

DEVON AND CORNWALL POLICE AUTHORITY

21 May 2004

(FOI – Open)

Report by Chief Constable

ARSON TASK FORCE

INTRODUCTION

1. This report gives members of the Police Authority an update on the progress of the Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Arson Task Force (Arson Task Force).

BACKGROUND

2. The Arson Task Force was established in October 2001 following a successful funding bid to the Arson Control Forum, part of the ODPM, by the partner agencies. Those agencies are Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, Cornwall County Fire Brigade, Devon Fire & Rescue Service and the Isles of Scilly Fire Brigade.

3. The team comprises of a Police Constable, a Fire Service Station Officer and an Arson Reduction Analyst who work closely with all Police and Fire Service Departments, as well as Community Safety Partnerships and a host of other relevant agencies. The Arson Task Force is managed by a Steering Group comprising of senior officers from each of the partner organisations.

4. The Arson Task Force uses a problem solving approach to develop ways of tackling arson related issues, identifying best practice and disseminating it to BCUs and partners.

5. The Arson Control Forum initially offered funding to tackle arson issues, due to a 10% increase in deliberately set fires nationally each year since the late 1980s, a trend mirrored in the South West. In the UK, the annual cost of arson is £2.1 billion and two people die each week in arson related incidents. Such tragic incidents are not confined to metropolitan areas but can occur closer to home, as demonstrated by Op ADRIFT, the investigation into a deliberate fire and subsequent death in Penzance in 2002.

6. Initial Arson Task Force funding expired in March this year. However, a second bid submitted to the Arson Control Forum by the partners has proved successful, with staffing costs for the Arson Task Force being funded for a further 2 years, until March 2006 (£218K). The bidding process was extremely competitive and the work of the Arson Task Force evaluated by the ODPM. The award is seen as an endorsement of the work carried out to date.

7. Arson Task Forces are now being set up across the Westcountry and are in regular contact with the Devon & Cornwall team, seeking advice and drawing on our experience.

8. The Arson Task Force is working towards the ODPM aim of reducing deliberately set fires by 10% by 2010, thereby making the communities of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly safer places in which to live and work.

FIRE SERVICE DATA

9. Further to the Fire Service Data presented to the Police Authority in February 2003, additional research identified flaws in the ways in which data (incidents of deliberately set fires) was recorded. In order to ensure more accurate recording of incidents, recommendations have been made to partner agencies. There have been four changes in the way data is recorded by partners during the lifetime of the Arson Task Force, the most recent in May 2004. Recording will now be more accurate than ever before, and of a much higher standard than in many other parts of the country.

10. It is believed that this has been the most significant factor for increases in incidents of deliberately set fires recorded by the Fire Service when comparing the figures for 2003/4 with 2002/3. Other factors also include:

- ongoing training by Arson Task Force officers to detectives and firefighters in arson recognition to ensure accurate identification of deliberate/accidental fires
- improved communication between Police and Fire Service, brought about by the continuity provided by the Arson Task Force
- last year saw the hottest, driest weather for some years, e.g. it was the warmest June since 1976; rainfall in September was 47% below the average. There is a huge correlation between weather and certain types of deliberate firesetting
- figures for 2002 are believed to be artificially low due to recording problems during periods of Fire Service industrial action.

11. Exeter University has been commissioned to assess these factors to see if there is a method of quantifying their effect on statistics. This study has been financed by the ODPM.

12. Fire Service data for Devon suggests that when comparing 2003/04 with 2001, there has only been an increase in reported incidents of approximately 4% (3666 incidents for 2001/2 compared to 3818 for 2003/4) over this period (due to changes in mobilisation system, Cornwall data not yet available). As part of its overall aim, the ODPM is seeking to arrest the growth in arson by 2007- it would seem that Devon & Cornwall are well on the way.

POLICE DATA

13. With improved arson recognition/recording by the Fire Service, it was expected that we might see a leap in incidents crimed as arson. This has not occurred. Not all incidents recorded as deliberate by the Fire Service will result in an arson crime report. This is due to the fact that most incidents the Fire Service attend involve items of low value with no ownership, (eg rubbish), which are not covered within the Criminal Damage Act. There was only a 3% increase in recorded arson crimes comparing 2002/3 with 2003/4.

14. In the previous year the Arson Task Force had targeted areas where specific problems had been identified. It is pleasing to see that there have been reductions in these areas e.g. Plymouth, Caradon, Exeter. There has also been good work in Torbay, but it is disappointing that the arson crime figure has risen. This is mainly due to deliberate fires involving motor vehicles. The Arson Task Force has been targeting deliberate rubbish fires in the town centres of Torbay, which in the past have proved to be a major risk to shops and people living above them. There has actually been a 6% reduction in this type of fire. This suggests that where geographic areas or specific fire types are targeted by the Arson Task Force there can be success, with reductions in fires and associated crime.

15. From the figures below, it is possible to see where there are current areas of concern, which the Arson Task Force will be seeking to address.

Arson related Crimes in Devon & Cornwall
January to December 2002 and 2003

Offence District	Arson / arson endangering life	
	2003	2002
Penwith & IOS	54	53
Kerrier	77	58
Carrick	65	50
Restormel	119	83
Caradon	70	80
North Cornwall	61	60
Plymouth	352	368
West Devon	39	57
South Hams	56	45
Torbay	139	119
Teignbridge	97	88
Exeter	114	137
East Devon	69	73
Mid Devon	38	28
North Devon	78	71
Torrige	24	36
TOTAL	1452	1406

Strategic Development Department 2004 – Data Services – Information Management

16. It is also pleasing to note that the detection rate for arson across the Constabulary has risen from the previous year from 10.2% to 11.4%. The most up to date national average is 8%.

INITIATIVES

17. Some of the examples of Arson Task Force initiatives are detailed below:

- **Refuse Protocol-** the Arson Task Force and Torbay Council have been working together to address the problem of deliberate fires in inappropriately stored commercial waste in town centres. The protocol (involving a joined up approach to educating businesses and using legislation to deal with persistent offenders) is near completion. There has already been interest from other parts of the country in adopting the scheme. Once the protocol is formalised, it will be marketed across the Constabulary area where other local authorities will hopefully seek to adopt it.
- **Community Action Days-** The Arson Task Force introduced this concept to Devon & Cornwall. These are simply multi-agency days of action to target elements of anti-social behaviour in identified communities. Not only are there quantitative results (e.g. On one day in Bodmin nearly 100 cars identified as being of interest to DVLA) but feedback from local residents has suggested the days are well received by the community. Community Action Days have happened in Restormel, North Cornwall and Plymouth and are currently being marketed throughout the Constabulary area.

- **Project Hawkeye-** deliberate fires in open countryside are often difficult to prevent or detect due to their isolated locations. Project Hawkeye promotes the Crimestoppers number in rural areas to encourage people with intelligence to share it. The aim is also to deter 'would be' offenders by showing that their actions may be observed and reported. The project was initially launched on The Lizard, is now running on Woodbury Common, near Exeter. It is hoped that the project will be rolled out regionally to include the National Parks and north coasts of Devon & Cornwall.

OTHER WORK

18. Other work carried out by the Task Force involves giving presentations to CID courses, probationary firefighter courses and Fire Investigation officers, attending relevant fire incidents to provide investigative support and subsequently court attendance. To also provide advice to the Police and Fire Service in all aspects of fire investigation and arson reduction and disseminate relevant legislation and case law. The Task Force represents the Constabulary at national conferences and shares good practice as appropriate.

19. In addition, a database containing relevant Police and Fire Service data is maintained and relevant arson data provided to Community Safety Partnerships. This includes identifying arson trends and providing data packages to alert and assist BCUs. The Task Force also does interviews with the media, promoting arson reduction and providing relevant comment as well as having an important educational remit in schools.

FUTURE PROPOSALS

20. The Arson Task Force has developed into a major tool in reducing crime, the fear of crime and tackling anti-social behaviour. It is a high profile example of partnership working at its best. When the current external funding expires in 2006, the Constabulary and its partners should adopt the Arson Task Force as core business.

21. Deliberate fires in abandoned or unroadworthy vehicles still make up a large percentage of deliberate fires attended by the Fire Service (over 50% in some areas). Often, such vehicles have been brought to the attention of police and local authority before they are burnt. Project Onager aims to address this issue and is being promoted throughout the Constabulary area.

22. Often fire setting involving items of little or no value does not constitute an offence. Such fires can add to the fear of crime, cause unnecessary call outs, damage the environment and can cause danger. Mention has been made at a national level to make such behaviour an offence and this is a move the Constabulary should support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

23. It is recommended the Police Authority note the contents of the report.

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