

## **LOCAL AUTHORITY PEST CONTROL SERVICES IN LONDON DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract** In London, most local authorities provide pest control services to their residents. However, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21 triggered national ‘lock-downs’, requiring organisations to change their working practices. Pest control managers in selected boroughs were interviewed to assess the impact that the pandemic had had on their pest control services. Prior to the pandemic, none of the pest control sections interviewed had contingency plans that were relevant to the onset of a pandemic. The provision of pest control in the UK during lockdown was greatly facilitated by the government’s decision that pest control was an essential service, and so could continue to operate. Working practices and risk assessments therefore had to be developed by each pest control section and local authority, usually with limited external consultation. Pest control staff were involved in the development of risk assessments that allowed safe working in customers’ premises. Video-conferencing software was widely adopted for staff meetings, although some staff initially found the technology challenging. All boroughs reported a substantial decrease in demand for pest control services during lockdown, although demand gradually returned to normal levels after lockdown was eased. The initial telephone or website contact with customers was extended to include screening questions. After treatment there was greater reliance on customers to report any pest issues, instead of a series of follow-up visits. Many customers were concerned about pest control officers entering their homes, so accepted the need for temporary changes in the way that pest control was provided. Pest control managers indicated that even after the pandemic subsides, there would be greater initial assessment of customers before site visits, greater reliance on technology to allow staff to work remotely, and a consequent increased trust of staff that were not in the office every day.

**Key words** Local authority, Covid-19, London, pest control.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Greater London has a resident population of around 9 million people, and covers an area of 1572 square kilometres. It is divided into 33 local government districts most of which have an Environmental Services unit, which deals with a variety of issues, often including pest control. The normal pest control arrangements differ from borough to borough. A few continue to provide a free pest control service to all residents, some provide a free service to certain types of resident only (e.g. those in social housing, or in receipt of state benefits), some charge all users, while a few provide no pest control service but leave residents to make their own pest control arrangements (Audley et al. 2017, Murphy et al. 2014). In addition to this public sector pest control provision, there is also a large private pest control industry. The Greater London Pest Liaison Group (GLPLG) is an organisation is an information-sharing resource on pest issues, for local authority pest control sections. The Group holds meetings twice yearly, to address issues of common interest.

In the UK, the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 were reported in late January 2020. The number of cases then grew rapidly, and on 23 March 2020, a wide range of restrictions (known as ‘lockdown’) were put in place nationally. These covered many areas including ‘stay at home’ orders, wearing of masks, types of shops that could remain open, social distancing, working from home, and social gatherings. Elements of this first lockdown were eased during July 2020, but a second lockdown was re-imposed in November 2020, lifted in December, and then re-imposed in January 2021. This third lockdown was then eased and lifted during May – July 2021.

During lockdown, specific essential services such as the police, healthcare, food retail and others were allowed to continue working. During the first lockdown, the British Pest Control Association successfully negotiated with government departments for pest control to be added to the list of essential services, so pest control technicians could continue to work.

## METHODOLOGY

Members of the GLPLG were asked if they were willing to participate in a survey of pest control during the Covid-19 pandemic. Pest control managers that expressed an interest were provided with an outline of the project, and informed that the findings would be published anonymously. Nine local authorities from north, south, east, west and central London, agreed to participate. Each interview lasted 1 – 1.5 hrs, and was carried out remotely, either by telephone or by video-conferencing, in May – August 2021. The interviewer used a list of topics to steer the interview. These prompts expanded slightly after the first couple of interviews, as additional topics of interest became apparent. Additional but less detailed information was received from a further six sections. The interview material was processed qualitatively, to assess the diversity of responses to the pandemic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Preparedness and Information Sourcing

At the start of the pandemic, none of the pest control sections interviewed had a specific plan that assisted them in dealing with the emergency. Business continuity or emergency response plans did exist, but they did not address a generalised and contagious risk to all personnel.

Sources of information on which the pest control teams based their new working practices and risk assessments included official government information, local radio, pest control trade associations, and pest control product distributors. However, despite the various pest control teams having much in common with each other, there was very limited sharing of information and good practice between sections in different local authorities. Nonetheless, most pest control teams reported that an informal exchange of emails about working practices during the first lockdown, had been very helpful. In hindsight, with better liaison between the teams, good practice could have been shared and become more quickly stabilised.

### Work Volume and Pest Changes

All of the interviewees reported a dramatic decrease in the number of requests for pest control visits and treatments at the start of the pandemic. Work volumes remained depressed for some months, but gradually returned to near-normal levels after lockdown eased. Most of the pest teams also reported modest changes in the type of pests that they were asked to deal with. Some had proportionately more rat jobs, others more bed bugs, or pigeons, etc. However, across the London pest teams interviewed, there were no consistent changes in the pest spectrum. In the UK as a whole, there were reports of increased rodent sightings during the pandemic, although this may have been linked to an underlying cycle in rodent prevalence (Lambert, 2021).

### Team Working

In normal times, the pest control sections administered and managed their work largely through face-to-face meetings with personnel, either individually or as a team. With the onset of Covid-19 and lockdown, a few pest control teams continued to have face-to-face team meetings, where space permitted. However, for most, there was a move toward working from home, with video-conferencing being increasingly adopted. The ability to organise a virtual meeting with participants joining from home, or even from a parked vehicle, was seen as a major advantage. One pest control manager also cited the ability of other personnel such as their line manager, to attend part of the meeting remotely, as a benefit. However, over half of the teams mentioned that some personnel found use of video-conferencing challenging initially, and that these people much preferred physical meetings. However, with practice, all team members eventually became familiar with the software. Most managers said that they planned to continue with this technology, although one had already reverted to face-to-face meetings.

### Customer Communication

Each pest control team had its own web pages within the local authority's website, that provide general advice to residents on pest prevention, together with information on the authority's pest control arrangements. Despite the widespread temporary changes in the provision of pest control services, few local authorities made detailed changes to their pest control pages. Difficulties and delays in getting approval and making changes, were cited as the main reason for not communicating with customers in this way. One manager said that in hindsight, they should have used their web pages more effectively. In one local authority, the process for changing web pages has since become much faster.

Prior to making a booking for a pest control visit during the pandemic, all authorities asked residents a series of questions, either over the telephone for call-centre bookings, or on the website for on-line bookings. Questions covered any recent overseas travel, whether they or any family members had symptoms of Covid-19, or were isolating, or particularly vulnerable to infection. Positive answers resulted in the resident being asked to re-book later. In addition, residents were usually informed that when the pest control officer was in their house, they had to keep a safe distance and keep windows open.

Prior to entering the property, officers asked the residents the same questions, and reminded them about opening windows and keeping a safe distance. If residents did not comply, then the officer could terminate the visit. Pest control officers sometimes found it difficult to maintain a safe distance in small homes with large extended families, while at other times residents were reluctant to let officers into their homes for fear of infection. Several managers said that even after the pandemic was over, they planned to continue with more detailed questions for residents at the time of booking the appointment, so that the technician was better prepared for the visit.

### **Safe Working on Site**

Employers have legal responsibilities to ensure the safety of employees, and others who may be affected by their work. In the early stages of the pandemic, most pest control managers reported employee concerns about working in premises where there might be a risk of infection, especially from vulnerable employees. Initially, pest control sections did not have relevant risk assessments, so their development was critical in ensuring that employees felt safe and supported when working within customers' properties. Some sections rapidly developed appropriate risk assessments while in a few, such assessments were not developed until weeks or even months later. Most pest control managers stated that involvement of individual officers in defining the detail of the risk assessments was essential in ensuring that officers felt safe. Almost all pest control sections reported that risk assessments were reviewed and updated frequently, as new information and experience became available.

The availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to pest control personnel was essential if work was to continue. Most pest control sections reported that they had to change suppliers owing to shortages or had to use central PPE stocks within their local authority. A few teams stated that there were times when availability was low, and work had to be rescheduled as a result. However, reduced work volumes meant that PPE demand was similarly reduced.

### **Pest Control Services Provided**

The type and extent of pest control services provided by different local authorities, varied considerably during the pandemic. In most local authorities, some pest control work continued through the pandemic in external areas such as gardens, external bin areas, roof voids, sewers and in parks, where necessary and safe to do so. This was seen as an opportunity to carry out proactive and preventative work, as well as keeping staff in a working routine.

Regarding work within domestic premises, there was a considerable range of responses across different local authorities. Most pest control teams continued to carry out indoor domestic treatments, subject to initial screening of residents, and with use of PPE. Others restricted domestic treatments to emergencies, such as an indoor rat, or for vulnerable people only. During the first lockdown, a few local authorities stopped working within domestic premises altogether, but did offer advice over the phone or at the front door and provided appropriate amateur-use pest control products. Most sections paused block treatments during the pandemic. Work within domestic properties gradually recommenced as lockdown was eased, risk assessments were developed, and residents become more confident.

Treatment of some pests, such as mice, would normally require a series of visits to assess progress and comply with label requirements. However, to reduce the number of times it was necessary to enter residential property, most pest control teams reduced or suspended these follow-up visits, unless they were specifically requested by the resident.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Covid-19 pandemic tested the ability of organisations to continue to provide a functioning public service. Nonetheless, many of the local authority pest control teams in this survey clearly saw their role as providing an essential public health service to the community, especially to more vulnerable people, even during the most challenging stages of the pandemic. This focus has parallels with reports from pest management organisations elsewhere (Moise et al, 2021). Continued delivery of this service required great flexibility, as shown by the rapid development of new risk assessments and other changes to working practices. For some teams, the pandemic gave them the first opportunity to experience remote-working, video meetings, and generally reduced supervision. A few

managers indicated that despite their initial skepticism, they learned to trust their staff to work well without close supervision. Some local authority leaders made special mention in their internal communications, of the important contributions made by their pest control teams during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, there was limited liaison between the different local authority pest control teams in London, although the sharing of information and good practice that did occur was valued by those involved. The experiences of the pest control sections in the Covid-19 pandemic should be used to guide the preparation of contingency plans for any such events in the future. There is clearly an important role for the GLPLG to facilitate that process.

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