor is most welcomed and we would welcome further urgent discussions on the potential of alternative funding sources for any of our BPF Projects for the 2024/25 period.

Firstly, I would like to provide you with some background to our Steering Group, our partners and what we have achieved to date through strong partnership working.

Background and Achievements

Our Steering Group is comprised of representatives from Highland Council, Stagecoach, Shiel Buses and HITRANS. We have met every second Friday since November 2021. The Group during this time has grown from strength to strength with commitment from all partners to work on a collaborative basis with a project delivery focussed attitude, to ensure we deliver infrastructure on the ground that can support improved local bus services.

We have demonstrated throughout the last two years commitment from all partners to deliver on many aspects of our match in kind contribution towards the fund, including Stagecoach's investment in an all-electric bus fleet to the City of Inverness

in February 2023 and outline agreement regarding the provision of bus stop information in the area.

Work towards a formal Bus Service Improvement Partnership

Through a strong partnership approach, we have also almost formally established our BSIP Plan, and await secondary legislation to progress. We had however, had discussions on forming a voluntary partnership in the interim and this will be something we still consider doing as all partners are keen to keep the Steering Group active in some form, even with the pause in funding for the short term.

Projects delivered under Highland BPF

Under the Bus Partnership Fund, we have been able to deliver several successful projects which are all playing their part to assist in the reduction of congestion, improving local bus journey times, reliability and incentivising the use of Bus Travel over the private car.

Traffic Light Priorities

Within the centre of Inverness, we have upgraded 26 traffic light sites along strategic bus routes with Adaptive Traffic Priority. Using the latest free roaming 4G Network technology, in conjunction with the onboard ticketing equipment, we have been able to provide a robust Traffic Light Priority System which will aid with traffic congestion, improve bus service reliability and offer opportunities for the operators to work in journey time improvements with the Inverness Network.

Rose Street Enforcement Camera/Foundry way Bus Link

The completion of the Foundry Way Bus Link between Farraline Bus Station and Rose Street (funded by the Bus Route Rapid Development Fund) in July 2021. This link allows buses to exit Farraline Bus Station without the need to circumnavigate the currently congested Academy Street in the centre of Inverness. This in turn offered more reliability and time savings to bus services operating from Farraline Bus Station, whilst reducing emissions in Academy Street. In conjunction with the construction of this Bus Link the Bus Partnership Fund installed a Traffic Enforcement Camera to monitor this Bus Link to ensure that no misuse of this Bus Link occurred.

Nearing completion are two other projects:

Raigmore Bus Gate

Once completed the Raigmore Bus Gate will allow direct access from the Bus Terminus situated at Raigmore Hospital through to Raigmore Estate before joining one on the main corridors to the centre of Inverness. This Bus Gate will be controlled by an ANPR system and controlled barriers and will also allow direct access to the

Scottish Ambulance Service, providing a vital and potential lifesaving link. This bus gate will assist in offering a greater frequency, significant time savings on bus journeys, better reliability and allow these services to avoid congestion. The bus gate will also allow operators to reallocate savings made, to improve and increase frequency in other areas of their service.

Torvean Mobility Hub

A Mobility Hub is currently under construction in Torvean, on the outskirts of Inverness. Once completed this Hub will be the first of its kind with the Highlands, offering ample parking space for cars, E-Charging facilities, bicycle parking and coach parking. Local and regional bus operators have agreed to incorporate this hub to their existing services to maximise travel and multi modal connection options for the general and commuting passengers to and from Inverness. With the substantial expansion of housing within this area, there is also potential to capture commuters to the centre of Inverness.

Summary of Concerns

We recognise the budgetary constraints being faced by the Scottish Government and look forward with anticipation to further information and commitment to future Bus Partnership Funding and would be grateful if any further information could be provided on this.

The correspondence on the 16th of January which confirmed the pausing of the Bus Partnership Fund for the financial year 2024/25 has left the partners of the Steering Group with a great sense of disappointment and to an extent, frustration.

It has been highlighted that only £26.9 million of a £500 million fund (as announced in a previous Programme for Government) has been spent to date through the BPF leaving a considerable underspend in the allocated funding. It is the position of our Group that there is so much more work to do to fully realise the potential of bus within the Highlands and it is so very disappointing at this juncture we are to be stalled in our progress.

We recognise that many of our projects have been challenging to implement, but we persevered and were beginning to see real progress. It has taken considerable time to navigate through elements such as third-party land requirements, reallocation of road space to buses and lengthy negotiations with third party organisations and stakeholders with some of our projects.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some projects that we have serious concerns will be negatively impacted by the pausing of the BPF:

Blar Mhor

Blar Mhor Bus Gate land negotiations are nearing completion after over two years and we would be in a position to progress construction imminently, so I hope you can understand our disappointment and frustration in particular on this project, where we are so close to delivering infrastructure on the ground and that the result of pausing this project at this stage for 1 year may prove to be fatal to the project ever being delivered. We would appreciate any further support on this specific project as to whether alternative funding resources could be found to take forward this project in 2023/24.

Millburn Corridor

It has been communicated by the Transport Scotland BPF Team that there is currently consideration been given internally to the possibility of being able to possibly access alternative funding sources for our Millburn Corridor Project. This is a strategically important project for Inverness and is very much connected and aligned with our Academy Street project which is seen as a step change project for the city centre of Inverness. We await further information on this from our BPF Colleagues in Transport Scotland. Any further indication of when we might receive a further update would be gratefully received.

STAG Work to Date (Lochaber, Connecting Inverness, B9006 & Millburn)

We had made considerable progress on the STAG elements of the BPF submitting 3 out of 4 STAG reports in Spring 2023 (B9006 STAG has been on pause since March 2023, awaiting planning approval of Inshes junction so the STAG Report is not complete) which has resulted in the most part that further investigative works would be required to complete the STAG work. We acknowledge although disappointing this work will not be progressed in the 2023/24 financial year, it is possible that these projects could be restarted in 2025/26 excluding Millburn which would benefit from being progressed in 2023/24 should suitable alternative funding be found.

Impacts on the Wider Strategic Transport Networks Lochaber & Inner Moray Firth

The Partnership would like have confidence that the progress made on identifying improvements for public transport network in Fort William will be fast tracked within the Governments wider commitment to develop an Integrated Transport Plan for the town as part of the Strategic Transport Projects Review. Work undertaken by the partnership has identified a number of projects which could help reduce bus journey times and improve congestion on the A82 and A830 in Fort William.

Indeed, the Group has genuine concerns of the negative impact on the wider strategic transport network of both the Inner Moray Firth and Lochaber. BPF was seen as part of larger plan which enhanced other work that all our partners and others were contributing to at a strategic level. This aimed to contribute towards contributing to reducing car kilometres by 20 per cent by 2030. The enhancing of the bus offering to make this mode more attractive resulting in modal shift through, stimulating less congestion, increased frequency of bus services, improved reliability and punctuality, improved public transport information, further widening the uptake on MaaS and in some cases enhanced active travel provision bringing increased health and wellbeing were seen as integral to improving the over transport networks of both BPF areas.

Project Management

With just 10 weeks' notice of the intended pause to the BPF funding before the end of the 2023/24 financial year, it will be incredibly challenging to consolidate almost two years of BPF work to bring projects to conclusion or to get them to a place that will allow them to be easily recommenced in 2025/26 following the pause to the fund. The group would ask that consideration is given for a 2–4-week extension of Project Management funding beyond the end of the 2023/24 financial year to allow for funding claims to be submitted and project closure to be completed.

Conclusion

All organisations that form part of the BSIP steering group have built a strong partnership over the last years, which has resulted in an ability to drive projects to completion using a partnership approach, even when presented with challenges. As demonstrated, the BPF has allowed the Group to deliver impactful projects across Highland. While the good work that has been achieved by the BPF has been demonstrated, it is clear that there is so much more work to do to fully realise the potential of bus within the Highlands and to be stalled at this juncture, could be detrimental to progress. We appreciate your consideration of our concerns.

Yours Sincerely

Robert Andrew

Chair

Highland BSIP Steering Group

c.c Fiona Hyslop, Minister for Transport Scotland

Mairi McAllan, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero, and Just Transition

Edward Mountain MSP, Highlands & Islands Region, Convener NZET
Committee

Tracey Urry, Head of Service, Roads and Infrastructure, Highland Council

Julie Cromarty, Sustainable Transport Lead, Environment – Development &
Active Travel, Highland Council

Ranald Robertson, Regional Transport Director, HITRANS

Neil MacRae, Partnership Manager, HITRANS