

Fly-tipping and rubbish dumping blamed for rat surge in West Lothian

An upsurge in rats in West Lothian has seen the council receive over 300 requests for pest control treatments last year.

There are concerns the rise in reports around Livingston and other West Lothian towns may be the tip of the iceberg, as the council doesn't have records of calls to private pest control companies.

There are also fears that growing fly-tipping and rubbish dumping are fuelling the spread of vermin despite the efforts of litter pickers to clear up.

Changes in the way we live and eat have added to the problems. The growth of vermin has come on the back of the spread of fast food and selfish littering – with at least 250 million pieces of litter thrown away each year, according to Zero Waste Scotland.

And as summer nears there are fears that rat numbers will grow. Home-owners and tenants across Livingston have complained of growing problems from rat infestation.

West Lothian Council stressed this week it can help tenants.

SNP councillor Maria MacAulay raised questions about rat infestation at the recent meeting of the full council after Dedridge residents had faced growing problems.

She told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "I know there have been issues in Bathgate too, so Dedridge is sadly not an isolated incident. I am aware that the removal of bins and increase in fly tipping hasn't helped, however Dedridge Litter Pickers do an amazing job in Dedridge to deter this and frequently post the vast amounts picked up."

Now, her SNP colleague in northern Livingston, Councillor Robert Brown has been asked to raise the issue again following complaints of rat infestation as work goes on to redevelop Deans South.

Ghost estate campaigner Kerry Macintosh found an infestation of rats attacking the newly built homes within months of moving in last May.

And while recognising that the building work may be disturbing nests Kerry Macintosh has also blamed the human element.

Kerry first discovered rats had invaded her garden when she moved bikes in her garden. At first, she thought moles had invaded before realising that rats were digging under her garden fence.

She actually caught the vermin invaders on camera as she began tackling around a dozen holes dug under the fence which is adjacent to a footpath on the newly built estate. The new homes are surrounded by building work, but elsewhere rubbish is piled in gardens in black bags.

She has filled in the rat holes and laid rat bait, but the rats continue to burrow, and she fears they will eventually destabilise the fence.

She told the LDRS: "Whether it's Dedridge or Knightsridge or Deans, rats are a big problem. It's wonderful what the litter pickers are doing, but there are some people who don't give a toss and just leave food and rubbish out in their gardens or

in bin stores. That's what's encouraging rats."

She called for those who deliberately rubbish their neighbourhoods to be charged by the council. Kerry, who is an active member of her local litter picking group, told the LDRS: "There's no excuse for folk who deliberately dump their rubbish on the streets or in gardens. It's disrespectful to their neighbours and people in the community."

But Kerry also called on the council to show "a bit of leeway" to those who were struggling and couldn't pay for bulky rubbish uplifts, or those who amass rubbish in their gardens.

"The council does need to show a bit of leeway and help people who are clearly struggling. It needs to offer support if folk cannot afford bulky uplift charges or people are piling up rubbish in their gardens," she added.

Kerry also called for more dog waste bins as fouling has become another obvious problem on the newly rebuilt streets of Deans South.

A spokesperson for West Lothian Council said: "It is widely reported that societal changes, such as an increase in fast food litter, food packaging being littered, building development, habitat and climate change have always played a part in pest control, and there is no one issue that contributes to the issues being felt across the country.

"Food litter is one issue that contributes towards an increase in pest control services. Keep Scotland Beautiful declared a litter emergency in 2022 and Zero Waste Scotland estimate that every year, 250 million items of litter are discarded across Scotland. This equates to 15,000 tonnes of litter collected annually, or nearly 50 pieces of litter for every person in Scotland. At least £60 million of public money is spent annually to clean up litter, money that could be better spent on other services."

The spokesperson added: "That is in addition to the work of community volunteers who play such an important role. Keep Scotland Beautiful found that the majority of litter in Scotland is a result of pedestrian activity, in other words, a personal choice not to dispose of litter by an individual appropriately.

"These behaviours increase the burden on local authorities and volunteers in managing the cleanliness of streets in Scotland.

"Rats are only one pest that our pest control service deal with. There are often too many factors likely to have supported rat activity at a location and numbers can fluctuate for various reasons.

"The responsibility to address any issues with rats will rest with the owner or occupier of land affected. That includes owners and occupiers of domestic and commercial property. The pest control team will assist owners and occupiers with treatment and advice if requested."

They continued: "West Lothian Council offers a pest control service for council tenants and non-council tenants and our prices are generally below average when compared to the many private operators. Given the cost of living increases over recent years, it is not surprising that there has been an increase in demand for our service which receives very good customer reviews and is part of the Trusted Trader initiative."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter