



Report by the Labour Research Department
for the Fire Brigades Union
April 2005

A stylized illustration of a firefighter in a red protective suit. The firefighter's face is obscured by a large, circular target. The target has a yellow center, a red ring, a blue ring, and a black outer ring. The helmet is yellow with a blue and red gear-like emblem on top. The background is a light blue sky with white clouds. The numbers '5' and '6' are visible on the sides of the target's white border.

Attacks on firefighters

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Introduction

In March this year a two year old boy died in the Easterhouse area of Glasgow after he was shot in the head with an air rifle while walking down the street with his older brother. Police believe that he was shot accidentally – the real target being firefighters attempting to put out a kitchen fire. A firefighter was also hit with an airgun pellet at around the same time.

The most shocking thing about this incident is that it was not an isolated event. Attacks on firefighters are both widespread and increasing. In February, a firefighter was shot at with an air rifle by a group of youths as he tackled a blaze and attempted to rescue people trapped in a three storey building in Stockwell, south London.

On one night at the beginning of March this year, Belfast fire crews faced eight separate hostile incidents over a 10-hour period.

And at the end of March two firefighters and a sub-officer were injured when their crew faced a barrage of missiles – sticks, stones and bottles – while attending a small rubbish fire in Winton, Eccles in Lancashire.

In December, a firefighter in Stockton, Cleveland needed hospital treatment after being punched in the face and knocked unconscious by youths attempting to steal a defibrillator and first aid kit from his engine.

And these are just the incidents that get reported in the press. In some areas, attacks involving air rifles, crossbows, missiles including bricks, stones and bottles or verbal abuse happen virtually every night.

In Strathclyde, where the young boy was killed, firefighters say that the problem is escalating, with more frequent attacks and more serious incidents occurring. In Central Command alone over a three-month period to the end of 2004, there had been 26 incidents involving groups of youths throwing stones, bottles, fireworks or other objects at crews and/ appliances.

Other incidents reported to the Brigade over the last year include one in which youths injured four firefighters, one of whom was detained in hospital. So much damage was caused to the fire engine that it had to be temporarily withdrawn from service. In another incident, a firefighter received cuts to his face when a bottle was thrown by a gang of youths. And a youth threatened fire fighters with a knife as they were attempting to rescue people from a lift.

In Northern Ireland, firefighters at Springfield and

Cadogan stations said that they were likely to face some sort of abuse in 75 to 80% of callouts – “almost daily.” Here, firefighters say that attacks increasingly involve weapons, with air rifle and knife attacks occurring in recent months. There are also incidents which firefighters find abusive or humiliating, such as youths urinating on appliances.

Over the two-week period 7-21 March the FBU in Northern Ireland reported 62 calls to Brigade headquarters asking for assistance at civil disturbance attacks.

In another recent attack, a piece of equipment controlling the water power in the hose was tampered with by a group of youngsters, causing the water power to triple. One firefighter was seriously injured as he was lifted into the air and flung onto the ground, breaking a bone in his back, and a second was also hospitalised.

Kieran Nolan, Assistant Chief Fire Officer at the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, says that across the Brigade there were around 200 attacks a year on firefighters, but significant under-reporting meant that the true figure was likely to be closer to 400.

According to John Jenkins, FBU Brigade Secretary for South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, where the problem is also growing, “There isn’t a day goes by in South Wales when someone doesn’t have a bit of abuse.”

Although the problem tends to be worse in deprived areas, it is by no means only firefighters working in poor inner city areas that are being attacked. Two of the 26 attacks on firefighters recorded by the Kent Fire and Rescue Service over a 12 month period in 2003/4, for example, occurred in Tunbridge Wells. In South Wales, although some areas of Cardiff are problem areas, so are villages and small towns like Abersychan, Tredegar, Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare.

And Eddie Cardoso, FBU Brigade Secretary in Berkshire recently told Firefighter magazine, “People... think of Berkshire as Windsor Castle, Eton School and Royal Ascot. But like most other brigades we have areas which are either trouble spots or potential trouble spots. This isn’t just about inner cities.” In one recent incident, Berkshire firefighters were attacked by a group of youths who had set fire to mattresses and other materials in a public park.”

The aim of this report is to provide an overview of the issue – indicating the scale of the problem and the extent to which official statistics fail to reflect this.

It then goes on to look at a range of initiatives being taken by brigades around the country in order to identify examples of good practice which could be taken up more widely. These range from the more immediate measures taken to improve the protection and safety of firefighters threatened with violence and the more long-term initiatives that begin to address the root cause of anti-social behaviour.

Above all the intention is to help inform what should be a UK-wide debate on an issue that has hitherto been tackled at local or regional level. A “one size fits all” policy may not be appropriate and initiatives in one area may need to be adapted if they are to work elsewhere but national recognition of the problem and a national policy response are needed to replace the piecemeal approach that exists at the moment.

1. The scale of the problem

1.1 The problem with official statistics

The British Crime Survey (BCS) 2002/3, which is based on interviews with around 36,500 people, shows that fire and rescue firefighters and officers, along with police officers and prison service officers and other workers defined as being in “protective service occupations,” most at risk of experiencing violence at work.

Fourteen percent of workers in this occupational category report that they experienced an incident of actual or threatened violence while working, in comparison with 1.7% of the workforce as a whole.

Although statistics on the number of attacks on firefighters collected by individual brigades, and anecdotal evidence from firefighters themselves, suggests that the problem is both extremely serious and on the increase, it is only very recently that data has been collected and published at national level across the UK in an attempt to quantify the scale of the problem.

For England and Wales, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has collected figures since 1 April 2004 at the request of the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) Operations Committee. Its statistics show that there were almost 400 attacks on firefighters over the nine-month period to the end of January 2005 (see table 1). The ODPM confirmed that the statistics are to be collected on an ongoing basis.

However, this figure is based on serious underreporting by brigades – only 18 out of the 50 English and Welsh fire and rescue services responded to requests for information in compiling these figures, representing only around a third (36%) of all brigades in England and Wales.

The arrangements for reporting attacks on firefighters to Her Majesty’s Fire Service Inspectorate (HMFSI) at the ODPM were revised at the end of March 2005 to improve the collection of data and make reporting easier. Chief Fire Officers were recently requested to send the updated notification procedure, which includes a revised reporting template, to all fire stations to ensure that full details of attacks are being reported.

While this should improve the returns from fire and rescue services, there is a further problem with underreporting by firefighters themselves to their brigades.

This is demonstrated by a glance at the ODPM statistics for Greater Manchester, according to which there were only nine attacks in the whole of the Greater Manchester area in the nine months to the end of January 2005., when figures collected by the brigade itself indicate attacks running at around 200 a year, with a figure of nine reflecting more the level of incidents recorded each month.

Avon firefighters and managers gave differing pictures of the problem. Assistant chief fire officer, Bill Feeley, thought that the reported incidents, numbering 45 over the period from August 2001 to February 2005 was fairly accurate, while FBU brigade secretary Kevin Herniman described the official figures as “the tip of the iceberg,” with only the more serious incidents being reported.

In Scotland also, official figures do not reflect the extent of the problem.

The Scottish Executive (SE) has collated figures from Scottish Brigades since April 2003. It reported at the end of 2004 that there were 388 attacks on fire service personnel

– more than one a day – between April 2003 and March 2004.

But again, it is believed that there is underreporting by firefighters. Linda Shanahan, FBU brigade secretary for Fife and currently seconded to the SE to work on a project aiming to protect public service workers from violence at work, says: “It has been difficult to get an accurate picture on the number of assaults happening to any group of workers. We found that only the British Transport Police were actively encouraging staff to report all incidents.”

The SE itself agrees that there is underreporting. In its recent report outlining the action it is taking to protect public service workers, When the customer isn’t right, it says: “It is very difficult to estimate the true figure in relation to assaults on workers due to the fact that it has been demonstrated that

Fourteen percent of workers in this category report that they experienced an incident of actual or threatened violence while working

Table 1: Attacks on firefighters, England and Wales 1 April 2004–30 January 2005

	Missiles Thrown	Physical Abuse	Verbal Abuse	Harassment	Other acts of aggression	Firefighters won't return to area / incidents or only with police	Total attacks for each fire and rescue service
Bucks	1					N	1
Cheshire	12		5		3	N	15
Cleveland	26	10	29	1	3	N	49
Cumbria	1	1				N	2
Dorset			1		1	N	1
Hampshire	4	1	2		1	N	5
I O Wight	1		1			N	1
Kent	2	3	7		1	N	10
Lancashire	3				1	N	4
Merseyside	77	10	15	12	11	Y x3	125
Norfolk			1	1		N	1
Notts	12	4	4			N	15
Staffs	1					N	1
South Yorkshire	17	2	7	3	1	Yx1	19
West Midlands	42	21	49	5	11	N	95
Greater Manchester	5		3		1	N	9
Mid and West Wales	3	1	2			N	5
South Wales	31	3	6			Yx5	35
Total in each category	238	55	141	22	34	9	393

Total attacks to date on firefighters from the fire and rescue services 393

Four of these attacks resulted in firefighters being taken off duty and hospitalised

Source: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) • Some incidents involved more than one category

many people regard verbal abuse as ‘part of the job’ and others feel unable or unwilling to report all but the most serious of incidents. For example, a recent report by the National Audit Office (NAO), estimates that around 40% of violent and aggressive behaviour incidents in the NHS in England are not reported. It is widely accepted by all of the organisations consulted in this project that this is true of most industries.”

In Northern Ireland, attacks on firefighters have long been monitored in particularly because of the level of attacks during the height of the troubles.

Statistics are compiled by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). According to figures released by the DHSSPS in February 2005, there were 1,500 attacks on ambulance workers and firefighters in the last three years. But here too the figures are disputed. Jim Barbour, FBU Northern Ireland Executive Council member, said the union absolutely rejected this figure, and said that the true figure far exceeded the 1,500 quoted.

In addition to problems of underreporting, there is a further problem in Northern Ireland. Barbour says the union believes “there is an ongoing, orchestrated

Table 2: Total Attacks on Fire Brigade Personnel in Scotland 2003-04

Brigade	Verbal	Physical (armed)	Physical (unarmed)	Missile	Other	TOTAL
Central Scotland	0	0	0	13	0	13
Dumfries & Galloway	1	0	0	0	0	1
Fife	4	2	0	10	1	17
Grampian	6	1	0	5	0	12
Highlands & Islands	1	0	0	1	0	2
Lothian & Borders	46	3	2	64	19	134
Strathclyde	39	6	19	92	37	193
TOTAL	109	12	21	189	57	388

campaign aimed at massaging the figures in relation to attacks on firefighters downwards.” He went on to explain that the reasons for this were twofold: “Firstly, there is an attempt to cover up the utter failure of [Angela Smith] the Minister’s high profile media campaign to address the very real issue of such attacks ... Secondly, it is clear to the FBU that the Minister is paving the way to cease payment of the Northern Ireland Allowance [a special duty allowance paid to firefighters in respect of their attendance at

Civil Disturbance incidents] to the firefighters who face these attacks on a daily basis," he said.

Union officials also point out that because statistics are compiled by three different organisations, all using different report forms, there is currently no consistent way of collecting the information about the scale of the problem across the whole of the UK.

According to Linda Shanahan: "You need the hard figures before you can get a true picture of the scale of the problem before moving towards a strategic solution. With credible statistics we can then work out training needs and what needs to be done for all those workers who face violence at work."

This is a view echoed by Kevin Herniman, FBU Brigade Secretary for Avon. He said: "Verbal abuse tends not to be reported – only the more serious incidents, like damage to a fire engine. We want our members to report all incidents so that the statistics collected truly reflect the problem. We need to show that it is a big problem and it needs a big solution."

Tony Ciaramella, Senior Divisional Officer at the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service points out that it may well be at the very stations where crews suffer most that might be more prone to under-reporting. In effect, where the problems are a daily occurrence there could well be a greater tendency not to report every incident.

Andrew Strawson, an inspector in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Defence, Fire and Policy Unit confirmed that firefighters have not been regarded as a priority group with regard to violence at work, and the HSE interdepartmental committee on violence to staff is not specifically looking at firefighters.

Statistics collected by the HSE through the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences (RIDDOR) Regulations 1995 only include those attacks which result in injuries resulting in firefighters being away from their normal work for more than three days – far more injuries of this nature are caused by manual handling and slips, trips and falls.

However, he added that the statistics are moving in a way that would suggest that this report is a timely intervention, and that the HSE needs to re-examine the issue of attacks on firefighters in terms of its priorities.

1.2 The firefighters' view of the problem

Interviews with firefighters themselves suggest not only that in some areas, serious attacks, with actual or serious risk of injury, are taking place on a regular basis; but also that verbal abuse and less serious physical abuse, such as spitting, is experienced so frequently that it has become seen as part of the job by many firefighters.

Peter Craig is Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Head of Community Development at the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade. He says that although it was expected that attacks would decline as the peace process brought a return to normality, attacks are still at a high level and incidents can range from verbal abuse and urinating on machines to attacks with breeze blocks and ball bearings. More serious incidents in the past include having an appliance stolen at gunpoint, although this would now be regarded as abnormal.

Tony Bryan, Assistant Divisional Officer (ADO) at the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, says that in some of the inner city areas in Manchester, the fire service regularly receives hoax calls which result in firefighters being trapped and attacked by youths with weapons such as crossbows, as well as fire appliances and equipment being damaged or stolen.

He says that, as the recent event in Winton in Eccles demonstrated, fire fighters could face a situation where they are surrounded by 20 to 40 children and youths. Manchester firefighters have had TVs and mopeds dropped at them from the top of blocks of high rises flats, and concrete slabs have been dropped from railway bridges.

And in Strathclyde, firefighters said that the statistics did not reflect the true situation faced by firefighters with verbal abuse more or less a daily event and threats and attacks becoming more frequent.

Nick Crolla, a Scottish firefighter describes what he has been subject to during his career as a firefighter on the Talking Scotland website. "Over the years I've had fireworks fired at me; I've been stoned; I've had liquids thrown at me; I've been punched; I've had missiles thrown at me while I've been in the fire engine; I've had equipment pulled out of my hands; I've been subject to people throwing golf balls while we are trying to put a fire out; people stealing equipment from the fire engine; people jumping in the

fire engine and tampering with the engine while the firefighters have been fighting a fire.”

Says John Jenkins, FBU brigade secretary in South Wales: “There isn’t a day goes by in South Wales when someone doesn’t have a bit of abuse,” and many incidents are far more serious than a bit of abuse. “One of the worse incidents was where a car was driven at a firefighter about three months ago. Another firefighter had a house brick thrown at him which hit and split his helmet. He was off work sick for six months after that,” he said.

“We also had a firefighter killed last year after a group of youths set fire to a building containing gas cylinders which exploded as he was attempting to put out the fire.”

“Attacks are worse in the run up to bonfire night, when we have a dry summer, and school holidays, when fields are set alight and then stones are thrown at the fire brigade when they come to put the fires out.”

“Firefighters are sworn at, and kids try to mess about with the equipment. We are also spat at. Sometimes, if there is a road traffic accident below a bridge, people will spit at the fire crew from the bridge as they are trying to get people out of the vehicle.”

In Avon, bricks and scaffolding have been thrown at fire engines, and firefighters are spat on and verbally abused. At Bedminster station, Jeff Lovell, Watch Manager said: “Over the last two years there have been around a dozen more serious incidents. On one occasion, a group of youths were lying in wait for the fire brigade to attend a fire, and threw broken concrete slabs at the fire engine.”

Kevin Herniman, FBU Brigade Secretary for Avon, says “School holidays are the worst. Fires are set on open ground, and then the fire crew is verbally abused when they come to put out the fire. Bonfire night and the run up to Christmas are also difficult periods because there are a lot of fireworks around.”

Gary Houldsworth, FBU Health and Safety Officer for the FBU’s North West region said that the main pressures on fire crews were in the six-to-eight week period leading up to and just after 5 November with incidents starting just after children come out of school and carrying on until 11pm or midnight. Deliberate attacks include firing of fireworks at appliances through scaffolding tubes.

In Belfast crews are more likely to face incidents in July and August around the time of events associated with the different communities and around Halloween at the end of October. However, as the introduction to this report highlighted, incidents can happen at almost any time of year.

1.3 Why don’t firefighters report incidents?

Two pieces of academic research in this area found that official statistics underestimate the problem because firefighters do not report many incidents, in part because attacks are so frequent that they are seen as part of the job.

And this was certainly the message put across by the firefighters, FBU representatives and Fire and Rescue Service officials who were interviewed in the process of preparing this report.

Researchers at the Centre of Investigative Psychology at the University of Liverpool, in a report commissioned by the Manchester and Merseyside Fire and Rescue Services, Youth Hostilities Towards Firefighters: A scoping study for Manchester Fire and Rescue Services, found that “in general only the most serious incidents are reported, and possibly not all of them, so the full scale of this problem is difficult to estimate.”

It found, for example, that although interviews with firefighters showed that the frequency of attacks increased around bonfire night, this was not reflected in recorded incidents by the two fire and rescue services. It reported that the amount of paperwork and effort required deterred firefighters in community stations from reporting incidents to the brigade headquarters. Lack of police support was also cited as a reason – although the police were informed of attacks in the majority of cases, they only attended the incident in less than a third of cases, so firefighters saw reporting incidents as pointless.

And a second report published in June 2004 by the Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership (EYSIP), Understanding Young Fire setters Project, reported that “ADOs [Assistant Divisional Officers] in the fire brigade felt that fire crews didn’t usually report such attacks, as they had become an “accepted” part of the job...There was a strong concern among Lothian and Borders Fire Brigade staff that attacks on fire crews and theft of equipment usually went

ENCOURAGING FIREFIGHTERS TO REPORT INCIDENTS: STRATHCLYDE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

In the past there was not a systematic procedure for logging violent incidents, but this has now changed and crews are now able to report violence and threats of violence on an Acts of Violence/Near Miss Investigation form. It is intended that this form should be revised so that acts of violence are recorded separately.

The Brigade defines an act of violence as “any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work.”

The Brigade asks firefighters to do three things following all acts of violence:

1. report them to the police and obtain a crime reference number;
2. telephone the 24-hour near miss/acts of violence hotline at Brigade headquarters using the pro-forma supplied to each station/section, ensuring that the crime reference number and Brigade incident number, where applicable, are included; and
3. complete a near miss/acts of violence investigation report, ensuring that the crime reference number and Brigade incident number, where applicable, are included and submit the form as soon as practicably possible to the Command Health and Safety Liaison Officer.

The Brigade feels that it is important to have the crime reference number so that there is an official police record of the incident even if it is acknowledged that the police will not respond on all occasions.

In fact to try to ensure that there is a

response to the more serious incidents, the Brigade now has a special arrangement with the police so that if a firefighter is subject to attack or is in immediate threat of attack then a “code 13” message should be sent to Command and Control and this should ensure immediate assistance from the police.

In Glasgow Central Command statistics on attacks are collected and used locally as well as being forwarded to Strathclyde Brigade for further analysis. A weekly round-up of statistics is circulated by the Brigade so that health and safety liaison officers and community safety co-ordinators can respond quickly if there is evidence of a spate of incidents in a particular area.

The most recent round-up of incidents circulated in March 2005 reported 31 acts of violence in the three-month period from 1 October to 31 December 2004. They affected crews at 15 different stations. There are 21 full-time stations in the Command and two staffed by retained firefighters. Twenty-six of these incidents involved groups of youths throwing stones, bottles, fireworks or other objects at crews and/or appliances.

The memo circulating the summary of incidents was distributed to officers-in-charge at all stations and sections and they were advised to “remind all personnel under their supervision of the importance of reporting these incidents so that efforts can be made to address the issues and so prevent accidents and reduce the risk of injury.”

unreported by fire crews as they saw it as an everyday occurrence.”

Interviews with firefighters and senior officers in the fire brigade revealed a number of other reasons.

Tony Bryan, Assistant Divisional Officer, at Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service believes that reasons for under reporting include a dislike of filling in forms, a lack of training, a lack of operational procedures and a lack of response by police when incidents are reported.

John Jenkins, FBU Brigade Secretary for South Wales, believes that a lack of clear procedures for reporting incidents and lack of training is to blame for

underreporting.

Firefighters in Northern Ireland also pointed out that the fact that some firefighters felt ridiculous reporting attacks by children as young as eight.

And firefighters and union officials in Strathclyde, Manchester and Northern Ireland all acknowledged that a “macho” culture within the service contributed to the under-reporting of incidents, particularly where the perpetrators are young children.

Firefighters in Strathclyde reported: “As a general rule, if there is no physical injury and no substantial damage to equipment then there would be no report.” Fire crews in Northern Ireland said they had a similar

approach but acknowledged that high levels of verbal abuse and threats of violence, if not actual violence, took their toll in psychological terms and so should be reported.

They also felt that unless firefighters understood what would be done with the reports they would not see the point in spending time filling out forms and reporting incidents.

Chris Kerr, Senior divisional officer and area commander, Eastern Area Northern Ireland Fire Brigade said that although the Brigade was trying to encourage firefighters to report more incidents, there is a reluctance to do the paperwork.

In Scotland, the Scottish Executive is developing a model report form to be used for all industries and sectors. According to Linda Shanahan "The aim is to keep reporting simple and straightforward without making people fill in reams of paper – the purpose of this is to positively encourage people to report. Some reporting systems are so involved and take so long, only the most serious incidents get reported."

1.4 The impact of attacks on firefighters and the fire and rescue service

In addition to the obvious risk of physical injury, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) points out that "serious or persistent verbal abuse can be a significant problem too, as it can cause damage employees' health through anxiety and stress."

Firefighters in Northern Ireland pointed out that it was stressful attending an incident where firefighters not only have to tackle a fire, but also keep a constant watch on what is happening around them.

Peter Craig says that it is clear, if not fully quantifiable, that attacks are taking a serious toll on firefighters in Northern Ireland, physically and psychologically. For the service this means higher costs of sickness absence and higher costs of maintenance of appliances. He estimates that perhaps £1.5-£2 million a year is wasted as a result of attacks on firefighters and equipment.

Bill Feeley, Assistant Chief Fire Officer at Avon Fire and Rescue Service, said that one firefighter eventually left the service after a long period of sick leave due to post traumatic stress disorder. He had been involved in an incident in which a scaffold pole had been thrown through the window of a fire engine.

Linda Shanahan says that really serious incidents are thankfully relatively rare in Scotland, but the cumulative effect of less serious incidents also has an impact on firefighters.

These views are backed up by academic research – the Youth hostilities towards firefighters report also found that attacks have a demoralising effect on firefighters.

There can also be the effect of stress in attending an incident where there may be even only a threat of violence. When groups of children and youths gather round appliances, firefighters point out that they often have to be vigilant in case youths try to climb on the appliance or try to steal or damage any of the equipment. And in these instances firefighters say they often feel unsure about how to respond and what their rights and responsibilities are in dealing with youths or young children who try to climb on the appliance or tamper with equipment.

1.5 Who attacks firefighters and why?

According to the Youth hostilities towards firefighters report, attacks are generally carried out by groups of youngsters who are involved from about the age of 10 upwards, although some are younger, and some reports include reference to people in their late teens and early twenties.

Although some attacks are obviously planned – the research found that 18% of incidents in one brigade involved organised entrapment of the fire crew – many occur where there is an opportunistic source for fire, for example accumulations of rubbish, abandoned cars, derelict buildings or dumped furniture.

And although the problem is by no means confined to inner city areas, hostilities tend to occur more frequently in areas lacking youth facilities and in areas where anti social behaviour is a general problem.

The Understanding Young Fire Setters Project reported that those responsible for attacks on fire crews were thought to be mostly young men and boys anywhere from eight years and upwards.

Firefighters themselves say that children from as young as six are involved. Bryan estimated that those involved in attacking Manchester fire crews were usually aged between around 6 and 17; while

Jenkins estimated that those attacking crews in South Wales were generally aged between 12 and 18. In Avon, Jeff Lovell put the ages of attackers at 6 to 7 to teenagers, with younger children copying the older ones.

Although there has been some research into why children and young people deliberately start fires, little appears to be known about the motivations of children and young people who attack fire crews.

With regard to firesetting, the Understanding Young Fire Setters Project found that opportunism was a factor, but so was the fact that no one seemed concerned about removing opportunities. Because adults in the community dumped items such as mattresses, and the local authority passively condoned this action by not removing them, there was the perception that no one cared much about the area. It reported:

“Within the community, adults abandoned rubbish knowing that it might be burned and never usually bothered to phone the fire brigade when they did see a fire. This gave the message that secondary firesetting was at best ignored and at worst passively condoned by the community. There was no source from which young people would get the message that secondary firesetting could have serious consequences and was not condoned by the council or the local community.”

It also found that young people involved in starting fires saw the council and the fire brigade in a “faceless” way and saw any consequences as affecting abstract organisations rather than individuals. The research suggests that “humanising” the issues around firesetting and attacks on fire crews could help the situation, as would more activities organised for bored young people.

Firefighters themselves believe that it is boredom and a lack of facilities, rather than malice, that leads to attacks in most cases.

The Understanding Young Fire Setters Project reported that fire and rescue personnel did not necessarily agree with media portrayals of “out of control” and malicious – they tended to see them as bored young people with nothing to do.

“I don’t think it is malicious, its boredom and frustration. There are no facilities for young people around here,” said Jeff Lovell. This view was reflected in similar comments from firefighters and union

officials in Strathclyde, Belfast and Manchester.

Strathclyde firefighters said that it was no coincidence that the crews in Easterhouse and Paisley were among those suffering the highest number of attacks, when these areas were characterised by problems of poor quality housing, poverty, drugs and alcohol. These areas also had few if any facilities for young people.

In Belfast, firefighters said that the community divide means that crews, whatever their background, were often attacked as “the enemy” for coming from “the other community” and it was often difficult to deal with incidents at the interfaces between the communities.

In addition to the particular political/community-based reasons for attacks on firefighters, Peter Craig believes that social deprivation is also an important element. He also says that firefighters are an easy target – they are reliable in that they will always respond to a callout and vulnerable in the sense that the attackers know that they won’t fight back.

Chris Kerr, Senior Divisional Officer, Area Commander, Eastern Area, Northern Ireland Fire Brigade also believes that in addition to increasing social exclusion and the growth of “yob culture,” there is a generation that has grown up with riots and street violence and the view that state institutions are not legitimate.

The firefighters in Northern Ireland interviewed for this report reported that in some cases adults were also involved, as well as youths, particularly during periods of high political tension. And situations can flare up unexpectedly, with drink and drugs sparking violence or threats of violence.

Some firefighters view offenders as often beyond hope. That they are so anti-authority and so alienated that they cannot be rehabilitated. Clearly this attitude creates scepticism when brigades are devoting time and resources to public awareness campaigns and projects with offenders. If there are positive results from these initiatives then it is vital that these are communicated to firefighters.

2. Examples of action to prevent attacks on firefighters

In response to attacks on firefighters, fire and rescue services have implemented a range of strategies to try to prevent attacks. These range from involvement in public awareness raising campaigns, to partnership working with other organisations such as local authority community safety and youth services and the police, to increasing security for fire crews, to working with children and youths on education and training initiatives.

As an illustration of the different levels of activity and response set out below in some detail is the wide ranging Scottish Executive project to tackle attacks on all public service workers.

Attacks on public service workers

– when the customer isn't right

In Scotland, it had become apparent from evidence put together by the trade union movement as part of the pre consultation on the Emergency Service Workers Bill, that physical and verbal abuse of staff was a growing problem, although the lack of consistent, or in most cases any, reporting made this difficult to demonstrate.

It was identified that:

- there was a need to increase public awareness of the unacceptability of assaults on workers;
- that few organisations, with the exception of the NHS and the rail industry in partnership with the British Transport Police, had taken effective steps to deal effectively with the problem;
- that employers were generally unaware of their responsibilities under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 with regard to assessing the risk of violence at work;
- there was little provision for training for staff in recognising potential aggression and or defusing it;
- there was a need to inform children from a very early age about the unacceptability of assaulting people at work;
- there is a perception that the courts do not treat the issue seriously; and
- that many workers accepted that being abused was part of the job and something they had to put up with.

In order to address these issues, a partnership

initiative between the STUC and Scottish Executive (SE), including a public awareness campaign around the unacceptability of abuse of public service workers was developed.

The SE agreed a three-year campaign aimed at raising awareness of the unacceptability of verbal and physical abuse of people at work, and encouraging employers and employees to realise that such abuse is not part of the job. The campaign aims to change behaviour and focuses on the theme of respect.

The campaign consists of:

- TV adverts based on a swinging punch bag with film of workers imposed on them, including a firefighter having missiles thrown at him, followed by the strap line "Abuse of workers is Bang Out of Order";
- programmes on the Scottish Media Group's Talking Scotland slots, which feature ordinary people talking about issues which concern them, with individual workers telling their story;
- promotions on local radio stations and in local papers, including interviews with experts;
- posters in bus shelters, and workplaces; and
- articles in the trade union and trade press.

Research commissioned by the SE found that whilst verbal and physical abuse is deemed reprehensible, not everyone is aware that it constitutes assault and can be prosecuted in the courts. The second phase of the public awareness campaign concentrates on highlighting not only the unacceptability of spitting, for example, but the legal consequences, so that affected workers and employers realise they no longer have to tolerate this.

The public awareness campaign is part of a package of measures to address the problem of attacks on public service workers which the SE is implementing in partnership with the STUC, employers and other agencies over a three year period.

The report also outlines a series of recommendations which are to be implemented over the three year period:

- **Common identification** – all public manifestations of the strategy should have a common badge which organisations wishing to be associated with the strategy can use;
- **Communications** – there should be a dedicated web page to highlighting on training and reporting incidents;

THE LAW RELATING TO VIOLENCE AT WORK

Although there is no specific legislation aimed at controlling violence at work, employers have legal duties under both statutory and common law. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work related violence as “Any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This can include verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks.”

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have a general duty to ensure as far as is reasonably practicable the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees and must provide a safe system of work, a safe workplace, a safe working environment and information, instruction and training for staff. This duty includes risks arising from physical or verbal violence at work.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers must assess health and safety risks in order to identify the measures needed to reduce them. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) says that this includes violence where it is a significant risk. Risk assessments must

be "suitable and sufficient" and employers must ensure that those carrying them out are competent to do so. Where there are five or more employees the assessment must be in writing.

Employers must have arrangements to put in place any measures needed to prevent or control the risks identified. If violence is identified as a significant risk, employers, should eliminate it, or reduce it to the lowest level possible.

The regulations also state that employers must establish procedures to be followed in the event of serious or imminent danger at work arising from work-related violence. Information on health and safety risks identified, the control measures and health and safety training must be provided for employees.

Under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences (RIDDOR) Regulations 1995 employers must report any incidents at work if they result in death, major injury or incapacity from normal work for three or more days. This includes incidents where injury is caused by physical violence.

- **Encourage employers to act** – Scotland’s Health at Work (SHAW) framework and Awards scheme should be expanded to include the promotion of good practice in the prevention of workplace violence and public service employers and contractors should lead the way in promulgating best practice in the prevention of work related violence;
- **Training and education** – Existing training courses and accreditation bodies as well as initiatives to identify good practice should be audited to ensure consistency in delivery and with a view to providing a directory of available training. Training agencies and trade unions should be encouraged to include WRV in health and safety training as a priority;
- **Children and Young People** – The Scottish Executive should look at what might be done at school from an early age to inform children to the unacceptability of assaults on people at work through a working group at which all key players should be represented and through the development of appropriate guidance and educational materials;
- **Reporting and processing incidents** – The

Scottish Executive should facilitate setting up a forum in which concerns about the criminal justice system by those suffering from work-related violence or abuse can be aired;

- **Model guidance on the importance of the reporting of work-related violence to employers** – should be agreed to encourage the development of consistent and accurate reporting of all instances of abuse.
- **Statistics** – the Scottish Crime Survey should undertake a regular survey of the level of workplace violence and its cost to industry, commerce and the public sector, the results of which should be published.
- **Monitoring and evaluation** – the effectiveness of these measures should be regularly monitored.

The partnership strategy has been successful in bringing together good practice from across sectors and across trade unions. For example, the FBU in Scotland has been able to use information from shop workers’ union USDAW Freedom from Fear campaign, which provides guidance and information to its members on how to deal with aggression from the public.

In comparison, Phillip Powell at Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate (HMFSI) at the ODPM says that a lack of resources is currently holding up ODPM plans to coordinate research and publish guidance to brigades (under the leadership of the Chief Fire Officers Association) on tackling the problem of attacks on firefighters. This would include working with the police, working with communities and providing awareness training.

He says that there are currently problems with accessing funding for this type as a result of a lack of familiarisation with new systems introduced by the modernisation programme.

In the meantime, in the absence of a centrally coordinated drive, various initiatives are being taken in individual brigades. Some of these initiatives (in Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as in England and Wales) are described in the sections below.

2.1 Using risk assessments

Brigades around the country get fire crews to apply dynamic risk assessments when dealing with incidents and the decision not to tackle an incident or to withdraw from one could be taken on the basis of there being no threat to life or further threat to property.

So, for example, a fire in a derelict building or rubbish burning away from any occupied property could be left to burn if it is clear that intervention would most probably result in serious threats to the health and safety of fire crew.

The operational guidance issued by the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service explains how it should work: "Dynamic Risk Assessment is a multi-faceted process, which involves a wide range of supporting assessments, encompassing skills, training, rehearsal, information, equipment, support services, Command training, tasks in hand, experience, and the urgency of the situation."

Brigade officials argue that proper implementation of dynamic risk assessment should enable crews to avoid many of the situations where they might come under attack. The challenge is to ensure that crews on the ground can apply the operational guidance in practice.

The key issue here is the extent to which fire crews can make these decisions when dealing with

an incident and with the confidence that they will be backed up by senior management if criticised by the local community or in the local press for leaving a fire to burn or holding back from attending an incident.

The point was also made that incidents can be very unpredictable and it wasn't always possible to determine levels of risk. It was also pointed out that there was also concern about the fire risk to the youths responsible who might be responsible for the fire in the first place.

The Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) Violence at Work Strategy sets out how dynamic operational risk assessment is used:

2.2 Increased security measures

The research commissioned by Manchester and Merseyside Fire and Rescue Services, Youth Hostilities towards Firefighters included a survey of UK fire and rescue services, which asked how they had responded to any attacks on firefighters. Ten fire and rescue services responded to the survey, and four of these reported that they had installed CCTV equipment on fire engines.

Earlier this year the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service reported a 47% fall in the number of attacks on crews since CCTV cameras were installed on fire engines, following a spate of attacks in 2003. A survey of firefighters there showed they believed that the cameras acted as a deterrent and had helped secure criminal convictions.

There were 124 violent incidents reported against firefighters in 2003, and 81 of these were against crews in engines with CCTV. In 2004, the number of incidents dropped to a total of 104, with 43 against crews in engines fitted with CCTV.

In Strathclyde CCTV cameras have been installed on six appliances in a pilot project to assess to what extent they might ease the problem. CCTV evidence has been used in the prosecution of two men who were convicted of breach of the peace for assaulting and obstructing fire crews and fined a total of £700.

However, there are some concerns about the use of CCTV, for example in Northern Ireland, where this is currently being discussed. There is a question as to whether CCTV is there primarily to report what happens, or whether its presence is a key factor in preventing an incident if potential offenders see that

DYNAMIC OPERATIONAL RISK ASSESSMENT AT MFRS

Emergency situations are not simply events. They are processes. This is particularly the case when fire crews are faced with actual or potential violence and abuse. Consequently, the risk to rescue personnel on the incident ground is dynamic in nature. It is subject to constant change, and may be complex with hidden and uncertain hazards and, potentially, catastrophic outcomes.

In relation to reducing the risk to firefighters from violence and abuse, (and indeed, other risks) MFRS seeks to adopt a common culture of safety in which the views of management regarding risks are disseminated to those with responsibility for making important safety and risk-related decisions on the ground.

Dynamic operational risk assessment assists personnel in making professional judgements in a structured and considered manner to enable tasks to be carried out in circumstances that may be unforeseeable and/or changing constantly. Dynamic operational risk assessment can be applied by all personnel at an incident to aid decision-making whilst overall responsibility rests with the Incident Manager. With incidents where there is a threat of, or actual violence, it must be remembered that a judgement is required to ensure that risks to personnel are not out of proportion to the benefits to be gained from achieving a given task.

it is being used or could be used.

There is some reluctance to put firefighters in a position where they are seen as prosecutors and effectively the “eyes and ears” of the police. Generally the Fire and Rescue in Northern Ireland tries to keep its identity separate from the police.

2.3 Legislation and stiffer penalties

Scotland is in the process of enacting new legislation on violence at work. The Emergency Service Workers Bill will make it a specific offence to assault, obstruct or hinder emergency service workers (and those assisting them) who are responding to emergency situations, including firefighters. It will introduce a maximum penalty of nine months imprisonment, a

fine of £5,000 or both.

There is some support other brigades for this, for example Kieran Nolan Assistant Fire Officer of the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service said he would welcome a similar initiative in England and Wales.

The issue of stiffer sentencing is a live one in Scotland where a teenager, Martin Wason, is about to face sentencing having been found guilty of assault and breach of the peace following an incident in December 2003. A firefighter had to have hospital treatment after being attacked with bottles and other missiles when a gang attacked his fire crew in Coatbridge in Scotland.

At the trial at Airdrie Sheriff Court, Sheriff Alfred Vannet remanded Wason in custody for sentencing on 12 April but suggested he may refer the case to the High Court for a stiffer sentence to be imposed.

While there is clearly sympathy and support from some within the service for special legislation and stiffer sentences there is also some scepticism among firefighters about whether these will work and whether they help to address the wider problems that lie behind increase in attacks on firefighters and other public service workers.

2.4 Working with children and young people

According to a 2000 Home Office report, Safer Communities: Towards Effective Arson Control, about three quarters of brigades run some sort of education programme to address the issue of juvenile fire setters. However it also notes that community fire safety has focussed on reducing accidental fires in the home.

And in Scotland, a 2002 report by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland (HMIC) and HM Fire Service Inspectorate for Scotland (HMFSI) found that the education programmes of brigades focussed on accidental fires, but not the dangers of deliberate fire setting.

However, a number of brigades have been involved in initiatives with school children and local youths to prevent attacks on firefighters.

Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service has been praised for its good practice in targeting “hot spot” areas of deliberate fire setting for its school and community education programme. Here, there was a strong desire amongst brigade staff, especially

firefighters themselves, to improve relations with young people following attacks on fire crews.

It designated these areas for its education in school programme, which involves intensive input in the form of fire safety weeks at primary level every other year, and then in the first year at secondary school and fifth year, just before pupils leave.

This concentrates on house fires and fire safety, but includes the risk of diverting fire appliances that setting fire to a field would entail.

Its strategy recognised that pointing out the costs of firesetting, in terms of property damage and Fire and Rescue resources, and what such funds could otherwise bring to a community might do more to change behaviour than risk education alone.

South Wales Fire and Rescue Service goes into

We want our members to report all incidents so that the statistics collected truly reflect the problem. We need to show that it is a big problem and it needs a big solution

all schools throughout south Wales and includes attacks on firefighters as part of a wider talk about fire safety.

It also has a fire cadet scheme, which is aimed at young firesetters and involves providing

training and visiting fire stations. It is in part aimed at breaking down the anonymity of the Fire and Rescue.

Jeff Lovell says that the work Avon Fire and Rescue Service carries out with children and young people is also aimed at trying to break down anonymity and attempting to make young people see themselves as being a part of the community.

He says that although it is easy to target young children, from age five, through schools – where fire safety education covers attacks and abuse of firefighters and the implications of this – it is not so easy to target youths.

Although on occasions, firefighters have been able to identify where perpetrators live, and have carried out home visits with the police to talk to young people and their parents, there is a general problem of making contact with local youth, because of a lack of youth facilities through which to engage with them.

A fire cadet scheme is to be set up in Avon, but there is currently a lack of resources to implement it. This will cover firefighter training, danger of fires, and will be targeted at young people from poor areas, aiming to make them feel part of a team.

The Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service works with young people through a fire cadet scheme based at Moss Side, Broughton, and Hyde stations. This provides activities such as outward-bound courses and, training with fire and rescue service volunteers and it is hoped that this will be rolled out to other stations.

The LIFE project (see box) is currently being piloted in Northern Ireland, where it is seen as one element of community engagement, improving the links between the fire and rescue service and the local community and in particular young people. Young people who have been excluded from school or are the subject of anti social behaviour orders are brought into fire stations to spend a day or week finding out how an operating fire station works.

A similar project, but renamed Firefly, has also been tried in Oldham following major civil disturbances there in 2001. Early indications are that the project has had an impact with attacks on firefighters down 75% in the Oldham area, according to brigade officials.

In West Lothian a similar project, known as “The Coldown Crew” is being piloted having received funding from the local Community Safety Partnership. Social workers, youth justice workers and other agencies can refer teenagers who have been caught starting fires or targeting fire crews. They spend a day a week for two months with fire crews.

Firefighters in Northern Ireland thought such initiatives were certainly worth trying, although it was emphasised that there should be plenty of consultation with staff beforehand with volunteers encouraged to get involved. There was concern there and elsewhere that not all firefighters would be immediately sympathetic to youths known to have attacked fire crews.

School visits are another important element of community safety work and attacks on firefighters now forms part of the standard presentation to both primary and secondary school children in Northern Ireland. An attempt is also made to target schools in those areas which report the highest level of attacks.

Strathclyde currently has an “open-door” policy – one that integrates the fire and rescue service and particularly fire stations into the local community.

An important part of this policy within Central Command is the work of four full-time community safety coordinators. Their role is mainly to work with local authorities and other agencies and ensure that firefighters get into local schools to deliver a community safety message which now incorporates attacks on firefighters.

After one stone-throwing incident in Cowcaddens, firefighters went into a local school to talk about community fire safety and the issue of attacks on firefighters. It was encouraging then to report that as a result of this the local station received letters from schoolchildren saying how sorry they were about the incident.

The brigade also encourages groups of children to come into fire stations to learn about fire safety through the Phoenix initiative. In this, a small area of the fire station is set aside with wall charts to highlight the main community safety messages. The issue of attacks on firefighters forms part of the standard community safety message.

The “Safety Houses” are a more ambitious project involving local authority funding whereby a building on fire station premises is converted into a community facility. The Safety House will have meeting rooms and demonstration rooms so that children from local schools can come in and learn about fire safety.

2.5 Working with local communities

In Northern Ireland, links have also been made with local community representatives. Following FBU initiatives, the Brigade established links and put these on a more formal footing when it became involved in the Good Relations Steering Group in April 2003.

Work involved visits to community centres and participation in initiatives such as the Safer Streets Campaign which tries to tackle the widespread problem of joyriding. The Brigade has also taken part in festivals in both nationalist and loyalist communities (West Belfast and Shankhill festivals). The key factor was making it clear that the fire and rescue service is neutral and this was achieved by talking to everybody and not by talking to nobody.

Although there are special circumstances in Northern Ireland, senior officers thought that there were some valuable lessons for other areas, particularly those where the fire and rescue service is perceived as not reflecting the local community and where contact with community leaders could help improve links.

In Belfast a network of contacts has now been established and linked to specific areas of the city so that if an incident flares up there is a community representative to contact who might be able to help calm the situation.

This kind of long term strategy appears to be working and last 11 July, normally the busiest night of the year for the fire and rescue service, there were no injuries to firefighters from attacks. There had been plenty of consultation in the weeks leading up to that night to ensure that communities understood when and how the fire and rescue service would intervene.

It has been a question of establishing the integrity of the fire and rescue service and respecting the traditions of the different communities.

In some cases it also means getting involved in community rather than official initiatives so while there is a Northern Ireland

Office Community Restorative Justice campaign involving the police, the Brigade has recognised the importance of getting involved in the separate campaigns run by the different communities.

This means firefighters going to talk to offenders and it was felt that if this had been tried only through the official campaign then the service would not really be engaging with the right people.

However, firefighters in Northern Ireland reported that there had been some problems with official backing for the time and resources necessary for building community links, and gave the example of the refusal even to fund a fire station barbeque that had been proposed as a way of building bridges with

A network of contacts has been established linked to specific areas so that if an incident flares up there is a community representative to contact

THE LIFE PROJECT: LOCAL INTERVENTION FIRE EDUCATION

Fire crews in east London had faced abuse and attacks from young people, and things came to a head on bonfire night 2001, when two firefighters from Tower Hamlets were hospitalised after youths fired rockets at them as they responded to a call. In response to abuse and attacks, the LIFE (Local Intervention Fire Education) was developed.

In 2001, few firefighters in Tower Hamlets came from minority ethnic communities, and cultural barriers made it difficult for them to engage with local communities. After the project started, there was a 76% reduction in attacks on firefighters. In addition, six participants in the project applied to train as firefighters, whilst others became youth workers. This included three young Bengali “gang leaders” who had been involved in leading attacks on firefighters.

The week-long course for young people is aimed at developing useful life-skills – it includes some practical work on fire stations, with firefighters from local stations providing the training. It also aims to improve relationships between young people, the local community and the local fire and rescue service.

The LIFE project has been extended from Tower Hamlets to other brigades in London. It is delivered by London Fire Brigade staff, usually operating within their own borough.

Over the week, the young people start to work as a team, developing leadership skills and having a more responsible attitude. They are treated as adults, given adult responsibilities

and often for the first time, they are placed in a real adult-to-adult relationship. They are given personal responsibility for the management and maintenance of the fire engine, firefighting equipment, the fire station and their own personal protective equipment.

The course is aimed at changing the attitude and behaviour of young people by getting them to:

- Adopt a new set of values;
- Address the consequences of antisocial (firesetting) behaviour;
- Work co-operatively with others;
- See the advantage of improving their own learning and performance; and
- Gain esteem and self confidence and to communicate better and consequently achieve self empowerment.

Each young person has their progress evaluated by a Brigade trainer, and the ratio of firefighter to young person is 1:2, which means that a strong bond of trust is established.

Amongst its achievements, there has been a noticeable reduction in attacks on firefighters.

The LIFE programme is currently running in the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Islington, Brent and Newham, Redbridge, Barking and Dagenham and will be extended to Camden and Westminster. However, a lack of funding has prevented it being rolled out to other London Boroughs.

Sources: LIFE Local Intervention Fire Education Information Pack, London Fire Brigade, FRS01 magazine published by the ODPM.

local people. And even at higher levels there appear to be problems in getting relatively modest resources to take local initiatives.

In Strathclyde, the Safety Houses initiative means that community facilities within fire stations are available to local people to use for their own meetings and events. A Safety House has been open at Pollok fire station for about a year and a new facility at Paisley should be open shortly. It is hoped that the initiative will help break down barriers between the fire and rescue service and the local community. The extent to which this will be taken up in other areas will depend on local authorities' willingness and

capacity to provide the funding.

2.6 Working with local agencies

Brigades often work in partnership with the police, local authorities and other agencies to try to prevent attacks on firefighters occurring.

For example, the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service participates in Manchester City Council's Crime and Disorder Partnership and Anti Social Behaviour Forum, along with the police, youth service, probation service, head teachers and local NHS trusts.

Through these bodies the fire and rescue service

has been successful in raising the profile of the issue of attacks on firefighters and as a result Manchester City Council agreed to set a target to remove rubbish and therefore reduce the opportunity for fire setting.

Similarly, Tyne and Wear has been cited as an example of good practice with regards to multi-agency partnership working through the Northumbria Arson Task Force. The task force involved police, fire brigade, outreach workers, local authority and local schools.

Here, Newcastle City Council wrote to every household in the area with their designated day and time for putting out rubbish, and giving notice of prosecution for illegal tipping, as part of a zero tolerance campaign with regard to litter and refuse removal in order to cut the opportunity for arson. In addition, the procedure for the removal of abandoned vehicles was speeded up, and outreach workers reached an agreement with local children that if there were no fires set in an estate of 80 houses prior to their demolition, then some of the land would be used for a BMX track which the children could help to design. During the period that the outreach workers were active, there were no fires on the estate.

In some brigades, there is agreement on joint attendance of incidents. For example, Fife Fire and Rescue Service entered into an agreement with the local police force after experiencing problems with youths setting fires every night, and attacking fire crews, in a particular area in Glenrothes. The fire brigade and police agreed to jointly attend fires in that area, but after finding that the problem simply moved to another area, they then agreed that a police officer and community fire officer would go into every classroom throughout primary and secondary schools in the area. The result was that the area went from being the worse area for assaults to an area of no assaults.

However, firefighters report that there are problems with the resourcing of both the fire and rescue service and the police. This can mean that the police cannot always attend incidents where the fire brigade want back up.

The view from other brigades, including Northern Ireland and Manchester, have found that joint attendance with the police can make the situation worse and that there arguments for maintaining a certain distance between the police and the fire and

rescue service.

In South Wales, a lack of resources meant that a zero tolerance reporting schemes for abandoned/stolen cars which had been run in cooperation with the police had not been running for the last year because the fire and rescue service's workload had been too high to continue with it.

A similar "car clear" scheme is run in Avon, where telephone numbers to report abandoned cars in the Avon area are publicised, and the brigade guarantees to clear them away within 24 hours so that they do not attract children/young people.

2.7 Public awareness campaigns

A key part of the current approach in Northern Ireland is a major public awareness campaign which includes television and poster advertising. Success in promoting very high public awareness of, and actual use of, smoke alarms indicated that a public awareness campaign around attacks on firefighters might work.

The thrust of the campaign is to emphasise that firefighters are the targets, but the community is the victim, as people will suffer if crews and appliances are unavailable to respond to a call.

A conscious decision was taken to maintain a low key approach so the ads, while showing injured firefighters, do not depict violent incidents themselves and do not berate the perpetrators directly. (Strathclyde firefighters expressed some concern that the Scottish Executive campaign – see page 00 above – could lead to copycat attacks).

Independent research indicates a 100% response rate to surveys asking if people had seen the campaign.

Alongside this initiative the Brigade is also ensuring that the media are aware of incidents where firefighters are attacked.

Peter Craig, Community Development Officer in Northern Ireland felt that although a Northern Ireland initiative, this campaign could be used across the UK and a standardised campaign would be much more cost-effective.

A second stage of the campaign has been drawn up and is awaiting financial approval. This will involve ads featuring a group of youths waiting for a fire crew to arrive and hints at the idea that they are

lying in wait but reveals them to be actually waiting anxiously for the crew to come and deal with a fire.

Craig acknowledges that the public awareness campaign needs to be long term and has to work in conjunction with other elements such as the LIFE scheme and school visits so that young people get the message in different ways and at different times.

In essence the campaign and other initiatives are about getting the local community to respond and to begin to change attitudes. Although the Brigade can't stop attacks, it can encourage the local community to address it as an issue.

However, firefighters expressed some reservations about whether the campaign is reaching its target

There appears to be a general lack of specific training for firefighters on the issue of violence at work in many brigades

audience, and about whether a wider strategy, crucial in terms of any lasting impact, is actually in place. In addition there was concern that the considerable level of funding

for a TV campaign would mean budget cuts in other areas.

One view is that an advertising campaign is easier to assess and justify than other initiatives. At least in the short term, you can measure the impact on the basis of surveys of people's awareness and so can be justified in budgetary terms in a way that it is impossible to do when spending time and resources building relations with the local community

The problem in Northern Ireland now is that a recent spate of attacks have hit the headlines and raised the possibility that some incidents could have taken place because the campaign has highlighted the vulnerability of firefighters. The controversy over funding of the publicity campaign is also likely to intensify in the light of reports that the Brigade may face spending cuts of up to £3 million.

2.8 Training

There appears to be a general lack of specific training for firefighters on the issue of violence at work in many brigades. In Strathclyde the issue of attacks on

BELFAST: A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

According to Chris Kerr, a strategy to combat attacks on firefighters needs to look at three key elements in the problem – the location, the victim and the offender – and deal with each in different ways.

In terms of location it may involve removing potential sources of fire such as derelict buildings. In one example in Northern Ireland lobbying of the Housing Executive – and use of community representatives to lobby as well – led to the swift demolition of derelict housing and so removed a focus for firesetters.

The victims, that is in this case firefighters themselves, can be removed or kept away from incidents where the risk to persons or property is slight in contrast to the risk of attacks on fire crews.

An example of dealing with the offender was through the West Belfast Essential Services Group which includes Fire and rescue service representatives. This met to discuss problems in the Polglass area with attacks on emergency and transport workers and taxi drivers. A simple measure which helped to ease the problem was the decision to have a much large number of taxi drivers available at pub closing time so that fewer people were hanging around and creating a potentially difficult situation.

The more challenging and longer term part of the strategy in dealing with offenders involves getting firefighters into local communities on a regular basis to help create a human face to the service. It is important to get the right people for the job, people who are aware of, and understand, community sensitivities.

firefighters and the importance of reporting incidents does form part of the basic health and safety briefing. However, guidance on how to deal with violent incidents is not tackled in any formal training beyond the kind of general advice to always wear personal protective equipment, helmets with visors down, if facing a violent situation.

Strathclyde health and safety officer Martin Gordon explained that the Brigade was looking into the question of training but that it wanted to ensure

that it struck the right balance with the emphasis on trying to ensure that crews did not get into or could withdraw from situations before they faced any violence.

In the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade, there has been some training in conflict resolution and negotiating skills for senior officers provided as free training for a public body through the Workers' Education Association. However, Chris Kerr said that there was nothing like the sort of conflict management training that took place in the police service available for firefighters.

There has been some guidance from local community representatives in terms of how they perceive the fire and rescue service and how they think firefighters should deal with an incident. Their advice included "just basic things like not rushing in with the intention of extinguishing a fire, but going in first without a helmet on and visor down, to talk to community representatives."

Firefighters in Northern Ireland felt that there was a reliance on "collective wisdom" built up over the years, rather than providing proper training and that there was a danger that this could gradually disappear particularly if there was a period of rapid staff turnover.

A number of firefighters felt unsure of their legal position. The tendency was to assume that although they should not retaliate, they could use "reasonable force" to defend themselves. Firefighters in Northern Ireland assumed that the Brigade would not support them if they used physical contact. There was no specific guidance, for example as to how they should react when young children climbed on to fire engines.

Some brigades do provide training. For example, the Assistant Chief Fire Officer of Avon Fire and Rescue Service, Bill Feeley, reported that training on bullying and harassment for managers and supervisors included violence, and that junior officers had access to management training at Bridgewater College which also included conflict management.

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service provides training for dealing with conflict, aggression and violence that will present participants with a range of strategies they can employ in diffusing situations of aggression and potential violence. The course content includes:

- Exploring feelings around aggression and violence;

- Assault cycles and other theoretical underpinnings;
- Practical strategies for dealing with difficult situations;
- Respecting signs and situations;
- Worker safety: a basic introduction to breakaway techniques and the legal context;
- Teamwork and implications for the work.

The whole emphasis in the training is on diffusing situations with guidance on protective measures for personal safety and control measures. It does not extend to restraint.

3. Conclusions and key issues that need to be addressed

3.1 Collection of statistics

The official statistics on attacks on firefighters seriously underestimate the scale of the problem, both because many fire and rescue services do not provide details of attacks to the government department responsible for collecting the statistics, and because firefighters themselves do not report many of the incidents for a variety of reasons. In addition, the statistics are not collected consistently across the UK. Only from March 2005 will brigades in England and Wales be using standard forms issued by the ODPM.

Underestimating the problem in this way has implications for the priority given to the issue. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) points out that the statistics it collects through the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences (RIDDOR) Regulations, only include those incidents resulting in

A nationally driven campaign could help ensure that fire and rescue service employers are encouraging firefighters to report incidents

firefighters being incapacitated from their normal work for more than three days. According to these statistics, violence is not a major cause of injury for firefighters.

And because

the figures collected by the ODPM and Scottish Executive – the HSE does not operate in Northern Ireland – also underestimate the problem, firefighters have not been regarded as a priority area for action on violence at work. In Northern Ireland the situation is different in that while significant under-reporting of hostile incidents is acknowledged at senior levels in the brigade, this message does not appear to be endorsed by the DHSSPS.

A nationally driven campaign could help ensure that fire and rescue service employers are encouraging firefighters to report incidents, and that incidents are properly recorded and sent to the appropriate government department, so that the official figures reflect the real scale of the problem.

These figures should be circulated widely and regularly so that brigades, the union and firefighters themselves know what is being reported and what

the trends are and to ensure that the official figures begin to reflect what is actually happening.

The ODPM, Scottish Executive and DHSSPS should consult on how statistics are collected, what forms are used and how to make the process easier. With greater use of IT throughout the service, it should be possible to make reporting, collecting and analysing statistics a much simpler process.

The issue is key, as FBU health and safety officer Paul Woolstenholmes said: “How else will attitudes change or progress be made unless we are getting the figures as to what is actually happening on the ground?”

3.2 A nationally driven campaign to prevent attacks on firefighters

Although the Scottish Executive are involved in a wide-ranging partnership initiative to prevent attacks on public service workers including firefighters, there is no centrally driven campaign across other parts of the UK. The FBU wants to work with the ODPM, the HSE and other agencies at national level on a high profile initiative to prevent attacks on firefighters.

Brigades across the country are experimenting with initiatives to deal with violence. In some cases these are in the earliest stages and are yet to be fully evaluated. But how are they being evaluated and what is being done with this information? There is clearly a need for a better exchange of information across brigades so that they can easily find out what is happening elsewhere, what has been tried, what has failed, what has worked and what might work better if implemented in a different way.

3.3 Getting across a different image

Close identification of the fire and rescue service with the police and authority in general has been identified as a possible factor in attacks on fire crews and initiatives to deal with would be worth investigating. This is partly dealt with through the schools and community initiatives that make clear what firefighters do and put a human face on the service. Practical measures in this area could be changes to uniforms, for example.

Work done with young offenders in initiatives like the LIFE project can help this process as can

liaison with local schools. An important message coming across from different brigades was the need to start young and keep in contact. So community safety visits of primary schools can be the first image children have of the service and then as they get older the community safety message can be broadened to the risks created by hoax calls and attacks on firefighters. This is already being tried by some brigades but in other areas community safety visits are only carried out in primary schools.

3.4 Proper resourcing of fire and rescue services

A lack of resources was identified as a barrier to tackling this issue at all levels. At national level, it is preventing the ODPM from carrying out research and publishing guidance for brigades; and at local level it is holding back training and stopping fire and rescue services from being involved in a variety of community and education initiatives which firefighters believe could prevent them being attacked.

It would help if resources could be allocated specifically to these initiatives rather than Brigades having to find the funds on an ad hoc basis from other budget headings.

3.5 Avoiding/withdrawing from incidents – dynamic risk assessment

Operational guidance across Brigades shows that there is awareness of the threat to firefighters and ways in which crews can avoid or minimise that risk. For example, if a group of youths have set light to a car in an open area then it may be quite straightforward for the officer in charge to assess this as a case where there is no danger to persons or property and so the fire is better left to burn out rather than risk the health and safety of firefighters who are likely to come under attack when they tackle the fire.

What may appear to be the best course of action in operational guidance may be difficult to implement in practice. In these circumstances it is vital that there is training and management support for personnel involved.

3.6 Training in dealing with conflict and aggression

In comparison with employers in the health service and police service, few brigades are providing firefighters with training on violence at work. There needs to be an investigation of the most appropriate level of training for firefighters. This may cover dealing with conflict, aggression and violence, including the legal context should be available for firefighters facing attacks.

The exact nature of this training needs to be fully discussed and put into context so that it is clear that there is a hierarchy of responses to an incident. If avoidance and withdrawal are not options, only then would fire crews need to call on potential knowledge gained from training in legal rights and responsibilities, conflict management and possibly self-defence.

3.7 Assessing the impact of initiatives

An important factor to bear in mind when attempting to assess the impact of any initiative taken to tackle attacks on firefighters is that we currently do not have a clear picture of the level of attacks. The challenge is to ensure that the unofficial estimates of violent incidents and abuse are translated into official statistics.

If this happens then the official figures should increase but at the same time if initiatives are being taken to reduce attacks then this has to be taken into account when analysing the figures.

3.8 Communication and consultation

Firefighters on the ground need to know what initiatives are being planned, when and how they are being introduced and how they fit into an overall strategy to tackle attacks. They also need to be informed of, but more importantly, consulted over the impact of these policies.

This report was produced by the Labour Research Department on behalf of the Fire Brigades Union.

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