

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**10 September 2025**

## **Oxford Temporary Congestion Charging Points Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee (“the Committee”) considered a report on the Oxford Temporary Congestion Charge Points at its meeting on 27 August 2025, prior to its consideration by Cabinet on 10 September.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Aron Wisdom, Programme Lead – Central, and Hannah Battye, Head of Place Shaping for attending the meeting and responding to questions.

## SUMMARY

5. Following presentations by two councillors and eight members of the public, the Leader of the Council introduced the report. Councillor Leffman explained the context of the policy, namely the impact of the Botley Road closure on the Council's bus gate plans, and the urgent need for interim measures to improve bus journey times. Whilst noting that in consultation the majority of responses were in opposition, there was greater support from city residents and young people. Importantly, the Citizens Assembly on transport had concluded that congestion charging was necessary. The Leader noted that the scheme was not a permanent solution and would be reviewed.
6. In a wide-ranging discussion of approximately two hours the Committee examined the proposals from many angles, including the timing and duration of consultation, the financial aspects of the proposals, the likelihood of achieving modal shift and ways to improve bus usage, the impacts on key workers of the proposals, public health impacts, vulnerable groups and mitigations, the user-friendliness of the scheme design, and particular focus on issues around park and ride capacity.
7. The Committee makes eight recommendations and one more general observation. These pertain to the Council's data and monitoring, exemptions from the scheme and areas for investment of income generated, system and process improvements, and other supporting works.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATION

### Data and Monitoring

8. A key area of feedback from a number of public speakers related to the impact on businesses of the congestion charge, particularly around the commercially crucial Christmas period. One of the key mitigations proposed is to make the bus element of the park and ride free of charge over the months of November and December, with the park and rides continuing to play a core role in reducing car journeys within the city beyond that time. During discussions, however, the Committee queried what levels of capacity the park and rides had, and whilst they were provided with averages which demonstrated significant capacity, details of peak capacity were not known.
9. This peak capacity data point is potentially important. If every November and December park and ride usage sits at near capacity already, there is very little surplus to increase usage. Furthermore, the benefits of investing £1m to make bus fares free would be limited in terms of the number of additional people travelling into the City by bus rather than by car. Equally, if there are peaks at other points where capacity for additional use of the park and rides is limited, this may inform the Council's future plans.
10. Without this data the Committee cannot advise on what the conclusions drawn from this data should be. However, it is Committee's view that this is something

the Cabinet should be looking at as part of its decision on whether to adopt the proposals or not.

**Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet gives specific consideration to historic peak capacity levels data at the Park and Rides and whether there are any negative implications on plans to reduce car journeys within the city by increasing park and ride usage**

11. Another aspect of public concern was transparency and timely reporting over the impacts of the proposals, a concern shared by the Committee. The details of the proposals contain a monitoring plan, which undertakes that 'data on the scheme's impacts will be published every month where possible, and as often as possible for data that is updated less frequently'.
12. The Committee is of the view that monthly reporting is far too ponderous for a project only lasting ten months, and especially when its most significant financial investment – pre-Christmas park and ride reductions – will only last two. If projections on park and ride usage were to fall short or be vastly inflated on the park and ride scheme, a monthly report would mean that the issues would only be reported on half way through the pre-Christmas free bus period and would provide little opportunity to adapt the project as necessary. The Committee recognises that there are some data points which will only be taken periodically, but it is of the view that a period of a month should be the maximum wait for the data on the scheme's impact to be published and not the minimum. The goal should be to publish relevant data as close to real-time as possible.

**Recommendation 2: That the Council publishes and updates its monitoring data online as closely to real-time as possible, and no less than once a month from the commencement of the congestion charge.**

Exemptions and Income Re-investments

13. The Committee welcomes the proposed exemption from congestion charges for those with responsibility for SEND children and the recognition that those with responsibility for SEND children can often be significantly more reliant on cars to access education than those without SEND children. Parents and carers of SEND children would, therefore, be disproportionately impacted by charges above the allowed number of passes without this exemption.
14. The concern of the Committee is that the wording of the exemption is not broad enough and will leave many parents or carers of SEND pupils facing a disproportionately negative impact. The reason for this is that to be categorised as a SEND pupil it is necessary to be assessed and confirmed via an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) that a pupil requires additional support. However, the process for assessments is rarely quick; the statutory deadline is 6 weeks to make a decision on the need for an assessment and 20 weeks to undertake the actual assessment. Nationally, 46.4% of assessments

are completed within that timeframe,<sup>1</sup> and the Council has reported a 28% completion rate within 20 weeks.<sup>2</sup>

15. It is perfectly plausible, therefore, that a parent may have a child with SEND, demonstrating all the behaviours related to it, but even if they were to seek an assessment today they may not receive an assessment until the congestion charge scheme ends. The Committee seeks, therefore, that parents of children who have been referred for an EHCP but are waiting for the assessment to take place or are awaiting the results of an assessment which has already been undertaken are also exempted from the congestion charge. The Committee appreciates that not all children assessed will be diagnosed as having a form of SEND, but it is of the view that the benefit of supporting those parents with SEND children outweighs this concern.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council provides congestion charge exemptions for those Oxfordshire parents with children referred for but awaiting EHCP assessments and/or results**

16. Based on the congestion charge being in place for 10 months and a £5 levy on non-exempt vehicles, the estimated net income of the scheme is £3.2m. Supporting usage of park and ride services over the months of November and December by making the bus element free is expected to cost £1m. The exact usage of the remaining £2.2m remains unallocated, though it is recognised that it must be used by law for transport schemes.
17. The Committee does not support the idea of using income to continue to reduce park and ride costs and considers that there are two key groups whose needs should be prioritised in allocating this funding: those in deprived areas of Oxford, and those living in rural areas.
18. If one of the aims of the wider suite of measures around the congestion charge is to deliver modal shift from cars to other forms of transport within the city, then consideration must be given to the cost of bus tickets. Bus fares are capped at £3, and two £3 tickets outweigh the cost of the congestion charge. Admittedly, this does not factor in parking, petrol or vehicle depreciation but nevertheless, the relative cost of bus tickets to the congestion charge provides little financial incentive for modal shift where there are multiple travellers, and arguably disincentivises the shift from car usage.
19. A single parent with one car in the household whose family drives through the congestion charge areas to visit a place of worship once a week and participates in youth activities once a week also will use virtually all their passes just on those activities. Given that Oxford has one area ranking in the 10% most deprived areas in the country according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, and a further five within the top 20%,<sup>3</sup> incurring additional costs on people in those areas where there is often little viable alternative is considered to be disproportionate. As such, targeted support for lower-income

---

<sup>1</sup> [Education, health and care plans, Reporting year 2025 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>2</sup> [CA170625R11 Annex Aii - Performance - March 2025.pdf](#) – OCC 07.08

<sup>3</sup> [Bitesize 10 most deprived wards](#)

residents should be an important consideration in how net income is reinvested.

20. Of similar concern are the needs of those in rural areas. Whilst the Committee supports the proposal to make bus travel from park and rides free for a period, that period is limited. Furthermore, whilst it achieves its primary objective – to reduce congestion – it does so in a way which is not particularly effective at reducing the number of motor vehicle miles driven. Fewer car journeys are undertaken and fewer miles driven if people avoid driving and take buses from outside Oxford into Oxford, than if they drive to the park and ride and then take the bus in from there. Enabling modal shift is very location specific across the county, but for rural areas more regular services, quicker buses, support to get to major bus routes, improved access to non-Oxford locations, and better facilities to support multi-modal transport (for instance, cycling to a bus stop) are all important areas.
21. The Committee does not wish to set a specific figure on how much should be spent on these areas, but it does seek that Cabinet will actively consider what a suitable percentage would be, and commit to supporting those priorities with proportionate levels of investment.

**Recommendation 4: That the Council commits to dedicating a proportionate percentage of income to supporting services in deprived and rural areas**

22. Whilst the importance of improving the desirability and functionality of bus travel is clear, it is not the only channel to support modal shift towards bus usage. In some cases, public awareness of what already exists may be lacking, meaning behaviour is predicated on incorrect perceptions rather than reality. The Committee is keen that the flexibilities and helpful functions around bus services are promoted: online bus tracking, buses from the park and rides to hospitals, different ticketing options, and route planning tools. The more members of the public are able to achieve a better experience from using buses, the more likely they are to continue using them. The Committee is of the view that there is space to maximise the contribution of existing services and structures, as well as seeking to undertake new initiatives and it hopes that the Council will invest in realising this.

**Recommendation 5: That the Council invests in increased education around the flexibilities in the existing bus network**

Systems and Processes

23. The resident pass system is one of the key means by which the proposals balance the need to reduce congestion within Oxford whilst at the same time not unduly impinging on the ability of residents to travel within Oxford when necessary. The process of accessing passes to residents is therefore also critical, and it is with disappointment that the Committee was informed that the intention is to use the same IT system the Council uses for its parking permits. The parking permit system is the source of many public complaints to

Members, particularly in Oxford, with the feedback being that it is poorly designed and deeply un-user friendly even for those who are highly computer literate. Given that the pool of residents who are likely to need passes exceeds those needing parking permits, extending use of an already-unpopular system seems unwise. The resident pass system exists to make residents' lives easier by giving them some unrestricted access around Oxford; the Committee fears that if the Council uses the parking permits IT system, then the process of obtaining those passes will introduce a significant new form of frustration instead. It is suggested that an alternative solution is found, even if there is a cost associated with it.

**Recommendation 6: That the Cabinet does not extend the IT system used for parking permits to the resident pass system and finds a more user-friendly alternative instead.**

24. An aspect of flexibility built into the proposals is the flexibility for the police to be able to 'direct the local highway authority to suspend the congestion charging points in severe emergency situations'. This is a similar power to that held by the police to suspend the zero emissions zone restrictions in emergencies. Whilst the Committee supports this power, its application has not always been as quick as an emergency situation would demand. For instance, it took approximately 48 hours for the bus gates on the High Street to be suspended when Abingdon Road flooded in late 2024. If the power is there to manage emergency situations, it is vital that it can be deployed quickly if it is to be truly useful. The Committee asks that the Council works with the police to enable faster deployment in emergency situations.

**Recommendation 7: That the Council improves the time it takes to enable the police to suspend congestion charges in case of emergency**

#### Other Supporting Works

25. There are a number of smaller schemes within the proposals which are currently being progressed. A number of these smaller schemes relate to school-related traffic, such as the school streets initiative, and seeking to support schools to organise pick-ups from park and rides. Given that by the time Cabinet meets to consider the congestion charge proposals schools will have reconvened after the summer, the Committee is keen to see these schemes up and running as early as possible to maximise the potential impact.

**Recommendation 8: That the Council expedites the delivery of its 'smaller schemes' with additional resource, particularly those which relate to schools.**

## Observation

26. It has been referenced above already, but it is Committee's view that a key way to reduce the traffic in Oxford is to enable people to access the services they are looking for more locally. The Council has recently agreed a motion around banking hubs seeking to safeguard access to banking facilities within local communities. It is similarly making investments in the market towns across the county to make them more attractive and functional destinations for local residents. It is important that this recognition of the need to promote genuine choice for residents is maintained in Council policy with ongoing investment in market towns and other localised service centres across the county, and that doing so creates a win-win for Oxford and the rest of the county.

**Observation: That continuing to focus on developing greater choice of destinations and promoting the facilities of non-Oxford destinations is a positive for the City and the rest of the county.**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

27. The Committee has requested that a performance monitoring report on the proposed Congestion Charge comes to its April meeting in the event that the Cabinet approves the scheme.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

28. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them, the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
29. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex:	Pro-forma Response Template
Background papers:	None
Other Documents:	None
Contact Officer:	Tom Hudson Scrutiny Manager <a href="mailto:tom.hudson@oxfordshire.gov.uk">tom.hudson@oxfordshire.gov.uk</a> Tel: 07791 494285

September 2025