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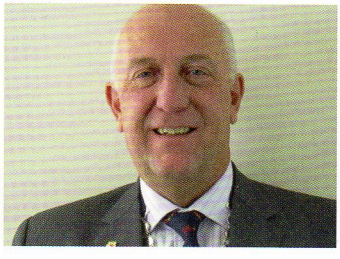

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Arson policy in London: policy lessons from the last decade

Dr Ian Greatbatch, Kingston University London, Station Manager Seth Why, London Fire Brigade, and Dr Penelopi Alexandrou, Kingston University London, identify areas for improvement in London Fire Brigade's arson prevention activity

Over the last ten years, the incidence of arson in the capital has been steadily dropping[1]. This is clearly a welcome outcome that serves as a testament to the hard work, dedication and thoughtfulness of arson prevention practitioners throughout this period. However, the trimming of budgets within the fire and rescue services, local authorities, police and prison services, and the NHS, presents us with a potential shortfall in resources that could affect this positive trend. In addition to its decline, data suggests that arson is changing in nature, and the policies adapted in recent years (as well as some external factors, of course) have been behind this change.

How much has arson changed recently?

During the 2003-2013 period, there were roughly 177,000 cases of fire that were coded Deliberate or Suspected Deliberate in London[2]. As indicated on page 30, there was a distinct drop in overall arson frequency over this period (an 84.9 per cent decrease), throughout the whole of greater London. Refuse fires remained the most common form of arson, while the most significant change during this period was the proportion of vehicle fires throughout the period.

This drop in the number and proportion of vehicle fires may be attributed to changes in vehicle security (cars are simply harder to break into) and the increase in scrap value (people are less likely to abandon their cars, no longer making them targets for arson, and those stealing cars are more likely to attempt to sell them for scrap rather than burn them). However, the Scrap Metal Dealers Act passed in 2013, which has introduced amendments to regulations regarding the sale of scrap metals, which may have an impact on the frequency of vehicle fires and that is worth monitoring; any restrictions on the ease of scrap sales, for instance, could yield an unwelcome increase in vehicle fires.

Analysis of the data also allowed us to identify certain arson (incidence) trends, which likely correspond to held preconceptions from the perspective of a fire and rescue service. For example, there is a slight increase in arson frequency at the weekend, which is mainly attributed to the increase in refuse fires. This would reinforce the notion that arson is typically perpetrated by young males, since the times when they are more likely to congregate (after school, before curfew, at weekends) correlate with an increased number of fires.

This spike in arson could be targeted through a 'dynamic' arson policy using real time data to direct interventions such as improved lighting or increased police presence around identified hotspots over the weekend. Moreover, it could potentially be addressed through a change in local authority collection policies, working to ensure that material was not available to burn at riskier times.

We further determined daily and seasonal arson patterns; the evening period of a day has the most arson incidences, while the period around dawn has the least. Moreover, arson frequency correlates positively with temperature (see pg 30), with arsons rising over the summer months and falling during winter or the colder months of the year (with the notable and understandable exception of the period around Bonfire Night).

How does arson policy fit in with this pattern of falling arson numbers?

Our research examined four elements of arson policy across the capital; the knowledge and understanding of arson of practitioners, the selected practices for the delivery of arson prevention in boroughs, the employed strategies amongst agencies in multi-

agency prevention working and the performance of boroughs in response to arson. We interviewed key personnel from a number of agencies that are involved in some way in active arson policy. They have been divided into the following four sections, dealing with each in turn.

One: Practitioners Knowledge and Understanding of Arson

We established that agencies concerned with addressing arson consistently demonstrated a good understanding of local arson issues, and as may be expected, in the words of one interviewee, the perpetrators were "...mainly by youths, kids and anti-social behaviour". The teams focused on residential, business and industrial zones within their boroughs, and were especially observant of derelict or unoccupied buildings, as these were considered more likely targets.

According to the teams in London, arson was attributed to three main types of activity: the overall environmental conditions, the availability of combustible materials – especially in refuse areas – and the level of antisocial behaviour (ASB) in that location. None of the local authorities in question, were able to, or chose to, gain guidance or best practice from a professional body, which our report strongly recommends as best practice.

'Broken Windows'	If the area was perceived as not being managed properly by the local authority, some people treat their surroundings poorly, potentially resulting in arson.
Storage of Refuse	Typically expressed categorised as 'low incident, high frequency'. This is categorised by mainly opportunistic crimes, but exacerbated by fly tipping and poor security of recycling areas.
Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)	Youth boredom was frequently raised as an instigator. Concern over youth gangs carrying out 'postcode arson' in another gang's area for initiation or to gain further credence through press articles.

Two: Practices Selected for the Delivery of Arson Prevention in Boroughs

Boroughs blended local knowledge with arson data provided by the London Fire Brigade (LFB) to select the best approach to follow. Options ranged from liaising through an informal gathering of agency partners to a fully-fledged Community Safety Partnership Team. One borough employed their own fire liaison officer who created a network of intelligence and contacts to address arson issues successfully. Having a single point of contact and expertise regarding arson could provide challenges in terms of post resilience, but the risk versus benefit has provided significant year on year savings for the borough that established the practice.

One common observation from participants was that there was a discrepancy between Metropolitan Police and fire brigade arson statistics. The reasons for this are straightforward: the LFB use their own Incident Management System to log every call, whereas the police have two (relevant) datasets. The first is the Crime Reporting Information System (CRIS) used to record 'typical' crimes incurring financial loss such as car or property arson. The second is CRIMINT, which is fundamentally an intelligence tool concerning individuals, rather than crimes themselves. There was some suggestion that the latter was easier to use and available to a greater proportion of the workforce (including police community support officers) and thus used more frequently. This splitting of arson data resulted in a fragmented statistical picture of the arsons and arsonists within a borough.

Three: Strategies Employed Amongst Agencies in Multi-agency Prevention Working

The level of effective liaison varied from borough to borough; while some agencies stated multi-agency work occurred and supported its benefits, other agencies evidently worked in silos despite physically being in close proximity to others. In our research it was apparent that there was little liaison between boroughs.

Where effective multi-agency collaboration did occur, the benefits were considered to be a reduction in bureaucracy, and collaborative working with community ASB areas.

Four: Assess the Performance of Boroughs in Response to Arson

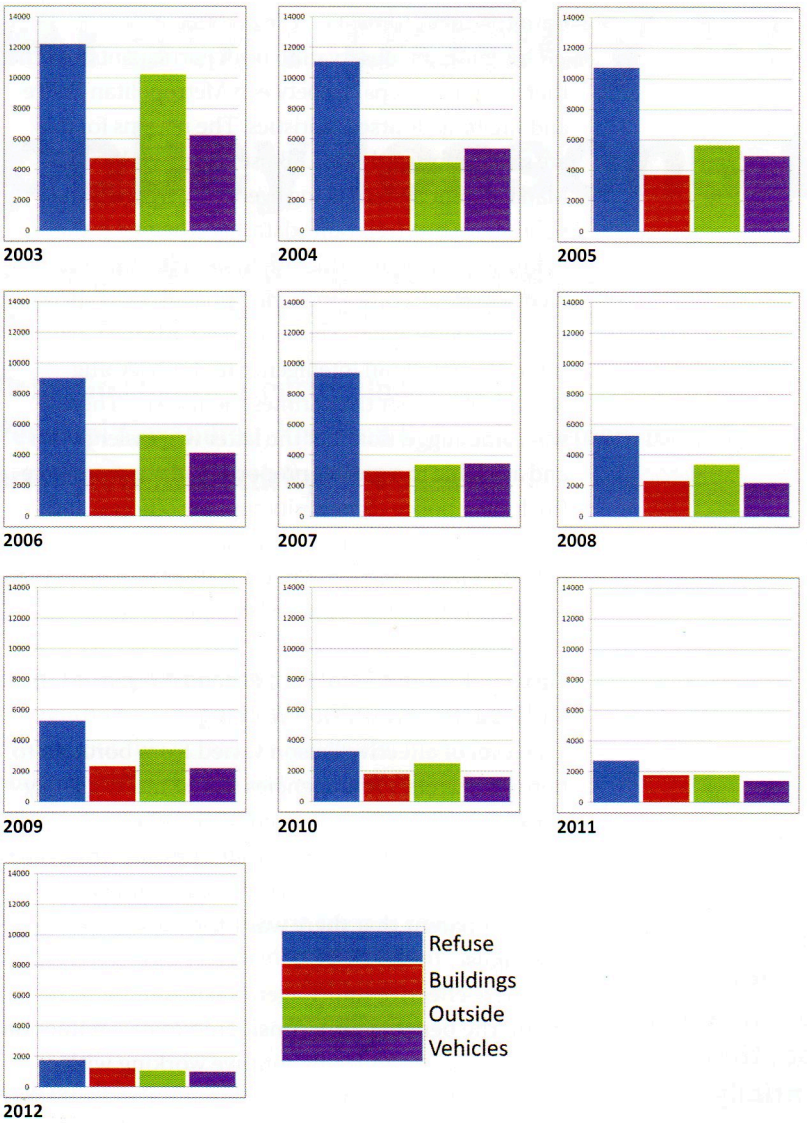
Despite some positive work in some boroughs, there was less use of Arson Risk Assessments than hoped. Nevertheless, Arson Prevention Groups had some success at local levels with projects such as training housing wardens to tackle small fires and addressing wider community ASB projects, through work with trading standards and licensing teams.

All participants in the research stated that communication could be improved. It was revealed that only a quarter of the participating agencies regularly used social media to communicate with the general public and other groups to inform them of arson issues.

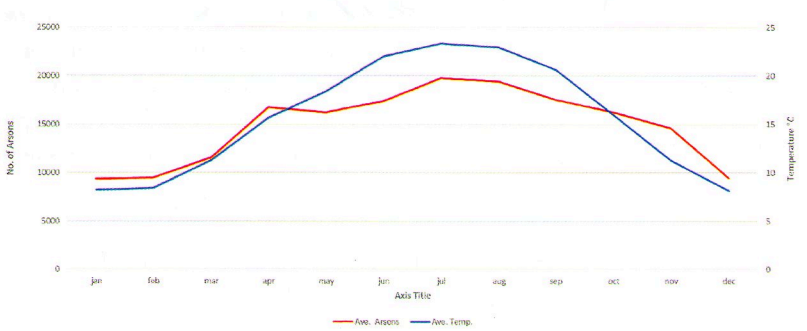
In conclusion, there are a number of recommendations we would like to make based on these results for fire and rescue services and local authorities. They include:

- All London boroughs should align with a professional body for coordinated arson advice

Changes in numbers of arsons by category and year.



Arson numbers and their relationship to average temperature.



in order to establish forums and best practice amongst practitioners. Further advice can be obtained from The Arson Prevention Forum, www.stoparsonuk.org

- Boroughs should create an Arson Reduction Panel or appoint a Fire Liaison Officer to network and coordinate actions including risk assessments.
- Key individuals should receive arson reduction training, in areas such as fire prevention (methods/techniques/policies), the management of derelict buildings, evidence collection and use of databases.
- All agencies should prioritise improvement of communication between emergency services and local authorities.
- Bespoke arson reduction plans should be created and written for each area of operations, based on current and empirically collected spatiotemporal data concerning arson. These dynamic plans should be written to include all partner agencies, working in unison with local communities.

About the Authors:

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Dr Ian Greatbatch is a senior lecturer in Geography at Kingston University London, specialising in Search and Rescue, Fire and Rescue and Disaster Response. He has worked with a number of rescue organisations, providing research and consultancy in spatial analysis, tactical advice and strategic data analysis. He has worked recently on applying mobile technology to research and practice within search and rescue teams, both in a Wide Area Search capacity and USAR. He has recently contributed to USAR and Water Incident Management training for two fire and rescue services.

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A serving officer of London Fire Brigade, currently on detachment with Dorset Fire and Rescue Service. He completed his Msc in Hazard and Disaster Management at Kingston University in 2013 and has 22 years' experience of Fire Service operations, more recently working in USAR and tactical line and water rescue.

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Dr Penelopi Alexandrou is a recent PhD graduate of Kingston University London in the field of Social and Human Geography. Her research focus includes human mobility, migration and social networks. During her time at Kingston University her research has expanded into the field of Search and Rescue, where she collaborated on research that examines the socioeconomic significance of non-profit Search and Rescue organisations in the United Kingdom.

References

1. http://www.london-fire.gov.uk/ReducingArson.asp

2. The full set of codes were "Deliberate – others property", "Deliberate – own property", "Deliberate – owner not specified", "Deliberate – unknown owner" and "Doubtful – suspected deliberate".

3. You must now only buy scrap metal with a license, you cannot buy for cash, you cannot buy without proof of address of the seller. For full details see https://www.gov.uk/scrap-metal-dealer-registration