

**HEADING** Pest Control Advice Provision

**Submitted by:** Head of Environmental Health Services

**Portfolio:** Operational

**Ward(s) affected:** All

**Purpose of the Report**

To seek Committees support to cease offering free pest control telephone advice

**Recommendations**

That Members agree:

a. That pest control advice should only be available on a chargeable basis.

If agreed, then Members to recommend to Cabinet

b. The corresponding charge of £10 for 2018/19

**Reasons**

To align demands on the service with the team's capacity, and enable its focus to be upon 'doing' rather than 'discussing'.

1. **Background**

1.1 The council continues to offer a popular in-house pest control service, providing a wide range of treatments to Newcastle residents and businesses.

1.2 In recent years the size of the team has been reduced. The service currently employs one permanent pest control officer and a further pest control officer on a temporary contract (until 31/3/18). Support is provided by an Environmental Health Manager (approx. 0.4FTE), and approx. 0.3 of a clerical assistant.

1.3 During 2016/17 Customer Services recorded 1441 requests for the teams help, corresponding to £64,000 of income

|   | 2014-2015        | 2015-2016        | 2016-2017        |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Rats & Mice (treatments)  | 776              | 744              | 467              |
| Insects treatments inc Wasps, ants, cockroaches, bedbugs, fleas | 784              | 589              | 509              |
| <b>Advice requests/complaints</b>                               | <b>361 (18%)</b> | <b>330 (18%)</b> | <b>357 (25%)</b> |
| Other including 'commercial services'                           | 98               | 137              | 112              |
| Total Pest Control Requests                                     | 2,019            | 1,800            | 1,441            |
| <i>Pest Control Officers</i>                                    | <i>2.5 FTE</i>   | <i>2.5 FTE</i>   | <i>2.0 FTE</i>   |

## 2. Issues

- 2.1 As charges have been introduced / increased for services, a growing number of people want to 'discuss' pest control problems – currently a free option - rather than simply commission chargeable council pest control services. Frequently asked questions include: How would council officers approach a problem? What equipment would they use? Can it be bought on the internet? What other options are there? What do I need to buy? Where can I get it from? How do I use it? Is this information from the internet true? ....etc.
- 2.2 Although comprehensive advice has been added on the council's web pages to encourage self-service, the team continue to receive high volumes of advice requests either with additional questions, or seeking confirmation that the published information is correct.
- 2.3 Whilst such conversations clearly meet our residents' expectations of the assistance their authority should be providing, the time taken to respond impacts on the services we deliver and has a corresponding cost.
- 2.4 Essentially providing free advice means that those who have paid for a treatment service wait longer for the officer to be able to respond.
- 2.5 Historically many advice calls became treatments, however as charges have increased this has reduced. Price for many residents is now key and having been told of charges they want alternatives.
- 2.6 The diverse nature of requests means they can generally not be fully answered at first point of contact by Customer Services.
- 2.7 A number of other commercial service providers compete to provide pest control services to our residents in a price and performance sensitive market. Free advice is not generally offered.
- 2.8 Nothing in these proposals restricts a resident's right to report a problem / make a complaint. It is anticipated that complaints and enforcement caseload will increase as uptake of chargeable services falls.

## 3. Options Considered

- 3.1 Three basic options are outlined below. It is accepted that this list is not exhaustive and officers would welcome Members suggestions

|  | Advantages  | Disadvantages   |
|--|---|---|
| OPTION ONE:<br>Continue to provide telephone advice at no cost                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aligns with residents expectations that independent objective advice should be available from the authority</li> <li>About 1 in 4 advice requests translate to treatment.</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impacts adversely on response times with those paying for treatments waiting longer</li> </ul> |
| OPTION TWO:<br>Do not provide telephone advice. Offer chargeable treatment services / visit only | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focusses officer resource on 'doing' rather than 'discussing'</li> <li>Advice given as part of a visit is likely to be more reliable to advice given when problems has not been seen first hand</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is an expectation that advice will be available at no charge</li> </ul>                  |
| OPTION THREE:<br>Provide telephone advice, but only on a chargeable                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reducing the number of jobs 'in the queue' by only creating caseload where a payment has</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is an expectation that advice will be available at no charge</li> </ul>                  |

|                  |                |  |
|------------------|----------------|--|
| basis (e.g. £10) | been received. |  |
|------------------|----------------|--|

#### 4. **Proposal**

4.1 Option One is essentially a 'do nothing' option and makes no changes to current arrangements. Alternatives both involve some payment of some kind

4.2 Option Three is recommended.

#### 5. **Reasons for Preferred Solution**

5.1 Option One is not sustainable. With current staffing levels the team does not have the capacity to respond within a reasonable timeframe to advice requests. Providing advice impacts on the delivery of treatment services.

5.2 Option Two limits the scope of the service to treatments and chargeable advice visits. Chargeable advice visits (currently £45) have been offered for several years with a very low uptake. The authority would not cover its staff time and transport costs if this charge was lowered.

5.3 Option Three still provides telephone advice (up to 20 mins conversation, with a next working day target), but requires a payment to cover the direct costs the authority incurs. If selecting this option Members are requested to propose a fee for telephone advice. £10 is recommended.

5.4 Charging for advice is increasing common across a range of local authority services including planning & development.

#### 6. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

6.1 Charging for advice will potentially reduce the caseload for the pest control team, but ensure that their time can be focussed on providing treatments or where appropriate enforcement.

#### 7. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

7.1 The authority has no obligation to offer either pest control advice or a treatment service.

7.2 The authority has a duty to investigate complaints of rats on land and to ensure that owners and occupiers control rodent numbers, using enforcement powers and arranging works in default where appropriate.

#### 8. **Equality Impact Assessment**

8.1 No impact is identified.

#### 9. **Financial and Resource Implications**

9.1 Charging for telephone advice creates an additional entry in the council's list of fees and charges, which will need to be considered by Cabinet.

9.2 No significant income generation is anticipated as a result of introducing a charge.

10. **Major Risks**

10.1 No significant risks have been identified

11. **Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

11.1 No relevant considerations

12. **Key Decision Information**

12.1 This is not a key decision

13. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

13.1 None