

Report to: Licensing and Environment Health Committee, 13 June 2022

Report of: Corporate Director – Operations, Homes & Communities

Subject: REVIEW INTO THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF A SUBSIDISED PEST CONTROL SERVICE FOR WORCESTER CITY

1. Recommendation

That Committee:

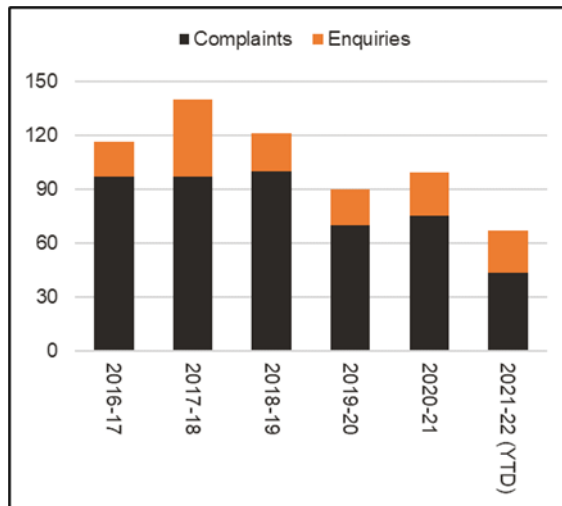
- 1.1 Notes the contents of the report, and in particular the outcome and conclusions of the review undertaken**
- 1.2 Supports the use of the Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme where applicable, to support residents deemed to be in financial hardship with the cost of essential pest control treatments.**

2. Background

- 2.1 In April 2010 the Council withdrew its Pest Control Service as part of budget setting for 2010/2011 onwards. The decision to withdraw the service was primarily made on the grounds of achieving savings but acknowledging that there was no statutory responsibility placed upon a Council to provide a Pest Control Service and that other measures are available to deal with significant infestations of rats & mice, where a property owner or landowner was responsible.
- 2.2 At Environment Committee on 25th January 2022, a funding proposal was submitted as part of the budget setting process for 2022/2023 linked to a request for the re-introduction of a subsidised pest control service for residents on low incomes.
- 2.3 It was agreed that rather than reach a decision about funding in the absence of information that would support Members in reaching an informed decision, that further work would be undertaken by officers with a view to bringing a report back to Licensing & Environmental Health Committee, as the Committee with functional oversight of the activities carried out by Worcestershire Regulatory Services on behalf of Worcester City Council.
- 2.4 Across Worcestershire there is a varied picture on the provision of a District Council subsidised pest control service with four councils providing a service through Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS), and Worcester City Council and Wyre Forest not doing so.
- 2.5 Each of those councils providing a service, specifies the benefits whose recipients qualify for the service and the pests included in the service provision. Eligible benefits are largely consistent across all four as illustrated in the table below. If eligibility and criteria is met, then a free pest control treatment is provided.

Council Area	Qualifying Benefit	Pests Covered
Bromsgrove	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) • Full Housing Benefit • 80% Council Tax Support • Universal Credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rats • Mice • Fleas • Bed bugs • Cockroaches
Redditch		
Malvern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income Support • Income Related Employment & Support Allowance • Job Seekers Allowance • Disability Allowance • Personal Independence Payment • Attendance Allowance • Housing Benefit (must be paid 100%) • Council Tax Benefit • Pension Guarantee Credits • Universal Credit 	
Wychavon		

- 2.6 The subsidised service is delivered via a framework agreement that has been subject to the host authority's procurement processes, which currently has six pest control contractors listed. Those not eligible to access the service are free to use these contractors or others by way of private contractual arrangements.
- 2.7 Across the UK it is estimated that between 20 – 30% of councils have withdrawn their pest control service and this shift has been driven by several factors as outlined below.
- 2.8 There is now a very buoyant and competitive pest control market including national, regional, and local pest control contractors. These are organisations and companies that specialise in pest control and have flexibility and resilience built into their system to deal with the changing nature of how people live and work nowadays. With increased choice, it became evident that pest control as a core historical local council function was less required than it was when local councils were at the heart of traditional public health work focussed on sanitation and infectious disease.
- 2.9 In terms of cost of delivering the service, when looking for the best value for money, it is highly likely that the cost of delivering a local council pest control service would be more expensive and less efficient than a private contractor. The purchase and maintenance of 1 dedicated van, the requirement of 1 or more likely 2 staff (to ensure resilience,) the relatively narrow range of pests dealt with and the traditional window of working means that it is likely to cost councils more on a per unit basis. The buoyant pest control market has also restricted the commercial opportunities for local council pest control services.
- 2.10 Since April 2016, 633 pest control cases have been recorded by WRS following contact from residents in Worcester City. The graph below indicates this clear downward trend.



- 2.11 Based on a population of just over 100,000 the case rate per 1000 population (resident/business making a pest control complaint or enquiry) in Worcester City during the 5-year period 2016/2017 - 2020/2021 is 5.25. This is a very low number, but it is acknowledged this will not include those people who have decided to approach a pest control contractor before seeking advice or guidance from WRS, have dealt with issues themselves or have not dealt with issues. These low numbers would support the fact that the Council has received very little if any representation from residents or businesses about the re-introduction of a pest control service or complaints about the council no longer providing one.
- 2.12 Having not had a pest control service for 12 years, reintroducing the service would present a risk both financially and reputationally. Based on information provided by neighbouring councils, it is likely that the cost of reintroducing the service in Worcester City would be in the region of £15,000 per annum.
- 2.13 This is not budgeted for at present, and neither is there a relevant reserve that exists which could be considered. A decision to reintroduce a subsidised pest control service therefore will present a budget pressure of circa £15,000 per annum with our medium-term financial plan confirming that the council needs to achieve a significant reduction in net spending as shown by the budget report published in February 2022.
- 2.14 Furthermore, reputationally there is a risk that if a subsidised pest control service is reintroduced only to be withdrawn at some point in the future, residents' expectations will have been mismanaged. Given that regular reviews into the provision of discretionary services being undertaken over the next several years are highly likely, it is not considered prudent at this stage to reintroduce a non-statutory service that will create an ongoing revenue pressure.
- 2.15 The presence of a river and canal running through the centre of the city will naturally lead to the presence of rodents, particularly in areas where there is high density of population and accessible food sources. However, modern building materials and techniques, good hygiene and control of waste disposal minimise the risk of significant rodent infestations and their impact. The treatment of mice and rats is relatively straightforward with effective controls and advice readily available commercially for residents to take advantage of.

- 2.16 As already set out in this report, there are legal controls available to deal with rat and mice infestations from third-party properties or land that create issues (Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949). Notice, prosecution and works in default powers are available to local authorities under the legislation where the owner or occupier of a third-party property does not address a significant pest issue.
- 2.17 Environmental Health Officers, Private Sector Housing Officers and Environmental Enforcement Officers will respond where a complaint is received and enforcement action will be taken, if necessary, to resolve the issue. So if a resident or business believes they have pests, the cause of which is linked to another property they should report it to the council at [Contact form - Worcester City Council](#) .
- 2.18 Severn Trent Water provides funding to WRS to undertake sewer baiting across the County including in Worcester City, and the service targets areas with known problems or areas with higher rates of rodent complaints.
- 2.19 Additional investment was approved during 2021/2022 to ensure that the City was kept clean and tidy, removing opportunities for vermin, particularly discarded food. Other measures such as the reintroduction of Saturday skips, investment in public bins, and new bins in the City Centre will all play their part in discouraging vermin.
- 2.20 It is also important to note that the Council provides financial support to people on low incomes in a variety of ways to meet essential costs such as food, energy, and utility bills which in turn will play some part in protecting the level of disposable income available.
- 2.21 The council is one of very few in the UK that provides 100% Council Tax relief for those on lowest incomes. There is a Council Tax Hardship fund in place which assesses people's financial difficulty on a case-by-case basis. We continue to deploy financial assistance and grants through the household support fund provided by Government, the latest amount being more than £3,000,000 across the County and with £179,000 being able to be directly deployed by Worcester City Council. The council continues to support local organisations via grant funding, including Worcester Foodbank.
- 2.22 The council also provides a Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme (DWAS) which is intended to assist vulnerable low-income Worcester households in crisis who need assistance with the cost of food, white goods, or other essential supplies. The scope of the scheme was broadened (to include all essential costs) at the outset of COVID-19 in response to the government funding that was and continues to be provided to aid recovery and emerging cost pressures. This scheme would be open to those residents who would be seeking financial support with the cost of emergency pest control treatments (in response to a public health risk) where financial hardship was a factor.
- 2.23 As part of the review, a number of Registered Housing Providers were also contacted to understand the support they provide to their tenants who report pest control issues. Based on 2011 Census Data and affordable housing completion data provided within the Worcester City Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2019, social rented properties make up over 7000 of the City's circa 50,000 properties.
- 2.24 It was clear that good levels of support were in place for social rented tenants and that once pest control issues were reported to their landlord, an inspection would be carried out and repairs and or treatments arranged on their behalf. Historically it was very

often the case that landlords would only intervene where the pest control issue was affecting communal areas, but many landlords now appreciate that a one size fits all approach is not appropriate and that what starts out as an isolated issue, can without resolution become a wider issue affecting more households.

- 2.25 It is the concluding view of officers therefore, that it is not necessary to reintroduce a subsidised pest control service due to the following main reasons:
- 1) Pest control is a discretionary service that if reintroduced in Worcester City would create an annual revenue budget pressure in the region of £15,000 per annum at a time when the council needs to achieve significant reduction in net spending as shown by the budget report published in February.
 - 2) There is a buoyant pest control market including national, regional and local contractors who can provide a reactive, flexible and resilient service across a range of pest issues.
 - 3) The Council can take enforcement action in respect of significant pest infestation issues where this is caused by the failure of a third party to control matters on their property. In addition, Registered Housing Providers are supporting tenants with their pest control issues.
 - 4) Numbers of service requests and complaints about pest control have decreased over the last 5 years and the rate per 1000 population average across Worcester City is very low at 5.25.
 - 5) The Council already provides a wide range of financial support to residents on low income and in financial hardship to support them with essential costs and protect their disposable income.

3. Preferred Option

- 3.1 The review and conclusion of this report is that at this current time there does not appear to be a compelling business case to reintroduce a subsidised pest control service for Worcester City.
- 3.2 The report does recognise however that households in financial hardship are likely to find it more difficult to pay for pest control services, perhaps not perceiving it as important as other essential costs such as food and energy.
- 3.3 Therefore, in addition to the existing breadth of financial support available to residents to support with essential costs, the report proposes that this Committee endorses the use of the existing Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme for those in financial hardship to support with the costs of essential pest control services for public health pests.

4. Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The option to re-introduce a pest control service would likely be centred around 2 models. These include –
 - 1) The provision of a 'full cost recovery' pest control service with no subsidies in place either delivered in house or through a procured pest control contractor; or

2) The provision of a 'subsidised' pest control service only available to residents who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit either delivered in house or through a procured pest control contractor

- 4.2 In respect of option 1, this has been discounted as in effect this would result in the Council adding cost to its base budget (staff costs, van, equipment, materials, etc) likely to be in the region of £30,000 - £50,000 per annum.
- 4.3 Although the aim would be to recover all costs of delivering the service, this would prove very difficult given that Worcester City Council has not provided such a service for twelve years and there is a very active and competitive pest control contractor market both locally and regionally that would be able to respond far more flexibly to demand than a more traditional Council service. Introducing charges to all for the service would also drive down demand, particularly for those on low income or in financial hardship.
- 4.4 The reasons for not recommending option 2 have been set out within section 3 of this report. However, if the Council was minded to approving option 2, then it would be preferable to do so via the uplift mechanism available via the Worcestershire Regulatory Services Shared Service arrangement, with WRS administering the scheme on the Councils' behalf.
- 4.5 It would be advisable that any qualifying criteria we seek to apply should be in line with criteria we currently reference for other subsidised services such as bulky waste and leisure memberships etc. In addition, it would seem sensible to only include treatments for public health pests including rats, mice, fleas, bed bugs and cockroaches. This would not include bees, wasps or squirrels etc.
- 4.6 Advice would also be sought on whether Worcester City Council could benefit from the existing contractual arrangement between the host authority for WRS and the selected pest control contractors via a framework.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

This report does not recommend the reintroduction of a pest control service and therefore the recommendation presents no financial and budgetary implications.

As already set out in the report however, if the Council were minded reintroducing such a service, then based on figures from a neighbouring council it is likely that costs of doing so on a subsidised basis would be in the region of £15,000 - £20,000 each year.

These costs have not been budgeted for and there is no current reserve applicable to this area of work. Funding the reintroduction of this service would therefore create a budget pressure both in year (pro-rata) and future years in the region of £15,000 - £20,000 per annum.

The Medium Term Financial Plan 2022 – 2027 approved by Council in February 2022 sets out the need to achieve a significant reduction in net spending over the MTFP period and likely beyond.

5.2 Legal and Governance Implications

As stated within the main body of the report, District Councils are under no statutory duty to provide a pest control service.

The duty placed on every local authority via The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, is as follows –

- To take such steps as may be necessary to secure so far as practicable that their district is kept free from rats and mice, and in particular—
 - (a) from time to time to carry out such inspections as may be necessary for the purpose aforesaid.
 - (b) to destroy rats and mice on land of which they are the occupier and otherwise to keep such land so far as practicable free from rats and mice.
 - (c) to enforce the duties of owners and occupiers of land under the following provisions of this Part of this Act, and to carry out such operations as are authorised by those provisions.

Furthermore, the Act provides enforcement powers for Councils to serve a Legal Notice requesting steps to be taken for the destruction of rats and mice, and these can be discharged through both the Council (Private Sector Housing) and Worcestershire Regulatory Services, where it is deemed necessary.

5.3 Risk Implications

The key risks identified are that of financial risk and reputational risk as set out at para 2.12 – 2.14.

5.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

The Worcester City Plan 2022 – 2027 includes three priorities that relate to the subject of this report. Stronger and Connected Communities, Healthy and Active City, and Enhancing and Sustaining our Beautiful City for Future Generations. Good quality housing, appropriate and accessible health services and our city being a beautiful place to be in as a resident or visitor are all key outcomes that we are seeking to deliver.

5.5 Equality Implications

There are not considered to be any equality implications associated with this report as the recommendation within the report is not considered to impact any one group of protected characteristics negatively or positively.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

There are no human resource implications in respect of what this report is recommending.

However, if the Council wished to reintroduce a pest control service and furthermore wished for this to be delivered in house and not through Worcestershire Regulatory Services or a procured contractor, then this would require recruitment of at least one pest control officer and require consideration as to where this function sat within the council and who it reported to.

5.7 Health and Safety Implications

There are no health and safety implications in respect of what this report is recommending.

However, if the Council wished to reintroduce a pest control service and furthermore wished for this to be delivered in house and not through Worcestershire Regulatory Services or a procured contractor, then this would require a series of health and safety risk assessments and working procedures to be developed to support the work of a pest control officer. His or her work would then require regular monitoring and assessment to ensure risk assessments and working procedures were being followed.

5.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

The social impacts of not reintroducing a subsidised pest control service include the impact that pest issues can have on a property and in particular its household if they are unable to afford or arrange a treatment, or in doing so places them under increasing financial pressure.

These impacts are mitigated as has already been set out within this report including by using enforcement powers and via the range of financial support provided by the Council through various schemes to those on low incomes and in financial hardship.

There are not considered to be any significant environmental or economic implications in respect of this report.

Ward(s): All

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Background Papers: N/A