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LOCAL AUTHORITY PEST CONTROL SERVICES IN THE UK: PESTS, PERFORMANCE AND PROFIT

[1]GAI MURPHY, [2]JOANNE FOZZARD, [3]DAVID OLDBURY, AND [2]SABRA FEARON

[1]College of Science and Technology, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT, UK
[2]Killgerm Group, Wakefield Road Ossett, WF5 9AJ, UK
[3]Chartered Institute of Environ. Health, 21 Raven Road, Timperley, Cheshire, WA15 6AP, UK

Abstract The National Pest Advisory Panel of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) in the UK was established in 2001 to advise the CIEH on pest control policy. It developed a pest survey to understand the way in which pest management services within local authorities were operationalised and delivered in the UK. This paper examines some of the changes that have taken place between the 2002 survey and the 2012 survey. Within this interval the economic downturn resulted in significant job cuts in the public sector. There was a significant reduction in the number of local authorities that continued to provide an in-house pest management service to its residents. Significant reductions were found in the proportions of local authorities providing pest management services for specific public health pests.
Key words Urban pest management, local authorities, in-house pest control services.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing the continued resourcing of local authority in-house pest management services may seriously impact on public health in the UK. Pest control is a core element of environmental health with specialist knowledge and practices that tackle pest issues and ultimately protect public health within the wider context (Bonnefoy et al., 2008). Focusing on the wider determinants of health makes an important contribution to the improvement of society's quality of life, health and wellbeing (Burke et al., 2002).

The National Pest Advisory Panel of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (NPAP) was set up in 2001 to advise the CIEH on pest control policy (NPAP, 2002). The object of the CIEH in its charter is to promote for the public benefit the theory and science of environmental health in all its aspects and the dissemination of knowledge about environmental health. It is a professional and educational body dedicated to the promotion of environmental health and encouraging the highest possible standards in the training and work of environmental professionals.

Pest management has been a neglected area of public health policy in the UK. There has been little consistent, reliable data on activities of the local authorities and municipalities in controlling pest species and this has in turn resulted in a fragmented approach to the control of pests of public health importance. Following the economic downturn in 2008/9, the UK Government's Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010) laid out the approach to dealing with the deficit. It detailed the likely loss of 490,000 public sector jobs and an average cut of 19% over a 4 year period in government departmental budgets. The pattern of cuts was not uniform across the country.

Planned cuts (which excluded education, fire and police services) between 2009/10 and 2011/12 exceeded 15% in approximately one quarter of local authority areas whilst in another quarter, they were less than 6% (Crawford and Philips, 2012). UNISON, which is one of the largest trade unions, representing staff who provide public services, examined the potential impact of these cuts by surveying their members who worked in environmental health services (n = 4,000) in June 2012; they received 422 responses. These employees reported a diminishing workforce and reduced services. Respondents expressed concern about landlords, highlighting that with less active regulatory staff, rogue landlords could become more confident about acting with impunity. Respondents pointed out the impact of poor housing and exposure to pests, such as bed bugs, on the health of families and particularly the effect on children. A large proportion expected that some services across their authority would be withdrawn altogether in the future and a number reported that they no longer provided a pest control service for their residents. Over half of the respondents reported the introduction or increase in charging for pest control services, with residents, when they could afford to, trying to control pest problems themselves. The need for reliable data about the way in which pest management services across the UK are operationalised and delivered became apparent to the NPAP, as anecdotal evidence indicated wide variations of approach.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The NPAP questionnaire was sent to all Chief Officers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2002 (n = 406) and 2012 (n = 368), allowing an overview of the changes that occurred in the 10 year window.

RESULTS

In 2002, 268 of the 406 local authorities returned questionnaires and in 2012, 151 of the 368 local authorities (reduction in numbers of local authorities as a result of some reorganisations) returned questionnaires giving response rates of 64% and 41% respectively.

Results confirmed a significant shift in the provision of in house pest management services in this period. In 2002 only 1% (n = 254; n = 3) of those who responded did not provide an in house pest management service. By 2012, this had risen to 10% (n = 151; n = 15) (Fisher's exact test $p<0.005$). Those who no longer offered an in-house pest management service were asked when the service had been withdrawn (Table 1). Between 2004 and 2009, respondents reported the withdrawal of pest control services from four authorities; however between 2010 and 2012, 10 authorities reported the cessation of their in-house pest management services. The survey was first sent out early in 2012 and may not have captured the full extent of the closures during that year. Financial and/or budgetary cuts were cited as the reasons why all of these in house pest control services had been withdrawn.

The proportion of local authorities offering in-house service to treat for pests in 2002 and 2012 are detailed in Table 2. Significant reductions in the numbers of local authorities offering in-house services between 2002 and 2012 were found for all the pests listed, apart from in-house services to control birds. These results suggest that for a number of important public health pests, local authorities had reduced their services.

Table 1. Year local authorities ceased offering in-house or out-sourced pest control.

Year	In house	Out-sourced	Both	Total
2004	1	0	0	1
2005	0	1	1	2
2009	0	1	0	1
2010	2	1	0	3
2011	3	2	0	5
2012	1	1	0	2
Total	7	6	1	14

Table 2. Percentage of respondents offering in-house pest service in 2002 and 2012.

In-house services provided for:	2002	2012	Significance
Rats	87%	76%	P= 0.005
Mice	86%	75%	P = 0.002
Birds	28%	24%	P = 0.44
Wasps	86%	71%	P= 0.001
Flies	60%	47%	P=0.015
Cockroaches	86%	67%	P <0.005
Fleas	88%	66%	P< 0.005
Bed bugs	87%	65%	P<0.005
Dermestid beetles	49%	37%	P=0.023

Table 3. Percentage of respondents only offering advice for pests in 2002 and 2012.

In-house services provided for:	2002	2012	Significance
Rats	6.5%	10.9%	P= 0.149
Mice	7.3%	12.2%	P = 0.118
Birds	51%	54.5%	P = 0.531
Wasps	8.4%	5.4%	P= 0.298
Flies	34.6%	38.8%	P=0.424
Cockroaches	7.9%	20.4%	P <0.005
Fleas	9.%	20.8%	P< 0.005
Bedbugs	9.4%	20.4%	P=0.004
Dermestid beetles	36.3%	35.2%	P=0.829

The proportions of local authorities that provided only advice for pests are presented in Table 3. The proportions of those providing advice only for infestations of cockroaches, fleas and bed bugs had increased significantly between 2002 and 2012.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the two NPAP surveys in 2002 and 2012 have provided a rich source of information about the way in which pest control within LAs is operationalised across England, Wales and N. Ireland and how these services have changed during this 10 year period. Whilst many local authorities

continue to provide a comprehensive in-house pest management service, the UK Government's Spend Review has had an impact, with fewer in-house services available and a reduction in the proportions of local authorities providing services to control a number of important public health pests.

Whilst historically pest management has been viewed as a core environmental health function providing key public health protection for its residents, the pace of change in the past 10 years is of concern. The strategies and arrangements in place to control pests is of concern. Local arrangements to deal with pests will reinforce an already fragmented approach and seriously impact on the UK's capacity to deal with a future outbreak of a pest-borne illness. The currency of the points identified in 2002 regarding provision of pest management services remain pertinent: 1) The nature and impact of an apparent uncoupling of pest control services from core EH activities in some Local Authorities; 2) The variation in the provision of a structured training/development programme for staff; 3) The complexities of the charging policies adopted for pest treatments; 4) Assessment of procedures and policies relating to contracted out pest control services; 5) The apparent variations in the nature and extent of the liaison between Sewerage Undertaker and LA to control rats in sewers; 6) The inconsistencies in funding arrangements between Sewerage Undertaker and LA for sewer baiting; 7) The variability in the membership of pest liaison groups; and 8) A review of the mechanisms to facilitate the dissemination of good practice in pest management.
The substantial fall in the response rates in the intervening years may be further evidence that many of the local authorities that did not reply had already removed the provision of a pest management service in the intervening period. This deduction in pest services is of concern to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health.

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