

REPORT TO: Environment and Urban Renewal Policy
and Performance Board

DATE: 26th February 2020

REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health

PORTFOLIO: Environmental Services

SUBJECT: Pest Control Service - Update

WARDS: Borough Wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an update on the Council's pest control service and to set out the rationale for maintaining free rat treatments for all residents.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1) The report be noted;**
- 2) The Board take the opportunity to raise any comments or suggestions about the provision of pest control services in the borough; and**
- 3) The Board supports the maintenance of free rat treatments for all Halton residents.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Pest Control service is part of the Environmental Health function within the Public Health Department of the People Directorate.

3.2 The service is currently delivered by three full time pest control operatives including a team leader. Prior to 2011 there were six full time operatives including a team leader. In 2011 three posts were subject to voluntary redundancy as part of a wider departmental restructure initiated to respond to the Council's budget position.

Over the last 12 months some temporary changes have been made to the service to cope with a temporary reduction in staff. The service has suspended chargeable treatments for nuisance pests. The free service for treating rats outdoors was also temporarily suspended to allow the service

to prioritise rat infestations inside properties. The full rat treatment service has now been restored.

- 3.3 The pest control service also provides the Council's statutory dog warden service during normal office hours. The out of hour's service is provided by an external contractor jointly procured by Halton, Liverpool, Knowsley and Sefton councils.
- 3.4 The pest control service and the provision of free rat treatments is not in itself a statutory function. However the council is under a duty by virtue of the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 to;

"take such steps as may be necessary to secure so far as practicable that their district is kept free from rats and mice".

In particular the Act requires local authorities to;

- from time to time carry out inspections as may be necessary
- to destroy rats and mice on land of which they are the occupier and keep such land so far as practicable free from rats and mice;
- to enforce the duties of owners and occupiers of land to keep their land free from rats and mice and take any action required to ensure this duty is fulfilled.

Whilst the standard of building, drainage and sanitation have improved significantly since 1949 rats are still considered a public health pest. Rats can carry and spread a number of infectious diseases and can cause damage to buildings by gnawing through wood, pipes and cables. Consequently controlling rat activity remains a public health priority.

Historically most local authorities including Halton have provided free rat treatments to residents as the most effective and efficient means of fulfilling the council's duties under the Act. This is supplemented by enforcement action where necessary in relation to private properties for example to secure the removal of rubbish accumulations or to repair defective buildings.

- 3.5 However in recent years the financial pressures faced by local authorities have caused some to introduce charges to residents. Currently within the city region Sefton, Knowsley and Wirral charge for rat treatments. However, Liverpool, St Helens and Halton have retained a free service. The neighboring Cheshire authorities also now charge for rat treatments. The prices charged and the approach to means testing the service are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Charges for rat Treatments LCR and Cheshire LA's

Authority	Fee £	Means Tested?
Liverpool	Free	N/A
St Helens	Free	N/A
Halton	Free	N/A
Sefton	38.50	Yes – free to council tax benefit recipients
Knowsley	24.00	No
Wirral	99.00	No
Cheshire West	40.00	No
Cheshire East	50.00	Yes – reduced to £25 for benefit recipients
Warrington	85.50	No

- 3.6 Halton Currently charges to treat all other pest species including mice, wasps, ants, cockroaches, bedbugs and fleas. The council also offers chargeable services to schools and commercial customers. The current charges for these treatments are set out below in table 2.

Table 2 Halton council pest treatment charges

Pest	Domestic £ + VAT	Schools £	Commercial £ per hour plus VAT
Rats	Free	56.60	78.40
Mice	27.20	56.60	78.40
Cockroaches	27.20	56.60	78.40
Bedbugs	52.70	56.60	78.40
Wasps	42.60	56.60	78.40
Fleas	47.10	56.60	78.40
Ants	47.10	56.60	78.40

- 3.7 The number of rat complaints has risen steadily in recent years. This is likely to be due to construction activity around the borough along with a growth in the population and an increase in the number of residential properties.

The number of complaints for other pests varies considerably from year to year. In particular the number of wasp complaints is dependent on weather conditions in early spring when queen wasps are emerging from hibernation. A cold snap during this period can reduce the number of queen wasps that can go onto form viable nests.

Table 3 below and the graph in Figure 1 provide details on complaint volumes and trends over the last 10 years.

Table 3 Pest control service request volumes 2010-2019

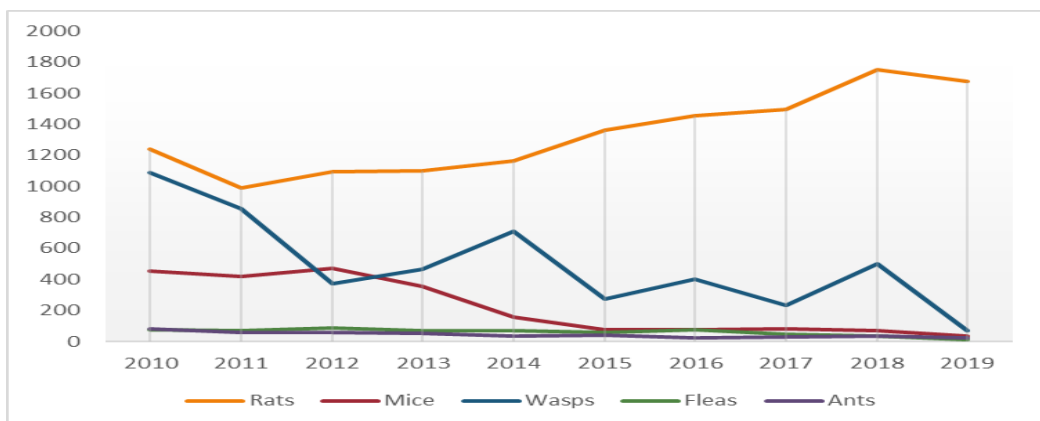
Year	Rats	Mice ¹	Wasps	Fleas	Ants
2010	1240	453	1089	77	80
2011	992	420	854	71	58
2012	1097	470	371	88	59
2013	1098	358	468	69	53
2014	1166	160	709	70	37
2015	1361	75	275	57	41
2016	1456	76	402	74	25
2017	1497	80	233	46	27
2018	1750	72	500	36	35
2019 ²	1678	35	69	12	22

Notes on table 1

1 Mice: Prior to 2015 the council offered free bait and treatments for Mice. After this point a charge was introduced and consequently demands for the service dropped significantly.

2 Chargeable requests 2019: Due to long term sickness there has been a temporary reduction in 1 full time officer within the service for much of 2019. This equates to a third of the workforce. Therefore priority was given to maintaining the free service for rats. Chargeable jobs were suspended part way through the year.

Figure 1 Pest control service request trend 2010-2019



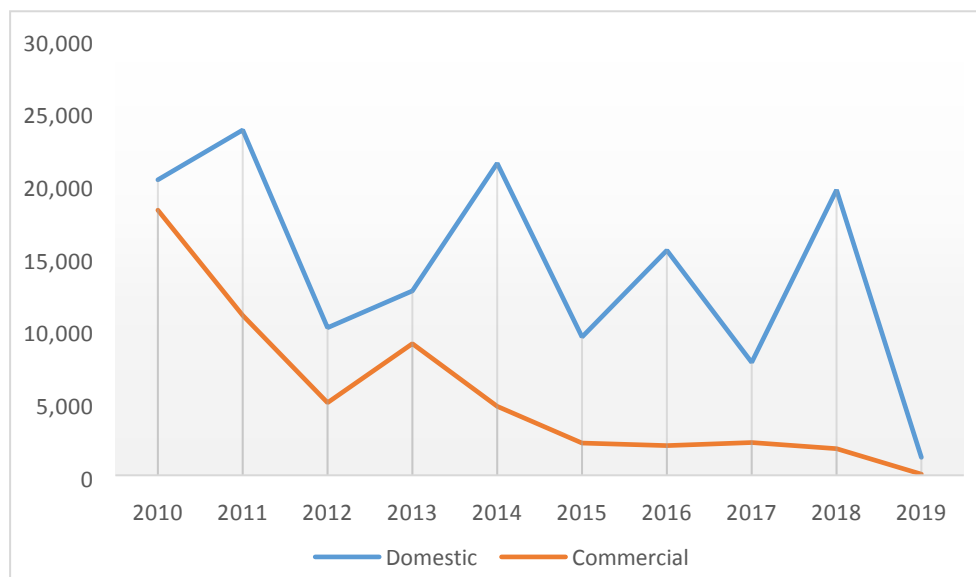
3.8 The total net budget for the pest control and dog warden service for 2019-20 is £112,200 (excluding internal support service recharges). This budget includes an income target of £25,420. However income fluctuates year to year corresponding to the number of requests received.

Therefore income is largely dependent on the weather in spring and the corresponding volume of wasp treatments carried out that year. Table 4 below details income over the last 10 years and Figure 2 shows the trend in income over the last 10 years.

Table 4 pest control income

Year	Domestic £	Commercial £	Total £
2010	20,331	18,243	38,574
2011	23,757	11,004	34,761
2012	10,155	4,996	15,151
2013	12,686	9,056	21,741
2014	21,465	4,745	26,210
2015	9,516	2,219	11,735
2016	15,477	2,043	17,520
2017	7,769	2,254	10,023
2018	19,633	1,832	21,464
2019	1,236	79	1,315

Figure 2 Pest control income trends 2010 to 2019



- 3.9 The table and figure above show the annual fluctuation in income achieved for domestic pest treatments. As previously, stated chargeable requests were suspended for most of 2019 due to a temporary reduction in staff. However the data for previous years demonstrates the unpredictable nature of income received. There has also been a downward trend in commercial income received. This corresponds to the reduction in the number of staff within the team in 2011 which resulted in domestic treatments being prioritised over commercial work.
- 3.10 Whilst the income received from chargeable services helps to reduce the net budget this income is unpredictable and does not provide a reliable basis to enable the service to become self-funding.
- 3.11 In recent months some members have suggested that a charge should be introduced for all rat treatments to help subsidise the service further and make it more sustainable over the longer term. However other members have expressed concern that the council may consider withdrawing free rat treatments.

Section 4 below will examine the policy implications around charging and set out the rationale for maintaining free rat treatments.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Firstly it is necessary to examine the potential income that may be achieved if a charge was introduced.

The average number of complaints received over the last 5 years is 1550. The treatment regime and pesticides used to control rats are comparable to those used for mice and so based on current fees a charge of £27.20 + vat would be appropriate. This would potentially realise net income of £42,160 based on the current level of requests. However it is considered very unlikely that this level of demand would be maintained if a charge were introduced.

- 4.2 The experience of other authorities who have introduced a charge suggests that the volume of requests received will drop considerably once a charge is introduced. Neighbouring local authorities who have introduced a charge experienced a drop in reports of rats by around 50%. It is considered likely that Halton would see a similar reduction in requests. Indeed such a reduction was observed when free mouse treatments were stopped in 2015 (see table 3 above). This would cause the projected income to fall to around £21,000.

- 4.3 The introduction of a charge is likely to disproportionately impact low income groups. If members were to consider introducing a charge it is likely some form of means test may be considered. This would further reduce the projected income. The council no longer administers all means tested benefits it is therefore difficult to fully establish the numbers of households in receipt of a means tested benefit. However it is known that 17% of older people age over 65 are in receipt of pension credit. Another reliable proxy measure is children living in low income households. This figure was 20% for Halton in 2016 (latest data from HMRC). This includes children living in families in receipt of out of work benefits or tax credits where their reported income is less than 60% median income. Therefore around 20% of households may be exempt from or subject to a lesser charge for pest treatments.

Therefore projected income based on the proposed fee could fall to £16,800.

- 4.4 There are also hidden costs associated with the introduction of a charge. It will take considerably longer for the contact centre to process requests which are subject to a charge or where evidence in support of a means test exemption is required. Whilst the facility is available for the public to request a pest treatment and make a payment online many people still prefer to contact the council by phone to request a service. Most benefits are now administered online by the Department for Work and Pensions with limited paperwork issued to claimants. Therefore evidence of receipt of benefits must be provided in person. This will increase demands on the Council's direct link offices and makes it more difficult for those in receipt of benefits to access the service.

The introduction of a charge is also likely to take up more management time responding to requests for refunds and complaints about the service received.

- 4.5 Further concerns about introducing a charge are;

- Rat activity is likely to increase. The experience from other authorities who have introduced a charge is that the number of requests decreases by around 50%. This means less rat treatments will be carried out leading to an overall increase in rat activity.
- Many people who experience rat activity on their property, particularly if the activity is outdoors, view the activity as a wider environmental problem caused by conditions beyond their own property. They will therefore be reluctant to pay for something they don't perceive to be their responsibility. Consequently they won't report the problem.

- The experience from other local authorities who have introduced a charge suggests that members of the public delay reporting rats until the problem has got out of hand and is affecting a wider area. This is likely to require the input of the Environmental Protection Team to take action against the landowners to enforce the provisions of the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949. Such action is costly and time consuming and represents a further hidden cost to a charging regime.
- The information received through requests for free treatments enables the Environmental Health team to locate trends across the Borough. This helps to identify areas where there may be wider environmental issues such as refuse accumulations, nuisance properties or defective drainage which is causing the increase in activity. A reduction in notifications means the Environmental Health team may be slower to identify and respond to these issues.
- The council needs to place bait in secure locations so that it cannot be tampered with by children or animals. Therefore the council do not place bait on open land or public areas. If a member of the public complains of rats in their area we offer to place bait in their garden or yard as it is a secure location and provides a means to treat the wider area around the property. If households refuse to pay for a treatment because they believe the problem is a wider environmental problem the council will have access to fewer secure areas to place the bait. Because the service is currently free householders are happy for pest control to visit and place bait on their property as a means of treating the wider area.

- 4.6 The professional opinion of the Environmental Health Department is that introducing a charge for rat treatments is counterproductive. Whilst this would significantly reduce demand for the service and make service volumes more manageable, it would have the unintended consequence of increasing rat activity in the borough by reducing the number of proactive rat treatments that are carried out.

It is the view of the Environmental Health Department that control of the rat population is a wider environmental concern that is best addressed collectively through a universal service rather than on an individual basis by providing a service only to those or willing or able to pay for it.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Should a charge be implemented it is projected an income of £16,800 would be achieved. However there would be significant hidden costs associated with administering a charging regime and dealing the consequences of increased rat activity through more costly legal means.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None

6.3 A Healthy Halton

Rats are a public health pest and are known to carry a number of infectious diseases. An introduction of a charge is likely to lead to a reduction in reports made to the council and treatments carried out. This will lead to an increase in rat activity.

6.4 A Safer Halton

Pest activity can cause damage to buildings and is a factor in determining the fitness of residential accommodation for human habitation. An introduction of a charge is likely to lead to a reduction in reports made to the council and treatments carried out. This will lead to an increase in rat activity.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

An increase in rat activity is likely to adversely affect the public's perception of the area where they live.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

The relatively modest income that would be realised by introducing a charge is outweighed by the environmental and public health costs of an increase in rat activity caused by a reduction in pest treatments.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

The introduction of a charge without an associated means test would disadvantage low income households. Providing the proof required to satisfy the means test may act as a further barrier to accessing the service. Areas with a high number of low income households are likely to

see an increase in rat activity due to the reduced number of treatments in those areas.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.