

PERFORMANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

05 December 2025

Digital Parking Permits Review

Report by Paul Farmer, Director of Highways and Environment

RECOMMENDATION

The Performance & Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

NOTE the plan from Officers to extend the existing parking permit software, recognising some improvements have and will continue to be made.

RECOMMENDED to consider the report and raise any questions, and to **AGREE** any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet.

Background

1. Digital parking permits have been operational in Oxfordshire since November 2022 and digital parking permits for visitors have been operational since December 2024.
2. The procurement of the system was carried out via a competitive tender process where 19 expressions of interest were received and a single bid received, which was subject to full and comprehensive evaluation. The procurement was weighed 58% quality, 30% cost and 12% on societal benefit. The evaluation also included a demonstration of the Unity 5 system to ensure it was able to deliver on the specific requirements for Oxfordshire.
3. The move to a digital approach is supportive of the County Councils commitments set out in its 'Digital, Data and Technology Overview 2025 – 2028' to have a 'digital first customer offer' and to ensure digital filing of records and data. Where digital is not an option for some residents, by exception, paper 'scratch card' permits are still offered.
4. The contract with Unity 5 to provide a digital parking permits solution is also used to deliver the traffic filter trial and subsequently congestion charge permits, Unity 5 were the only bidder capable of providing a suitable system for traffic filter trials. The current contract runs until May 2026 with the ability to extend for up to 2 more years, extensions are at the discretion of the council.
5. Unity 5 are considered mature player in this sector providing parking permit software for several other authorities in the UK. The difference which is believed to be creating the issues for Oxfordshire which isn't seen elsewhere,

is the complexity of the scheme itself.

6. Whilst the permit scheme could be simpler on the ground for residents, visitors and businesses would lose benefits. Our scheme recognises not only the different users we need to cater for, but also that different areas have different needs.

Data for parking permits appeals

7. The September committee requested data be provided showing parking appeals related to permit parking. Data from December 2024 to September 2025 is provided below.

Total number of on-street PCNs issued	50,130
Total number of PCNs issued in residents bays	13,034
Total number of PCNs issued in shared use bays (limited waiting and permits)	6,064
Total number of PCNs cancelled in Shared use bays (all reasons)	701
Total number of PCNs cancelled residents bays (all reasons)	2,044
Total number of PCNs cancelled as recorded Visitor Permit issues (paper and digital)	257
Total number of Visitor Permits activated	74,639

8. The data suggests c. 26% of all penalty charge notices (PCN's) were issued in CPZ areas, and 12% of all PCN's were issued in relation to contravention of conditions of shared bays specifically (though please note this does include pay and display bays also).
9. Current reporting tools do not allow for a detailed quantitative assessment of reasons PCN's were issued in relation to parking permits as specific reason is given via 'free text'. However, qualitative assessment through discussions with parking officers suggests a significant proportion of PCN's are issued due to overstaying the 2-hour window without a valid permit, a small minority of PCN's are issued due to incorrect dates being put on visitor permits or incorrect vehicle registrations being used.

Software Considerations and updates on improvements

10. At the September committee residents experiences of using the software were discussed. There are c. 124,000 users of the system with several placing calls with the customer service centre with queries on how to operate the system. The key issues being reported as of September 2025 were related to:
 - a. Getting stuck in a 'loop' after using the single sign on function
 - b. Slow speeds when loading pages on the system
 - c. Difficulty in loading documents and submitting payment

- d. Not receiving reminders that permits are due to expire
11. Of the above issues, the single sign on function and accessing the system are controlled by Oxfordshire County Council.
12. Based on this feedback the county council has worked closely with Unity 5 to deliver a series of system and experience upgrades, seeking to improve user experience (UX) and 'flow' of customer journey.
13. Key improvements tested and delivered between September 2025 and December 2025 include:
- a. The implementation of a new 'single sign on' function where users now only need to log in once to access the Unity 5 system via the Oxfordshire County Council website (previously two separate sign on's were required). This implementation has removed the 'loop' experienced by residents when trying to access the system. This now means as long as a resident has a log in for the Oxfordshire County Council website (for any service, not limited to parking) then they will now automatically be logged into the Unity 5 system.
 - b. As discussed at the September committee, the speed of the website was compromised by the number of parking permits which were available to residents. Officers have supported Unity 5 to deliver an overhaul as to how the Unity 5 system accesses/ loads permits. This has reduced the time taken to significantly, with system pages now loading in line with the loading of a typical webpage.
- A review of permit types was undertaken as part of this exercise by officers however in order to provide an 'inclusive' experience where permits are designed to meet the varying needs of Oxfordshire residents it was determined a reduction in the variety/ duration lengths of permits would reduce flexibility currently afforded to residents.
- c. Considering resident feedback on areas of challenge using the Unity 5 system an Oxfordshire County Council customer service led UX overview has been carried out with wording changes made/ additional text added to address areas of concern. In addition to this written and video-based user guides are being developed to act as an extra support to those who are using the system and may be unsure, providing a step-by-step guide to enable users to independently operate the system.
14. As part of the investigation for this scrutiny paper it can be confirmed for all permit types (with the exception for individual visitor permits) emails are sent to account holders advising them their permits are due to expire. Emails to advise when an individual use of a visitor permit are not sent as the number of emails could be overwhelming for users. When a visitor permit is enabled, users are explicitly told of the start time/ date and end time/ date and that all

visitor permits are valid for 24 hours only.

15. Other improvements have included the simplification of system pages to only allow users to only see permit types directly applicable to them and the reordering of the county council public webpages to ensure areas of the process which receive the most questions/ most common types of permits applied for are more clearly located.
16. Officers are in continual dialogue with Unity 5 to seek out further UX and system enhancements to improve resident experience. However, as discussed at the September committee, any radically different user experience would require the procurement of a new system.
17. Officers have explored the idea of integrating the Unity 5 system into the councils GOSS platform to create an 'OCC style' front end to the permit system. However, it was found to do so would significantly increase the risk of processing error and the need to manually post data, adding unnecessary risk into an already complex process.

Digital Inclusivity

18. The parking permit system supports the council's commitment to a digital first approach to customer interactions. Similarly, by adopting a digital approach the efficiency of how parking contraventions are managed is improved, reducing the number of incorrectly issued PCN's and allowing officers to provide greater levels of enforcement over a larger geographic area, ensuring value for money for the council.
19. To ensure inclusivity, support on how to apply for a parking permit can also be provided through contacting the council's customer service team and through staff at the county's libraries. Where digital is not an option for some residents, by exception, paper 'scratch card' permits are still offered.
20. To support residents applying for temporary congestion charge permits a series of 'drop in' sessions in community settings are being delivered. These sessions have been extended to also ensure those facing challenges applying for other parking permits can also speak to and be guided by a council officer in successfully applying for permits.

Protection of two-hour bays for short visits

21. The September committee discussed difficulties experienced by carers in using the system. For carers across Oxfordshire whose organisations are registered with Oxfordshire County Council a free permit which allows them to park for up to 3 hours in any of the Oxford City permit zones. If evidence of care provision can be provided by unregistered carers e.g. demonstrate they are in receipt of carers allowance or a supporting letter from GP, the free carers parking permit will also be issued. Please note for carers working for a registered organisation permits will cover all CPZ's, for unregistered carers the

permit will be specific to a CPZ.

22. The committee also raised queries around the use of contractor parking permits for those who need to visit a permit zone to carry out work, it was felt the council's minimum offering of a weeklong pass was not appropriate for a single short visit to carry out work. Whilst in most cases the 2-hour free pass is sufficient to carry out work, a single day contractor pass will be introduced from April 2026, to cater for these instances. A fee will be levied to cover the cost of administering the permit, whilst the cost of this permit may be passed to the customer, a visitor pass could also be used to avoid the cost.
23. For visitors, once the visitor arrives at a property a visitors permit should be promptly issued, however it should be noted, in many cases a 2-hour grace period is automatically applied as many bays allow for a 2-hour window for parking without a permit. Visitor permits can also be set up in advance. For shared use bays a minimum observation period before a PCN can be issued is 10 minutes and for resident only bays the observation period is 5 minutes, this allows time for visitor permits to be registered. The only permit zones not to offer 2-hour windows are those where short-term parking is at a premium and would be subject to abuse e.g. near hospitals.
24. It should be noted the move to a digital solution also helps protect two-hour bays. The digital solution allows for a targeted approach to enforcement to be taken with enforcement officers being able to scan vehicle registration numbers whilst on a motorcycle and targeting those which are in breach of their permit conditions rather than individual inspections. This allows enforcement officers to be dispatched to enforce genuine contraventions. This approach frees capacity allowing enforcement checks to be made on a more frequent basis.

Contractual arrangements

25. The contract with Unity 5 to provide parking permit software expires in May 2026 with the option to extend the contract for a further 2 years in either annual increments or a 2-year block to April 2028. The extension is at the discretion of the council and decision delegated to the Director for Environment and Highways.
26. It is considered that the timelines for a reprocurement exercise is anticipated to be a 12-month process. This timescale includes allowance for specification to be finalised, a competitive procurement exercise to be completed (deemed necessary given the specific complexities of the temporary congestion charge/future traffic filters trial requirements) and the testing, implementation and migration of permit data. These timescales are based on the assumption a permit system capable of managing a range of permit types (including Traffic Filters) is available on the market as an existing product (any product needing development is likely to extend this period), noting as of 2025 only Unity 5 were capable of offering this type of system.

27. Taking an approach of not extending the current contract and looking to procure a new system at this time, given the implications for the temporary congestion charge and traffic filters trial in particular, would bring create further public frustration. With the demonstrable commitment from both county council officers and Unity 5 to the delivery of improvements to the system it is considered that the best approach is to extend the existing contract by 2 years and to continue to make improvements.
28. The county council is set to reprocure the majority of its civil enforcement operations, including its 'back end' enforcement system in 2026, with the new contracts being operational in Q2 2026/2027. For both operational and resource reasons, it is preferable for a replacement permit system to be procured following this.

Financial Implications

29. The Unity5 permit system contract is funded through revenue into the Parking Account. Further extensions to the contract will continue to be funded via the Parking Account thus placing no additional revenue pressures on the County Council's budget.

Comments checked by:

Filipp Skiffins, Asst. Finance Business Partner (Finance)

Legal Implications

30. The proposed extension is permissible under clause 2.2 of the terms of the Contract. The extension is also permissible under the Public Contract Regulations 2015 ("PCR 2015"), provided that no material variations to the terms of the original contract are being contemplated. On the same basis, there should be no subsidy control implications of the proposed extension.

Comments checked by:

Busola Akande, Contract Solicitor (Legal)

Staff Implications

31. No staffing implications have been identified through the recommendations in this paper.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

32.No Equality and Inclusion implications have been identified through the recommendations in this paper.

Sustainability Implications

33.No sustainability implications have been identified through the recommendations in this paper.

Risk Management

34.Failure to award an extension to the Unity5 contract will result in risk to the Oxford Temporary Congestion Charge and Traffic Filters Trial as no other bidders came forward to provide a permitting solution capable of managing these types of restrictions.

Paul Fermer
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