

AGENDA ITEM:

REPORT TO:	COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE
DATE:	21ST APRIL, 2005
REPORT NO.	CFO/81/05
REPORTING OFFICER:	CHIEF FIRE OFFICER
CONTACT OFFICER:	DEPUTY CHIEF FIRE OFFICER M. HAGEN
OFFICERS CONSULTED:	T/D.O. DAVIES, ARSON REDUCTION MANAGER
SUBJECT:	ARSON TASK FORCE PROGRESS

Purpose of Report

1. To inform Elected Members on the progress of the Arson Task Force.

Recommendation

2. Elected members to note the content of this report.

Background

3. The Arson Task Force was created in April 2003, and consists of the Arson Reduction Manager, a Police Officer, five district based Arson Reduction Advocates (ARA's) and the Fire Investigation Dog Handler.
4. The work of the Arson Task Force centres on developing and implementing strategies to reduce the numbers of deliberate fires on Merseyside in line with the ODPM PSA target. IRMP 1 action points 8 – 13 provide the strategic direction for the Arson Reduction Manager to achieve the PSA target.
5. Merseyside Police seconded a Police Officer to work at MFRS Headquarters in September 2003. The secondment clearly demonstrates close partnership working to reduce deliberate fires. In May 2004 we formalized our partnership with the publication of our "Arson Fire investigation joint agency agreement", and the signing of a partnership agreement.
6. In February 2004 we were successful in securing £380K funding from the Arson Control Forum. The funds are provided until March 2006 and are used to employ five Arson Reduction Advocates, three Bi-lingual advocates, with a further Asian advocate to be employed June 2005, and seven new vehicles. Reports detailing progress are made to the Arson Control Forum on a quarterly basis.

7. In September 2004 we appointed four Arson Reduction Advocates, and have recently appointed our fifth. All districts are now represented by an advocate working from, local authority premises.

Progress

8. The Arson Reduction Advocates are now fully embedded in their respective districts. The ARA's support the Station Managers to achieve their performance targets. Strategies and action plans formulated by District and Station managers to reduce deliberate fires within their communities now fully utilize the ARA's. The ARA's are able to react to local problems, and use their evolving network of local authority contacts to achieve swift solutions. There is no doubt that their working location within Local Authority Community Safety Teams, significantly enhances their capability to resolve arson issues. Issues that remain problematic are brought to the attention of the District Manager to be resolved through the CDRP route. Examples of work performed by the Arson Reduction Advocates are provided in Appendices A-D.
9. The Arson Task Force continues its work to develop a pan-Merseyside approach to abandoned vehicle removal. The Areas of Liverpool, Knowsley and St Helens, are all now equipped with an abandoned vehicle fast-track removal scheme. Wirral has gone out to tender for a scheme. Sefton is interested in the concept of a no tolerance "Abandoned Vehicle Gold Zone". We will continue to progress this over the coming months. Quarterly figures Oct – Dec 2004 for deliberate vehicle fires demonstrate a 20% reduction, when compared with the same period for 2003.
10. In November MFRS suffered a double fatality as a result of fire spread from a wheelie bin to a domestic property. The Fire Investigation concluded that the fire in the wheelie bin was most likely to have been started deliberately. To raise awareness with the public as to the safe storage of wheelie bins, the five local authorities of Merseyside have agreed to fund a bin sticker campaign. A multi-agency meeting took place at service HQ in March to progress this campaign, and St Helens & Sefton councils have already released funding. The ATF are also investigating the feasibility of fireproof wheelie bins in particularly vulnerable areas. This problem will only get worse in future years, most properties will be equipped with two wheelie bins as local authorities demand that customers divide their refuse into recyclables and non-recyclables.
11. The Arson Task Force has recently taken responsibility for racially motivated arson attacks within Merseyside. Referrals come from Merseyside Racial Harassment Unit, and Merseyside Police Hate Crime Co-ordinators. These vulnerable individuals who live in fear of fire being used as a weapon against them, are provided with smoke detection, fire proof letterbox bag, a fire extinguisher, fire survival advice, and on occasions improvements are made to the property to further reduce the risk and enhance the prospect of it being able to withstand an arson attack. The properties are also flagged as high risk within the MFRS mobilising system. It is our intention to expand and enhance this service to include all Hate Crime across the whole of Merseyside.

12. The Arson Task Force has produced our "Guide to Arson Risk Assessment in Schools" (available on MFRS website). This represents our commitment made in our Integrated Risk Management Plan, to "Offer those schools most at risk of an arson attack, a specific arson risk assessment." We are performing post fire arson risk assessments on every school that has suffered from a primary deliberate fire, and have programmed for the top ten most at risk schools in each district. The Arson Task Force has delivered two training sessions to Knowsley school building managers and delivered two presentations to St. Helens Headteachers.
13. Consultation has taken place with Registered Social Landlords on Merseyside, to develop a good practice guide to the securing of void property. Once published it is hoped that RSL's will enter into partnership agreements to all secure their premises to a common standard based on risk of arson.

Conclusion

14. The Arson Task Force will continue to support Station Managers in resolving deliberate fire setting issues, and work proactively to prevent deliberate fires occurring in our communities.

Equality & Diversity Implications

15. Arson is known to impact disproportionately on lower socio-economic groups. Therefore, work directed at reducing arson helps those most at need.

Financial Implications

16. The total scheme involves the employment of:-
 - 4 Bilingual Advocates
 - 5 Arson Reduction Advocates
 - Payment toward Merseyside Police Officer salary

The budget for 2005/06 is £0.200m. This is funded by grant from the Arson Control Forum of £180,000 and the balance is funded by previous years grant carried forward. It is not yet clear whether this funding source will be renewed in subsequent years.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None