

London Fire Brigade Potential Arson Targets (PATs) Project

Summary

The Potential Arson Targets (PATs) Project is a key tool for identifying and reducing the threat of potential arson through partnership working. This London Fire Brigade (LFB) project gathers information from local authorities on planning application refusals, licensed premises closures, licence revocations and rating reductions due to vacant premises. Letters are sent to all refused applicants warning of the potential for arson in vacant premises and outlining the penalties for arson-related crime. The project allows local firefighters to keep a particularly close eye on specific buildings in the area.

Background

London's housing market has grown significantly in the last 10 years, allowing small and independent developers to make more profit. This has encouraged developers to take larger risks and take on bigger projects. For example, developers may have felt confident enough to buy larger buildings with the hope of getting planning permission to demolish existing premises and erect small blocks of flats.

But the global credit crunch has had an impact, meaning there is less money available for them to fund such projects. The decline in the housing market – as well as potential refusal of planning permission – has left independent developers with little or no cash flow, seeing potential profits disappear.

At the same time, more and more pubs are becoming vacant, with around 50 closing each week in the UK. There is less demand for a number of reasons, including the impact of the smoking ban, and the availability of cheap alcohol in supermarkets.

Key issues and problems

Refused planning permission

Over the past year, LFB has dealt with a number of large fires in premises that on further investigation were found to have been previously refused planning permission.



Accelerated fire growth

When firefighters arrived at some incidents, they found that the fires were unusually strong, particularly considering they had allegedly only just started. The ferocity of the fire at such an early stage made the work far more dangerous for firefighters.

Purpose of PATS

The purpose of the PATS project was to highlight buildings that were possible arson targets (known as 'red hot' premises), and to minimise the risks to firefighters. Fire crews would familiarise themselves with each potential arson target (PAT) so they knew the possible risks they could face if a fire did break out at that location.

Arson reduction

The Arson Task Force Project (ATFP) would use the details of all PATs to further understand the risks in their boroughs and take action to make the areas safer.

What they did

The following process is used to identify risks in an area. It allows station crews to focus on problem areas, and at the same time means the ATFP can find out which property owners are in most need of fire prevention advice.

Phase 1

The PAT manager gathers information on planning refusals, surrendered licences and pub closures from local authorities.

Phase 2

This list of premises is filtered and prioritised using the criteria detailed below.

Phase 3

The PAT manager puts the prioritised list into the PAT database on the Fire Investigation Shared Drives.

Phase 4

The property addresses are checked to see if there have been previous incidents there and if so, they may be moved higher up the list.

Phase 5

Each profiled property is filed in the database by borough, along with a satellite photograph of the location.

Phase 6

Profiles are sent to the ATF. Either members of the task force, borough arson liaison officers, or fire crews then finish the assessment by visiting the site to assess any further issues. Ideally, fire crews would do this as it would be a clear message to the public that work was being done.

If crews notice any fire risks on site such as poor fuel management or inadequate building security, these can be dealt with immediately.

Phase 7

All completed profiles are stored by the PAT manager, and copies are sent out to each fire station in the borough, the relevant borough and station managers, fire investigation teams and arson task force members. Each borough is reviewed every three months.

Phase 8

The PAT manager keeps the database up-to-date so anyone using the system can access profiles in full.

Properties are prioritised on a scale of 1 to 3.

Priority 1:

- pubs where licences have been surrendered or have closed and are known to be empty
- pubs that have been refused planning for demolition and rebuild
- any buildings that have been refused planning for demolition and rebuild more than once
- any planning application to convert a 'brown field' site into a residential site that has been refused more than once
- planning refusals in a conservation area.

Priority 2:

- first time planning refusals for any building facing demolition and rebuild into multiple units
- first time planning refusals for a 'brown field' site conversion into a residential site.

Priority 3:

- empty properties identified by the rates departments of the council.

The PAT manager also has the authority to include any site into any priority if deemed appropriate.

PAT Reports are sent out to:

- every fire appliance and station within the borough, to ensure that all crews are aware of the risks in their area, fully understand their patch, and can train for specific incidents
- ATF members, so they can assess the area and carry out further action, such as removing rubbish or securing sites, if necessary
- fire investigation teams, so they are fully briefed on potential targets they may need to attend in the future
- borough and station managers, to ensure everyone is fully aware of the risks in their area.

Key outcomes

The main objective of the PATS project is to reduce the risks firefighters face when carrying out their duties.

Firefighters can use the information in PAT profiles to understand potential hazards at particular sites. It also means they can plan ahead and carry out specific training so they are well prepared for any incident. If there is a fire, they have all the information they need to carry out their duties safely, in accordance with brigade operational procedures.

There is currently a Dynamic Risk Assessment (DRA) model in place throughout the brigade, which is used at all incidents. The PATS project works in conjunction with the DRA to help firefighters of all ranks when making tactical and strategic decisions. The arson task force can use PAT data to single out high-risk addresses in their boroughs. They can then make the locations safer by removing cylinders, fly tipping and dumped cars, for example.

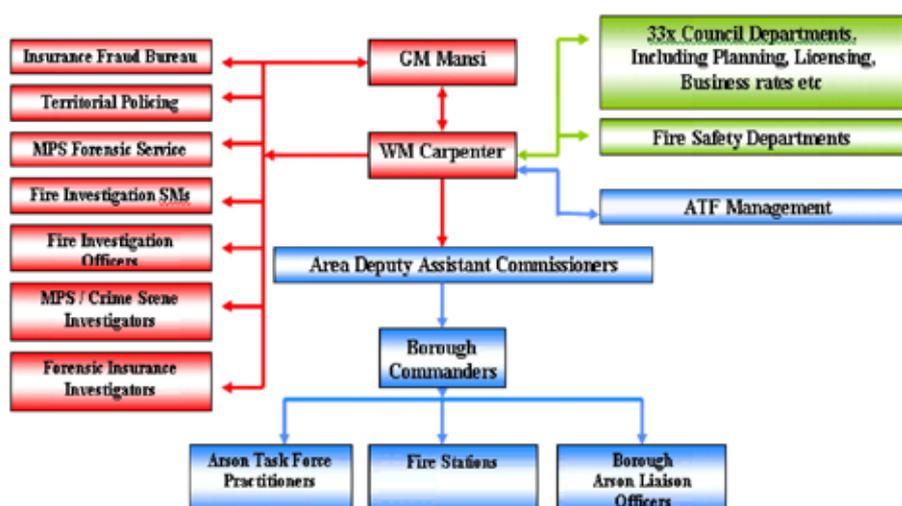
Community fire safety visitors can use PAT data to find out if premises are occupied or vacant. This saves them time as they know in advance if a building they had planned to visit is actually empty.

Resources

Two watch managers were needed to set up the project. It is run by one full-time watch manager, supported by the ATF.

Who was involved?

The project had the support of all levels of management, from the watch manager who originally came up with the idea, all the way through to the head of service. Below is an overview of those involved:



Barriers and how they were overcome

The project relies on good relationships with councils, because local authorities need to supply the original data. This was difficult initially as it created extra work for council officers. However, the success of the project has shown councils that the benefits are worth the extra effort.

Critical success factors

As stated above, strong links between the local authorities and the PAT team was crucial to the project's success.

How could it be done better?

The team believes it has explored every option to ensure the service is the best it can be. However, extra staff could lead to the creation of a dedicated team. This would improve the understanding of at-risk areas with more detailed work.

Key contact

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