

To: Infrastructure, Land and Environment Policy Board

On: 25 August 2021

Report by: Director of Communities and Housing Services

Heading: Pest Control - Update on Temporary Suspension of Charges for Vermin Treatment

1. Summary

1.1 At the Council meeting on 5 May 2021, a Motion was approved in the following terms:

Council agrees to suspend the charges for services associated with the control of rodents until such time as the current explosion in rat infestation is under control and to encourage our local residents to take up those services.

1.2 Subsequently charges for pest control treatment for rodents (rats and mice) were suspended as the impact and service delivery was assessed. This update is being brought to the Infrastructure, Land and Environment Policy Board as agreed at the Council meeting.

1.3 Since the suspension of charges there has been an increase in service requests, particularly where the caller has seen rodents but is not actually experiencing any infestation within their property. An impact has occurred on income which goes to support the service and has created associated costs with additional work currently requiring to be passed to a private pest control contractor.

1.4 There has been a marked increase in calls from residents of social landlords who would normally have contacted their landlord and been provided with a service. Calls from these residents have increased significantly during the period of suspension as can be seen from the data in table 2 in appendix 1.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that the Board:

- (i) notes the impact on service delivery as a result of the cancellation of pest control charges for rodent treatment;
- (ii) notes the analysis undertaken which indicates that there is no evidence of increased infestation of vermin during or following the pandemic lockdown period;
- (iii) in view of both the service impact and the lack of evidence of increased level of infestation, agrees to remove the temporary suspension of charges;
- (iv) notes that Council tenants will continue to receive the pest control service which is recharged to the Housing Revenue Account; and
- (v) notes that the reintroduction of charges will increase the capacity of officers and the service to respond to calls related to communal property and public areas which will continue on a non-chargeable basis.

3. Background

- 3.1 Under the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, a local authority has a duty, as far as practicable, to keep their district free from rats and mice through taking action to destroy rats and mice on their own land and further, to enforce this duty on owners and occupiers of land which is not under Council ownership. Therefore, it is clear from a legislative perspective that responsibility for treatment of rodent infestation on private land rests with the owner/occupier and not with the Council.
- 3.2 The Council has always provided a pest control service for Renfrewshire residents through the employment of in-house Pest Control Officers, and currently there are one and a half full time equivalent posts allocated to this role. The service is supported through a contractual arrangement with a local private pest control contractor, being used at times of higher demand and to undertake wasp nest destruction.
- 3.3 Where a request for a pest control service is received, Officers discuss the situation with the occupier of the affected property and aim to visit to assess and bait with approved rodenticide within two working days. Further follow up visits are undertaken to monitor the situation, with each request being monitored until the Officer is satisfied there is no further activity. This generally results in a minimum of three visits.
- 3.4 A benchmarking exercise was undertaken in 2019/20 with other neighbouring local authorities and it was established that Renfrewshire was one of the last authorities to introduce charges and that those proposed, were in the mid-range of charges applied by other authorities and significantly less costly than those provided by private contractors.

- 3.5 The £61.25 charge was introduced on the basis that it would encourage some residents to self-treat an infestation and the expectation was that overall requests for support would reduce. Charges in other Council's range from £40 to £123. The market rate is generally over £100 with Rentokil charging £200 for rat infestations. Almost half of service requests come from Council tenants who do not pay for the service directly with their costs covered through the HRA.
- 3.6 The income generated is used to enhance the overall service provided - funding additional permanent posts within the service to retain resources in house, create employment opportunities and create the capacity to be able to respond more effectively to service requests where there is no clear person responsible – for example infestations in communal areas or town centre locations that are not directly linked to an individual property. Generally, infestations within communal buildings are often not recharged to owners due to issues with allocation of costs amongst multiple property owners and cost recovery expense outweighing the charges. This is however, determined on a case-by-case basis.
- 3.7 Renfrewshire Council tenants - who make up around 50% of calls are not directly charged for the service - the costs being met from within the Housing Revenue Account.
- 3.8 Registered Social Landlords have previously had varying charging policies for tenants, with some employing their own contractor, others paying for the Council service and others requiring their tenants to pay this charge themselves. Since the charges have been suspended, communication from a few Registered Social Landlords has been received, advising that during the period of suspension tenants are being referred to the Council. Appendix 1 notes that the number of calls from RSLs has been recorded and equates to 49 for the reporting period – a seven-fold increase on previous numbers. Based on the requests received and the market rate for treating rat infestations, this equates to a revenue saving for RSL's in the region of £5,000 to £10,000 in the time the charges have been suspended.
- 3.9 When the first lockdown was introduced more people being at home resulted in a greater number of sightings being reported particularly in open spaces/streets during this period, it is not always possible for such areas to be safely baited and treatments therefore will generally only be undertaken within defined areas where it is possible to secure baiting stations and prevent non-target species (domestic pets etc) being at risk of accidental rodenticide uptake. Since the suspension of charges, there have been a number of situations where multiple calls from residents in the same street have requested treatment, based on the sighting of vermin within one or two garden areas but leading to visits and baiting of multiple gardens as a result, with little/no activity being identified at these properties. It is likely that previously, when charges were in place residents would have waited until there was more evidence to indicate an infestation in or around their own property, before seeking treatment.
- 3.10 The increase in service requests has resulted in an increased number of calls being passed to the Council's private contractor with associated costs incurred during the reporting period from 13 May to 20 July 2021, equating to 90 calls at a cost to the Council of over £5000.

- 3.11 During the ten-week period prior to the charges being suspended in May 2021, there were 188 recorded rodent calls however, the following 10 week period (to 20 July) has resulted in 358 recorded rodent calls. A breakdown by tenure is provided within appendix 1 and it can be seen there has been a significant increase in calls across all tenures, most significantly within RSL and privately owned property.
- 3.12 For comparison purposes, a breakdown of rodent related service requests has been provided within appendix 1, table 1. This provides details of request numbers over the previous five years, including this year. It can be seen from this table that there has been a general slight increasing trend in calls; with a drop in 2020/21. Extrapolating the current year to date numbers does result in similar call levels to the years prior to charges being applied - but does not indicate an increase in infestation of rodents during or since the pandemic period. Table 2 provides a breakdown of service requests by tenure between 13 May and 31 July 2021.
- 3.13 As noted above, while there have been reports of an increase in rodent sightings and infestations during the pandemic lockdown period, there is no evidence to support that overall numbers of rodents or infestations have been increasing – and the experience since the charges have been suspended, with increased numbers of speculative calls for treatment, supports this position.
- 3.14 Overall, for comparison, there were 1,340 recorded calls within the Service for the year 2019/20 (the year prior to charges being introduced) and for 2020/21, there were 871 recorded rodent calls. Calls include both rats and mice. Calls have generally followed the pattern seen across other local authorities, with a significant number of calls being made on the basis that occupiers of property have seen rodents and are looking for visits to be undertaken on a precautionary basis when charges are not in force. Following charges being introduced, such requests were minimal, reflected in the numbers of recorded calls pre and post charge introduction.
- 3.15 The significant increase in workload resulting from the charges being suspended has impacted on service delivery, even with the support provided by the external pest control provider. Initial calls are now subject to a delay, and there is a knock-on effect that revisits to calls to check for pest activity and re baiting have also experienced delays. This impact is not only on rodent calls but now applies to all pest treatments and is currently being compounded by self-isolation for COVID-19, annual leave and the summer months being a particularly busy time for wasp nest calls.
- 3.16 It is therefore recommended that the temporary suspension of charging should be removed as costs for Council tenants are recharged to the Housing Revenue Account and the effect of the reintroduction of the charges will increase the capacity of officers and the service to respond to calls related to infestations on communal property and in public areas.
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Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – continued suspension of the charges for vermin eradication will have an impact on income generation and at cost where we are passing work to our contracted private provider. There are also there are increased costs for the service through increased requirements for consumables.
2. **HR & Organisational Development - none**
3. **Community/Council Planning –**
 - *Our Renfrewshire is safe* – control and eradication of pests is essential to ensuring that our communities are protected from the adverse impacts which can result from vermin infestation, including disease, property damage and general wellbeing.
4. **Legal - none**
5. **Property/Assets - none**
6. **Information Technology - none**
7. **Equality & Human Rights**
 - (a) The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website.
8. **Health & Safety - none**
9. **Procurement -N/A**
10. **Risk - none**
11. **Privacy Impact- N/A**
12. **COSLA Policy Position-N/A**
13. **Climate Risk- N/A**

List of Background Papers

Infrastructure, Land and Environment Policy Board Report dated 22 January 2020:
Fees and Charges – 1 April 2020

Pest Control Service Request Breakdown

Table 1- Breakdown of Rodent Calls for the previous five years

Reporting Year	Number of Rat and Mice Calls
2017/18	1077
2018/19	1210
2019/20	1340
2020/21	871
2021/22 (YTD)	465

Table 2- Breakdown of 2021/22 Rodent Calls by Tenure

Received Calls Prior to Charge suspension (1/3/21- 12/5/21)		Received Calls Post- Charge suspension (13/5/21- 20/7/21)
Private	94	178
RSL Tenant	6	49
Renfrewshire Council Tenant	82	128