

Rodent infestations on rise across Preston

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Rodents running around the streets of Lancashire are a pest that no-one wants. Council rat-catchers have been laying bait across the county, as Brian Ellis reports.

Work to refurbish Preston Bus Station has been hit by an invasion of rats and mice, it has been claimed.

The facelift, part of a £23.3m youth zone scheme, has been overrun by vermin, stirred up by recent construction activity.

It is understood private pest controllers are being brought in to deal with a “widespread” problem, although owners Lancashire County Council have played down the issue, insisting it is not a problem.

Bus station manager Linzi King said: “We don’t consider there to be a problem. We’ve had to bring in pest controllers at times to deal with incidents in certain areas of the bus station site, although this is only occasional.

“We regularly check for rodents on the site and take suitable action when needed.”

The claims of a major infestation come at a busy period for rat catchers both in the city and across the rest of Lancashire.

Preston Council has been inundated with calls, with its pest control officers called out 40 times to just two streets in Preston last year to deal with rats.

And now all householders are being urged to help stem a worrying increase in vermin across the city by taking better care of their rubbish.

Rat catchers made 25 visits to Blackpool Road and a further 15 to New Hall Lane during 2015/16, according to figures released by the city council in response to a Freedom of Information request.

There’s less traps being set in sewers, so they grow in numbers before coming to the surface.

The picture was even worse in the Chorley area where one street alone had a staggering 53 visits from the borough's pest team during 2015.

Where available, statistics across the county suggest that the rat menace is growing due to milder winters - and the council-sourced figures do not include additional call outs made to private pest controllers.

After years where sewer baiting looked to be tackling the problem, vermin numbers are back on the increase.

Preston Council's pest controllers answered 1,120 calls to deal with rats in 2015/16. But that did not give the full picture, with private contractors also busy fighting the menace.

"We're being called out more and more and homes and buildings being overrun are quite regular," said Michael Flynn of Bamber Bridge-based exterminator Alpha Pest Control.

"There's less traps being set in sewers, so they grow in numbers before coming to the surface. They're also harder to catch because they've started to eat different types of food, meaning finding bait that works for all of them is tricky."

Deepdale Road was another hotspot in Preston, with 12 visits for rats. Watling Street Road also had a dozen call-outs and Ribbleton Avenue 11.

Others where rat infestations were a problem included Fishwick Parade (11 call-outs), Castleton Road (11), Robin Street 10), Tulketh Road (10) and Callon Street (nine).

South Ribble Council, which includes Leyland, Bamber Bridge, Lostock Hall and Penwortham, refused to reveal the numbers of pest control visits - fearing identifying problems streets could have an adverse effect on house prices.

When the Post appealed the decision an exemption panel met to reconsider our application, but still declined to release figures, something the council did with a similar FOI request back in 2015.

In Chorley, where figures are gathered on a calendar year basis, residents in Preston Road summoned council pest control teams 53 times in 2015 and a further 22 times last year.

The figures show Grasmere Grove, near to the River Lostock in Whittle-le-Woods, had 45 visits to deal with rats in 2015, but only four last year.

Higher Meadow had 37 in 2015 and 14 last year, while Chorley Road was visited 33 times in 2015 and a further 13 in 2016.

“We have identified certain areas where there had been damage to drains and property which we’ve now had repaired and we are continuing with the sewer baiting that we do,” said Coun Paul Walmsley, who looks after environmental health issues for Chorley Council.

Preston is one of the few local authorities which operate a free pest control service to households. But budget cuts have seen the number of full-time staff halved from six to three.

The British Pest Control Association says a typical home has more than a dozen potential entry points for rats. And it is calling on householders to be “pest aware.”

The rodents can get through the tiniest gaps - as small as 2cm - and they use plumbing pipes, vents and even gaps in the roof eaves to gain access. Once in they build nests in attics or walls and breed rapidly.

With wheelie bins overflowing with household waste, especially over the Christmas and new year break, the visitors have had a plentiful supply of food to sustain them.

“We’ve had abnormally mild conditions throughout the UK (in 2016) and that is likely to have led to an increase in the number of rats,” said Dee Ward-Thompson, technical manager of the BPCA.

“Any cold snaps will drive them into buildings in search of shelter. They also go scrounging for food from bins and bird tables.”

Preston

The city’s pest controllers answered 1,569 call-outs in 2015/16, with 1,120 of those involving rats and a further 425 to deal with mice.

They made visits to a total of 607 properties during the year.

In the period from April to October 2016 – before the cold weather – they took a further 665 calls, almost 500 of those to deal with rats.

Blackpool Road, with 25, had the highest number of visits in 2015/16.

However, it is the longest street in the city and also had a much-publicised rat problem around the pond in Moor Park caused by people feeding the ducks.

A city council spokesman admitted the number of call-outs to rats had increased, although a more accurate assessment of the scale of the problem could not be made because not everyone had used the free public service.

“As well as carrying many diseases that can be passed to people, rats also cause considerable damage to buildings by gnawing.

“Their teeth don’t stop growing, so they need to gnaw to keep them short, said the spokesman.

“In colder weather they are more likely to be found indoors as they seek shelter, where there is often easy access to lots of food for them too.

“The council still has a small team of pest controllers; although over the last few years of continuing budget cuts the number of full-time staff has reduced from six to three.

“We are one of the few remaining councils in Lancashire to offer a free at point of use rodent control service for domestic property.

“Due to sewer baiting work part funded by United Utilities, rat numbers have been declining over recent years.

“However, latest figures have started to show an increase, and this is where the public can really help.

“Really simple things that most people do help tremendously - putting litter in the bin, disposing of domestic waste properly, not leaving plastic bags containing food outside and so on.

“The recent rise in popularity of keeping chickens means that those who don’t carefully provide feed for them are unfortunately also feeding rats.

“The council has preferred to offer a free service in the past, although we have powers to require people to take appropriate actions to control vermin when necessary.”

Fylde

Fylde District Council’s pest control team had only seven call-outs to deal with rats in 2015/16.

They made four visits to Green Bank in Wesham, two to Kilnhouse Lane, Lytham and one to Pool Foot Lane, Singleton.

The authority no longer provides pest control services and therefore there are no figures for the current financial year.

Ribble Valley

Pest control teams dealt with only nine call-outs for rats in the district in 2015/16. Three were in Whalley Road, Wilpshire, three in Greendale, Grindleton, two in Whalley Road, Clitheroe and one in Henthorn Road, Clitheroe.

In the current financial year – up to mid-October – there were also nine.

Three were in Inglewhite Road, Longridge, three in Branch Road, Mellor, two in Hillcrest, Langho and one in Bradyll Court Old Langho.

South Ribble

South Ribble Council refused to release details of the district's pest control problems citing the possible effect on house prices in the worst-hit areas.

The Post submitted a Freedom of Information request which was rejected by the authority. An appeal against that decision was also refused.

Explaining the decision not to co-operate, the council said the newspaper was seeking to obtain information which would “likely prejudice the commercial interest of any person or public authority”.

The statement went on: “We consider that the release of the information you have requested may have an adverse effect on the property prices in the streets in question – hence the commercial interests of the residents could be compromised.”

The authority also said the information “could prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.”

“The council is concerned that to release the information...could act as a deterrent to other residents to report instances of pest infestation,” said the statement.

“People need to feel confident that they can report such problems without it necessarily being made public.”

Chorley

Council pest controllers were summoned 2,367 times to deal with problems in the district during the 2015 calendar year. Just over 1,500 of those were involving rats.

The figures fell during 2016 due to extensive work carried out by the authority to bait sewers and broken drains. The total was down to 1,787 call-outs, with 1,157 to deal with rats.

Coun Paul Walmsley, who looks after environmental health issues, said: “We have identified certain areas where there had been damage to drains and property which we’ve now had repaired and we are continuing with the sewer baiting that we do.

“I also think that people are being more vigilant and making sure they cover compost bins and keep the lids on household waste bins.

“However, there is always more that can be done to help, such as if you feed birds, use a bird feeder basket.

“If you keep livestock, even rabbits and guinea pigs, make sure there is no food left out at the end of the day. And don’t drop litter including.”

In 2015 the streets with the highest number of pest control visits for rats were:

Preston Road 53 , Grasmere Grove 45, Higher Meadow 37, Chorley Road 33, Station Road 31, Chorley Old Road 26 , Withnell Road 26, Bolton Road 23, Highfield Road 21, Park Road 21,

In 2016 the call outs were: Bolton Road 36, Fairview Drive 22, Preston Road 22, Rockwood Avenue 16, Park Road 15, Steeley Lane 15, Grundy’s Lane 14, Leeson Avenue 14, Higher Meadow 14, Chorley Road 13, Spring Meadow 13, Studfold 13