

## **BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

### **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 1 NOVEMBER 2007**

#### **REPORT OF THE OPERATIONS MANAGER (ENVIRONMENT)**

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#### **THE PROVISION OF THE PEST AND DOG CONTROL SERVICE**

**Summary:** The purpose of this report is to raise the issues facing the provision of the pest and dog control services. OSC requested an update report on the Dog Warden Service which is currently delivered as a combined service with Pest Control. The report asks you to consider its contents and provide your views on the possible direction of travel for these services.

### **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The Council is statutorily required to collect stray dogs under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) however the level of service is not defined. Custom and practice over the last 12 years has developed an in-house service where dogs are only seized and returned to owners during normal working hours. The police currently have a duty to receive stray dogs at their police stations and as such a good working relationship has been developed with local police for them to accept strays out of hours and where appropriate the dog warden service will collect such dogs during the next working day. In emergency circumstances i.e. dogs behaving in a dangerous manner in a public area will be seized in conjunction with the police, but such times are rare and such work is done with the goodwill of the officers. Changes are proposed potentially for later in 2007 where the police will lose their responsibility for accepting stray dogs and as such the council will have to increase its provision particularly in the evenings and at weekends.
- 1.2 The dog warden service also carries out a large number of investigations into Dangerous dog / biting incidents and dog fouling. We also provide dog safety talks to schools, dog training classes and dog identification micro chipping.
- 1.3 Under the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 (PDPA) the council is required to inspect its area for rodent infestations and require land owners to take action to control such incidences. This legislation is very labour intensive through the legal measures involved to require action. Breckland Council, (and its predecessors prior to 1974) like many other local authorities throughout the country, saw that the provision of a free rodent control service to domestic residents would be far more efficient and effective both in terms of control and costs. The Breckland Council pest control service has developed through custom and practice over the years providing a free rodent (rats and mice) service in domestic premises and a chargeable service providing insect treatments (wasps, fleas, cluster flies and bed bugs) in domestic properties and insects and rodents in commercial premises.
- 1.4 The service is only available during normal working hours and the two pest control officers are required to provide back up cover for the collection and return of stray dogs during periods of sickness or holiday when the dog warden is unavailable. One of the pest control posts has been left vacant this year.

### **2. KEY DECISION**

- 2.1 This is not a key decision.

### **3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

3.1 The matter raised in this report falls within the following Council priorities:

- A safe and healthy environment

### **4. OPTIONS FOR CONTINUED SERVICE PROVISION**

#### **4.1 Issues to be considered**

There are pressures on both parts of the service to change / review how they operate:

##### **Dog Control**

As stated above the police are likely to be losing their responsibilities towards accepting stray dogs at their police stations (section 68 Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005). Negotiations have been held with local police as to the council using the existing station based kennels however the police are unwilling to allow this to take place and as such if the provisions come in the council will need to make arrangements available for dogs to be collected either 24 hours a day or from 8am to 10pm 365 days a year (this lesser hours provision is seen more appropriate for our local circumstances and is believed acceptable under the guidance set for by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) if supported by kennel provision for the public to store a stray dog outside these hours).

The extended hours service provision would need to provide a possible shift/flexible working based work pattern for in house officers and examine safety issues where back up officers are made available out of hours. It should be noted that officers dealing with stray or dangerous dogs are faced with not just the physical dangers of dealing with the dogs but also verbal and in extreme circumstances physical abuse from dog owners.

The service is also under great pressure in terms of both kennelling of stray dogs during the minimum holding period of 7 days, as we have only one kennel locally able to provide such facilities, and then what to do with seized dogs that are not claimed by their owners. Rehoming is becoming a major problem because whilst there is a large rehoming kennels within the council's area they have become increasingly unwilling to accept locally seized stray dogs except in exceptional circumstances, resulting in the dog warden service having to use rehoming kennels well away from Breckland. Rehoming kennels are becoming more selective as to the type of dogs that they will take and are resisting taking dogs which have a medical problem, have a history of biting or are of a type linked to national publicised biting problems i.e. Pit Bull Terriers or ones which resemble such dogs i.e. Staffordshire Bull Terriers. The council is therefore very reliant on the services of two sets of local kennels and the loss of these would result in the authority being unable to fulfil its statutory duties.

#### **4.2 Pest Control**

The pest control service currently only operates 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday; however with the increasing changes in consumer demand many customers express a desire of treatments in the early morning, in the evening and at weekends. There are also increasing demands on health and safety arrangements which are becoming more expensive both in terms of resources (additional visits required to ensure that excess bait and waste are removed at the end of each treatment) and costs (waste disposal).

Many surrounding councils have removed their free rodent treatment service introducing a charge as a mechanism to cover the costs involved. South Norfolk Council makes a nominal charge of £7 per treatment payable prior to the treatment being carried out. South Norfolk deal with around 2500 and 3000 and they report that whilst there is an element of dissatisfaction at a charge most people pay it and they do not report a major decrease in the level of requests for service. North Norfolk placed a charge of £30 a few years ago. The charge by South Norfolk appears to have been accepted but it is questionable if it is cost effective to collect and covers the costs both of treatment and collection. The North Norfolk charge covered costs but resulted in

residents not using the service and the service has now been withdrawn, which is also the case for St Edmundsbury Council.

Much of the free domestic rodent control work carried out by Breckland allows us not only to treat at the property from where the call originated but potentially at adjoining properties with the agreement of other land owners. The introduction of a charge could have the effect that property owners are unwilling to pay for pest control treatment where they feel that rodents are coming from next door and therefore are not 'their' rats. As such where people are unwilling to pay, the council may no longer have a reduced demand for its service but the rats still exist and become even more of an uncontrolled problem. It is suggested nationally by the National Pest Control Technician Association that rodent's numbers are on the rise particularly during the summer. The removal of the pest service potentially could result in complaints from residents who believe that the treatment of rodents is included within their council tax and also lead to increased council costs in the investigation of complaints about rats infesting areas of land which if proved would potentially lead to increased service of treatment notices and court action using the PDPA.

## 5. **OPTIONS AVAILABLE**

### 5.1 **Issues / Service Requirements:**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Statutory / Discretionary</b>
Seizure of Stray Dogs	Statutory
Duty to keep district free from rat infestations	Statutory
Provision of Pest Control Service (rodents / insects)	Discretionary
Charging for pest control services	Discretionary
Provision for the collection of Stray Dogs out of hours	Statutory need to extend our current service
Investigation and Control of Dangerous dogs	Discretionary
Investigation and enforcement of dog fouling issues	Discretionary
Provision of advice, school talks about safety with dogs	Discretionary but DEFRA C of P says "vital" and "should"
Treatment of rats in public areas	Discretionary
Duty of council to rehome / dispose of stray dogs if not claimed after 7 days	Statutory

### 5.2 **Current In house Costs and Provision and External Contractor Cost**

See Appendix 1

### 5.3 Options for future Service Provision

Option	Possible issues
Retain both pest and dog control within the council	Full management control but very labour intensive and significant investment would be needed to improve the level of service provision 2/3 officers to provide shift cover for out of hours dog collection and an additional 2/3 pest control officer to allow for pest control to be provided within 24hour of a request being received with evening and weekend cover
Withdraw Pest control services but use the financial savings to improve and fund an improved dog control service providing out of hours / shift cover for dog collections. Use of Environmental Health officers / Technical assistant to investigate complaints of rodent infestations (possible increased costs of investigation and court enforcement)	Potential back lash from Breckland residents who expect a free pest control service, increased uncontrolled numbers of rats in the environment which would need investigation by Environmental Health Staff – unknown increased workload / costs.
Place pest and dog control with an external contractor	No savings potential increased costs of £100,000 for contract and additional costs enforcement of dog fouling issues would need to remain within the council.
Provision of Council controlled Stray Dog Kennel and Rehoming facilities	<p>Security for the council in terms of kennelling for stray dog holding facilities however there would be significant increased costs of purchasing suitable premises and then in the ongoing maintenance / 24/7 staffing for the care of the dogs housed there. This option gives us control of the service and removes the current uncertainties surrounding the contracted kennels we are dependent upon at this time.</p> <p>There would need to be a robust investigation and business case to establish financial outlay and income feasibility to establish investment viability.</p>

## 6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 6.1 Members views are required to enable compliance with newly enhanced statutory duties, ensure future services are sustainable operationally and financially (trading/delivery) resulting in robust and cost effective services.
- 6.2 Decisions on future provision of the service need to be made in the light of the stray dog handling requirements likely to come in 2008 which if retained in house will require additional resources as already highlighted. The only way of providing such a service without additional funding would be to withdraw the pest control function and use the savings to finances to fund the required dog warden services changes

**7. RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 7.1 That OSC consider the contents of this report and provide a steer as to how they wish to see the pest control and dog warden services to be provided in the future

*Appendices:*

*Appendix 1: Current In house Costs and Provision*

### **Current In House Costs and Provision**

The dog control and pest control service currently costs £168,625 (2006/07 probable costs) (this includes £43,245 internal support costs and has been offset by an estimated £30,250 income) employing 1 Dog warden, 2 pest control officers (1 vacancy at present) and a technical administration officer to receive calls for service and booking treatments, and covers all the costs involving vehicles, kennelling, rehoming, veterinary treatments, and pest control baits / equipment.

The service when fully staffed is able to provide a very effective dog control service and an adequate pest control service 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. The dog warden service provides a number of additional features particularly education and training activities and advice to internal departments on dog control issues.

However to comply new duties of collecting stray dogs out of hours and to improve the pest control section to provide a service delivering what customers and residents want there is a need to invest heavily potentially in additional officers or an external collection service to deal with dogs out of hours and increase treatment delivery hours. Consideration also needs to be given to the increasing reliance of the council on two sets of kennels which operate on a knife edge and particularly with the rehoming kennels whether they are able to guarantee that they can take dogs for rehoming. Costs of setting up a council run kennels has not been explored but are likely to be high as this would not only include purchase of a suitable set of kennels but also the annual running with the need for round the clock staffing.

Costs could be increased or introduced for the returning of dogs to their owners however whilst they are lower than the majority of surrounding councils there is a danger that if too higher a charge is levied owners will simply not claim their pets, which happens to certain extent already, and the council will be saddled with the costs of kennelling and rehoming.

Approximate additional hours to provide a pest control on a Saturday (along the lines of the external contractors suggestions) would be 400 representing a cost of £5000 However through the need to comply with the working time directive it is likely that an additional officers would need to be employed to provide the extra hours coverage.

### **External Contractor Cost**

For the purposes of this report initial negotiations have been held with a local pest control company to give an indication of the anticipated costs and the level of service that an external contractor would consider appropriate, particularly in terms of a modern pest control service.

The company have put forward an annual costing of £182,400 based on a minimum three year contract (with a yearly cost increase to cover inflation) to provide both pest control and stray dog seizure. Pest Control would be provided 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday and Dog Control 9am to 10pm Monday to Saturday, both with an additional cost for emergency visits or collection outside these hours. These costs do not include kennelling, veterinary or rehoming. If Pest control was only to be provided the yearly cost would reduce to an approximate £127,000

It should be noted that both parts of the service result in times of dissatisfaction or complaint which require the involvement of a senior council officer to investigate the issue and discuss / negotiate with the complainant and over the issue.

**NB: It should be noted that the provision of the services under either option would be subject to council internal support costs of £43,245 which have to be paid not withstanding the level of service provided to the customer unless the total service is completely withdrawn.**