

# ARSON IN SCHOOLS



[www.merseyside.police.uk/](http://www.merseyside.police.uk/)

## A guide to Arson Risk Assessment in Schools



[www.merseyfire.gov.uk](http://www.merseyfire.gov.uk)

### School fires are on the increase

There is a growing national problem involving school arson. On average there are three school fires every day in the United Kingdom. The financial cost to the insurance companies for these school fires hit £100,000,000 in 2002, which is more than twice the cost four years ago. It is estimated that 75% of these fires were the result of arson attacks.

A large school fire devastates. The aftermath of such a fire lingers for years. The long-term disruption that follows puts staff and pupils under stress and imposes large financial, educational and administrative costs. It is a price that your school cannot afford to pay. However, schools can certainly reduce the chances of it happening or, if the worst does occur, keep losses to a minimum.

Every school fire initiates its own array of stories of disrupted education, lost teaching materials and community devastation. Schools sit at the very heart of a community and it is vital that everything is done to protect them from harm.

Evidence suggests that children of school age start the majority of school fires and that they are opportunistic crimes where the culprits are not aware of the consequences of their actions.

**"I cannot imagine the feelings of the staff who have been here for 25 years, some of them 30 years. Their whole lives have been committed and devoted to this school. But it is actually the work inside the building, the students' work, the artwork on the walls, the work that is on computer systems and so on, that cannot be replaced or it will take a long time to replace."**

### Merseyside Perspective

Your school is not immune from the threat of arson, and with the number and cost of school arson fires still at an

unacceptable level, it is time to accept that Risk Management in schools offers a major opportunity to reduce these unacceptable losses.

School fires – accidental as well as malicious – are all too common, and Merseyside is no exception to this. In the 2 years from April 2002 to April 2004 Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service attended 62 fires in school buildings.

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, in partnership with Merseyside Police is committed to reducing the incidence of arson in school buildings.

Integral to this approach of arson reduction is the need for headteachers; school governors and teachers to be able to recognise the signs and symptoms that make their schools vulnerable to arson. All employers have a duty under the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 (as amended) to carry out a workplace risk assessment in relation to fire safety. This risk assessment process should take into account the risk presented by arson. It is essential to develop site specific proposals and ensure that measures are put into place that are commensurate with the risk.

By putting simple precautions into place that deter or limit the activities of an arsonist, they will also have the effect of deterring the vandal, petty thief or other opportunistic criminals. Such measures as these may also restrict the growth and development of any accidental fire, thus reducing the subsequent risk to lives and property.

The purpose of this guidance note is to assist you in the completion of your school arson risk assessment. However, if you feel that you need further help or assistance then please contact a member of Merseyside Arson Task Force on:

[arsontaskforce@merseyfire.gov.uk](mailto:arsontaskforce@merseyfire.gov.uk)

0151 296 4000

# ARSON IN SCHOOLS

## Who Starts the Fires?

Arson in schools is directly linked to youth disorder, anti-social behaviour and other youth nuisance crimes in the community. Unfortunately, pupils, ex-pupils or others with knowledge of the school generally start the greatest number of fires in schools. It is more than likely that they will be living in the school catchment area.

Of the people who were found guilty of the crime of arson, 50% were between 10 and 16 years of age. Not all of them were boys; girls are just as capable of arson as the boys are.

The majority of school fires – approximately 70% - occur outside the normal school hours, usually between 1900 – 2300. The remaining 30% of fires actually happen during school time, and this is a trend that appears to be on the increase. Fires will be started using any form of combustible material that is found lying around the school premises.

During school hours, evidence suggests that lunchtime and the time immediately after the end of school are susceptible to arson, and the following areas in your school are of concern:

- Toilet Blocks
- Cloakrooms
- Concealed Areas and Alcoves
- Unsupervised Storerooms

These areas should be subject to extra staff supervision at known vulnerable times during the school day.

Fires started during the school day are generally smaller in nature and detected at an early stage of development, whereas fires started after the school closedown are often more severe in nature and cause much more damage to the school.



## Assessing the Arson Risk

Much can be done to deter the arsonist or even limit the spread of the products of a fire involving the school. The ultimate arson reduction tool is an automatic fire sprinkler system. Sprinklers can be considered to be a combined detection / suppression system. A suitably installed sprinkler system will not only prevent the fire from spreading, but will control, if not extinguish, the fire in the earliest

stage of development. Any damage is limited to the room of origin and the school is capable of quickly returning to normality after the fire. Fire sprinklers should be considered for **ALL new schools**, schools assessed as being high risk and those undergoing major refurbishment to provide the optimum level of protection in the event of a fire occurring. Sprinklers are extremely cost-effective when incorporated in the initial planning of new and refurbished schools, and once installed the maintenance costs are negligible. Schools that are fitted with sprinklers will attract substantial reductions in insurance premiums.



However, more can be achieved by taking other, less cost-intensive actions relating to staff training and house-keeping. For example:

### 1. Prevent Unauthorised Entry onto Site

- Maintain perimeter fencing, hedges and external lighting in good order. Fences and hedges should not obstruct the vision of the neighbours.
- The majority of trespass and any associated vandalism usually occur under the cover of darkness. Therefore, care should be taken not to provide intruders with 'working light' in concealed spaces or recesses.
- Consider obtaining advice on lighting and CCTV from the local Crime Reduction Officer.
- Remove graffiti without delay. If it is left then vandals and arsonists will begin to see the school as a legitimate target, appearing to have little or no value.
- Consideration should be given to the use of random security patrols. If this service is to be used, close liaison with the Police is recommended.
- Good relationships with neighbours are vital, as they are the people observing any unlawful activity when the school is closed. They should be encouraged to contact the Police on all such occasions or alternatively, they can contact **Crimestoppers** on telephone number **0800 555 111**. Callers are never asked for their name or any personal details and no calls are traced or recorded.



## 2. Prevent Unauthorised Entry into Buildings

- Ensure that doors, windows and skylights are secure, if necessary with bars and grilles. Maintain an effective burglar alarm system.

### DO NOT COMPROMISE THE MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM THE BUILDING.

- A routine should be established whereby a 'Nominated Person' is responsible for securing all doors and windows on the school premises at the end of the working day.
- All shrubbery and foliage should be controlled and prevented from encroaching upon the school buildings
- Intruder alarms, connected to a call-monitoring centre, should be installed. If the coverage is limited, areas such as corridors should be alarmed, as intruders will be detected moving from room to room.
- The use of schools outside normal hours is on the increase, and it is therefore more imperative that access to other parts of the school is restricted. A good closing down routine should be adopted by the person responsible for securing the school when it is vacated at the end of the day

## 3. Reduce the Opportunity to Start A Fire

- All external combustible storage sites should be secure and emptied on a regular basis.
- Skirts should be fitted to the base of all mobile classrooms to prevent the accumulation/placement of combustible materials underneath the classroom. The skirts will need to permit a degree of air movement to avoid condensation.
- Waste bins should not be fixed to walls or sited under roofs, but kept in a bin room or secure compound, or alternatively secured to an immovable object with a padlock and chain and at least 8 metres from a building. The bin lids should be locked outside normal school hours.



Poorly sited & secured bins



Correctly sited & secured bins

- Ensure that matches and lighters are not left in the staff room overnight

## 4. Reduce Potential Fire Damage

- Consider installing sprinklers in the school if it is due for refurbishment
- Secure high value equipment out of sight in a locked separate room

- Keep all internal and means of escape doors closed
- Install an Automatic Fire Detection System

## 5. Reduce Subsequent Losses



- Should the worst occur and your school suffers a fire, there are procedures available for disaster recovery and advice should be sought from your own LEA. However, Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service have entered into a partnership with ISS Ark that offers an immediate response from an international disaster recovery firm, of which the first 4 hours on-scene activity is free.

### Close-Down Procedure

The most important steps in fire prevention are good housekeeping and proper close-down procedures.

The following checks are recommended:

- all flammable materials are locked away;
- all valuable equipment is secured;
- no cash is left unsecured overnight;
- all rubbish/waste has been removed from the building and placed in secure storage;
- everyone has vacated the premises and all rooms, especially toilets and showers, have been checked for anyone hiding;
- the external lighting is working correctly;
- all windows are shut and locked;
- all internal doors are closed (to prevent the spread of fire); this will lead to a reduction in the amount of damage should a fire occur in your school
- the intruder alarm and fire alarm systems have been correctly set;
- all the external doors have been secured;
- gates in the perimeter fences are shut.

## RISK TO PREMISES FROM ARSON

CONSIDER THE THREAT	YES	NO	CONTROL MEASURES INTRODUCED
Is there a history of vandalism or fire setting at the premises?*			
Are there any pupils/students who have a fire-setting history/background or who have been diagnosed with serious behavioural problems?			
Is there a history of vandalism or fire setting in the area around the premises?*			
Is there a history of break ins at the premises?			
Is security lighting provided?			
Is there a CCTV system installed?			
If Yes, are the pictures of suitable quality?			
Are there alcoves around the building?			
Are waste bins (or other containers holding flammables) kept in a secure compound?			
If not, are bins locked or secured in such a way that they cannot be moved and placed against the buildings?			
Are bin lids locked when not in use?			
Is all rubbish placed in the bins?			
Are there litter bins in the grounds?			
Are litter bins sited away from buildings?			
Are litter bins emptied regularly?			
Is there a boiler house or plant room?			
Is the boiler house properly secured at all times?			
Is fuel kept outside?			
If so, is it and any pipe work or cabling secure?			
Is the boundary fence in good order and at least 2 metres in height?			
Are there any outbuildings such as storage sheds?			
Are outbuildings well away from main buildings and kept locked/secured?			
Are there any de-mountable buildings?			
Are de-mountable buildings in good repair and kept locked/secured?			
Is the skirt around the de-mountable in good repair?			
Is the premises fitted with a fully operational intruder alarm?			
Are <b>all</b> external doors, windows and roof lights secure?			
Is a good closing down regime carried out at the end of each day?			

\*The Arson Task Force will be able to advise on the level of vandalism / deliberate fires in your area.

\*If your school suffers a small fire that does not require the attendance of the Fire Service, please inform the Arson Task Force

Any of the highlighted areas receiving a tick will require active control measures to be put into place in order to reduce the risk. The findings should be included in the school fire risk assessment and reviewed on a regular basis or whenever the layout of the school is altered.

