

LOCAL AUTHORITY PEST MANAGEMENT SERVICES IN THE UK

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Abstract The National Pest Advisory Panel (NPAP) of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) in the UK was established in 2001 to advise the CIEH on its pest control policy. As part of its work, a pest survey was developed to investigate the way in which pest management services within local authorities (LAs) were operationalised and delivered in the UK. Questionnaires were distributed to all LAs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and a response rate of 67% was achieved. Although there is no statutory duty on LAs to provide pest management services, only 3 of the LAs which responded did not provide one. Seventy-eight percent of LAs had in house services, 13% contracted out pest control services out and 9% had a mixture of in-house and contracted out service provision. The management and nature of contracted out services varied with 56% of the authorities issuing fixed term, fixed price contracts, 30% issuing contracts based on the jobs done or the number of properties treated and the remainder having a mixture of the two. The survey confirmed considerable variation in the staffing levels, the pests treated, the financing of the services provided and the means by which performance criteria were used to judge the success of the pest control measures taken. The survey also explored the arrangements in place to manage contracted out services. In the UK, LAs and the water and sewerage companies should share responsibility for the control of rats in sewers. This survey found considerable variation in these relationships. The adverse public health impact of the changes to and variations in local government pest management services and the impact of much of the sewerage infrastructure being controlled by the privatised authorities is considered.

Key Words Urban pest management, local authorities

INTRODUCTION

The National Pest Advisory Panel of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (NPAP) was set up to advise the CIEH on pest control policy. 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. The NPAP which had its first meeting in May 2001 applies that approach to pest management. Its mission is to ensure that pest management is undertaken or managed in a professional way so as to protect public health. It also exists to enable the CIEH to provide the necessary leadership and guidance to those in charge of local authority pest control departments.

The objectives of NPAP are: to raise the profile of pest management in the UK, leading to better understanding of the need for good pest management; establish channels of communication throughout industry, government, local authorities and academics, leading to a greater awareness of problems and the need for priorities; improve the standards of pest management throughout the UK by promoting good practice, leading to reduced pest levels and pesticide use; provide expert advice to government departments and agencies via CIEH; identify and promote research needs into pest management issues.

Pest management has been a neglected area of public health policy in the UK since the role of central government was reduced in the early 1980s. Until that time LAs were required to make an annual return to the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food on their pest management problems and activities. This has now meant that there is no reliable data on activities of the local authorities/ municipalities. Combined with this was the introduction of the best value regime, under the Local Government Act 1999. The regime required Local Authorities to seek to achieve continuous improvement in the way in which they deliver services having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Bean and Hussey, 2000; Audit Commission 2001a, b) and in some LAs pest control services were heavily scrutinised and in some cases, decisions (often

driven by financial pressures) were taken to withdraw in house pest management services and contract out these services. Thus, 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. This NPAP survey was developed and administered to provide such baseline information.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The NPAP questionnaire was divided into 5 main sections, dealing with: general characteristics of the Local Authority; training and qualifications of pest control staff; pests treated; sewer baiting; membership of Pest Liaison groups. The questionnaire was sent to all Chief Officers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (n = 402) during 2002/03. Following this initial posting, a reminder was sent to all non-respondents. Two hundred and seventy one Local Authorities returned completed questionnaires, giving a response rate of 67%. Data was inputted to the SPSS statistical package for analysis.

RESULTS

General Characteristics

Populations within the Local Authority boundaries ranged from 10,000 to 1,000,000, with a mean of 149,000. The majority (58%) had both rural and urban areas within their boundaries. Twenty four percent of respondents stated their authority area was entirely urban and 18% entirely rural.

Organisation of Pest Management Services

In the UK, the main legislation relied on by local authorities is the Prevention of Damage by Pest Act 1949 but this does not place any statutory requirement on Local Authorities to provide pest management services. However, only 3 respondents (from South West England, N. Ireland and Southern England) did not provide one. These three dealt with pest problems by giving advice and where necessary using enforcement action. Seventy-eight percent of those Local Authorities that did provide a pest control service did so in house using their own staff, 13% contracted out this service and 9% had a mixture of in-house and contracted out services. Only a small proportion (12%) of those authorities that provided in-house pest control services were fully supported by local authority funding. The more common model (in 88% of cases) was one where pest management activities were either partly or fully underwritten by charged for pest control services.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents with a structured training programme (n = 257)

Type of pest management service	% with structured training programme	χ^2 ; p
In house	74%	$\chi^2 = 35$; p<0.001
Both in-house/contracted out	40%	
Contracted out	23%	
Type of Authority	% with structured training programme	χ^2 ; p
London Borough	83%	$\chi^2 = 12$; p<0.02
Metropolitan District	58%	
Unitary Council	81%	
District Council	76%	
Other	62%	

Fifty-nine of the authorities that responded contracted out their pest control operations. Of these, 56% had fixed term/fixed price contracts, 30% had contracts based on the jobs done/number of properties treated and the remainder (14%) had a mixture of the two. Those with contracted out operations were asked about the frequency with which these pest control contracts were audited. Thirty-eight per cent stated that they were audited randomly, 13% audited annually, 13%, quarterly, 13% had other arrangements in place and 22% stated that they did not audit the service. Where auditing did take place, only 25% used personnel with a specific pest management qualification.

Assessing Levels of Infestations

Responses confirmed that there did not appear to be a consistent means by which LAs assessed the levels of pest infestations within their boundaries, making estimates of infestation levels both nationally and regionally meaningless. Assessing infestation levels was undertaken either by logging the number of service requests (43%), the number of enquiries (2%) or a combination of both (53%).

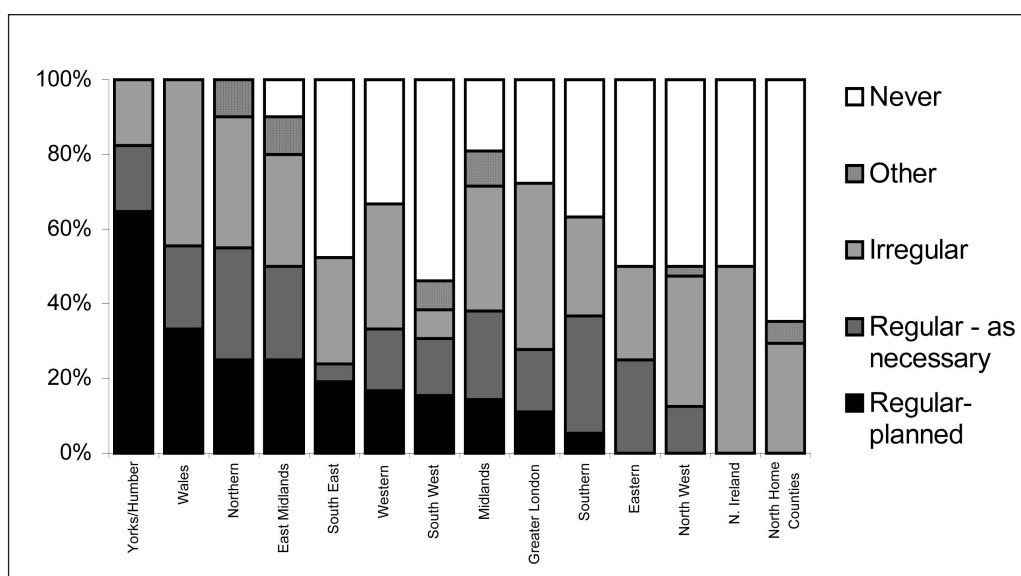


Figure 1. Variations in the nature of the liaison between Local authority regions and the water and sewerage companies

Performance Criteria

Respondents were asked about the performance criteria used to judge the success of the pest control measures undertaken. Whilst two thirds had measures in place, a sizeable proportion did not (34%). The use of performance criteria was consistent irrespective of the type of service provision (in-house services, 66%; contracted out services, 60% and services with a mixture of in-house and contracted out services, 64%). The most common means of measuring performance cited were re-treatment visits and customer satisfaction surveys.

Staffing

The number of staff working in pest management services varied considerably between LAs. Two hundred and thirty six respondents provided details about their staffing arrangements. Staff numbers varied from an Authority with one part time pest technician and a part time administrator to a large Metropolitan Authority with 27 full time staff. Respondents were asked about the training their staff received. Two thirds of LAs had a structured training programme in place for their staff. Both the type of service offered (in-house/contracted out/both) and the type of authority (London Borough/District Council/Metropolitan/Unitary Council) had a significant influence on whether structured training programmes were present (Type of service: $\chi^2 = 35$; $p < .0001$; Type of Authority: $\chi^2 = 12$; $p = .007$) (see Table 1).

Charging for Pest Management Services

There was little uniformity in the way in which LAs dealt with their pest problems and the charges levied for services. This was typified in reviewing approached to the control of urban rats and mice, particularly in domestic premises, where previous research has highlighted the need for effective control strategies (Bentley, 1960; Richards, 1989; Colvin et al., 1998; Channon et al., 2000; Langton et al., 2001; Battersby et al., 2002, Murphy and Williams, 2005). Of the 225 LAs that offered treatments for domestic rodent infestations, 54% treated rats and mice free of charge, 22% treated rats free of charge, but charged for mice and 22% charged for both rats and mice. Further complexities arose in how charges were applied with differential charges for owner-occupied, private-rented and council properties. Policies on charging for pest services appeared to relate to local political agendas and there was little uniformity across the LAs surveyed.

Sewer baiting

Historically in the UK, LAs were responsible for the control of rat populations living in the sewers within their boundaries and often carried out control programmes in association with the water authorities. However, following privatisation, the water and sewerage companies in the main took sewer baiting back under their control. Local authorities were asked about the arrangements for the control of rats in sewers within their Authority boundaries. Two thirds (66%) confirmed that sewer treatments were undertaken, 27% stated treatments were not undertaken and the remaining 8% did not know (n = 272).

The Water UK protocol (Water UK, 2000) provides a mechanism for improved communication and co-ordination between LAs and Sewerage Undertakers (Water and Sewerage Companies) on the control of rats in sewers. The protocol states that: where a Water UK member commences a new sewer baiting activity, it should inform the relevant local authority; where a local authority commences a new baiting activity to combat rat infestation, it should inform the relevant Water UK member; where possible, sewer baiting to combat rat infestation should be undertaken in a complementary manner, by agreement between the local authority and the Water UK member.

Just over half of respondents (52%) stated that their Local Authority was aware of the protocol. However, a quarter (26%) were not and a fifth (21%) did not know if their Local Authority was aware of it or not. A third of respondents reported that the water authority never liaised with them on sewer baiting. Where liaison did take place, a quarter reported regular, planned liaison, a quarter regular liaison as and when required and just under half stated it was irregular. The nature of the liaison between LAs and Water Authorities varied considerably between regions (Figure 1). Thus, in Yorkshire/Humburside 65% of respondents reported regular, planned liaison with the Water Authorities. However, in the Northern Home Counties, 65% reported no liaison with Water Authorities.

Pest liaison groups

Over the years a number of regional pest liaison groups have been established. Similar groups have been established for other areas of environmental health activity such as occupational health and safety, and food safety. These groups provide a forum for local authority officers from an area (usually a county) to improve co-ordination of pest management within a defined area. These groups are able to discuss current problems and solutions and also to keep up-to-date with developments. They provide a means of achieving consistency, although this is always difficult given that different LAs may have differing political, social and economic priorities. Although pest management may be the responsibility of each individual local authority, problems are rarely encountered in isolation, particularly in urban conglomerations.

Seventy percent of respondents reported that they were members of a pest liaison group. Membership within CIEH centres varied, with all respondents from the North West confirming they were members of a Pest liaison group, but membership in the North Home Counties (45%) South West (36%) and Wales (10%) was low. Most (85%) of the authorities that were not members stated that they would like to join a pest liaison group.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the NPAP survey and the detailed responses given by the respondents have provided a rich source of information about the way in which pest control within LAs is operationalised across England, Wales and N. Ireland. Whilst there were many examples of good practice and commitment to staff and clients, there were also areas of concern. In addition to more detailed analyses of the responses to the 2002 survey, the

intention is to undertake further surveys periodically so that changes in the nature of LA pest management services can be tracked.

Whilst historically pest management has been viewed as a core function providing public health protection within environmental health departments, this view appears to be changing. Until the early 1980s the then Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food provided advice to LAs and disseminated good practice, however this has now lapsed and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) does not provide any such advice to LAs. The plethora of strategies and arrangements now in place to control pest species has evolved locally. Results from the survey suggest that pest management may be viewed by local politicians as an additional or bolt-on service and indeed in some instances used as an income generator. Conversely the input of central government to areas of environmental health work, such as food safety and health and safety and pollution control has continued to increase. Thus, the Food Standards Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency all provide both advice and a coordinating role for LA activities, providing advice and good practice guidance so that LAs can improve performance. Indeed such agencies monitor local authority activity so that poorly performing authorities can be supported to improve performance, and the good authorities highlighted as exemplars. There is no such mechanism or co-ordinating body for pest management, and so LAs are left to develop local policies and procedures for delivering services.

There are several points of concern which this preliminary analysis of the data have highlighted and require further investigation, including: the nature and impact of an apparent uncoupling of pest control services from core EH activities in some Local Authorities; the considerable variation in the provision of a structured training and development programme for staff; the complexities of the charging policies adopted for pest treatments; assessment of the procedures and policies relating to contracted out pest control services; the apparent variations in the nature and extent of the liaison between Sewerage Undertaker and LA to control rats in sewers; the inconsistencies in funding arrangements between Sewerage Undertaker and LA for sewer baiting. The variability in the membership of pest liaison groups. A review of the mechanisms to facilitate the dissemination of good practice in pest management.

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