



Report to: Environment Committee, 19th July 2022

Report of: Corporate Director – Operations, Homes and Communities

Subject: PROPOSAL TO INTRODUCE A SUBSIDISED DOMESTIC PEST CONTROL SERVICE FOR WORCESTER CITY RESIDENTS

1. Recommendation

That the Committee:

- 1.1 Approves the implementation of a subsidised domestic pest control service as set out at Appendix 1, for Worcester City residents at a cost of £20,000 per annum.**
- 1.2 Approves funding of £41,000 to be taken from the Worcestershire Regulatory Services 2021/2022 underspend to cover the cost of the service between the period 1st September 2022 – 31st August 2024.**
- 1.3 Notes that future costs of delivering the service will be built into future budgets via the review of the medium-term financial plan.**

2. Background

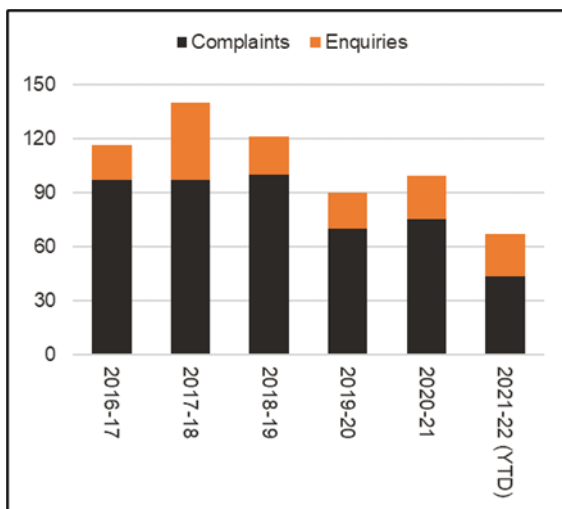
- 2.1 In April 2010 the Council withdrew its Pest Control Service as part of budget setting for 2010/2011 onwards. The decision to withdraw the service was primarily made on the grounds of achieving savings but acknowledging that there was no statutory responsibility placed upon a Council to provide 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 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 On 7th June 2022, Licensing & Environmental Health Committee agreed to recommend to the Environment Committee the implementation of a subsidised domestic pest control service. Additional information requested during the meeting has been incorporated into this report for a final decision as the relevant Policy Committee.

- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 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 • Wasp Nests
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		

- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 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.

- 2.10 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.
- 2.11 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.



- 2.12 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.
- 2.13 It was highlighted at Licensing and Environmental Health Committee however, that many Councillors have residents approach them concerning pest control matters that they would direct to private companies knowing there is no service provided by the Council.
- 2.14 Having not had a pest control service for 12 years, introducing the service would present a risk both financially and reputationally. Based on information provided by neighbouring councils, it is likely that the cost of introducing the service in Worcester City would cost up to £20,000 per annum.
- 2.15 This is not budgeted for at present, and neither is there a relevant reserve that exists which could be considered.

A decision to introduce a subsidised pest control service therefore will present a budget pressure of circa £20,000 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.

- 2.16 Subject to approval of this report this base budget pressure would commence in September 2024 as it is proposed to utilise WRS underspend (not accounted for in councils' base budget) from 2021/2022 to fund the service from 1st September 2022 – 31st August 2024.
- 2.17 Reputationally there is a risk that if a subsidised pest control service is introduced only to be withdrawn at some point in the future, residents' expectations will have been mismanaged. Should a decision to later withdraw the service be made through any regular reviews into the provision of discretionary services over the next few years (which is highly likely) it will be important to publish and communicate a clear rationale with supporting evidence for such a decision.
- 2.18 There are many ways in which pest control issues have and can be addressed. 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.
- 2.19 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.
- 2.20 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](#) .
- 2.21 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.
- 2.22 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.
- 2.23 The Council already 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.
- 2.24 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.

- 2.25 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 could 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.
- 2.26 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 8000 of the City's circa 50,000 properties.
- 2.27 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, they would attempt to identify if they do have a responsibility and if that was the case, 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. This is certainly true of rat, mice and cockroach infestations caused by property defects but fleas and bedbugs would not receive support.
- 2.28 For tenants with private landlords, the situation is similar. Unless a property defect which is the landlord's responsibility has caused the pest issue, most tenancy agreements will require tenants to deal with pest control issues themselves. The only exception would be if there was a pre-existing pest presence at the start of the tenancy which would be difficult to prove.
- 2.29 In order to ensure any subsidised pest control service that is reintroduced reaches those in financial need, there are three aspects that have been considered: how to identify financial hardship; how the service can practically be delivered; and how awareness and knowledge of the service can be targeted to those who meet the eligibility criteria identified.
- 2.30 You will note from table 2.5 above what the other District Councils in Worcestershire have identified as appropriate eligibility criteria for the service in their areas. The list is based on benefits that are largely means tested (for financial hardship) but that are easily identified or checked by the pest control technician when they attend the resident's property to treat the pest.

There are a number of complexities, such as in the case of contributory or new style Job Seekers Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, which are not means tested but it is not possible or reasonable for the pest control technician to readily identify the difference between the type that is and that which is not means-tested. The key benefits which would largely identify financial hardship are:

- Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)
- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit
- Full Housing Benefit
- Council Tax Benefit

2.31 In addition, Worcester City provide financial subsidy for Leisure services to residents in receipt of specific benefits. For consistency the following benefits/status should be included as eligible criteria in Worcester:

- Child Tax Credit
- Carer's Allowance
- Income Support
- Pension Guarantee Credits
- Working Tax Credit
- Foster Carer's with Foster Children.

2.32 In order to ensure that any new service is communicated to those communities and households that need it, the recipients of qualifying benefits provided by the local authority could be provided with information on the service in any language considered appropriate. A Communication strategy to include publicity and media releases can be developed to support the service and reissued during key times of the year where pest infestations are likely.

3. Preferred Option

3.1 Licensing and Environmental Health Committee agreed to recommend to Environment Committee the implementation of a subsidised domestic pest control service should recognising 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.

3.2 A subsidised pest control service for recipients of specific benefits will target support where the service is required most.

3.3 Delivery of the pest control service through the existing arrangements that WRS delivers for the other District Council is the preferred method via a financial uplift mechanism available in the WRS Shared Service arrangement. This reduces overall costs of the service through economies of scale and provides a consistent standard of service across most of the County. The current contractual arrangements that WRS have in place enables an additional local authority to be added to that framework with the agreement of the contractors who have expressed a positive response to the proposal.

4. Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 Full Recovery Pest Control Service - The alternative option to introduce a pest control service would likely be 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
- 4.2 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 Alternative delivery method of Subsidised service – The resource and material costs in delivering a full cost recovery service (as set out above) would also be a factor should the Council chose to deliver the service directly in house. Similarly, the administration costs would also be a factor should a procured pest control contractor be arranged outside of the process that WRS already delivers for the other councils of Worcestershire.
- 4.5 Utilisation of existing mechanisms available to residents with pest issues to support with essential costs in the absence of a service provision - Consideration was given by Licensing and Environmental Health Committee members on how the mechanisms set out in 2.15 to 2.21 currently work and how that Committee could endorse 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. The conclusion of the Committee was that the scheme was not accessible by local residents sufficiently for it to make enough of a difference where many households are facing financial difficulties.
- 4.6 Alternative pests: It would seem sensible to include treatments for public health pests including rats, mice, fleas, bed bugs and cockroaches. For consistency the treatment of wasp nests has also been proposed as that is a service provided by the other District Councils in Worcestershire acknowledging the impact these can have in or in close proximity to a residential property.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

It is proposed to fund the implementation of this new service for an initial 2-year period by utilising the remainder of Worcester City Councils' proportion of Worcestershire Regulatory Services underspend for 2021/2022.

The total Worcester City proportion of underspend for that period was £66,000 (against a WRS total underspend of £397,000). At WRS Board on 23rd June, Members approved a customer improvement project at a total cost of £247,000 with Worcester City Councils contribution being £25,000.

This has therefore left £41,000 of Worcester City underspend and given that the upper costs of delivering a subsidised pest control service have been estimated to be £20,000 per annum, it is proposed to utilise the remaining underspend to fund the service for a period of 2 years (1st Sep 2022 – 31st Aug 2024).

This underspend has not been accounted for as part of the Councils 2021/2022 final outturn position and neither has it been allocated or committed up until this point.

Subject to approval of this report, then as part of reviewing the medium-term financial plan it will be necessary to build the cost of delivering a subsidised pest control service into future budgets.

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

The recommendations of this report will have a positive impact on those residents that are under financial hardship by providing a free pest control service.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

There are no human resource implications in respect of what this report is recommending as the administration and management of the arrangements can be included within the current service of WRS.

However, if the Council wished for this service 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 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. Their 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 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 by placing them under increasing financial pressure are mitigated by the recommendation of this report.

These impacts can be somewhat 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.

The pest control service currently deployed across the county is largely in diesel vehicles and these contracts will likely be providing some of the service as a paid service already. The recommendations will have a negligible impact on carbon emissions directly, but by providing a service to resolve pest control issues at an earlier stage it reduces the likelihood of larger infestations developing where treatment cannot be afforded which require a greater intensity of resources to be provided.

Some influence can be put on contractors to utilise ultra-low emission vehicles through the procurement process which will similarly have a positive impact.

There is minimal positive impact from the recommendation other than reducing the likelihood of individuals undertaking their own action to control pests with poison that were used inappropriately could have a negative impact on wildlife.

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Background Papers: Minutes of Licensing & Environmental Health Committee
13th June 2022

Appendix 1 – Proposed Domestic Subsidised Pest Control Service for Worcester City residents

This service would only be available to residents (subject to criteria below) living within the District Administrative Boundary of Worcester City Council and would only apply to domestic properties they are residing in.

Only those residents in receipt of the following benefits will be eligible to access the service:

- Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)
- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit
- Full Housing Benefit
- Council Tax Benefit
- Child Tax Credit
- Carer's Allowance
- Income Support
- Pension Guarantee Credits
- Working Tax Credit
- Foster Carer's with Foster Children.

The service will only provide treatments in respect of the following pests:

- Rats
- Mice
- Fleas
- Bedbugs
- Cockroaches
- Wasps Nests

