

Bus Partnership Fund Grants Awarded, Fund freeze and Community Bus Fund Award

Report by Kevin Anderson, Executive Director - Place

Report for Decision

1 Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

- a. Agree to accept the award of £178,336.80 from the Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) for the purchase of 24 upgraded Real Time Passenger Information screens, in 2023/24. as part of a SEStran region-wide upgrade project.
- b. Note the announcement of a freeze to the BPF in 2024/25,
- c. Note the completion of the BPF funded Orbital routes study, appended to this report.
- d. Note work by officers to explore other funding opportunities to support delivery the appraised measures from the Orbital study.
- e. Note the need to form a strategic view of the sustainability of bus services in Midlothian and officers will scope out the work required.
- f. Approve acceptance of £101,000 Transport Scotland's Community Bus Fund grant award and allocates the £101,000 grant award to purchase 13 real-time passenger information screens as part of a SEStran region-wide upgrade project.

2 Purpose of Report/Executive Summary

The report provides detail of a BPF award of £178,336.80 for adding 24 Real Time Passenger Information screens to the Council estate, this year. This brings the total BPF awarded to Midlothian to £480,336.80.

The report advises of a freeze to the BPF in 2024/25. Following the Scottish Budget announcement on 19 December 2023, Transport Scotland has notified all BPF recipients by letter on 16 January 2024 of the freeze.

The report summarises the outcomes of the BPF funded 'Orbital' study (now complete) and confirms that officers will explore all possible external funding sources to deliver the appraised measures.

The report notifies Council of the intention to develop a strategic view of approaches to sustaining local bus services in Midlothian. Engagement with bus operators will be through the Midlothian Bus Alliance.

Finally, this report describes the source and rationale for the granting of £101,000 Community Bus Fund money to the Council. The report proposes that the grant be used to purchase 13 real time passenger information signs to replace old signs which will be obsolete in March 2024 when the controlling system is switched off.

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Background

- 3.1 In 2020, the Scottish Government announced £500m support for targeted bus priority measures on local and trunk roads, to reduce the negative impacts of congestion on bus services and address the decline in bus patronage. The Bus Partnership Fund (BPF) was established, and two competitive funding rounds were held in June 2021 and February 2022. A further 'Quick Wins' funding round was available throughout 2023/24. The total BPF disbursed across Scotland so far is £26.9m.
- 3.2 The BPF was also designed to complement new powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, enabling local authorities to work in partnership with bus operators to develop and deliver more ambitious schemes that incorporate bus priority measures and lead to the establishment of Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIP). Applications to the BPF needed to show evidence of partnership work towards a future BSIP.
- 3.3 The Bute House Agreement and Programme for Government 2022/23 included a commitment to establish a "Community Bus Fund (CBF) to support local transport authorities to improve local public transport in their areas. The fund will support local authorities to explore the full range of options set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, including municipal bus services."

Main Report

Bus Partnership Fund Freeze

- 3.4 Midlothian Council has been successful in attracting nearly £5M from BPF, first from Round 2 (reported to Council on 21 March 2023) and also, through a 'Quick Wins' round, detailed further within this report. The two funded sets of activity are as follows:

BPF Funding Awards to Midlothian Council		
BPF Funding Round	Funded activity	Funding Amount £
Round 2, September 2022	Develop options for four bus routes, identified by the Midlothian Bus Alliance (MBA)	302,000.00
'Quick Wins' round, January 2024	Install 24 x Real Time Passenger Information Signs at £7,430.70 each	178,336.80
Total BPF Funding Awarded		480,336.80

- 3.5** On 16 January 2024, Transport Scotland wrote to the Council confirming that the £0.5Bn value BPF will be frozen in financial year 2024/25, due to budgetary constraints. The letter received, at Appendix B, thanks the Council and partners for work to date, noting there is now “an opportunity to recast bus priority projects within the wider work to be undertaken to deliver on (Transport Scotland’s) vision for the Future of Public Transport”. Funding for the project activity summarised in table 1 is committed for the remainder of this current financial year.

Real Time Passenger Information Screens and BPF ‘Quick Win’ Grant

- 3.6** The availability of Real Time Passenger Information (RTPI) plays a significant role in increasing bus patronage in both urban and rural areas, improving social inclusion, and improving accessibility to employment opportunities and healthcare. In the south east of Scotland, RTPI is available for the main operators, however operators, Local Authorities and SEStran all recognise the need to make real time information available to passengers across the region.
- 3.7** The City of Edinburgh Council, SEStran and contractor, Journeo, are jointly developing a new, common regional RTPI system to improve the information provided on the screens incorporating multiple transport operator (bus, rail & tram) data and scheduled information. This will replace the current RTPI signage and software system, which becomes obsolete on 31st March 2024, with no further software upgrades. Midlothian currently has 44 RTPI sign sites; and several of the old units are no longer functioning.
- 3.8** To upgrade the RTPI signs as quickly as possible, four signs have been replaced as part of a SEStran pilot roll-out, and a further 13 are proposed for upgrade through a Community Bus Fund grant. The BPF ‘Quick Wins’ award of £178,336.80, for 24 RTPI signs (inclusive of installation and maintenance) makes a substantial and time critical improvement to the RTPI network for bus passengers in Midlothian. The purchases, utilising the SEStran Framework, will be completed within 2023/24.

Community Bus Fund

- 3.9** £5 million capital was distributed through the General Capital Grant for distribution to all local authorities on a per capita basis, based on levels of transport poverty to support the fund objective of improving local public transport in areas of rural deprivation. On this basis Midlothian Council was allocated a £101,000 share of the £5m total grant fund.
- 3.10** It is proposed that the £101,000 Community Bus Grant be allocated to the purchase of 13 RTPI signs at a cost of £96,603. The proposed RTPI will be delivered utilising SEStran Framework (CT2119). The contract owner is City of Edinburgh Council and Midlothian Council have direct call off access. The framework delivers 5-year turn-key solution with unit price being inclusive of installation, maintenance, and communications.
- 3.11** The combined CBF, BPF and funded SEStran RTPI works will leave a balance of 3 units to be replaced in future.

Orbital Bus Study, and implications of the freeze on delivery of orbital measures

- 3.12** The award of £302,000 (reported to Council on 21 March 2023) carried out an appraisal study into bus priority measures on four east-west routes in Midlothian. The work was conducted by consultants Aecom and is now complete. The four routes studied are:
- Corridor 1: A6094 Whitecraig to A6094 Eskbank;
 - Corridor 2: B6392 Eskbank to A772 Gilmerton Junction;
 - Corridor 3: A7 Gorebridge to A7 Danderhall; and
 - Corridor 4: A6094 Eskbank to A701 Straiton
- 3.13** The Executive Summary of the Orbital Study provided at Appendix B, provides details of 'Options packages' of appraised measures for each corridor that would help improve bus priority, and in turn, bus journey times. An early costing indicates the delivery of all measures on all four routes of just over £5.6M. This early estimate includes a 44% optimism bias applied to measures involving some construction activity.
- 3.14** Proposed measures that include a construction element are realistically now deliverable in the medium-term (3-7 years), so there is a possibility that developer contributions may provide a source of funding. Nevertheless, officers will continue to liaise closely with Transport Scotland to identify any new prospective funding streams. Officers will also explore opportunities to re-package Midlothian measures as part of wider projects should this lead to their delivery, and benefit for Midlothian passengers.
- 3.15** Appraised measures such as road lining or new signage may instead be deliverable in-house, as part of any future planned road works. In fact, this has already happened at Lothian Street, Bonnyrigg, where new double yellow lines have helped reduce the impact of uncontrolled parking on bus movement.

Future sustainability of bus services in Midlothian

- 3.16** The sustainability of bus services across Midlothian communities remains an ongoing concern for communities, the Council, and bus operators. There is a need to develop a strategic view of existing and new approaches to sustaining local bus services across all settlements, and engagement with bus operators is key to this. Therefore, it is recommended that a study be progressed, with ongoing engagement with bus operators achieved through the continued role of the Midlothian Bus Alliance.

4 Report Implications (Resource, Digital and Risk)

4.1 Resource

The BPF Orbital Study and the purchase of RTPI signs are both fully externally funded through capital grants and therefore the delivery of this infrastructure has no net borrowing requirement to the Council. RTPI infrastructure will be installed by a framework contractor, therefore no additional internal resource is required. Funds to support a study into sustainability of bus services will be met from existing Place resources.

4.2 Digital

The RTPI system is a standalone system, replacing a previous standalone system managed by SEStran. As such there is no crossover with internal digital services.

4.3 Risk

Failure to conduct the RTPI screen upgrades will risk public criticism when current units become obsolete on 31st March 2024.

Lack of future funding sources will impact on the speed of delivery of identified bus priority measures.

4.4 Ensuring Equalities (if required a separate IIA must be completed)

All new RTPI assets offer enhanced clarity and are angled in such a position they can be easily seen by all, including wheelchair users. The Orbital Bus Study reviewed the equalities impact of all proposed packages of measures.

4.5 Additional Report Implications

Appendices

Appendix A – Additional Report Implications

Appendix B – Midlothian Orbital Bus Corridors Study - Executive Summary

Appendix C – Letter from Transport Scotland, 16 January 2024

APPENDIX A – Report Implications

A.1 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

A.2 Key Drivers for Change

Key drivers addressed in this report:

- ☐ Holistic Working
- ☒ Hub and Spoke
- ☐ Modern
- ☒ Sustainable
- ☒ Transformational
- ☒ Preventative
- ☒ Asset-based
- ☐ Continuous Improvement
- ☐ One size fits one
- ☒ None of the above

A.3 Key Delivery Streams

Key delivery streams addressed in this report:

- ☒ One Council Working with you, for you
- ☒ Preventative and Sustainable
- ☐ Efficient and Modern
- ☒ Innovative and Ambitious
- ☒ None of the above

A.4 Delivering Best Value

The report does not directly impact on Delivering Best Value

A.5 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

In summer 2022 and spring 2023, engagement activity was delivered by Aecom, to obtain public and stakeholder feedback on proposed bus priority improvements identified through the bus corridors study. This, and previous reports to Council (21 March 2023) mean there is an awareness of funded activity in the wider public domain.

Key stakeholders within the Midlothian Bus Alliance will be advised of the freeze.

A.6 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

The report does not directly impact on Midlothian Council's performance and outcomes.

A.7 Adopting a Preventative Approach

Not applicable

A.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

Not applicable