

Tackling Arson

ABOUT THESE GUIDES

This is one in a series of guides designed to share ideas for tackling vandalism and other forms of criminal damage. They are based, as far as possible, on examples we have found from around the UK and further afield. Although in most cases these have not been rigorously evaluated, they are reported to have been successful in tackling this sort of crime.

This guide gives a broad overview of arson how it can be tackled. Other guides already produced in this series cover:

- a broad overview of the problem
- the available powers and how they can be used;
- environmental approaches;
- tackling youth offenders; and
- high visibility "policing"

Further guides are in preparation including on, criminal damage to vehicles and analysing criminal damage data.

These guides are intended to be living documents that can be up-dated as necessary so if you have any comments on these guides or if there are any other subjects you would like covered, please send your suggestions to us via your regional Government Office or the Welsh Assembly Government.

WHAT IS VANDALISM / CRIMINAL DAMAGE?

Criminal damage refers to crimes where any person without lawful excuse intentionally or recklessly destroys or damages any property belonging to anotherⁱ. Activities resulting in non-permanent damage (i.e. that can be rectified, cleaned off or removed at no cost) such as letting down of car tyres should not be classed as criminal damage, nor should accidental damage.

Any damage around a point of entry to a house or vehicle should be treated as attempted burglary / vehicle crime rather than criminal damage if, on the balance of probabilities, one of those crimes is the more likely offence than criminal damageⁱⁱ. Vandalism is the term used in the British Crime Survey. Whilst the definition has been kept as close as possible to that of criminal damage, it only covers crimes against households and household property, including cars.

ARSON: THE PROBLEM

Arson fires are those fires where malicious or deliberate ignition is suspected. Although arson makes up a small proportion of police recorded crime (4% in 2004/05) some cases of arson are not recorded as such because they take

place alongside crimes with more severe penalties, and also the police may not be called to all arson scenes. However, the number of arson incidents attended by the fire rescue services over the last decade has doubled.

At its most serious, arson can lead to the loss of life, as well as inflicting serious financial damage - the *direct* financial costs alone are estimated to amount to around £2.4 billion in 2004. In addition, in communities where arson is persistent, it can be indicative of a wider problem with anti-social behaviour, and can lead to residents feeling highly vulnerable.

The risk of being a victim of arson is not evenly spread, with those living in socially deprived areas most at risk of experiencing arson against themselves, or against their communityⁱⁱⁱ. Arson rates are 30 times higher in poorer areas, with a 15 fold increase in the chance of death compared with affluent areas^{iv}.

In terms of offender profile the extent of what is known is limited by the 8% detection rate. However, it is likely that arson shares many links with criminal damage more widely. A large number of offences are committed by young people under 18, within their local area, and often in groups^v. Moreover, the majority of arson is unplanned, arising from opportunity, and perhaps even peer pressure.

One of the main strategies for preventing arson is therefore providing young people with educational and diversionary activities. This of course should be accompanied by making arson harder to commit, as well as ensuring that clear investigation policies exist to increase the chance of catching offenders when they have committed an arson offence.

YOUTH INTERVENTION

Early and effective intervention, diversion and education can help reduce the levels of arson, and crime more generally. Youth intervention strategies broadly fall into two strands – prevention and restorative strategies. Prevention includes education about the potential impact of arson, as well as diversionary activities into which young people can pour their energies. Both of these in turn can inform a young person's attitudes and behaviour in relation to fire setting. Importantly, different schemes are needed to target young children that have an interest

in playing with fire, and older adolescents whose activities may be linked with wider forms of anti-social behaviours.

Restorative activities aim to tackle problems after they emerge. It is important that young people continue to have the support to enable them to understand the consequences of their actions, whether this involves meeting with those affected by arson, or engaging with the Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in a structured manner.

Local agencies may work together to develop locally tailored approaches, although young people should also be directed to schemes that are already well established, and which offer a mix of broad ranging and targeted activities. For example, the Young Firefighters Association and the Duke of Edinburgh Award provide diversionary activities for a large number of young people alongside shorter schemes that are typically focussed on particularly at-risk groups, such as the Prince's Trust 'Team' Programme.

An assessment of a range of schemes found that some key characteristics of the most successful ones:

- **Content:** Training with the FRS as an integral part of a wider programme of youth activities has been found to be particularly effective, as has the provision of informal and formal mentoring by fire-fighting personnel.
- **Delivery:** The use of visual aids and small groups are effective, as is providing a reward for completing a scheme, thus adding to a young person's sense of achievement.
- **Management:** Strong links between a range of partners, including the FRS, Youth Offending Teams, and educational institutions ensures a good mix of knowledge, skills and experience in delivering arson prevention education. This is especially important given a young fire offender may also display a number of other issues, such as substance misuse, and a history of family problems.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** A large number of schemes that currently run do not have adequate mechanisms to judge their effectiveness against the initial objectives. With a robust framework of assessment and evaluation in place, the schemes can develop and improve over time.

In **Essex**, the 'Firebreak' initiative involved fire-fighters mentoring a group of young people who were no longer engaged with the school system, and were not motivated in making decisions about their future. It provided a learning environment that combined practical fire safety and rescue skills with classroom based discussion at local fire stations, thereby developing interpersonal skills in an environment that required young people to exercise discipline. Part of the course was aimed at encouraging the participants to think about their futures, and how further education could be beneficial to them. Importantly, a presentation ceremony was held at the end of the programme to **recognise and reward accomplishments**, giving young people a positive perception of their own capabilities.

In **Merseyside**, the FRS run a series programmes tailored to young people of different ages, thus ensuring that the key messages are delivered in an appropriate and engaging manner:

- **Face-Up** (13-25 yr olds). One day arson intervention programme mainly aimed at convicted offenders, who are required to attend as part of their supervision order. The offender is confronted about their crime, challenged about their behaviour, and helped to understand the effects of their actions on individuals and communities. On completion a report is forwarded to the referral agency.
- **Beacon Project** (11-16 yr olds). Course running over 12 weeks aimed at young people excluded or at risk of exclusion from the education system. Fire fighting activities and fire safety awareness is accompanied by wider drugs, alcohol and smoking education. On completion students are offered first aid and attendance certification, and the opportunity to come back to mentor future students on the course.
- **Local Involvement Fire Education Project:** (11-16 yr olds). Fire station based programme aimed at providing diversionary activities for young people during the school holidays – which is when anti-social behaviour affecting the FRS is usually at its peak.

HARDENING THE TARGET

As with crime in general, better lighting and increased surveillance can help reduce the likelihood of vandalism being committed if deployed correctly. Effective surveillance not only includes well-targeted, staffed and clear CCTV, but also natural surveillance, by the public and by local agency officers.

For vehicle vandalism more specifically, the relationship between the theft, abandonment and arson of vehicles^{vi} highlights the need for local agencies and partnerships to

work together to prevent vehicles from becoming abandoned in the first place. This can be achieved through measures such as vehicle amnesties, end-of-life collections by the local authority, and encouraging owners to comply with vehicle disposal regulations. In addition, when cars are abandoned it is important that they are removed as rapidly as possible.

Since April 2002, local authorities in England have the power to remove vehicles that are abandoned on the street and are of no value (which covers the majority of abandoned vehicles) after 24 hours. Moreover, once removed, unlicensed vehicles without value can be destroyed within 7 days. There is no statutory duty on a local authority to contact the owner; however, it may wish to do so in order to reclaim the costs of removal and destruction. If a vehicle is believed to have some value, it is issued with a seven-day notice, and attempts must be made to contact the owner. After seven days it can be removed and destroyed, unless it has a valid excise licence, in which case it must be held until 14 days after the expiry of the excise.

In addition, the owner can be prosecuted by the local authority under the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 if they are found to be responsible for abandoning a vehicle.

In **Avon and Somerset**, the arson task force has worked together with the community and the commercial sector to dramatically reduce vehicle arson through the **Car Clear scheme**, which has four main elements:

- Community awareness – helping the public understand the problem, and the part they can play in tackling it. This has included dedicated ‘Vandalised Vehicles Hotlines’ – managed by the police – that provide a clear reporting mechanism.
- Targeting offenders – working with schools to educate young people about the risks and consequences of arson
- Reducing the supply of unroadworthy vehicles – collecting and disposing of vehicles for less than the cost the owner would pay to have it scrapped, and agreements with traders and auctioneers to reduce the sale of vulnerable vehicles
- Rapid vehicle removal – early identification of vulnerable vehicles, and their removal in as little as 30 minutes.

This joined up partnership approach – with input, commitment and ownership from all partners – has seen a reduction in vehicle arson by 50% since 2002.

INCREASING DETECTION

Detection rates for arson are currently 8% (compared with 24% for all indictable offences). The difficulties with collecting evidence are partly due to the nature of the crime itself – fire

and water have the potential to destroy evidence. However, lessons can be learnt from a number of arson task forces that have shown it is possible to improve investigation and thus increase detections.

It is important that the police and FRS – together with forensics and pathologists where necessary – work closely together to increase the understanding of what each partner can bring to the investigation process. This can lead to common investigation protocols between the FRS and police, containing provisions on the sharing of information, communication between services, responding to crime scenes and collecting photographic evidence. Inter-service co-operation and coordination may be further enhanced if a police officer is seconded to the FRS, thus helping to ensure that management systems are compatible, and information can be properly shared.

In addition, it can be useful to review existing technology and training practices to ensure that the FRS have the adequate resources and knowledge to gain the maximum amount of evidence from an arson incident - for example, new breathing apparatus? may make it easier to investigate more quickly, and the provision of hand held recording devices may enable a fire-fighter to record valuable information about the crime scene.

In **Sussex**, the Arson the Fire Investigation Team is accompanied by a trained dog, which assists in identifying the presence of hydrocarbons given off by flammable liquids, even amongst debris. Once the fire is extinguished and the scene is cold, the **dog is able to search the fire scene quickly**. The vapour given off by a liquid accelerant is tracked down at speed by the dog as it can differentiate between hydrocarbons produced naturally during combustion and hydrocarbons introduced in illegal fire setting. Success is based on highly skilled training and the respect, trust and bonding between dog and handler. The result is a reduction in the time an investigator spends on excavating and sampling fire debris, and a reduction in the number of samples required for expensive forensic testing.

PARTNERSHIPS

Arson affects a range of statutory organisations and commercial interests, and as such is important that a multi-agency approach is adopted where possible. In particular, the FRS, the Police and local authorities need to work together across a range of initiatives, drawing on the support and expertise of other bodies – such as Youth Offending Teams and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing

Agency (DVLA) – in addition to the commercial sector where necessary.

For example, in order to remove a vehicle a local authority must first establish the ownership of the vehicle. Registered keeper information can be obtained directly from the DVLA. Alternatively, the police can inform the local authority whether a vehicle is owned by someone and whether it has been involved in a crime, which is sufficient information to decide whether a vehicle should be destroyed. By working in partnership, a police representative can take on responsibility for contacting the owners of vehicles, negating the need for a local authority to contact the DVLA and speeding up the process considerably.

Moreover, the framework afforded by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provides an ideal opportunity for local agencies to work together to undertake community safety audits of their area and to develop strategies to address local issues.

In Luton and Bedfordshire, regular multi-agency **Environmental Action Days** are held to target areas that experience a number of environmental crimes, including abandoned vehicles, graffiti, fly-tipping, fly-posting and arson. A combined force of officers from the police, FRS, the council, the DVLA and other agencies work together and join their delegated and legislative powers to tackle any issue that directly affects the local street scene. Importantly the patrols are done on foot, so that residents can see that action is being taken. Moreover, the clean up is accompanied by education for residents, as well as enforcement of environmental regulations. In 2004/05 the 15 EAD's that were held resulted in a significant reduction for a whole range of crimes and anti-social behaviour, particularly arson related incidents, which fell by 55%.

In Merseyside a 'Fire Service Arson Control Officer' (a uniformed firefighter who is non-operational) works full time with the Local Authority but communicates daily with the FRS Headquarters to exchange information and receive instructions. The Officer raises the profile of arson throughout multiple agencies and helps encourage partnership working by:

- providing a highly visible and available single point of contact
- facilitating the exchange of information between disparate organisations including Environmental, Building Control,

Planning, Education and Housing Departments, the Police, Registered Social Landlords, and others.

- establishing contact with 'can do' people in partner organisations, reminding others of their implied duty to act under existing legislation and highlighting and persuading authorities that an arson problem exists.

As a result of the success of the pilot scheme in reducing secondary fires and improving community safety, Merseyside FRS now employs five full time Arson Control Officers (one in each District Council) and is proposing to further increase the number of personnel in this role.

NEED MORE HELP?

Further information and assistance on tackling criminal damage is also available via your regional Government Office / Welsh Assembly Government or from:

- Crime Reduction website (www.crimereduction.gov.uk). In addition to general criminal damage information, an arson minisite is available on the website
- Together Academies which bring together practitioners to provide advice and training on specific issues to transform the way that they tackle anti-social behaviour.
- ASB Action Days when an expert practitioner will meet with ASB teams and their partners to help find solutions to intractable problems, refocus action to get results, encourage use of the full range of new anti-social behaviour powers or remove blockages that are preventing progress.
- ASB Action Line (0870 220 2000) and website (www.together.gov.uk) which provide information, solutions and best practice to help practitioners tackle anti-social behaviour.
- Overseas websites such as the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime (<http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org/index.php>); the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing (www.popcenter.org); and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (www.ncjrs.gov).
- Arson Control Forum which is a Government-led national body seeking to reduce arson-related deaths, injuries and damage (www.odpm.gov.uk).

ⁱ Criminal Damage Act 1971 Section 1

ⁱⁱ Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime

ⁱⁱⁱ ODPM Arson Control Forum, Research Bulletin 4, "Social Exclusion and the Risk of Fire", April 2004.

^{iv} Merseyside FRS, "Community Safety Strategy", p.10

^v ODPM Arson Control Forum, Research Bulletin 6, "Interventions with Arsonists and Young Firesetters", May 2005

^{vi} ODPM Arson Control Forum, "Vehicle Fires: Explaining the Rise in Vehicle Arson", February 2005