

DATE OF DECISION: 23rd June 2023

Officer	Post Designation
Ainsley Williams	Director of Place and Infrastructure

SUBJECT: BUS EMERGENCY FUND – BUS TRANSITION FUND

Purpose: To set out the rationale for accepting the Bus Transition Fund offered by Welsh Government to provide immediate financial support to bus operators in Carmarthenshire and other Local Authorities in the Southwest Wales Region.

DECISION MADE:

To confirm acceptance of the Bus Transition Fund offered by Welsh Government to provide immediate financial support to bus operators in Carmarthenshire and other Local Authorities in the South West Wales Region, on the basis that further dialogue will be required with Welsh Government relating to the impacts.

Signed: A. Williams

Director of: Place & Infrastructure

Reason(s) for decision: The Deputy Minister for Climate Change has written to all local authorities requesting that they provide confirmation by 26th June that revised plans relating to bus services across the region, including Carmarthenshire, have been considered and agreed. The decision is made under general delegated powers due to the time constraints that make it impractical to convene a meeting of the Cabinet.

IMPLICATIONS

Policy, Crime & Disorder and Equalities	Legal	Finance	ICT	Risk Management Issues	Staffing Implications	Physical Assets
NONE	YES	NONE	NONE	YES	NONE	NONE

1. Policy, Crime & Disorder and Equalities

None

2. Legal

An updated formal agreement with bus operators for the Bus Transition Fund is required and will be developed by the Welsh Government and Transport for Wales.

3. Finance

There are no direct revenue funding implications for the Authority as the Welsh Government is meeting the costs of the Bus Transition Fund.

4. ICT

None

5. Risk Management Issues

Should the Authority not accept the funding, there will be a risk of losing bus services.

6. Physical Assets

None

7. Staffing Implications

None

CONSULTATIONS

I confirm that the appropriate consultations have taken in place and the outcomes are as detailed below.

Signed: S.G. Pilliner

Head of Highways and Transportation

1. Scrutiny Committee N/A
2. Local Member(s) N/A
3. Community / Town Council N/A
4. Relevant Partners: Southwest Wales Local Authorities
5. Staff Side Representatives and other Organisations N/A

CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER(S)
AWARE/CONSULTED

Yes

Section 100D Local Government Act, 1972 – Access to Information
List of Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

None

Title of Document	File Ref No.	Locations that the papers are available for public inspection

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Bus Emergency Fund – Bus Transition Fund

The Bus Emergency Scheme (BES) introduced by Welsh Government (WG) during the pandemic to financially support bus operators has been extended until 24th July 2023 to support the recovery of the sector as patronage on the public transport networks has not returned to pre Covid pandemic levels.

The Welsh Government has confirmed it will introduce a Bus Transition Fund (BTF) to extend financial support to bus operators and protect most bus services across Wales.

The Deputy Minister for Climate Change advised Local Authorities via a letter dated 14th June 2023, (Appendix One) that bus operators are required to give 28 days' notice to deregister any service and the Welsh Government needs to ensure that funding relating to routes in Carmarthenshire has been considered and agreed by Council or delegated decision making powers before 26 June 2023.

Work has been undertaken on a regional basis with Transport for Wales and the Bus Operators to develop service options that would align to the Bus Transition Fund allocation for the region. The situation is dynamic and consequently there is risk, as the bus operators can take a commercial view on which services it wishes to continue, where routes are not supported by separate direct revenue subsidy.

The region has reviewed the network and identified a provisional list of services that could be reduced to match the funds available. The provisional list of services are those services that would have the least impact if changed or withdrawn. For Carmarthenshire, the 110 and 111 bus routes from Swansea to Llanelli could be merged and/or modified to operate with a reduced level of Bus Transition funding. Discussions are ongoing with the Bus Operators, Local Authorities and Transport or Wales.

Given the urgent timescale for decision and the need to accept this funding, delegated authority is sought from the Director of Place and Infrastructure on to accept the funding to sustain as many services as possible within the timescale determined by the Deputy Minister.

A further report will be provided for Cabinet to consider as soon as the final position on the revised bus network in Carmarthenshire is known.

Detailed explanatory report also attached:

YES

Report of the Director of Place and Infrastructure 23rd June		
Bus Emergency Fund – Bus Transition Fund		
Head of Service & Designation. S.G. Pilliner Head of Highways and Transport	Directorate Place and Infrastructure	Telephone No. 01267 228150
Author & Designation S.G. Pilliner Head of Highways and Transport	Directorate Place and Infrastructure	Telephone No 01267 228150

1.0 Introduction and Background:

The Welsh Government a Bus emergency Scheme fund to support the public transport sector when the pandemic hit in March 2020. The public were advised not to travel and hence the bus operators' income revenue ceased.

As patronage slowly returned, the Bus Emergency Scheme (BES) has evolved to a second and third iteration and was due to end on 31st March 2023. However, patronage on the public transport network has not returned to pre pandemic levels due to factors such as home working, home shopping, parcel deliveries and the elderly not venturing out as often.

Following further work by Local Authorities, bus operators and partners, additional BES transitional funding was allocated to maintain services in their current form until 30th June 2023.

The scheme was extended further to 24th July 2023 to ensure that pupils and students could use local bus services to attend school until the end of the school year.

The Welsh Government has recently announced that they need to transition away from an emergency style funding and have introduced "The Bus Transition Fund" (BTF) from the 25th of July 2023 until the end of the financial year (31st March 2024). A grant agreement will be provided to local authorities to provide such funding, on terms and conditions that will be shared with local authorities shortly.

Across Wales the Bus Transition Fund is worth £46,000,000 in total for the 2023/2024 financial year. With £4,000,000 allocated to Welsh Government's Traws Cymru Bus Network leaving £42,000,000 for the rest of Wales.

An official settlement has yet to be formally confirmed for the region. However, officers understanding is that:

- There is less funding available than the level of BES required to sustain all services across the region.

- A reconciliation of operator claims against the existing BES funding needs to be concluded.

Transport for Wales have stated in regional meetings that the funding levels required for 22/23 and up to 24th July this year, will be met. Whilst this is the contractual position confirmed in the BES agreement, confirmation is required that the funding is in place. This is essential as in effect, it reduces some of the risk going forward.

Should the above position be confirmed, the level of service reductions required would equate to around **£1.18** million which would affect the current 110/111 services (Llanelli to Swansea). This is subject to bus operator agreement and official Welsh Government confirmation.

Time is of the essence as BES is due to expire and there are legal complications if there is a break between BES and the Bus Transition fund. There are a number of options open to local authorities:

Option 1 - Not accept the level of funding available and renegotiate the funding value.

There are no terms and conditions to the offer yet, the repercussions of not accepting the offer of funding have not been made clear in the Minister's letter. However, if the funding on offer is not accepted then there is a real possibility that most bus services will be unsustainable. Due to the very short timescale, there is no time to negotiate with the Welsh Government, before the end of the BES funding.

Option 2 – Accept the level of funding estimated and continue to lobby WG.

Representatives of Local Authorities and the Region have expressed significant concerns over the level of funding and have written to the Deputy Minister for Climate change (Appendix 2) However there is recognition that there is no realistic alternative option but to accept the funding level determined by the Welsh Government in order to protect the majority of services in the short term. Further discussions will continue with the Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and the bus operators.

2. Recommendation.

Given the level of risk to services if the funding is not accepted, it is recommended that Option 2 be pursued and that the Council accept the level of funding that is now estimated, whilst at the same time continuing to discuss with all parties. This will ensure the protection of most services in the short term.