

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor McElroy to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Licensing Houses in Multiple Occupation

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) are needed, but large concentrations in Redlands Ward and others create challenges. HMO licensing is a way to tackle these challenges and improve the quality of HMOs. Please can the Lead Councillor update me on the uptake of the latest mandatory HMO licensing scheme including the current number of licences issued and council targets. Greens think the Council needs to go further with a HMO licensing scheme covering all HMOs in the Borough. Disappointingly this scheme has been delayed. Please can the lead councillor update me on the most recent timescales for implementing the HMO licensing scheme which will cover all HMOs in the Borough?

REPLY by Councillor (Lead Councillor for Housing):

The Council currently has 1,240 Licensed HMO's within the borough and is currently processing 151 licence applications which includes new applications and renewals. Mandatory HMO Licenses are generally issued for a 5 year period.

Our figures show that we are on track to achieve above our target of 42% of licensed HMO's operating within the licensing scheme inspected for the current financial year and figures indicate that we are also currently on track to achieve our target for 23/24.

Any application to central government to introduce either a selective or additional HMO licensing scheme will require the local authority to provide evidence to support the need for such a scheme. We are therefore currently undertaking a tenure intelligence gathering process so as to differentiate between properties which are privately rented, HMO's and those that are owner occupied or socially rented.

The main aim of this review is to investigate and provide accurate estimates of:

- Current levels of private rented sector (PRS) properties and tenure change over time.
- Information on the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) as a subset of the PRS.
- Levels of serious hazards that might amount to a Category 1 hazard (HHSRS).
- Other housing related stressors, including antisocial behaviour (ASB), service demand, population and deprivation linked to the PRS.

This information will assist the council to make policy decisions, including the possible introduction of property licensing schemes. We will be sure to keep Councillors updated once the review has been finalised with any recommendations proposed.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

20 FEBRUARY 2023

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety:

Tackling Rat Problems

In the last year the number of rat reports that Green Party councillors have received from residents has gone up. Please can the Lead Councillor update me on the number of rat reports which have been investigated this municipal year and what action the council is taking to tackle this problem?

REPLY by Councillor (Lead Councillor for Environmental Services & Community Safety):

This municipal year to date, the Environmental Protection and Nuisance service, who are the team responsible for enforcing pest control legislation, has received 226 complaints about rats. Whilst I hear your concern, this data does not show an out-of-the-norm increase in complaints made to the team about this issue.

It is worth bearing in mind that in any high-density urban centre, there are always issues with rat infestations. Rats are a wild animal and as such they will always remain present in the environment. Problems occur where an infestation is concentrated in close proximity or inside people's dwellings, which is usually a result of defective drainage or poor waste management.

Our mapping of complaints also shows that the spread of rat complaints is fairly even throughout the borough, although again, there can be concentrations of issues in certain areas due to poor waste management, both of domestic and business waste, or the presence of a water course. The Environmental Protection Team is constantly reviewing any reports to find linkages where they exist, to ensure that any issues which can exacerbate rat populations are addressed. For example, the team is proactively working on a new project with the Council housing team in order to address rat problem areas more holistically, to reduce rat populations in the vicinity of Council housing stock, rather than reactively treating individual rat infestations.

When a report is received, the team undertakes the following work to tackle rats, taking into account that the duty to control rats is on the landowner, and the Council has responsibility as enforcing authority (and also as a landowner):

- All reports from residents regarding rat activity are responded to with advice on how to control rats
- including proofing of properties to ensure that rats cannot enter, properly managing waste and where necessary carrying out an effective baiting programme;
- Where there is evidence that a rat infestation is being caused by a factor outside of someone's control such as waste dumped by a neighbour or poor waste management by a business, then further investigation is undertaken and enforcement action taken where necessary;

- Where rat populations are present on Council owned land, advice is provided to the appropriate department on how to deal with the situation;
- Where issues relating to the sewer network are identified, the team liaises with Thames Water to resolve them;
- If the team receives a number of complaints about rats in the same area which indicates a significant infestation then a comprehensive site visit is undertaken to investigate and follow up action taken. As I stated above, proactive projects are undertaken when a particular area is identified as having significant problems with rats, whereby officers will carry out targeted visits to local businesses and residents to identify rat infestations, poor waste storage, and property and drainage defects which may allow access for rats. Examples of such projects already underway are: along Wokingham Road and in the Baker Street area. Plans are underway right now for work along the Oxford Road to start in the near future.

Finally, I will take the opportunity of your question to address the issue of treatment of rat infestations. Interestingly, this year, we have seen a drop-off of requests for the Council's contracted, highly-economical and competitive professional rat infestation services. This reduction of take-up is concerning, as when we give advice, we strongly advise engaging a professional service (either Reading Borough Council or other professionally accredited services). Unfortunately, when residents chose to take the matter in to their own hands and use "off the shelf" bait, it is often less effective than that used by pest controllers and may simply be providing a food source for the rats.

I would urge you and residents to access our rat advice leaflet on our website at <https://www.reading.gov.uk/nuisance-animals-and-pests/pest-control/rat-prevention/> as it contains very helpful information and guidance.