

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

19 OCTOBER 2010

FINAL REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL - - PEST CONTROL SERVICE

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the Environment Scrutiny Panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its investigation of Middlesbrough Council's Pest Control Service.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2. Pests such as rodents, wasps and fleas can cause structural damage to property as well as being sources of food contamination and potential disease. The scrutiny panel sought to examine the Council's role in eradicating these problems through its Pest Control Service.
3. The panel's investigation was undertaken as a short topic over the course of one meeting held on 23 August 2010. A further meeting on 17 September 2010 considered the scrutiny panel's draft final report on the subject.
4. A Scrutiny Support Officer from Legal and Democratic Services co-ordinated and arranged the submission of written and oral evidence and arranged witnesses for the review. Meetings administration, including preparation of agenda and minutes, was undertaken by a Governance Officer from Legal and Democratic Services. Copies of papers considered by the scrutiny panel, including agenda, minutes and reports, is available from the Council's Committee Management System (COMMIS), which can be accessed via the Council's website at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk.
5. The membership of the scrutiny panel was as follows: Councillors Kerr (Chair); Carter (Vice-Chair), Clark, Davison, C Hobson, Hubbard, Lancaster, McPartland and McTigue.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

6. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out below in respect of the agreed terms of reference, as follows:
 - To examine the level of fees and charges for pest control services, including charging arrangements and external income.
 - To investigate main areas of work, including pressure points or trends.

- To examine how performance is measured and recorded - particularly whether there are any relevant performance indicators.
- To investigate arrangements for pest control around becks and watercourses (particularly given the sensitive nature of wildlife habitats in these areas) and also sewers, including responsibilities of any other agencies.

THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINDINGS

7. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out below against each of the terms of reference.

TERM OF REFERENCE: "To examine the level of fees and charges for pest control services, including charging arrangements and external income."

8. Pest control is offered by the Council as a chargeable service. Current (2010/11) charges for a full course of pest control treatment (ie multiple visits where necessary) are shown in the following table:

Domestic pest control charges - 2010/11

Service	Weekday Price Inc. VAT/£	Weekday Price ex VAT/£	Saturday Inc. VAT/£	Saturday Ex Vat/£
Rats & Mice	40.36	34.35	43.93	37.39
Wasps	38.31	32.60	42.39	36.08
Other Insects	47.51	40.43	52.11	44.35
Hourly Rate: Commercial & Other vermin	40.36 1 man + vehicle	34.35 1 man + vehicle	47.00 1 man + vehicle	40.00 1 man + vehicle
Squirrels FLAT RATE For private houses	62.84 for private houses	53.48	63.86 for private houses	54.35
Drain Clearance	48.53	41.30	53.13	45.22
CCTV	118.52	100.87	128.73	109.56

9. In 2009/10, the pest control service undertook 3,617 domestic requests, which brought in income of £27,000. This income figure excludes treatments in Erimus and Endeavour Housing properties which are paid for through a service level agreement with each of the registered social landlords. These contracts are provided for a fixed total price, with the price set by the Council based on the previous history of demand.
10. Erimus tenants are not charged for rats, mice, fleas, cockroaches, bedbugs, wasps, squirrels, carpet beetles, woolly bears (larvae of the carpet beetle), woodworm and wharfborers (wood boring insects). Tenants are, however, charged for treatments for woodlice, ants, spider beetles, biscuit beetles, silverfish, bees, birds and other pests.
11. Endeavour Housing tenants are not charged for rats, mice, fleas, cockroaches and bedbugs but are charged for wasps. It was noted that while tenants of these two registered social landlords receive most pest control services free at the point of delivery, the tenants are effectively paying for the services via a levy on their rent.

12. Pest control services are also provided to external organisations through commercial contracts. In 2009/10 the pest control service operated 152 commercial contracts for external bodies and Council buildings. Commercial work includes routine preventative work, as well as one-off eradication treatments or proofing work. This is carried out not only in Middlesbrough but also in surrounding areas, at a variety of locations such as schools, public buildings, hotels and food premises.
13. Commercial contracts brought in £149,000 of income in 2009/10. The total income for the year was therefore £176,000 when including income from domestic operations. The price for domestic customers is effectively subsidised to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the pest involved, by commercial income. The following table shows the charge to the public compared to the actual cost of providing the domestic service. This illustrates that services for rodents and ants are subsidised and other pests are treated at around cost price. The total annual subsidy for providing rodent and ant services is in the region of £146,000 - which is covered by the income from commercial contracts. The Council's services are generally cheaper than private sector pest control operators as such operators' charges reflect a profit element.

Charge and actual cost of providing domestic treatments

Pest	Ave. No. of Visits to Eradicate Problem	Ave. Actual Cost	Charge (ex VAT)	2009/10 numbers
Rats	3.1	£90	£34.35	1,134
Mice	3.1	£90	£34.35	1,259
Wasps	1	£33	£32.60	635
Fleas	1	£33	£40.43	169
Bees	1	£33	£40.43	133
Ants	2.1	£71	£40.43	101

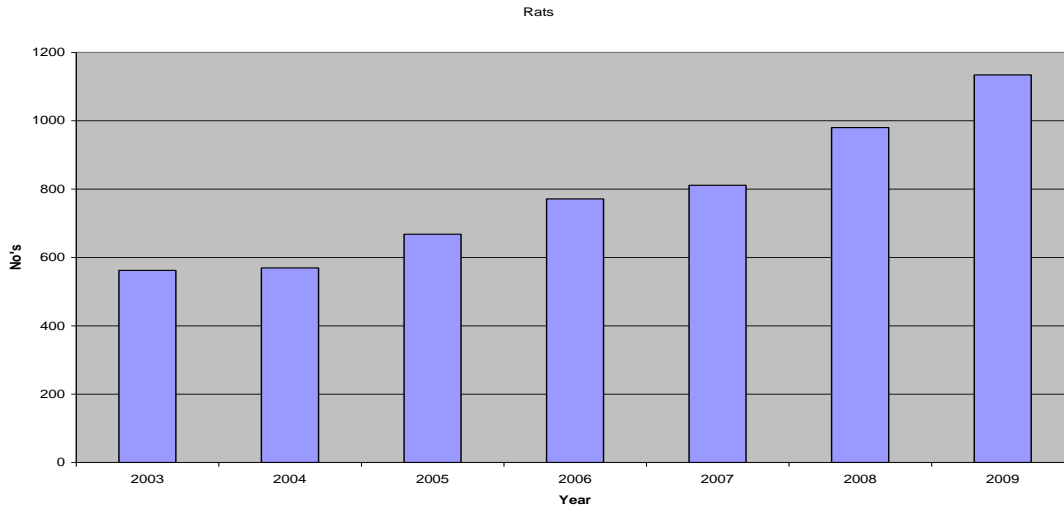
14. The scrutiny panel heard that the Service Level Agreement arrangements with the two local registered social landlords work very well. Regular reports of the service provided are made to both landlords. In addition to the domestic pest treatments carried out, the Council also undertakes pest control on open land owned by Erimus Housing. The advantages of these service level agreement are that:
- They provide a steady income of known amount every month.
 - The organisations are good payers so there is no bad debt issue.
 - Administration savings are made because the service does not have to raise individual bills for each job (as happens for other domestic work).
15. In respect of payment arrangements for domestic pest control services, the scrutiny panel ascertained that:
- Fees are the same for all service users. There are no reductions based on means or low income.
 - Households are not required to pay at the time of pest control treatment. They are invoiced and are required to pay later in full in one payment.
 - Electronic payment is not available.
 - Non-payment can be a problem. As invoice amounts are generally relatively small, they can be uneconomical to collect.

- In the case of a member of the household reporting a rat problem in a street or garden, efforts are made to trace the source of the problem. The relevant householder is then offered chargeable pest control treatment or asked to undertake the work themselves.
16. During the scrutiny panel's discussion, Members queried whether the cost of providing a free pest control service had been calculated. The panel was advised that free service provision would be likely to increase demand, which would require additional staffing. This, together with the loss of income from current service level agreements, would mean that additional funding of around £120 000 per year would be needed in order to offer a free service.

TERM OF REFERENCE: “To investigate main areas of pest control work, including pressure points and trends.”

17. The top six pests dealt with by the pest control service in 2009/10 (as listed in order in the table shown at paragraph 13 of this report) are :
- Rats
 - Mice
 - Wasps
 - Fleas
 - Bees
 - Ants
18. Rats and mice are by far the most reported pest, and the most heavily subsidised.
19. Wasps and bees are a seasonal issue and in summer months provide a high workload for operational staff. As bees are a protected species, swarms are not destroyed but are collected and passed on to local bee keepers.
20. Reports in respect of other pests such as foxes, moles and beetles are uncommon - with numbers in single figures each year.
21. Since 2003, the number of mice requests has steadily dropped and the number of rat requests has doubled, as identified in Figures 1 and 2 on the following page. The growth in rats is in line with national trends and has been identified by the pest control service as a matter of concern. Reasons for the rise are unknown but could include a series of warm summers and a greater availability of food sources, together with increased public awareness and higher levels of reporting.
22. Where a rat problem has arisen due to a food source (such as waste bins), the source is identified and an appropriate form of bait is identified to entice the rats. Different bait forms are utilised as necessary and alternative bait flavours - such as pasta, pizza or curry - have also been used to encourage take up. A risk assessment is carried out for each treatment and the area is checked for dead rodents to avoid the risk of secondary poisoning. In respect of treatments of open ground, poison is placed inside steel containers that cannot be accessed by children or pets.

Figure 1 - Rat requests since 2003

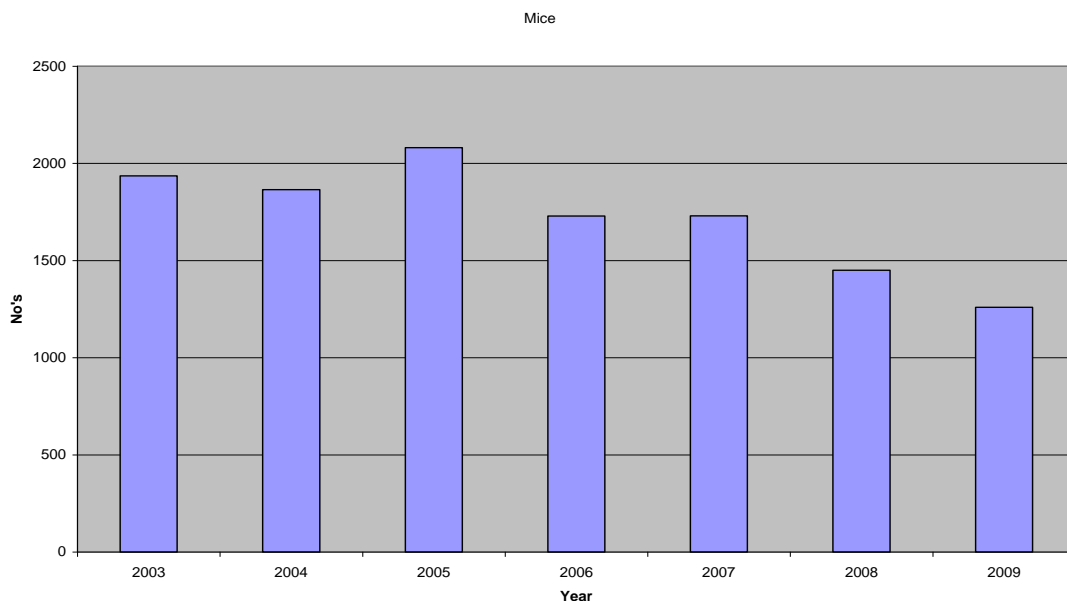


23. The service periodically uncovers a widespread rat infestation that is very costly and time consuming to deal with due to the number of repeat visits required. The scrutiny panel was provided with an example of how a recent rat infestation in central Middlesbrough area had been dealt with. This illustrated the labour intensive and time consuming approach which is needed and included:

- Serving notices on approximately 80 domestic properties concerning householders' responsibilities regarding refuse storage and disposal.
- Arranging inspections by the Back Alley Improvement Team.
- Arranging restaurant visits and inspections by the team responsible for food safety.
- Visits to the affected area and inspections of adjacent open space by the pest control team.
- Repeat visits to the area to ensure that the infestation had been eradicated.

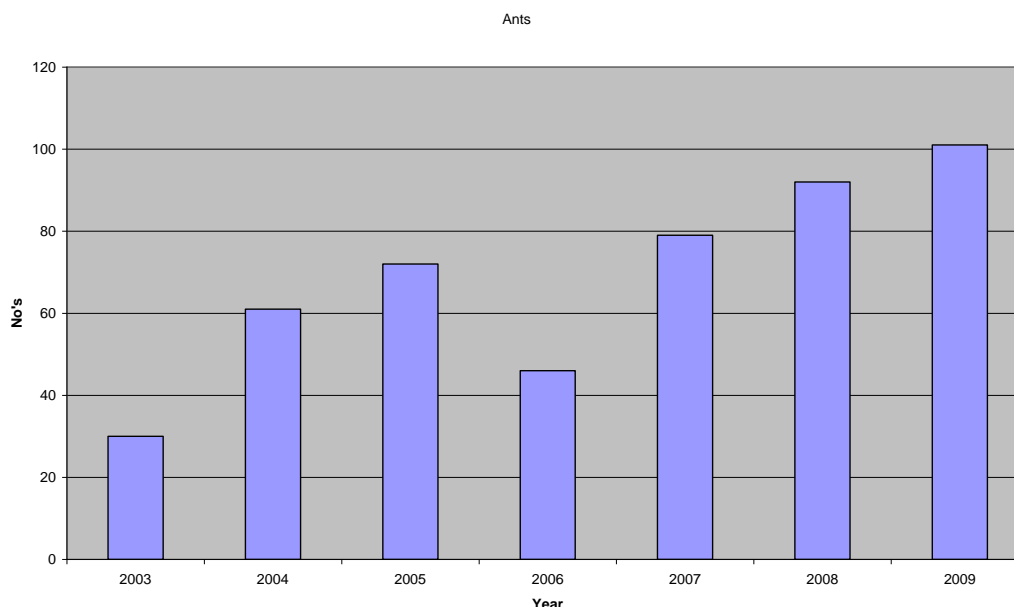
24. The panel was advised that the above work had involved hundreds of hours and was only one example of the work of the pest control service.

Figure 2 - Mice Requests since 2003



25. Ants are also showing a steady rise, possibly due to a series of warm summers. Figure 3 illustrates this trend.

Figure 3 - Ant Requests Since 2003



TERM OF REFERENCE: "To examine how performance in pest control is measured and recorded."

26. Target response times (in working days) are summarised below in table form. The performance standard is to meet at least 90% of these targets within the stated response time. A computerised system is used to provide regular monitoring reports.

Pest Control Response Time Targets

Pest Type	Response time in working days
Non-Public Health Insects e.g. fruit flies	5
Public Health Insects e.g. fleas, cockroaches	3
Rats and Mice	2
Blocked drains	1

27. The scrutiny panel heard that the pest control service is almost entirely reactive in nature, although officers do offer free advice to the public when this is requested - for example on the safe and effective use of poisons or the use of bird food without encouraging rats.
28. In addition to response performance, there are also income targets to meet, which are necessary to provide the required levels of subsidy to the service. In 2009/10 the income target was set as £206,000. For 2010/11 it is £211,000.
29. Monitoring reports are prepared on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis as follows:
- The number of requests for service.
 - The number provided with a response within the stated response time.

- The amount of confirmed income.

30. In 2009/10, there were 4,156 domestic and commercial requests for service. This amounted to a 20% reduction on previous years. The target response time was met in 91% of these cases, thus meeting the stated service standard of 90%. Income amounted to £176,000, which represented a shortfall of 15% of the target. A post was held vacant in the service to minimise the effect of this and to reflect the fall in demand, which is generally due to the economic downturn. The service is on course to deal with 4,000 service requests in 2010 - 11 and income is being monitored closely.

TERM OF REFERENCE: “To investigate arrangements for pest control around becks and watercourses (particularly given the sensitive nature of wildlife habitats in these areas) and also sewers, including responsibilities of any other agencies.”

31. In considering this term of reference, the scrutiny panel was concerned to ensure that adequate measures are in place regarding pest control around Middlesbrough’s becks -particularly given that the becks are a habitat for the water vole, which is a protected species.

Pest control around becks and watercourses

32. The scrutiny panel was advised that complaints about pests near water sources, such as becks or ponds, are almost entirely about rat sightings. An example was submitted to the panel of an area in East Middlesbrough which illustrated that the majority of reported rat sightings were concentrated around the local beck. A major issue around becks is that reports of rats can often turn out to be water voles, which are thriving in some areas of Middlesbrough’s becks. The distinction between rats and water voles is a large one, although people often get confused between the two. The common rat is an aggressive, fearless scavenger, is largely nocturnal and is a major pest. It carries disease and dwells in sewers as well as raiding human rubbish for food. By contrast, water voles, which have been in decline in recent years, are now a protected species, are almost entirely vegetarian, live extremely close to fresh water and have a far less hostile lifestyle.

33. Owing to the legal necessity to protect the water vole and its habitats, there is no standard arrangement for dealing with pest control in becks and watercourses. Each service request is dealt with appropriately according to the circumstances. The area is first surveyed by a pest technician, who is trained to distinguish between the common rat and water vole. As the water vole is now a protected species, it is not only an offence to kill them, but also an offence to disturb them or damage their habitat. There are three options in the case of pest control around becks:

- If there is no evidence of the area being inhabited by water voles, the area is baited using approved pest control methods.
- If there is evidence of just water voles, then no eradication treatment is carried out, and the complainant is advised of that.
- If there is evidence of both water voles and rats being present in the area, then careful baiting is carried out. As water voles live very close to water, no poisonous bait is used within 5 metres of the water’s edge. If there is evidence of rats in close proximity to a water vole colony, live traps are used where it is feasible to do so. Any water voles which are caught are set free and any rats are disposed of.

Rodent control in public sewers

34. The responsibility for rodent control/baiting in public sewers used to rest with Middlesbrough Council but is now undertaken by Northumbrian Water. Annual meetings take place between the Pest Control Service and the water authority to determine the baiting programme for the following year.
35. The scrutiny panel was advised that while Northumbrian Water's reactive rodent control (ie the service provided in response to reported rat problems) is good, its level of pro-active sewer baiting is provided at a lesser level than the former Council service. The water authority has, however, indicated that its more targeted approach to sewer baiting is efficient as this results in a greater percentage take up of bait compared to the higher level of baiting previously undertaken by the Council. Despite regular meetings being held with Northumbrian Water throughout the year, it has proved difficult to obtain feedback in respect of the results of sewer baiting, although the Council's view is that the former higher level of baiting worked better in controlling the rat population.

CONCLUSIONS

36. Based on the evidence gathered in the scrutiny investigation the Panel concluded that:
 1. Pest control is an important Council service in terms of environmental and public protection, although much work is unseen and unrecognised by the public. Investigations and pest treatments can be very labour intensive and time consuming, for example in cases of rat infestations. The public should continue to be made aware of the benefits that the service provides, especially in the context of current public expenditure constraints and increased public scrutiny of Council tax spending.
 2. With the number of reported rat problems increasing each year, there is a need to consider how the public can be best informed of measures that they can take to minimise the risk of encouraging rat problems or infestation.
 3. Pest control charges are standardised and are applicable to all, irrespective of means or income. Consideration should be given to how best charges can be collected, both to facilitate convenient payment methods for householders and to minimise debt collection problems for the authority.
 4. Numbers of rodent bait treatments in sewers have decreased since Northumbrian Water took on responsibility for this function. Although regular meetings are scheduled with Northumbrian Water, feedback/updated information has not always been obtainable. The scrutiny panel has some concerns regarding this issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

37. Following the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the scrutiny panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Board and the Executive are as follows:

1. That the work of the pest control service continues to be highlighted and publicised - for example by writing to all relevant households and businesses to inform them of a successful rat infestation treatment in their area. Such letters could also be used to provide advice on how similar problems can be avoided in the future.
2. That, publicity is issued to inform the public of the trend of increasing rat numbers and informing them of steps that they can take to minimise rat problems. Reference should be made to the fact that advice from the pest control service is provided free of charge.
3. That arrangements be made to facilitate easier payment of pest control charges - for example accepting immediate payment following treatment, utilising electronic payments, or introducing flexible payment arrangements, such as payment in instalments in cases of hardship.
4. That Northumbrian Water is informed of the scrutiny panel's concerns regarding the reduced frequency of sewer baiting, particularly given the trend of increasing rat numbers in general; and requested to provide regular written updates to the Council on the frequencies and results of the baiting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

38. The Panel is grateful to the following officers, who presented evidence during the course of this investigation:
- Paul Robertson - Environmental Protection Manager, Community Protection.
 - Linda Cummins - Principal Environmental Health Officer, Community Protection.
 - Chris Hudson - Senior Technician - Pest Control, Community Protection.

BACKGROUND AND REFERENCE MATERIAL

39. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:
- Report to, and minutes of, the Environment Scrutiny Panel Meeting held on 23 August 2010.

**COUNCILLOR BOB KERR
CHAIR OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**

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