

# European guideline



*Preventing arson  
– information to  
young people*

## **FOREWORD**

The European fire protection associations have decided to produce common guidelines in order to achieve similar interpretation in the European countries and to give examples of acceptable solutions, concepts and models. The Confederation of Fire Protection Associations Europe (CFPA E) has the aim to facilitate and support the fire protection work in the European countries.

In most developed, industrial countries arson has become the major fire problem of our time. While fire statistics in general and arson statistics in particular are inadequate to a lesser or greater degree in most countries, it has been clearly established that world-wide the cost of arson as a proportion of all fire costs is at least 15 per cent and may be as high as 50 per cent depending on the country. Insurers throughout the world are devoting between a quarter and a third of their total loss expenditure to pay for losses resulting from arson.

There are many different motives for arson although it is felt in most European countries that arson for gain (i.e. to defraud insurers), while a significant factor, accounts for only a small part of the cost. Where evidence has been collected it is seen that arson is principally linked to vandalism and other crimes such as burglary. A substantial number of offenders are young males aged 14-18; even younger children are often the culprits.

This guideline emphasises the importance of providing information and education for young people, to deter them from committing arson. It deals with the general principles of that approach and does not cover technical measures. Perhaps there is also a need for a more technical Guideline, which would be a good complement to this one.

The reason for this approach, aimed at young people, is because they are responsible for almost 60% of all arson.

The proposal for this guideline came from the Arson Task Group of CFPA Europe and the author is Mr Arne Kallstenius from the Swedish Fire Protection Association

This guideline was compiled by the Guidelines Commission and has been adopted by all fire protection associations in the Confederation of Fire Protection Associations Europe.

Zurich, 12 Mars 2004  
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Stockholm, 12 Mars 2004  
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## **1 Introduction**

Arson is a social problem, a serious crime and also the most common cause of fire. At least one fire in four is deliberately started. Arson causes society extensive material damage and economic losses, and it creates insecurity and suffering for many people. Arson is predominantly a problem associated with young people. Young people are responsible for commit more than 50% of the arson fires. In spite of the large number of different measures taken both by national governments and local authorities, it has been difficult to bring about a lasting change in this unfavourable development.

An increasing number of parties have demanded that a more concentrated effort should be made to solve the problem of juvenile arson by focussing on some of its key aspects and by setting common priorities. Experience at local level shows that the number of cases of arson can be reduced by effectively and systematically utilising and co-ordinating the limited resources that are available. Preventive work of a more targeted nature must, however, be carried out to bring about a permanent reversal of this trend at national level.

This guideline calls attention to priority aspects of the problem, those on which resources should be concentrated. It is aimed at local bodies, principally the fire and rescue authorities but also other organisations and people who are involved with accident and crime prevention. The guideline is based on practical experience of dealing with juvenile arson at local level in countries across Europe.

This Guideline highlights the areas where further priorities and measures should be concentrated. The guideline is addressed to the municipal safety organisation and in the first place to the rescue service, but also to the other players and activists who carry out accident and crime prevention work. The guideline is based on the practical experiences gained in the municipalities in some of the European countries

This Guideline emphasises the need to engage with and educate young people in ways which will help to deter them from committing arson.

Arson is responsible for a large proportion of all acts of vandalism in society. Experience shows that preventive action against arson – directed towards young people – has the effect of reducing vandalism of other types in the community. Action against arson can therefore be co-ordinated with other action to prevent vandalism so that juvenile delinquency in society may be reduced.

## **2 Arson experience and reaction**

Vandalism is a great social nuisance and arson is perhaps the worst kind – it is certainly the most serious fire problem. Over the years, in some countries, for example Sweden and UK, the county fire protection associations and individual rescue services have formed a number of local "arson prevention groups" with representatives from the rescue service, police, insurance companies, social services, schools etc. Who have produced information material and have been active at local level.

Experience indicates that nothing is done unless the fire sector assumes the principal responsibility for highlighting the issue and promoting arson prevention work. (The work has also in many cases been depended on individual voluntary activists). It is in the fire sector that the insight, knowledge, resources and engagement are to be found – leading to arson prevention initiatives which will bring considerable economic benefits to society as a whole.

Much good work directed at young people has been done, and individual examples in the municipal authorities, in Sweden for example, have shown that arson can be temporarily reduced by up to 50% - in most cases. This is a consequence of systematic and targeted information for school children not yet in their teens. In most cases it has been the staff of the rescue service who

## **Guideline No 8:2004**

have done this work – work which has often been carried out by activists on a voluntary basis and taken the form of projects.

In the event of an arson fire:

- one out of every four such fires is set to conceal a crime;
- in most cases, they are committed by young people;
- those young people do not understand the consequences of their actions, for themselves or for their surroundings.

Would, for instance, the Gothenburg disaster in Sweden of 1998, when 63 youngsters lost their lives, have occurred if those responsible had foreseen the consequences – very probably it would not. This is where the great challenge lies, as well as the evident opportunities for long term change.

The provision of appropriate information for our children and young people must begin at an early stage and should be carried on continuously if we are serious in our efforts to reduce arson. Society can make large economic and social gains by disseminating information about arson at school, but so far efforts have been too localised, fragmented and short-term in nature.

### **3 Arson – some basic facts**

Arson is predominantly a youth and urban problem. Research in Sweden shows that 80% of all children play with fire, and that young people under 21 commit 60% of arson. The most common motives among children and young people are curiosity, extreme boredom and vandalism. Other motives among both young people and adults are concealment of crime, revenge, hate, conflicts and insurance swindles. Pyromania is responsible for no more than 10% of arson. Most fires that are started by children are probably not deliberate but begin as play. But there are also many young arsonists that are known to the police or to social workers from earlier incidents. Many of these youngsters have difficulties at school or at home, feel a failure, or have other difficult relationships.

Everything from waste paper baskets to factories is the target, even though public buildings such as schools and recreational installations, and blocks of flats, are especially at risk. Containers, loading bays, entrances, cellars, refuse storage rooms, attics and vehicles are common targets.

Cause-of-fire analyses and fire investigations are often time consuming detective work. In most cases, the vital signs vanish in the first few minutes. Detection percentage is very low and in almost 90% of cases no suspect can be identified. Co-operation between the police, the fire and rescue service, insurance companies etc has improved in recent years but further improvement is desirable. The scope of the problem, i.e. the number of cases of arson and their everyday consequences is often obscured by more spectacular events in the media and in public debate.

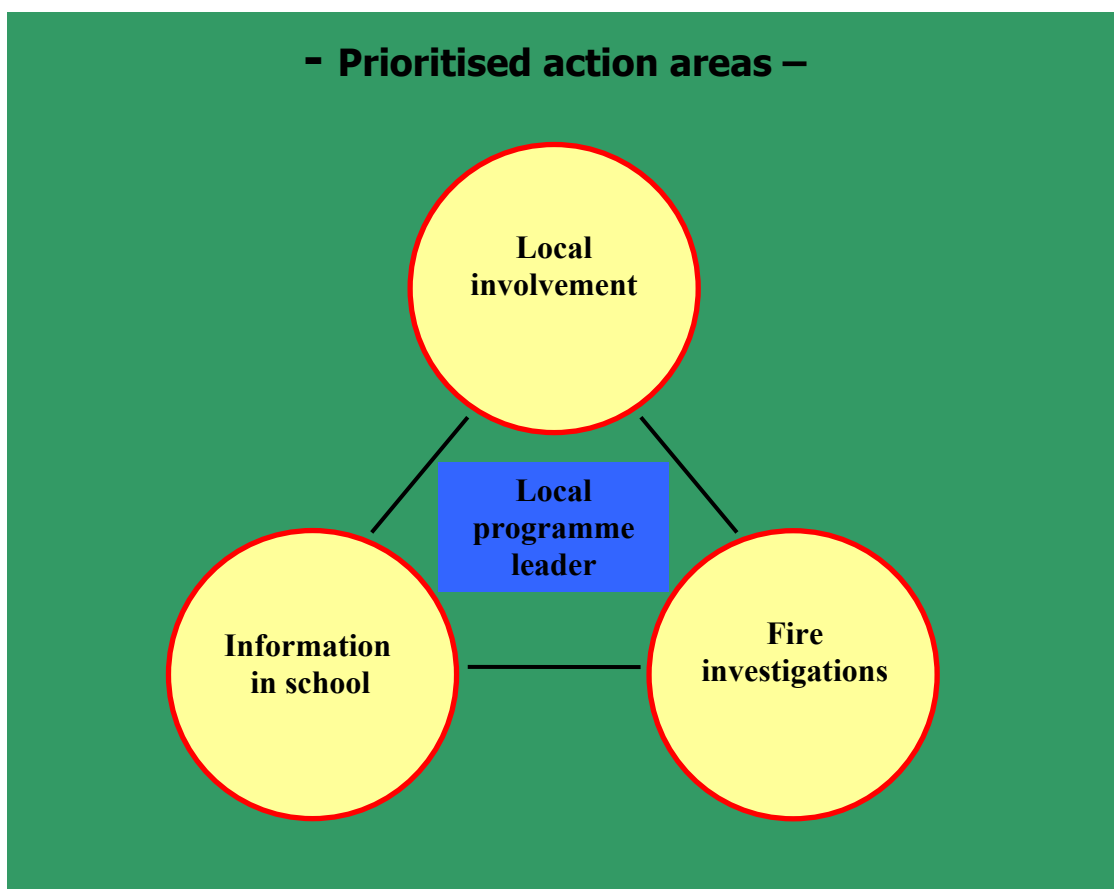
As far as damage prevention work (with the focus on arson) is concerned, priority has so far largely been given to different forms of technical fire protection devices and architectural design that prevent crime – these are very important areas but dealing with them does not tackle the symptoms.

Better information about all the basic facts surrounding arson needs to be published and circulated – not least in schools and other public buildings.

#### **4 The guidelines – prioritised measures**

The European fire protection associations consider it important that new and joint action should be taken against arson, with its focus as set out in this guideline.

The fire sector and other rescue services should endeavour to ensure that the principles of the guideline are firmly rooted, established and put into practice at municipal level and within the community.



The areas in the diagram are the case areas on which efforts should be concentrated unceasingly. Only then will it be possible to break the trend and to bring about a more lasting reduction in the incidence of arson in society. This will have the great additional benefit of helping to prevent our young people embarking on a criminal career. The most important part of local activities is the provision of information to young people in school.

#### **4.1 Local involvement is vital**

- Local networks and municipal involvement are the cornerstones of an enduring action programme.
- The local fire and rescue authority must take responsibility for ensuring that measures against arson are included and dealt with in the agenda, for example, the rescue services plan.
- A responsible person (programme leader) or group should be appointed with the task of co-ordinating and promoting the damage prevention measures in accordance with a long-term plan.
- The emergency services and the parties who deal with safety and crime prevention activity and insurance issues should be the obvious players in this local effort. The key concepts are enduring engagement and close networking. A model should be drawn up to replicate the local plan to combat arson and to identify the roles of the parties.

## **Municipal Plan of Action**

### **§ Arson**

**Action programme**  
**Local programme leader**  
**Co-operation/Networks**

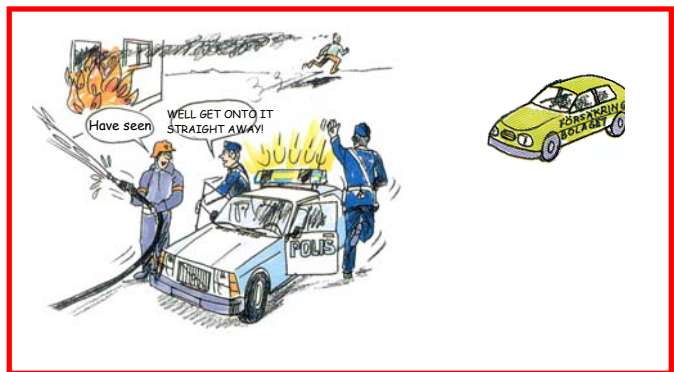
#### **4.2 Information for schoolchildren will reduce the risk**

- Continuous information for children and young people concerning arson and its consequences is the most important part of an action programme.
- All experience shows that young arsonists do not appreciate the consequences of their actions, either for themselves or for their surroundings. Information for these groups is therefore the major challenge and also provides the opportunity for enduring improvements of a more long-term nature. Continuous and targeted information for pupils just before their teenage years has shown good results, and therefore has high priority. Experience also shows that firefighters are the right people to provide this information.



#### **4.3 Fire investigation is an essential deterrent**

- Investigation of fires that results in young people and others who commit arson being called to account for their action is essential from the standpoint of general deterrence. A higher percentage of crimes must be solved.
- Co-operation between the fire and rescue service, police, the courts, insurance companies, social services etc is of the greatest importance.



## **5 European guideline**

Guideline No 1:2002 - Internal Fire Protection Control

Guideline No 2:2002 - Panic & emergency exit devices

Guideline No 3:2003 - Certification of thermographers

Guideline No 4:2003 - Introduction to Qualitative Fire Risk Assessment

Guideline No 5:2003 - Guidance signs, Emergency lighting and General lighting

Guideline No 6:2004 – Fire safety in residential homes for the elderly

Guideline No 7:2004 – Safety distance between waste containers and buildings