

Title: Bus Service Improvement Plan – Additional Customer Experience Staff
Report of: Heather Jones, Head of Transport Customer Experience
Portfolio: Transport

Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to recommend the Chief Executive to approve and sign Grant Funding Agreements (GFAs) with a total value of £750,361.51 for interventions funded by the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).

The total value requested is for additional 'Bus Champions', 'Bus Ambassadors' and Bus Contract Compliance Officers to be employed by Northumberland County Council and Durham County Council.

Recommendations

The Chief Executive is recommended to:

- I. Approve a total of £750,361.51 for the extension from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2028 to fixed term additional staff roles including Bus Champions, Bus Ambassadors and a Bus Contract Compliance Officer who are currently employed by Northumberland County Council and Durham County Council.
- II. Approve completion of the appropriate Grant Funding Agreements.

A. Context

1. Background

- 1.1 In April 2022, following a bid for BSIP funding, a total of £163.5 million was allocated to the North East region by the Department for Transport (DfT).
- 1.2 The BSIP sets out a wide range of significant proposed improvements to every aspect of bus services, which we are delivering through the North East Enhanced Partnership, a formal partnership of the North East Combined Authority, bus operators, local authorities and Nexus.
- 1.3 The total allocation was made up of interventions covering 'Customer Experience', 'Fares and Ticketing', 'Highways and Infrastructure', and 'Network Improvements'. A variety of projects have been created under each of these headline interventions.
- 1.4 The BSIP Programme fund allocations were approved by the Joint Transport Committee in June 2022.
- 1.5 In March 2024, the former Joint Transport Committee approved and allocated the remaining unallocated BSIP revenue funding to several sub-programmes which align to the refreshed BSIP and the Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme. This included an indicative allocation for the Community Bus Partnerships and Additional Staffing sub-programmes of £2.86m of which these roles form part.
- 1.6 On 30 July 2024, the unspent BSIP budget of £60.811 million revenue and £40.468 million capital, was approved at the North East Combined Authority Cabinet and delegated authority was granted to the Chief Executive to enter into the required grant funding agreements to facilitate these interventions.
- 1.7 Of the indicative allocation for Community Bus Partnerships and Additional Staff, an underspend of approximately £1.5 million is expected due to interventions having been delivered at a smaller scale than originally anticipated. Therefore, this amount has been earmarked for a funding swap from the

Bus Reform budget to allow its use beyond 31 March 2026 (beyond the BSIP spending deadline). These roles would be funded from this underspend/funding swap to extend the benefits which are now being realised for a further two years. The roles are essential to deliver the aims and objectives of the BSIP and therefore the wider objectives of the Combined Authority.

- 1.8 Bus Champions will provide community engagement activities to encourage more people to use the bus; Bus Ambassadors will provide additional customer service and information for bus passengers and the Bus Contract Compliance Officer will ensure that tendered bus services are meeting their contractual obligations.
- 1.9 Breakdown of positions being funded:
- Bus Champions/Ambassadors: 2 FTE Northumberland County Council, 4 FTE Durham County Council
 - Bus Contract Compliance Officer: 1 FTE Northumberland County Council
- 1.10 Grant Funding Agreements (GFAs) are being prepared, for agreement with scheme promoters.

B. Impact on North East Combined Authority Objectives

BSIP and its programme of activity supports the strategic aspirations of the North East CA, as detailed in the North East Devolution Deal signed in December 2022 and the Deeper Devolution Deal agreed at the June meeting of the North East CA Cabinet.

The roles will support us to deliver Mission 2 of the North East Combined Authority ('A North East we are proud to call home') by helping to implement the Mayor's Local Transport Plan.

C. Key risks

The main risk of this work is that the roles do not deliver what is expected and required. This would have an impact on the aims and expected benefits of the BSIP.

In order to mitigate this risk, the GFAs will reference the objectives of the roles and the Enhanced Partnership will require Northumberland and Durham County Councils to submit written reports with their quarterly claims, detailing the activities being conducted by each employee and its impact towards BSIP objectives and outputs.

In addition, there will be a regular meeting cycle between North East CA officers and the Bus Champion roles to discuss planned projects and interventions that arise from the community engagement activities and to share best practice.

To retain maximum flexibility, the grant recipients may determine the exact allocation of hours between the three role types, however the core tasks and functions of each of the three defined BSIP roles are specified within the Grant Funding Agreements and must still be met.

If we have concerns that the employees are not being used for the purpose outlined in the job description, we will withhold funding and work with the partner organisation to rectify the issue.

D. Financial and other resources implications

The funding for these staffing interventions is being drawn from the BSIP grant funding, which has already been received by the North East Combined Authority and held for the purpose of delivering the aims and expected benefits of the BSIP (subject to the funding swap outlined in clause 1.7). Approval for allocation of the funding has been given by the North East Joint Transport Committee and the North East CA Cabinet, and the Grant Funding Agreements are in line with these decisions. There are no other financial implications for the North East Combined Authority.

The financial profile for the programme is outlined below:

Funding source - BSIP Revenue	2026-27	2027-28	Total
Durham County Council	£197,347.50	£207,214.88	£404,562.38
Northumberland County Council	£168,682.50	£177,116.63	£345,799.13
Total (£)	£366,030.00	£384,331.51	£750,361.51

These posts are extensions of existing posts and will be funded until 31 March 2028.

E. Legal implications

The comments of the Monitoring Officer have been included in this report.

F. Equalities implications

The North East CA follows the Public Sector Equality duty and this report has due regard to the need to achieve the objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2010. In June 2024 the North East CA adopted equality objectives to reflect the different roles of the Combined Authority as an employer, a commissioner and deliverer of services, and a civic leader.

In relation to this project, the hiring processes for each role are in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

G. Consultation and engagement

No specific consultation was undertaken for these roles however they are aligned with requirements for delivering the BSIP which were reaffirmed by members of the Enhanced Partnership during the BSIP refresh in June 2024. Grant recipients have confirmed that they wish to retain the roles for a further two years.

H. Appendices

None

I. Background papers

The BSIP is available on the North East Combined Authority website [Bus Service Improvement Plan Schemes \(northeast-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/bus-service-improvement-plan-schemes)

National Bus Strategy [bus-service-improvement-plans-guidance-to-local-authorities-and-bus-operators-2024.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/123456/bus-service-improvement-plans-guidance-to-local-authorities-and-bus-operators-2024.pdf)

J. Contact officers

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K. Glossary

BSIP – Bus Service Improvement Plan
GFA – Grant Funding Agreement
LTA – Local Transport Authority
UTMC – Urban Traffic Management Centre

L. Sign-off

1) Cabinet Member: Yes	2) Director/Head of Service: Yes	3) Director of Finance and Investment: Yes	4) Monitoring Officer: Yes
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