

# **A Landmark National Rodent Survey**

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This year represents a landmark in our National Rodent Survey. The 2008/9 report is the tenth since we established our annual nationwide assessment of the UK-wide rodent challenge in the late 1990s.

We did this in response to members' concerns over the inability of an increasingly reactive and less well-structured approach to rodent control to effectively tackle rat and mouse problems; concerns that are, sadly, every bit as pressing today as they were then.

Over the years the support we've received from environmental health and pest control officers in local authorities the length and breadth of the country in responding to our annual request for information has grown tremendously.

Our very first survey included data from a third of all UK local authorities. Since 2004 we have never had less than a 60% response rate. And for the past two years more than three quarters of unitary authorities, district, borough and city councils have provided us with their figures and feedback.

That fact that at 76%, this year's response rate was within a whisker of the 80% record we scored in our 2007/8 survey despite the huge disruptions of the most recent local government reorganisation in many parts of the country speaks volumes for the dedication of those involved.

We are hugely grateful to all our local authority survey partners – and to the increasing number of members in private practice responding to our requests for wider information – for their continuing commitment. Without it we simply could not provide such a definitive annual picture of our national rodent challenge.

For the second year in a row, the support we've received from the Sorex team – now transformed into the global BASF Pest Control Solutions business – in putting together our increasingly professional industry report has also been invaluable.

With their assistance, as well as gathering our annual treatment data in much the same way as ever we've been able to extend our surveying to secure more quantitative information on rodent problems. At the same time, we've utilised our 10 years of figures to analyse rat and mouse treatment trends over the whole decade.

In addition to the printed report, members can find full details of this year's survey on line at both [www.npta.org.uk](http://www.npta.org.uk) and [www.pestcontrol.basf.co.uk](http://www.pestcontrol.basf.co.uk).

## Survey Results

So what of this year's results? Well, on the face of it, we can report a more encouraging position than 2007/8 when treatments rose to an all-time record in our 10 years of surveying.

The total number of professional rodent control treatments reported by UK local authorities in our annual survey fell slightly in 2008/9 to around 465,000 – a decrease of around 60,000 on 2007/8.

On a like-for-like basis (comparing reported treatments from only the same local authorities to eliminate the distorting effect of different samples in each year) brown rat treatment levels were only very slightly down on the previous year with house mouse treatments falling significantly.

Interestingly, in contrast to the local authorities, the private members providing us with data this year reported increases of nearly 30% and 20% respectively in their annual rat and mouse treatments. This almost certainly reflects the progressive transfer of public sector treatments to the private sector in many parts of the country, underlining the fact that local authority figures alone increasingly under-estimate the scale of the national problem.

More detailed analysis shows a general reduction in like-for-like rat treatment levels across most parts of the UK. Bucking the trend in a major way were London – reporting an increase of just under 40% in treatment levels – and the Midlands (including the City of Birmingham) – where the increase was a less dramatic 11%.

We saw more consistent regional reductions in like-for-like house mouse treatments, with only the Isle of Man reporting a significant increase.

When we look across our 10 year data set for the first time, however, the figures tell a far more sobering picture, suggesting the lower 2008/9 treatment levels are little more than part of a continuing – and worrying – trend.

To make the annual figures comparable, we have adjusted the reported treatments for the response rate in each year to provide an estimate of total national local authority-organised rodent treatment levels based on our sample.

At around 600,000 per year our 10 year analysis shows treatments remaining at almost exactly the same level as our first annual survey. And this despite the negative effect of the decline in free local authority control services on the willingness to have infestations professionally treated in recent years.

What is more, the regular surges in both annual rat and mouse treatment levels we've seen since 1999/2000 underline the UK's continued inability to get on top of rats and mice in a sustained way (*Figures 1 and 2*).

Instead, it seems that particular rodent problems stimulating notably high levels of professional treatment in one year are followed by a declining level of treatments in the next. This relaxation in treatment intensity appears to be allowing rat and mouse populations to rebuild rapidly, prompting another increase in problems within the next 12-24 months.

The fact that rodent problems are at least as bad today as they were 10 years ago – and in all probability considerably worse if the marked increase in level of non-local authority and household DIY treatments is taken into account – has to be a source of particular public health concern, as well as not inconsiderable embarrassment.

This precarious position is underlined by the major rise we've seen in apparent rat problems in London in this year's survey; something that is especially concerning with the 2012 Olympics fast approaching.

Our latest survey confirms that only a minority of local authorities are still providing rodent control services completely free of charge – around four in every 10 in the case of rats and half this number with house mice.

However, it also shows the majority are still providing free services to some groups of residents and over three quarters retain their own direct control capacity. Equally heartening is the fact that, despite intense budgetary pressures, around one in every 10 of those currently offering free services have returned to providing them having previously charged.

We have no doubt that enlightened local authorities re-introducing free control services set a very valuable example for the majority in living up to one of their most important statutory public health responsibilities; especially so as they retain the legal right to undertake the compulsory 'block' treatment of whole areas known to be so effective in controlling rats.

Other than the thorny issue of charging, the 2008/9 survey highlights over-feeding of wild birds, neglect in public sewers, poorly managed domestic waste and poor compost bin security as the four main factors responsible for the increasing control challenge seen by the overwhelming majority of pest control professionals over the past 10 years.

Three of these factors directly encourage rat and mouse populations to build by making food more readily available. So, when combined with today's far more reactive and piecemeal approach to control, it really isn't surprising our country continues to be unable to keep on top of rodent problems.

Nor can physiological resistance to the most widely used second generation anticoagulant rodenticides be blamed by most. This is confirmed by the fact that 90% of those involved in our survey have seen hardly any noticeable increase in resistance

in their areas over the past 10 years, with seven in every 10 of these seeing no increase whatsoever.

This tallies with the understanding that rodenticide resistant rats, in particular, appear to be inherently less competitive as a result of lower growth rates and overall vitality. So resistance only tends to be favoured where the same rodenticide formulations are used time and time again and in poor treatment programmes.

The majority of professionals further reckon most apparent resistance is, in practice, either to shyness to enter the boxes in which bait is placed to safeguard pets and other animals, or reluctance to consume the bait. This, in turn, is more related to insufficiently well-planned or managed treatment than real resistance.

## **Concerted Action**

Once again, our annual survey reaches the inescapable conclusion that concerted action is required to minimise the public health risks posed by rats and mice – let alone the food wastage and nuisance they cause – through a far better sustained level of national control.

First and foremost, I think we would all agree that a far more co-ordinated, better planned and, above all, less reactive approach to rat and mouse control is essential across the country.

Where serious rodent problems are identified, they need to be tackled on an area basis, with well-planned professional treatments extended beyond the immediate premises in which they were initially identified to ensure the most complete control.

Far better co-ordination of treatment is clearly essential between those responsible for local sewers, business premises and households too. And instead of merely leaving them until complaint levels again build-up, specific hotspots of infestation must be targeted for regular, repeated treatment.

Finally, there can be no doubt that policy makers and advisers need to be aware of the extent to which modern lifestyles are increasingly playing into the hands of the rats and mice, and take positive action to address this vital issue through better general public communication and waste food management.

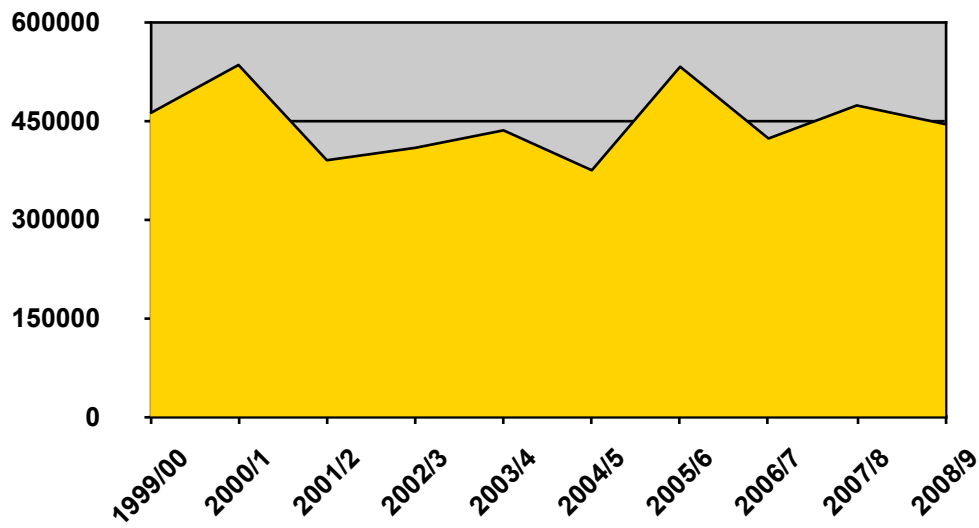
We know precisely how to keep on top of rodents in this country. We have quite sufficient professional capacity – in both the public and private sectors – to do so, and we have excellent examples of successful best practice from many areas.

The only thing we so self-evidently lack at both national and local level is the political will to ensure we actually get the job done. We are convinced this is a serious embarrassment we need to tackle as a matter of urgency before we show off our country to the world in 2012.

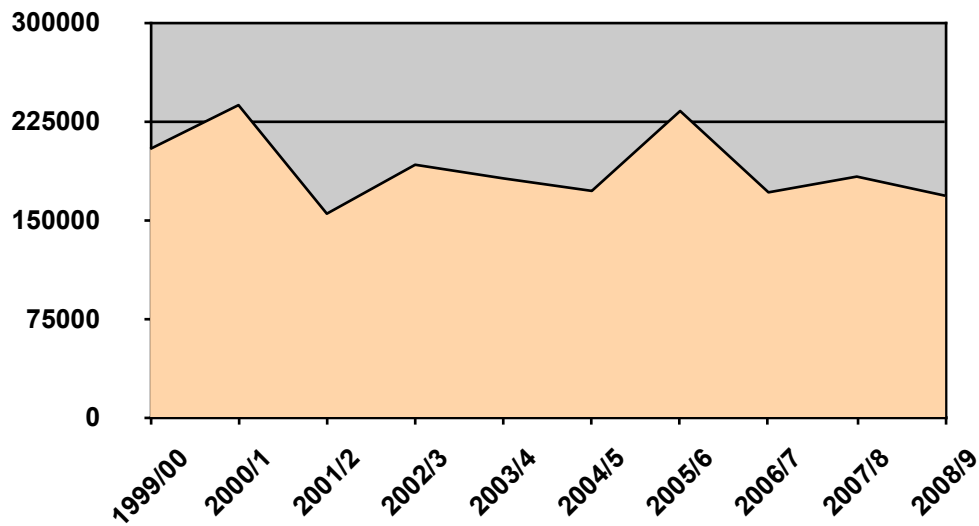
*As well as continuing to run this annual survey, over the coming year we are also working with BASF Pest Control Solutions to institute a parallel national study investigating key elements of control practice and concern with local authority and private members across the UK. We plan to send out questionnaires in April so the results can be published in the autumn. We very much hope as many people as possible will help us with this study which is designed to provide professionals with information of more direct pest control value than this primarily public-focused work.*



**Figure 1: Total National Rat Treatments (1999/00 – 2008/9) \***



**Figure 2: Total National Mouse Treatments (1999/00 – 2008/9) \***



*\* Total reported treatments in each year adjusted to a national level on the basis of the annual response rate.*