

Oxfordshire County Council Highways and Operations

The Proposed Oxfordshire Lane Rental Scheme

Executive Summary

Companies that need to undertake roadworks in Oxfordshire currently must apply to Oxfordshire County Council for a permit which provides permission to carry out roadworks. This scheme has been running successfully since 2020.

The Department for Transport has made available an opportunity for the council to make an application to introduce a Lane Rental Scheme in Oxfordshire.

The Lane Rental Scheme (LRS) would enable the council to make additional charges for works on our busiest roads at the busiest times. This encourages those working on the highway to avoid peak times (to avoid the charges) or pay the charges (completing the works in shortest possible timeframe), the maximum for which is £2,500 a day.

Income from the Lane Rental Scheme must be invested in works operations to reduce impacts, improving the highway network, and compensating society for disruptive works. The Department for Transport stipulates that the council and works promoters will work together to manage how the funding is spent.

The introduction of Lane Rental Scheme was included as part of a longer-term plan for managing Oxfordshire's roads, the Network Management Plan 2023-2028, which was agreed by Cabinet in February 2023.

If central government timetables allow, we plan to introduce Lane Rental from September 2024.

Background

As part of the council's legal duties, Network Management are responsible for supporting the management and operations of the road network, meeting the needs of road users as well as those who maintain the infrastructure (both of the network itself and of the services within it).

Network Management receives about 30,000 requests each year to work on the network and these are coordinated, inspected, and enforced to reduce the impact on the travelling public.

The Oxfordshire Permit Scheme has to be balanced financially, according to the rules from the Department for Transport (DfT) and the council does not make any profits from this scheme.

The Lane Rental Scheme will allow the council to impose specific charges on those requesting to work on the road network on our busiest roads at the busiest times (traffic sensitive streets at traffic sensitive times).

We want Lane Rental to be the next stage in the development of the Network Management Service for better coordination to manage the road network.

Research has demonstrated that imposing charges will encourage behavioural change in the industry.

Lane rental charges would be targeted only at the most critical parts of Oxfordshire's street network where evidence shows that works on the highway cause the highest levels of disruption and so require the greatest efforts to smooth traffic flow.

The busiest 5% of the Oxfordshire's road will be subject to Lane Rental and this is in accordance with the guidance from DfT.

Lane Rental will generate a financial surplus to the council which would be invested into measures to highway improvements and benefits for society.

Evidence to demonstrate the reduction in disruption will be gathered to evaluate effectiveness of the scheme.

Key benefits of Lane Rental include:

- Encouraging collaborative working between works promoters
- Improving the quality of works (to avoid return fees)
- Works are undertaken outside of peak times.
- Working smarter will reduce the time taken to complete works.
- Provide increased resource to manage the network, offset by income generated by the scheme.

Outline of Oxfordshire Lane Rental Scheme (LRS)

We have to work on the details of the scheme, and we'll take ideas from successful schemes while considering evidence specific to Oxfordshire. Initial thinking on some of the core principles for the scheme includes:

- That the Scheme will apply to:
 - All work on roads identified as Traffic Sensitive specifically for the Lane Rental Scheme.
 - Work undertaken outside of core off peak times (*off peak 'as specified in the special designations'*) on roughly 5% of the highway network - determined as the busiest by traffic volume/bus frequency/critical infrastructure.
 - That there will be one charge set at the maximum allowed daily charge of £2,500, with specific discount criteria to be determined.
- Lane Rental Traffic Sensitive Streets will be reviewed as part of the scheme development to include local conditions beyond those required by the Department for Transport. This way, we can make the most of the benefits for managing the network.
- The aim is to increase collaboration with all works promoters on the highways to reduce congestion at peak hours using financial incentives.
- Governance will be developed, in accordance with the Department for Transport requirements, for the allocation of surplus funds generated by the scheme.

It is hoped that the scheme will bring about behavioural changes from works promoters for the benefit of road users such as:

- Immediate works completed faster - more immediate works done within 2 days (free period) to avoid the charges.
- Reduced works impact - more resources applied to works to reduce the time taken or carry out works outside of charging hours (though this will mean longer works durations)
- Improved collaborative working - more work will be done collaboratively by promoters to share the costs and/or charges.
- Increases use of technology - greater use of new technology to speed up the works or reduce their impact, such as 'mole' systems.

There will also potentially be some impacts that could be considered as negative which will need to be considered when developing the specific details of the scheme, such as:

- Out of hours working - more works undertaken out of hours, including overnight (potentially an increase of 10% based experience of others)
- Works taking longer - Some works will take longer if there are done during a shorter day between busy periods to avoid the charges.
- Highway works - the council's own works are potentially chargeable, which may impact on programmes or budgets.