Transport and Environment Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 28 January 2021

Modernising Parking Permits

Executive/routine	**Executive**
Wards	**All**
Council Commitments	18, 19

1. Recommendations

1.1 Transport and Environment Committee is asked to approve:

    1.1.1 proposed changes from the current paper-based system to an electronic permit system for residents' parking permits and for retail, business and trades parking permits;

    1.1.2 proposed changes from the current paper-based system to an electronic permit system for visitor parking permits and the use of the existing RingGo payment system for these permits; and

    1.1.3 starting the necessary Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) procedures to make these changes to existing permits.

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Report

Modernising Parking Permits

2. Executive Summary

2.1 This report seeks approval to make changes to the way in which many of the Council's parking permits are issued, switching from a paper-based system to a system of electronic permits. This change will enable the Council to offer an enhanced service to residents, businesses and visitors, whilst reducing our reliance on physical permits as proof of entitlement to park.

2.2 The report also recommends changes to the way in which visitor permits operate, offering improved flexibility for users. This approach builds on the success of the existing RingGo system, which continues to attract new users to online services.

3. Background

3.1 Residents' parking permits have been issued in paper format since the Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ) was introduced in the early 1970's. Parking Attendants are now able to identify vehicles with valid permits using hand-held computers whilst they are on-street. This allows the Council to remove paper permits and improve the service offered to our residents.

3.2 This approach has been successfully trialled for motorcycle permits and, in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, all residents' permits issued since March 2020 have been "electronic" in nature.

3.3 Business, retail and trades parking permits were introduced between 2006 and 2012 and have always been issued in paper form. As these permits utilise the same permit software and stationery as resident permits, they can also benefit from a move to electronic permits.

3.4 Visitor parking permits were first introduced into the extended zones of the CPZ in September 2006. The format that was adopted mirrored standard practice at that time, where the permits were in paper form and required the user to scratch off the relevant panels to indicate when they wanted to park. Like resident permits, technology has now reached a point where additional benefits and improved flexibility for both residents and their visitors can be delivered via an electronic system.

3.5   The recently made traffic order for the Parking Action Plan already includes provisions to facilitate a move towards electronic permits.

4.   Main report

4.1   The electronic parking permit system aims to expand service delivery options by providing digital contact channels for customers to apply for and renew parking permits.

4.2   Electronic permits help to deliver a greener and more efficient service for the Council and its customers and will contribute towards achieving carbon reductions.

4.3   The move to electronic permits is also in keeping with the push towards online services across the wider Council and supports requests from customers to move towards electronic permits.

Residents' Permits

4.4   Since the Covid-19 lockdown began the Council suppliers have been unable to print and post resident permits so focus has shifted to the use of electronic permits. This has proven effective, with few complaints raised by residents and enforcement working well over the period. Moving to a paperless system on a permanent basis offers the following benefits to customers and the Council:

4.4.1   electronic permits reduce the requirement to print and post permits, helping to reduce their environmental impact;

4.4.2   electronic permits are available immediately and there is no need for residents or their visitors to remember to display a permit;

4.4.3   improved flexibility for residents with changing circumstances, such as making it easier to update to a new vehicle, as well as removing the need to return any unused permits for a refund; and

4.4.3   significant stationery, printing and postage cost savings for the Council.

4.5   The NSL Apply system, which is currently used to administer parking permits, allows for the continuation of merged permits for residents, where two vehicles can be registered to a single parking permit. Rather than swapping a single physical parking permit between the two registered vehicles, as currently happens with paper permits, residents would be able to update which vehicle was using the permit via the online permit portal. Some additional communications and engagement with customers may be required in advance of any formal change.

4.6   However, the NSL Apply system is unable to support electronic daily residents' parking permits, which will be withdrawn if the Council moves to an electronic permit system. The withdrawal of daily residents' parking permits was approved by the Transport and Environment Committee in June 2016 and these permits have been removed from the traffic order. The introduction of Visitor permits into the central and peripheral zones should lessen any negative impacts of the removal of daily permits.

4.7   It is recommended that the Council moves to an electronic system for residents' parking permits, with the current permit approach continuing in the interim before the formal move to virtual permits.

Business, Retail and Trades Permits

4.8   Due to the relatively small volume of permits, the Council's enforcement contractor has managed to continue to print and post business, retail and trades parking permits to customers throughout the lockdown period using resources from the local contract team in Edinburgh.

4.9   However, due to the similarities in how these permits are administered, a move to electronic permits for these permit types would realise the same benefits for both customers and the Council as outlined for resident parking permits in paragraph 4.4. of this report.

4.10   There are some additional complexities with the business, retail and trades permits due to the higher number of vehicles that can be registered to a single merged permit. Whilst these permits can be managed electronically, some additional communications and engagement with customers may be required in advance of any formal change.

4.11   It is recommended that the Council moves to an electronic system for business, retail and trades parking permits.

Visitor Permits

4.12   Visitor parking permits are currently administered through an online permit system provided through the Council's parking contract with NSL and are being widely used across existing Extended Controlled Parking Zones and Priority Parking Areas. Visitor permits are also currently being introduced to the central and peripheral permit zones as part of the recently made traffic order for the Parking Action Plan.

4.13   However, it is recognised that the current visitor permit system is antiquated and that there are other more customer friendly and efficient options available. Disbenefits of the current paper-based visitor parking permit system include:

4.13.1   residents are required to scratch out boxes to show the time (hour and minutes), day, date, month and year. This process can cause confusion and is prone to error, especially with multiple permits, often leading to errors and enforcement problems;

4.13.2   the current system is inefficient, requiring the Council to post out the required number of time limited permit books and for the customer to return any books of expired and unused permits in order to receive a refund, placing an unnecessary burden on both residents and the Council; and

4.13.3   there is a significant cost to the Council for visitor permit stationery as well as the printing and postage costs of visitor permits and associated staff time.

New Visitor Permit system

4.14 To seek improvements to the current paper-based system the Council engaged with NSL to determine what current suppliers were able to offer and how this compared to wider options across the market. There was a particular focus on:

4.14.1 Quicker and simpler methods for applying for and renewing parking permits;

4.14.2 Improved parking enforcement through digital means; and

4.14.3 Service efficiencies and cost savings.

4.15 Of the viable solutions proposed by NSL, the system supplied by RingGo (who are the Council's cashless phone parking provider for on-street public parking) was considered to be the preferred option, both in terms of the price and quality of the service.

4.16 The RingGo visitor permit solution met all of the service requirements and offered numerous additional benefits, including those outlined below:

4.16.1 RingGo visitor permit system is tried and tested and successfully in use in several other Local Authorities across the UK;

4.16.2 The RingGo customer interfaces are all easy to use and navigate and should be instantly recognisable to customers who already use RingGo to pay for on-street public parking charges;

4.16.3 Customers can use the award-winning RingGo app, the RingGo website and the dedicated local-rate phone number to access visitor permit services. The service is accessible from a landline and RingGo also have a customer contact team on hand for those that need further assistance;

4.16.4 The RingGo solution can undertake Experian checks to help validate customer applications and help expedite and automate the application process, as is already in place with other Council permit systems; and

4.16.5 The RingGo solution offers all of the benefits associated with an electronic permit system, as outlined for resident parking permits in paragraph 4.4. of this report and was also considered the best value option based on current permit usage.

4.17 As well as the benefits outlined above, the RingGo service was considered to be the most customer friendly and accessible option, offering the most flexibility to customers in terms of contact channels, such as the facility to speak to a customer service advisor and the ability to access the RingGo visitor permit service from a landline.

4.18 The RingGo service also offers significant benefits in terms of permit flexibility for customers. Rather than pre purchasing books of 90 minute visitor permits for future use, customers will be given an annual allocation of visitor permit hours within their RingGo account from which they can draw down, purchasing individual sessions as they use them.

4.19 It is possible to both pre-book RingGo visitor permit sessions and book them on demand. The service permits customer to purchase sessions in half hourly increments, thereby offering more flexibility and making it much easier to manage longer visits.

4.20 With RingGo already operating the Council's cashless phone parking service, much of the system configuration is already in place for Edinburgh. The configuration and ongoing maintenance of visitor permit prices will also be simpler given the links between visitor permit prices and on-street public parking charges.

4.21 Much like the RingGo cashless phone parking service, the RingGo visitor permit solution also promises future service improvement possibilities, such as new mobile phone payment options and the potential for initiatives such as emissions-based charging.

4.22 It is recommended that Committee agrees to the introduction of electronic visitor permits using the existing RingGo service and that the traffic order be updated to reflect the changes in the way visitor permits operate within the RingGo system.

4.23 It should be noted that no changes to the allocation or pricing of visitor permits are being proposed within this report.

5. Next Steps

5.1 If Committee approval is granted, then the following approach will be taken to formally introduce electronic parking permits.

Residents', Business, Retail and Trades Permits

5.2 The necessary traffic order provisions are already in place to enable electronic permits for residents', business, retail and trades permits.

5.3 A full communications campaign will be produced, outlining the key messages for this change and how this could reach all stakeholders. All permit holders will be contacted directly in advance of any changes being made to their permits.

5.4 Further communications and engagement may be required with business, retail and trades customers in order to clarify how electronic permits work and can be managed across multiple vehicles.

5.5 It is proposed that residents' permits would be the first permit type to move to an electronic solution. Once electronic residents' permits are in place focus will move onto business, retail and trades permits.

Visitor Permits

5.6 The introduction of electronic visitor permits will require a change to the traffic order due to the nature of the changes being proposed.

5.7 Once the traffic order has been updated, the Council will engage with RingGo to develop an implementation plan for the introduction of electronic visitor permits.

5.8   A full communications campaign will also be produced, outlining the key messages for this change and how this could reach all stakeholders. All current visitor permit holders and RingGo customers will be contacted directly in advance of any changes being made.

6.   Financial impact

6.1   Electronic visitor permits shall realise financial savings for the Council for printing, postage and stationery as well as administrative savings through reduced back office staff time.

6.2   In a normal year, the cost of residents', business, retail and trades permit stationery is c. £20,000 p.a. and the cost of printing and posting of residents', business, retail and trades parking permits is c. £21,000 p.a. A change to electronic resident, business, retail and trades permits will therefore realise a direct saving to the Council of c. £41,000 p.a.

6.3   There are no additional costs involved with the implementation or operation of electronic parking permits for residents, retailers, businesses and tradespeople.

6.4   In a normal year, the cost of visitor permit stationery is currently c. £40,000 p.a. and the cost of printing and posting of visitor parking permits is currently c. £4,000 p.a.

6.5   Payment processing costs within the RingGo visitor permit solution are comparable to current payment processing costs for visitor permits, however, the RingGo visitor permit system will incur a new ongoing cost to the Council of £550 per month.

6.6   The RingGo visitor permit solution will therefore provide an annual ongoing saving of c. £37,500 to the Council. However, implementation of the RingGo system will also incur a one off set up cost of £9,400.

6.7   It is not proposed to review or alter any parking permit prices as a result of moving to electronic parking permits.

7.   Stakeholder/Community Impact

7.1   An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken to consider any potential impacts of the move to an electronic permit system upon people. The impacts are expected to be positive, with any negative impacts negligible.

7.2   In line with the Council's wider approach to accessibility, parking permit services will continue to be offered at the High Street and at other Council customer hubs when these reopen, allowing permit customers to continue to make payments via cash and cheque and also to speak directly with Council officers where needed.

7.3   There will be no change to how customers apply for residents', business, retail and trades parking permits, however electronic visitor permits will be administered through a different system.

7.4   Residents can purchase visitor permits conveniently via the multilingual RingGo website or app 24/7, or alternatively by phoning RingGo's dedicated local-rate (or included in a mobile customer's 'bundle of minutes') phone line. Residents are also able to speak with and seek assistance from a telephone operative should they encounter any difficulties when making a purchase. This phone line option helpfully supports those without access to, or who are not confident in, the use of technology. The Council's permit team will also be available to help customers during normal office hours.

7.5   Whilst residents themselves have to apply for electronic permits on behalf of visitors, this is no more onerous than the current paper permits process and the resident now only needs to enter the visitor's vehicle registration details and the date and time online, to the app or by telephone. The ability to save the details of up to five visitor vehicles helps to speed up the process for ongoing visits. In addition, an online permit may be more accessible for some people than having to scratch out boxes on a paper permit.

7.6   There are no implications for visiting drivers who display a disabled persons' blue badge as such visitors will not be required to pay for parking. Disabled residents will continue to benefit from being able to apply for double the allocation of visitors permits at half the normal price.

8.   Background reading/external references

8.1   https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/parkingpermits

8.2   https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/parkingactionplan

9.   Appendices

None.