

LOCAL AUTHORITY PEST MANAGEMENT SERVICES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: 2002 AND 2009 NATIONAL PEST ADVISORY PANEL SURVEYS

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Abstract The National Pest Advisory Panel (NPAP) was established in 2001 to advise the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) on pest control policy. As part of its work, the NPAP sent a detailed survey to all Local Authorities (LAs) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2002 and 2009 about their approaches to pest management. Response rates were very similar; with a 67% response rate in 2002 and 69% in 2009. This paper examines the results of the two surveys and discusses the impact of the changes that have taken place. The major findings of the survey included a decline in the number of LAs that operated an in house pest control service – from 99% in 2002 to 89.1% in 2009. Changes were also apparent in the type of services being offered with a greater proportion contracting out their pest control services (13% to 22%) The involvement of Environmental Health Officers had declined and an increase in the number of LAs using enforcement action. The results show significant shifts in the way in which pest management services are provided and managed. The adverse public health impact of the current the Comprehensive Review is also considered. This paper will discuss the impacts of these changes on pest management and the importance of maintaining pest management services as a core part of environmental health.

Key Words Urban pest management, economics, public health, local authorities

INTRODUCTION

The National Pest Advisory Panel (NPAP) was established by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) in 2001 to advise the CIEH on pest control policy and to provide the necessary leadership and guidance to those in charge of local authority (LA) pest control services and those involved in pest management. The NPAP's mission is to ensure that pest management is undertaken and managed in a professional way so as to protect public health. Its primary objectives include: raising the profile of pest management within the UK, leading to a better understanding of the need for good pest management; establishing channels of communication throughout industry, government and academics which will lead to a greater awareness of pest related problems. By promoting good practice, the NPAP aim to improve standards of pest management throughout the UK by promoting good practice, leading to reduced pest levels and pesticide use. In addition, members of the NPAP provide expert advice to government departments and agencies via CIEH; identifying and promoting research needs into pest management issues.

Historically pest management was considered a function of public health protection until the early 1980s when the role of central government was reduced resulting in a decline in liaison between central and local government. With increasing financial pressure on local government, authorities have reviewed pest management services, and given that this is not a statutory function (or duty) have examined the possibility of imposing charges. They were no longer required to make an annual return on the treatments undertaken and over time, differences arose in the pests treated and the charges made. The Best Value Regime introduced under the Local Government Act 1999 placed additional demands on services provided by LAs to become streamlined in regards to economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Bean and Hussey, 2000; Audit Commission, 2008). This additional pressure on services and has often resulted in decisions to abolish in-house pest management services or in some cases to wholly contract out these services.

These changes led the NPAP to recognize the need for reliable data about how local authority pest management services are operationalised and delivered within the UK. The first NPAP survey in 2002 was conducted to provide such baseline information with the intention of undertaking further surveys periodically. The findings of the first survey (Murphy and Battersby, 2005) highlighted several points of concern including the variation of; services offered, staffing, structure and training, performance measuring, charging and pest treatments between LAs. The results from the survey suggested that pest management is now considered as an additional, non statutory service that in some cases could be used as an income generator or could only be provided with the introduction of charging and not paid for solely by local taxation. It also emphasised the lack of a co-ordinating body leaving LAs to develop local policies and procedures for delivering services.

In 2009 the NPAP conducted its second pest management survey to follow up the original survey in 2002 and this paper presents the shifts in LA pest management in the intervening time.

METHODS

The 2002 questionnaire provided a detailed baseline of the pest management services provided by LAs in England, Wales and N. Ireland. The 2009 replicated the questions of the 2002 survey and was augmented by a further two sections on health surveillance and the use of legal powers. The same methodology was followed with questionnaires posted to all LA Chief Officers with a follow up reminder to all non-responders. Responses were entered into the existing SPSS database. In 2002, 277 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 67%. In 2009, 258 were returned, giving a response rate of 69% (some LAs had merged or been reorganized between the two surveys). Analysis confirmed that the make up of the sample was similar in both years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A number of measures suggest that the links between pest control and environmental health is weakening. In 2002, 99% of respondents offered a pest control service, but by 2009 this had fallen to 89.9%. Significant differences were found in the type of service being offered (in house (down from 78% to 71%), contracted out (up from 13% to 22%), or a mixture of these (from 9% to 7%; ($\chi^2=7.7$; $df\ 2$; $p = 0.02$) with a greater proportion contracting out their pest control provision in 2009. The proportion of services where an Environmental Health Officer was involved also fell (from 77% in 2002 to 73% in 2009). There may be several reasons for these changes, including financial constraints, a perceived lack of demand for the service (often as a result of introducing charges) or the lack of a statutory requirement to offer an in house service.

Respondents were asked a number of questions about staff training and development. The number of LAs with structured training programmes for pest management staff decreased significantly between the two surveys

Table 1. Changes in LA services between 2002 and 2009.

Public Health Pest	In-house	Contractors	Advice Only	Enforcement
Bedbugs	-28%	+35%	+118%	+60%
Birds	-43%	+11%	+10%	+75%
Cockroaches	-25%	+61%	+140%	+88%
Exotic ants	-20%	+35%	+38%	+44%
Fleas	-25%	+33%	+127%	+42%
Flies	-29%	+35%	+18%	+215%
Mice	-25%	+42%	+100%	+30%
Rats	-23%	+36%	+111%	+19%
Nuisance Pest	In-house	Contractor treatments	Advice Only	Enforcement
Garden ants	-35%	+44%	+7%	+150%
Wasps	-26%	+11%	+129%	+125%

Results confirm a reduction in in-house treatments, a rise in the use of contractors, advice, enforcement and in the number of LAs not dealing with pest species

down from 65% in 2002 to 54% in 2009 ($c^2 = 5.96$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.01$). Fewer LAs required supervisors or operators to have a formal qualification in pest management, down from 84% in 2002 to 77% in 2009

There are a number of ways in which LAs may deal with pest problems. They may offer in-house provision, or use a contractor, or offer advice only, or deal with an infestation by using enforcement action. For certain pests they may not offer any form of service. The authors examined the changes which had taken place between the two surveys (Table 1). Currently LAs often provide services for both public health and nuisance pests, with the income for nuisance pests used to offset the costs of providing services for public health pests.

For all pests, there was a reduction in the overall number of LAs providing in-house treatments. A t-test confirmed a significant difference between the 2002 and 2009 surveys ($p = 0.045$). Results revealed that the number of authorities using contractors had risen. More LAs were taking enforcement action, suggesting that less time was being spent in exploring other environmental health options, such as providing advice, guidance and education. LAs have set their own tariffs for the charges made, but have often treated rats in domestic premises free of charge. These tariffs vary considerably and there is often a complex rubric applied, depending on individual circumstances. Again, an overall reduction in the extent of free treatments is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reductions in the free treatments offered for pest management services in privately owned domestic dwellings.

Public Health Pest	Privately owned domestic dwellings		
	Free 2002	Free 2009	% Reduction
Birds	11	3	-73%
Cockroaches	97	56	-42%
Fleas	44	26	-41%
Flies	20	12	-40%
Mice	121	71	-41%
Rats	174	112	-36%
Nuisance Pest	Privately owned domestic dwellings		
	Free 2002	Free 2009	% Reduction
Ants- exotic	20	11	-45%
Bedbugs	98	54	-45%
Wasps	11	7	-36%

The results have shown that there are greater numbers of LAs delivering their services through contracts. The two surveys examined the mechanisms used to monitor these contracts. There were two types, one which was a 'fixed' contract, with a fixed price for specified pest(s) over a set time. The other was based on the jobs done. Some LAs has a mixture of both. Respondents were asked about the frequency with which contracts were monitored (Quarterly (up from 15% to 42%); Annually (down from 15% to 6%); Randomly (down from 45% to 42%) or not formally audited (down from 25% to 10%) and a significant difference was found, with the largest shift apparent in the proportion of LAs undertaking quarterly monitoring of their pest management surveys in 2009. Contracts were also more likely to be monitored by someone with a specific pest management qualification, up from 26% in 2002 to 39% in 2009.

CONCLUSION

These results show significant shifts in the way in which LA pest management services are provided and managed. These changes are likely to be compounded by new financial pressures being driven by the introduction of the 2010 central government Comprehensive Spending Review announced in November 2010 (H M Treasury 2010).

This Treasury led- process of allocating resources across all government departments results in allocation of their budget to different services depending on the perceived priorities such as children's services. The spending review comes at a time when the State is spending significantly more than it raises in taxation (deficit). This fixed spending budget outlines budget cuts for all Governments department until 2014- 15 to narrow the State deficit. LAs are facing an average loss of grant of 7.25%, in real terms, for the next four years (Pickles, 2010).

At the time of writing, many LAs were unveiling their plans for service cuts in line with the government's Comprehensive Spending Review. The cuts span a wide range of services and many are considering withdrawing any services that are not required by statute such as libraries, bus services and pest control (Curtis, 2010; Hastings, 2011; Morris, 2011; Butler, 2011). However where services are seen as essential LAs are investigating ways in which to lower cost, often via the contracting or sharing of services. A recent survey recorded a 46% increase in interest by council leaders for the contracting out of services to the private sector while 95% said they planned to share services (Thraves, 2010). These financial pressures are resulting in local authorities reviewing their pest management services and either introducing charges for services/outsourcing services or withdrawing them all together.

A number of large UK cities are announcing their plans to meet the budgetary cuts. Manchester, a large UK city must save £109 million for 2011/ 12 rising to £170 million for 2012/ 13 resulting in savings of 25% over the next two years. (Manchester City Council, 2011). Bristol City Council pest control service has had a budget cut of £114,000.00 for 2011/ 12 from the original budget of £609,000.00. Overall the council must save £22 million for 2011/ 12 rising to £50 million for 2012/13 (Bristol City Council, 2011). Similarly, Birmingham City Council had announced budget cuts of £212.8 million for 2011/ 12 rising to £300 million by 2014/ 15 as well as a £78 million reduction in other specific government grants for 2011/ 12 (Birmingham City Council, 2011). Worcester City Council's pest control service will cease from April, 2011 due to £4.5 million of cuts and will be monitored via enforcement (Connell, 2010).

The outcome of these measures is likely to result in a loss of LA expertise in pest management and a reduction in the services which protect some of the most vulnerable groups in society and those who are least likely to be able to afford to pay for services. Comparison of the 2002 and 2009 survey confirmed that the link with environmental health had weakened and the comprehensive spending review may well sever it completely. Contracting out pest management to private providers may mean that there are 'reactive' services. However, the ability to apply effective integrated pest management regimes will diminish and whilst treatments in individual premises may reduce pest numbers, without the tools available to LA in house services (such as the links with housing, waste management and where appropriate the use of enforcement) integrated pest management in urban areas will diminish and vector borne diseases will become more likely (Bonney et al., 2008).

The drift towards enforcement may appear to be the cheaper option however administrative costs are rarely considered. Often even the introductions of token charges for pest control services dramatically decreases the demand for the service. Liverpool City Council made such a switch in service. The council went from offering a free service for the control of public health pests, such as rats and mice, to token charges of £15 + VAT. The council witnessed, for some pests, over 50% reduction in demand and following a review, reintroduced free treatment for public health pests. Service requests returned to their previous levels (Hughes, 2009).

Differences in the political make up of elected representative may well influence views on the priorities of service provision. The UK's CIEH has argued that public health considerations must prevail over financial expediency when LAs consider contracting out of services or the imposition of charges and that there is little evidence that cost savings are achieved by loss of or reduction in service (CIEH, 2011) and (CIEH, 2007).

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