

**HEADING:** Charging for the control of rats at residential properties

**Submitted by:** Nesta Henshaw – Head of Environmental Health Services

**Portfolio:** Environment & Recycling

**Ward(s) affected** All

### **Purpose of the Report**

To seek approval to charge for the treatment of rats at residential properties.

### **Recommendations**

- a) That a subsidised fixed charge of £30 for up to 4 visits should be applied for the treatment of rats at residential properties, subject to a fee waiver being available to applicants who can demonstrate their eligibility of the range of benefit entitlements listed in the report.
- b) That the final value of the charge be approved through the fees and charges approval process.
- c) That officers monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the charging regime and report back to Cabinet any need for modification or refinement.

### **Reasons**

Making a charge should help secure the continued provision of popular in-house pest control services for residents, whilst considering the Councils ever decreasing budget and resources to continue to offer 'free' or fully subsidised service. This will therefore achieve the requirements of the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/15 to 2018/19 and take into account the current operational capacity to deliver the service.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1. The Borough Council currently operates an in-house pest control service which delivers a range of pest control treatments to residents and business across the borough. The team currently resolve about 2,500 complaints, making approximately 5,000 treatment visits each year.
- 1.2. Over the last 10 years the service has adjusted its charges to ensure that the majority of its services are offered on a 'full cost recovery' basis. The service currently charges £65 for the treatment of insect pests such as wasps, ants or fleas. A subsidised service is offered for the treatment of mice at £25 for 3 visits. There is also a commercial service undertaken
- 1.3. It is anticipated that the pest control service will generate an income of £77,000 +VAT during the current financial year.
- 1.4. Income has been used to subsidise some specialist 'public health' treatments. Ensuring that these treatments remain affordable
- 1.5. Charges were introduced for the control of mice in January 2011. It is proposed to end free rat treatment for residential clients from April 2014

## **2. Issues**

- 2.1. Environmental Health Services, in line with all other parts of the authority, needs to review how it can reduce its expenditure or increase its income, to meet the requirements of the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/15 to 2018/19 and the Councils reducing budgets.

- 2.2. Currently the team receive about 1,000 requests each year to treat rats at domestic properties. This accounts for about 3000 to 3500 of the team's treatment visits.
- 2.3. It is anticipated that team resources will be reduced; accordingly the current volume of free rat control is unsustainable.
- 2.4. At present 7 of the 9 Staffordshire districts continue to provide pest control services. Of these 2 have contracted their service and 5 continue to deliver services through local authority staff. It is understood that 3 of the Councils which deliver services in house, including Newcastle, have a free rat treatment service in 2013/14.
- 2.5. Nationally an increasing number of authorities make some charge for rodent control. Most operate a set tariff structure, with the fee being agreed in advance of the treatment commencing.
- 2.6. There are valid public health arguments for continuing to maintain an in house pest control service which supports both residents and businesses. Guidance from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the professional body which represents Environmental Health Officers recommends: "*public health arguments prevail over financial considerations... ..when considering the imposition of charges and their scale*":

### 3. **Options Considered**

#### 3.1 **Option One: Retain Free Services**

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Popular. Residents currently expect these service to be delivered at no charge</li> <li>• Accessible. Ensures services are available to all residents, irrespective of ability to pay</li> <li>• Minimal administration required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsustainable with current resource constraints.</li> <li>• Would potentially impact on ability to deliver chargeable services reducing income and increasing net cost of service</li> </ul>

#### 3.2 **Option Two: Charge a subsidised fee (unit charge)** [Recommended Option] e.g. £30 for a treatment of up to 4 visits

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Straight forward to administer</li> <li>• Charge can be paid in advance, avoiding invoice processing</li> <li>• Affordable service – with charges equating to the costs of residents purchasing poisons themselves</li> <li>• Fixing a charge for a set number of visits encourages residents to take additional action themselves to ensure problem quickly resolved</li> <li>• Will encourage residents to attempt to resolve minor infestations themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced satisfaction with services provided, increased numbers of complaints about service delivery</li> <li>• Increased administration. 'Ownership' issues with residents unwilling to pay for services resulting from the actions/inactions of others.</li> <li>• Increased enforcement activity with resource implications</li> <li>• Potential for inappropriate and unsafe DIY treatments placing residents / pets / wildlife at risk</li> <li>• Likelihood that client will not seek assistance until infestation has grown</li> </ul>

#### 3.3 **Option Three: Charge for service at full cost recovery** e.g. charge calculated and invoiced at end of treatment

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures the authority generates income, at the market rate, for the professional services delivered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant dissatisfaction with services provided, with associated service complaints</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residents pay for exactly the service they have received</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complex to determine appropriate charge (officer time, travel and materials required vary with each case)</li> <li>Client can not be reliably advised of cost of work when placing request</li> <li>Charge may not be affordable to many clients. Anticipated charge would be approx £100 for typical treatment</li> <li>Increased likelihood that infestations will go untreated and problems escalate to affect other residents</li> <li>Potential for inappropriate and unsafe DIY treatments placing residents / pets / wildlife at risk</li> <li>Risk that clients may select other service providers, who may exploit vulnerabilities</li> <li>Significantly increased enforcement activity with resource implications</li> <li>Would require cases to be individually priced and invoiced on conclusion of treatment</li> <li>Likelihood that large number of charges would remain unpaid with associated recovery costs incurred</li> </ul>
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#### 4. Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution

4.1 The views of Public Protection committee have been sought and the committee discussed the accessibility of the service, in particular to those families on low income and how this could be simply assessed and administered by the Council (without incurring disproportionate costs), the committee recommended to Cabinet that **‘subject to a discretion to remit the fee in whole or in part in respect of low income families a charge of £30 for up to 4 visits to be made’** and that the final value of the charge be approved through the fees and charges approval process. Officers consider that there should be scope for introducing a process whereby a fee waiver could be offered based upon applicants demonstrating their eligibility of an appropriate range of benefit entitlements. To that end officers have reviewed the operating practices of a number of other Local Authorities in the area and consider that the following list of benefit entitlements would be appropriate at this stage:

- Council Tax Benefit
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support
- Job Seekers Allowance
- Pension Credit

The above list provides clarity about the eligible benefits at this time although it is not necessarily exhaustive and should be kept under review in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holders. Additionally it should be noted that in order to minimise the potential cost burden of administering the service it is intended to introduce a simple procedure for payment / assessment of the fee waiver. It would be prudent for officers to monitor the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the charging procedure and to report back to Cabinet should any refinement be needed.

- 4.2 Making a charge should help secure the continued provision of popular in-house pest control services for residents, whilst achieving the requirements of the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/15 to 2018/19.
- 4.3 Cabinet is requested to support option 2:
- a). That a subsidised fixed charge of £30 for up to 4 visits should be applied for the treatment of rats at residential properties, subject to a fee waiver being available to applicants who can demonstrate their eligibility of an appropriate range of benefit entitlements, the latter to be agreed with the relevant Portfolio Holder.
  - b). That the final value of the charge be approved through the fees and charges approval process.

## **5. Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community and Corporate Priorities**

- 5.1 Ensuring that the authority has the resources to assist residents with the control of rats in and around their homes is a fundamental public health role, which aligns directly with the council's priority to maintain a clean, safe and sustainable borough

## **6. Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 6.1 Although a local authority is not legally required to provide a pest control service, the Prevention of Damage By Pests Act 1949 (PDP Act) imposes a duty on councils to "take such steps as may be necessary to secure as far as practicable that their district is kept free from rats and mice," and in particular to keep the local authority's own land, and land the Local Authority occupies, free from rats and mice and to enforce the duties of owners and occupiers of land under the PDP Act.
- 6.2 Offering a treatment service is more cost effective than achieving compliance through enforcement activities.

## **7. Equality Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 No issues have been identified

## **8. Financial and Resource Implications**

- 8.1 It is anticipated that the proposed charge will produce approximately £10,000 inc vat of additional income.
- 8.2 The current demand for the service is likely to reduce once charges are adopted. This will enable the service to be delivered by 2FTE.

## **9. Major Risks**

- 9.1 There is a potential reputation risk to the authority if adopted charges are not affordable.
- 9.2 It is likely that many residents will attempt to resolve infestations themselves in the first instance. There are associated safety risk for them and the possibility that inappropriate use of poisons, or inaction, may make infestations harder to control.
- 9.3 A risk assessment has been undertaken and is available upon request.

## **10. Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

- 10.1 Service usage trend data suggest that there are significant numbers of rodents within the borough and that their numbers are rising.
- 10.2 If not appropriately managed rodent populations can adversely affect human health, damage building and crops, and impact adversely on other animals.

**11. Key Decision Information**

- 11.1 Agreeing, to make a charge for rat control at residential properties is a key decision as it will affect all wards within the Borough.

**12. Earlier Cabinet / Committee Resolutions**

- 12.1 Public Protection considered this matter on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013. Their recommendations are as 4.1 above.

**13. List of Appendices**

- 13.1 None