

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

13th November 2024

Report of Head of Engineering and Transport- David W. Griffiths.

Matter for Decision.

Wards Affected: All Wards

1. Report Title:

Local Bus Franchising Development.

2. Purpose of the Report:

This report summarises the progress being made to develop proposals for a future franchised bus network. This report seeks agreement to proceed to detailed planning and undertaking stakeholder and public engagement.

It is recommended that the progress being made to develop a base network is noted to:

- i) Enable progression towards undertaking structured regional stakeholder and public engagement activities in 2025 around the network proposals.
- ii) Form the basis for further detailed planning.

3. Executive Summary:

To deliver on the ambitions of 'One Network', Bus Franchising presents the opportunity to introduce improvements to the bus network for the benefit of the people of Wales.

The Roadmap document outlined a set of nine network planning principles to guide franchise network design, and introduce customer improvements. These principles are guided by the ambition of One Network, One Timetable, One Ticket and wider Welsh Government policy ambitions. The level and extent to which these principles can be implemented can vary across different investment scenarios.

The Roadmap document outlined that through partnership working, opportunities to improve access to education are being considered.

A 'Base Position' network has been drafted for the South West region, which is designed to be deliverable within the current funding envelope. Collaborative working has therefore been undertaken to optimise the existing network for the benefit of passengers. Where changes are proposed, these are based on the network design principles. For example, coordinating headways so passengers can receive a more regular and reliable service.

In Neath Port Talbot, the Base Position Network will be largely based on the current network (see Appendix 1) with additional improvements where funding allows. So, in the first instance we expect there will be an enhancement to the network. Then working towards franchising, the intention will be to continue to investigate where there are opportunities to make improvements within the current funding envelope, for example timetable improvements.

Franchising will provide the environment for the public sector to define the standard and quality of service. This will enable incremental improvements to be made across the whole passenger experience.

From a passenger perspective, the kind of changes that they may see in Neath Port Talbot on 'day 1' of franchising may be in terms of services having new route numbers, standardised bus livery, driver uniform, integrated ticketing for example. Services may be delivered by different companies.

An initial draft of an 'Aspiration Position' network has also been drafted for the South West region, which includes a number of provisional service and route enhancements and would require additional funding and resources to implement. In Neath Port Talbot, this will include consideration for more Sunday and evening services, increased frequency of strategic routes, better connections between bus services and with train service and re-routing some services to enable greater travel opportunities.

Agreement about the Base Position network is needed to provide the foundation for the detailed planning that needs to take place to provide the transition to franchising.

4. Background:

In March 2022, the Welsh Government published the White Paper One Network, One Timetable, One Ticket. It set out proposals to transform bus services. 96.1% of respondents agreed that change is

required to deliver bus services that meet the needs of the Welsh people and respond to the climate emergency.

Following the One Network, One Timetable, One Ticket consultation, bus franchising has been selected as the model to progress.

Bus Franchising means that decisions about bus services in Wales (including routes, timetables, fares, hours of operation and service quality standards) will be made by Welsh Government and Transport for Wales, working in partnership with local authorities and Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs). Bus operators can bid for contracts to run services to these specifications.

Transformative legislation is planned to be introduced to the Senedd in 2025, to enable franchising. Franchising will be introduced in regional phases, with South West Wales proposed as the first region for the roll-out, in 2027.

To prepare for the changes that Bus Franchising will enable, officers across the South West local authorities and Transport for Wales are working together collaboratively to co-create franchise plans, with a view to ensure that regional and local needs are considered in the development of the future franchise model.

5. Financial Impacts:

The Base Position network has been designed to be deliverable within the current funding envelope.

The current funding envelope includes:

- Existing Welsh Government revenue support, such as Bus Network Grant (BNG), Bus Services Support Grant (BSSG) and concessionary fares reimbursement.
- Existing Local Authority revenue support contributions for local bus services.

Existing Local Authority contributions for concessionary fares.

Transport for Wales are building a financial model to better understand the estimated cost of the network.

6. Integrated Impact Assessment:

A first stage impact assessment has been undertaken to assist the Council in discharging its legislative duties (under the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

The first stage assessment has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required. A summary is included below:

An integrated impact assessment will be undertaken as part of the detailed planning for the transition to franchising, to better understand the impact of proposed changes on people living in Neath Port Talbot and people with protected characteristics.

Appropriate channels for stakeholder and public engagement will be developed to ensure that the public are able to share feedback on the proposals in an accessible format, with dual language provision.

7. Valleys Communities Impacts:

There are no implications on the Valley Communities associated with this report.

8. Workforce Impacts:

There are no negative implications to the workforce associated with this report.

9. Legal Impacts:

There are no legal impacts at this time, but any franchising will be required to be conducted in line with legislative obligations.

10. Risk Management Impacts:

The current base position assumes that revenue support and operating costs remain stable. Any significant changes to these will need to be accounted as part of the ongoing network design process.

11. Other Impacts:

Neath Port Talbot Council note some key considerations to take account of in the transition to franchising:

- Maintaining clear communication with passengers and the public throughout the transition to franchising.
- Contract terms and conditions, with minimum standards for operators, vehicle and drivers
- Depot locations and requirements
- Fleet requirements and provision
- Ticketing and fares
- The best way to package franchises to ensure that opportunities are accessible to a range of operators, including SMEs and Community Transport organisations.
- Implications for Local Authority staff that currently manage and administer Local Bus Services contracts

 Mechanisms for Neath Port Talbot Councillors and Officers to have an on-going say in the provision of local bus services in Neath Port Talbot.

12. Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item at this stage.

It is noted that Members of both the Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet have attended two separate internal workshops each with transport officers to consider the draft base bus network with feedback provided to Transport for Wales in terms of both the base and aspirational network for the future of local bus services in the County Borough.

An All-Member seminar was also provided to Council by senior representatives from Transport for Wales on the 29th of October 2024 setting out the implementation programme towards formal Franchising arrangements planned for 2026 in the South-West Region.

Transport for Wales and the 4 Local Authorities in the South-West are proposing to jointly undertake regional public and stakeholder engagement activities.

Regional engagement will be a staggered and progressive process, throughout the transition to franchising, including local members, key stakeholders, operators and the public.

The plan for future public engagement is to outline the base network proposals across the region to seek feedback. Should additional investment be made, aspects of the aspirational network could be explored through engagement activities.

13. Scrutiny Observations:

Scrutiny Committee Members have been regularly updated and provided input into the process via workshops held on 11th July 2024 and 6th September 2024.

Cabinet Members also highlighted that it was extremely important to note that for the Bus Network to thrive in NPT and the wider region that it would require further investment by Welsh Government to maintain the existing services, the proposed base network and to deliver the aspirational network for the region and Wales be highlighted to both Transport for Wales and the Welsh Government in future Budget Setting rounds on the approach to franchising the bus industry in Wales.

14. Recommendations:

It is recommended that having due regard to the integrated impact screening assessment to endorse the proposed Base Position Network, to provide the basis for detailed planning for the transition to franchising and initial stakeholder and public engagement. As the proposed Base Position Network is based on Neath Port Talbot's existing network of local bus services, this option would minimise upheaval for passengers, and would be deliverable within the current funding envelope.

15. Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Bus Franchising is being rolled out across Wales, with the South West Wales proposed to be implemented first in 2027. A Base Network will be implemented when franchising is introduced. Providing funding is maintained, the proposed Base Network for Neath Port Talbot is the same as our current network of local bus

services. Agreement on the Base Network will allow detailed planning and initial public engagement to proceed.

16. Implementation of Decision:

The decision is proposed for implementation after the three day call in period.

17. Appendices:

Appendix A: List of bus routes currently operating in Neath Port Talbot.

18. List of Background Papers:

- First Stage Impact Assessment
- White Paper Consultation: <u>One network, one timetable, one ticket: planning buses as a public service for Wales</u>
 [HTML] | GOV.WALES
- Roadmap: <u>Our Roadmap to Bus Reform: Towards One</u> Network, One Timetable, One Ticket (gov.wales)

19. Officer Contact:

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