



Chartered  
Institute of  
Environmental  
Health



## Policy briefing note: Charging for pest control services

More and more local authorities are introducing charges for pest control services, often as a means of being able to maintain a service. In 2009, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health's National Pest Advisory Panel (NPAP) conducted its second pest management survey, following up on the original survey in 2002. The results of the survey reveal worrying trends within the pattern of local authority pest management provision and the changes that have taken place since the first survey.

In comparing the two surveys, the results reveal that the number of local authorities that provide a pest control service has fallen from 99% to 90%. In 2002 only 3 of the authorities that responded to the survey did not offer any service at all, this figure has now risen to 26.

It is worth noting that the survey was conducted in February 2009, before the worst of the cuts of last year, and before the announcement of the further cuts in 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review.

The CIEH is seriously concerned that an increasing number of councils are taking the decision not to provide a pest control service. It is equally concerned that more councils are introducing charges for pest control services, even for rats and mice.

### **The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949**

Although a local authority is not legally required to provide a pest control service, the PDP Act 1949 imposes a duty on councils to "take such steps as may be necessary to secure as far as practicable that their district is kept free from rats and mice," and in particular to keep the local authority's own land, and land the LA occupies, free from rats and mice and to enforce the duties of owners and occupiers of land under the PDP Act. It is also worthy of note that "the occupier of any land shall give to the local authority forthwith notice in writing if it comes to his knowledge that rats or mice are living on or resorting to the land in substantial numbers" (not agricultural land).

The NPAP survey also found that councils were relying on contractors to undertake treatments rather than providing these services in-house. For example in 2002 over 80% of treatments for rat infestations were performed by in-house staff, but this figure had fallen to around 60% in 2009. The number of free treatments in private houses for the most common pests – rats, mice, bedbugs and cockroaches – fell by around 15%.

So what are the issues a local authority ought to take into account when considering whether to introduce charges or contract out of the service?

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## Public health considerations

**Charging** can be part of a strategy to ensure that people play their part in addressing the problem – for example, ensuring that access is made (reducing the number of abortive visits/revisits) and that they remove harbourage and food sources.

**Contracting-out** can lead to a loss of expertise within the local authority, which might have an impact on the strategic aspects of pest management such as the design of buildings to minimise infestations, the effect of climate change on pest activity, block control measures.

Effective treatments require a strategic approach (especially in urban areas); relying on individual actions would completely work against this approach. The introduction of ill-considered charging can lead to an increase in “DIY” solutions by individuals; these are generally ineffective and can increase the amount of “poison” in the environment.

In urban areas rats and mice are no respecters of local authority boundaries; multiple infestations can therefore affect more than one local authority area. **Differing charging** regimes can lead to different levels of treatments and potentially exacerbate public health inequalities.

Reliance on enforcement action alone is less effective than a strategic approach, which includes advice and guidance and incentives.

## Economic considerations

While short term savings might be achieved by the **contracting-out** of the service, these can be overtaken by longer term increased costs associated with enforcement and with contract management and scrutiny. Contracts should be based on targeted levels of pest control and the specifications need to ensure that there is no loss of strategic oversight.

The imposition of **charges** can have a negative effect on service take-up, depending on per capita income and levels of deprivation. **Charges** will also fall disproportionately on those less able to pay (who may live in areas more likely to be subject to infestations). This is an important factor in the context of a local authority’s clear responsibility to improve the health and well-being of its community.

While it is possible that free services can lead to overuse and may discourage householder/landlord responsibility, local authorities should consider incentives within any **charging** regime that discourage repeat infestations.

## Political considerations

Infestations can cluster in districts/wards. Dealing with each treatment on a case by case basis might have the effect of storing up a problem that only has to be dealt with in longer term

The potential effects for pest management of a local authority decision to move to alternate weekly domestic refuse collections need to be considered.

## CIEH Policy Position

The CIEH believes that public health arguments prevail over financial considerations:

- when the question of whether to contract-out the pest control service is raised,
- when considering the imposition of charges and their scale.

We believe that the most effective pest management results from coordinated efforts with the local authority at the heart of the coordination. There is little clear evidence that cost savings are achieved in the long term if no service is provided or the contract is inadequate. This is because the need to maintain oversight of contract performance and reliance on enforcement of the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 can become expensive.

The CIEH therefore believes that increasing charges for pest control services and/or contracting out the service is inconsistent with local authorities’ public health responsibilities.

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