

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

27 January 2026

Parking Permits

Report of Performance and Corporate Services 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 Performance and Corporate Services 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 Performance and Corporate Services 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 Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Parking Permit system at its meeting on 05 December 2025.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment & Highways, and Phil Whitfield, Head of Network Management, for attending the meeting and responding to questions.

SUMMARY

5. The Cabinet Member opened the discussion, noting that the committee had previously received a verbal update in September 2025 and was now returning for a more substantive discussion. He explained that main parking permits had been digital for three years, with the visitor parking permit system moving online the previous December.
6. The Director of Environment & Highways and Head of Network Management elucidated further, highlighting that the report addressed all previously raised concerns, particularly the proposal to extend the current contract by two years. This extension would allow time for due diligence and a thorough procurement process for a new system. Improvements had already been made to the system based on committee and user feedback, focusing on user-friendliness and efficiency. Ongoing discussions aimed to review and challenge the system's performance, ensuring it met expectations for the remainder of the contract. Both officers stressed the importance of continuous improvement and responsiveness to user concerns.
7. The Committee's questioning was extensive, covering issues including the layout and usability of the permit website, the capabilities of the IT system, priorities for future procurement and whether to extend the contract and – if so - for how long, the challenges of GDPR in relation to supporting residents to help with local parking enforcement, and the different reasons for PCNs (Parking Charge Notices).
8. The Committee makes seven recommendations and a broader observation, which relate to its views on the forthcoming procurement for a new system, and a series of broader suggestions as to how the parking permit system might be improved.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATION

Procurement for the New System

9. It is worth making clear from the outset that the Committee is highly critical of the current online parking permit system, and that their dissatisfaction is mirrored by residents. Listening to resident complaints and frustrations arising from this system takes up a disproportionate amount of councillor time, particularly for those who represent divisions in the city. Across the two meetings where this issue has been considered, members have highlighted the following criticisms:
 - Unintuitive and confusing, to the point that IT savvy people struggled to navigate the 'terrible' system
 - Inefficient in that significant extra support is needed to help residents navigate
 - Text-heavy

This list is not exhaustive, and merely represents comments made by members in providing scrutiny to the broader parking permit system.

10. As detailed above, the Committee was informed of the Council's intention to extend the current contract by two years, which would allow time for due diligence and a thorough procurement process for a new system. The Committee appreciates that there are multiple elements to this system, which contribute to its challenging mechanics for end users. The complexity of the Council's permit system is a policy issue which manifests itself in more complex programming. The system relies on different providers for the front back end, and the two require integration in order to work seamlessly together. Simply changing the back-end provider, therefore, is not a complete solution although it does open up more options for finding solutions. Equally, it notes that changes are being made to the current system to address some of the most pressing issues, but as the report says, 'any radically different user experience would require the reprocurement of a new system'.
11. Overall, the Committee is of the view that the Council's current level of performance in delivering a permit system is sufficiently poor, creating significant angst and frustration amongst residents, that the contract should not be extended for two years but, as the Council has the option to do, to prioritise and expedite the making of improvements to the system and only extend for a single year. An additional year would take the contract end date to May 2027, which is feasible with a 12-month procurement period.

Recommendation 1: That the Council recognises the urgent need for improvements in the online parking permit system, and extends the current contract by only one year

12. As mentioned in the preceding section, certain members are all too well aware of the frustrations experienced by residents with the current system, and know which issues should be a priority for the Council to address. The Council should make use this knowledge at an early stage of the procurement process to enable it to identify the issues, understand their causes, and to incorporate solutions into the design specification which will go out to tender. The Committee seeks that it does so.

Recommendation 2: That as part of the early scoping process for the procurement, the Council involves members in reviewing the current system to identify, understand and design-out current flaws

13. In discussion during Committee, the following point was met with support from officers and the Cabinet member, so it is hoped that the wider Cabinet will also be supportive.
14. The conclusion of the Committee is that the existing system has not delivered satisfactorily for residents, and that it is imperative that a better system be implemented. Part of delivering that, lies in what the Council decides are its priorities, and how those priorities are weighted in assessing the suitability of

different tenders. The previous tender had a weighting of 58% quality, 30% cost and 12% on societal benefit.

15. Notwithstanding that quality formed the primary weighting in the original contract, what has been delivered has not been good enough. To see an improvement, either the Committee would like to see a further rebalancing away from price considerations and towards having a good system that will work for residents, and/or for the Council to review the criteria by which it judges quality so that the score more accurately reflects the end user experience.

Recommendation 3: That the Council prioritises quality and functionality over price in its weighting for the procurement of the new online parking permit system and/or reviews the measures it uses to adjudicate quality to make them more reflective of end user experience.

16. One learning point arising from the issues experienced with the parking permit system is that for policy and the technical solutions to implement that policy must be aligned.
17. Explaining why Oxfordshire faced more problems than other authorities with the same service provider, the report to the Committee pinpointed the problem as one of complexity. 'The difference which is believed to be creating the issues for Oxfordshire which isn't seen elsewhere, is the complexity of the scheme itself.' This level of complexity, however, is recognised to be a policy position: '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.' The problems experienced illustrate what happens when technology is put to use in implementing a policy for which its architecture is not well suited.
18. The Committee is keen that Cabinet recognises the importance of having policy positions inform technical requirements in the forthcoming tender, but equally understanding the perils of trying to implement a policy for which its technology is not well suited. To that end, and in view of the Committee's preference for a faster procurement, the Committee also recommends that the Council undertake a review of its CPZ (Controlled Parking Zone) and wider parking policy as a matter of urgency.

Observation 1: It is vital to recognise that technological requirements and capability, and Council policy, must inform one another, and that failure to align the two can render functional technology sub-optimal.

Recommendation 4: That the Council reviews its CPZ and parking strategy urgently, to allow it to inform the Council's technological requirements

Broader Improvements

19. One consequence highlighted by members of the Committee of the move from a paper to an online permit system was that residents are no longer able to tell whether a car is parked with a valid permit. This means they are reliant on the activity and schedule of enforcement officers, and cannot proactively report cars parking in areas they are not allowed to. This is an issue of frustration to some residents, yet the Committee's exploration of possible avenues to address it consistently ran a similar challenge: the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), which preclude the public from having general access to the data being held by the Council.
20. The Committee clearly does not wish to ask the Cabinet to contravene the requirements of GDPR, meaning it will not be possible for residents to regain fully their level of access under the paper-based permit system. However, one idea which had some promise, being far more restricted in access and targeted towards the Council's reason for holding permit-related data, was the creation of a small number of suitably trained 'super-users,' residents able to access the Council's systems and check the validity of a particular vehicle's permit.
21. GDPR is a complex area of legislation, and the Committee was unable to explore the viability of developing such 'super users' at its meeting. It does, however, recognise that residents are no longer able to support the Council in enforcing parking regulations, which is to the detriment of both. The Committee would like to see some action taken to re-empower residents, and asks that the Cabinet agree to investigate whether, and how, the Committee's suggestion might be implemented.

Recommendation 5: That the Cabinet investigates the viability of enabling trained 'super-users' to check the permit status of a particular car and report it to the Council without violating GDPR

22. During discussion at the September and December committees issues around how individuals are informed that their permits are expiring were explored. Having been assured in the report submitted to the Committee that 'emails are sent to account holders advising them their permits are due to expire' members queried whether those without e mail were written to instead. This question could not be answered immediately at Committee. If, on investigation, the Council finds that it does not write to those without e mails as a matter of course, then on equality grounds the Committee recommends that the Council do so.

Recommendation 6: That the Council, if it does not already do so, adopts a policy of writing to non-visitor permit users who do not have e mails to warn them when their permits are shortly to expire.

23. A further query explored was the degree to which GPs were aware of their responsibilities in helping unregistered carers access relevant parking permits. Whilst members were assured that carers were advised that it was sometimes necessary to secure a letter from the GP and that such letters were submitted on a regular basis, the overall level of awareness was not known. The Committee considers it to be a small investment in time and effort to raise

awareness around this with GPs, and one which could be of significant help to a cohort of people who require it. As such, the Committee requests of Cabinet that it do so.

Recommendation 7: That the Council works to raise awareness amongst GPs about their role in supporting unregistered carers access parking permits

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

24. Having heard a verbal update at its September meeting, and been provided a report at its December meeting, the Committee does not anticipate that this issue will be considered again during the current civic year. It may, however, wish to do so in the following year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

25. 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.
26. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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