

EVEN ONE ATTACK IS UNACCEPTABLE

EVEN one attack on one firefighter is unacceptable. And we all know they have happened over the years and no doubt heard of them within our brigades if not experienced them ourselves.

For a number of years it was a strongly held view that if these attacks were publicised – if they were made a public issue – then we could have faced copycat attacks. There was a certain degree of logic to that, because local experience was that copycat incidents could and did occur.

But the picture we have put together – based on some of the evidence available and some examples which have been highlighted – suggests a very worrying trend.

The clear indications are that attacks are increasing alarmingly. And they are not confined to the inner areas of the big cities.

We must all find it sickening that any such attacks occur. To have firefighters – or any public servants – attacked while trying to carry out work of such importance to public safety is simply not acceptable.

To hear of crews attacked while tackling house fires or on the way to house fires almost defies belief. As are the increasing number of attacks which appear to be pre-planned ambushes.

I doubt if there are any quick fixes to the problem. If there were they would have been found them already.



Andy Gilchrist:
No quick fixes

And yes, there are a number of initiatives at brigade and other levels which have tried to stem and reverse what seems to be a growing problem. Many of these involve engaging with local communities and a direct hands-on approach which has worked well with, for example, fire safety campaigns.

Those initiatives need to be applauded and supported. But we are also working at other levels such as in Scotland and at national level with the Health and Safety Executive.

We will be doing more detailed work in this policy area. Our feeling is that more needs to be done before either a firefighter is killed or someone dies in a fire because pumps have been delayed or taken off the run because they have been damaged.

Andy Gilchrist, General Secretary

CORBY,
Northamptonshire
19 August 2003:
crews lured to five deliberate fires and attacked with bricks and stones on all five occasions. Fire engines had been stoned and had lights and windows smashed in the previous seven days.

OLLERTON,
Nottinghamshire
18 October 2003:
teenage gang attack firefighters with bricks and bottles while attending a fire. One firefighter punched in the face. One youth jailed for 15 months for the attack.

Needed: the hard facts

TONY Bryant, a temporary assistant divisional officer in Greater Manchester, is carrying out an in-depth study of the problem of attacks on firefighters as part of a management training course. His dissertation is due this summer.

"I have been through all the ranks in the busiest inner city stations in Manchester and it is clear to me there is a problem," he says. "I was born and brought up on one of the roughest council estates in Manchester and what is happening shocks me."

Tony was so concerned he set up a group four years ago to get together the stations in Manchester with the biggest problems: Salford, Wythenshawe, Central, Gorton and Phillips Park. "There were some absolute horror stories," he says.

The preliminary findings of his study show that incidents are not being reported.

"Nationally I would say there was 60% under-reporting of attacks and violence against firefighters. We need reporting procedures put in place and the hard facts gathered so we can see the true scale of the problem."

Tony is carrying out a detailed survey of 200 inner city firefighters in Manchester to test their experiences, views and suggestions. He has also made contact with Northern Ireland, South Yorkshire, Cleveland, West Midlands and Scotland and has links into the ODPM, CFOA and the fire inspectorate.

"There is a growing awareness within the fire service

community that there is a problem, but that not enough is being done at national level at the moment.

"I am looking at what each brigade is doing, at the NHS zero tolerance attitude to attacks against staff and the new laws in Scotland.

"Having spoken to Greater Manchester Police, there appears to be a massive training need within the fire service in terms of conflict resolution, conflict management, operational procedures and raising awareness. I hope to identify the problems clearly and look at a coherent and all encompassing approach".

PONTYPOOL, South Wales, 3 November 2004: crews forced to withdraw from tackling a vehicle fire after coming under attack. Days before in Ely, Cardiff a road was blockaded and crews attacked with bricks and stones preventing them from getting to a house fire.

STEVENSON,
Ayrshire April 28
2004: snipers hiding in a block of flats shoot airgun pellets at firefighters tackling what is thought to be a fire started to lure them into an ambush.

Tony Bryant is looking for examples of best practice and evidence of attacks, especially some of the more 'creative' types including what may be termed booby traps. These can be sent to: bryant@manchesterfire.gov.uk

All information sent will be invaluable in assisting to identify the problems and therefore point to the solutions.