



ARSON CONTROL FORUM

Implementing Arson Reduction Projects: Findings from the Arson Control Forum's New Projects Initiative

Foreword

Arson remains the largest single cause of major fires in the UK and can destroy lives and cost millions of pounds in damage to property. As the recent Fire White Paper highlighted, arson control is a key element of the Government's fire and rescue service modernisation agenda, which places a greater emphasis on fire prevention.

During the first two years of its existence the Arson Control Forum has invested over £2.25 million piloting local arson reduction schemes, such as those mentioned in this research bulletin. The common theme of many of these projects is the use of the framework provided by crime and disorder legislation to foster strong multi-agency links, often involving local authorities, the police and fire and rescue services as well as other key stakeholders such as the insurance industry.

Following these initial pilot schemes to see what works on the ground, the Forum is now moving into a period of implementation, promoting successful arson control measures that have proved effective during the previous two years. With this latest round of bids we must aim to build on the success of existing projects already established across the country, such as car clearance schemes and arson task forces, and take forward the fight against arson.

This research bulletin summarises the emerging findings from the evaluation of those pilot schemes, focussing on the key process-building issues associated with the implementation of locally based arson control projects. It provides a valuable insight into some of the factors that need to be taken into account when working in partnership with other agencies to address the problem of arson.



Phil Hope MP,
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister



Introduction

This paper summarises the emerging findings from the evaluation of the Arson Control Forum's New Project's Initiative (NPI) by Evidence Led Solutions with Morgan Harris Burrows and CRG Research. To date, 45 projects have been funded over two phases, of which, 31 have received independent evaluation¹. These projects have been implemented across the country, have focused upon various types of arson and implemented a variety of strategies to reduce and prevent such incidents. Such strategies include refuse removal, vehicle removal schemes, conducting arson audits with schools, businesses and ethnic minority groups; educating young people about the risks of arson and using problem-solving methods to increase the number of detections of arson incidents. The evaluation (undertaken by the authors) included an examination of processes, outcomes and cost-effectiveness associated with each of the projects. Here we focus on the key process-orientated issues associated with the implementation of the projects.

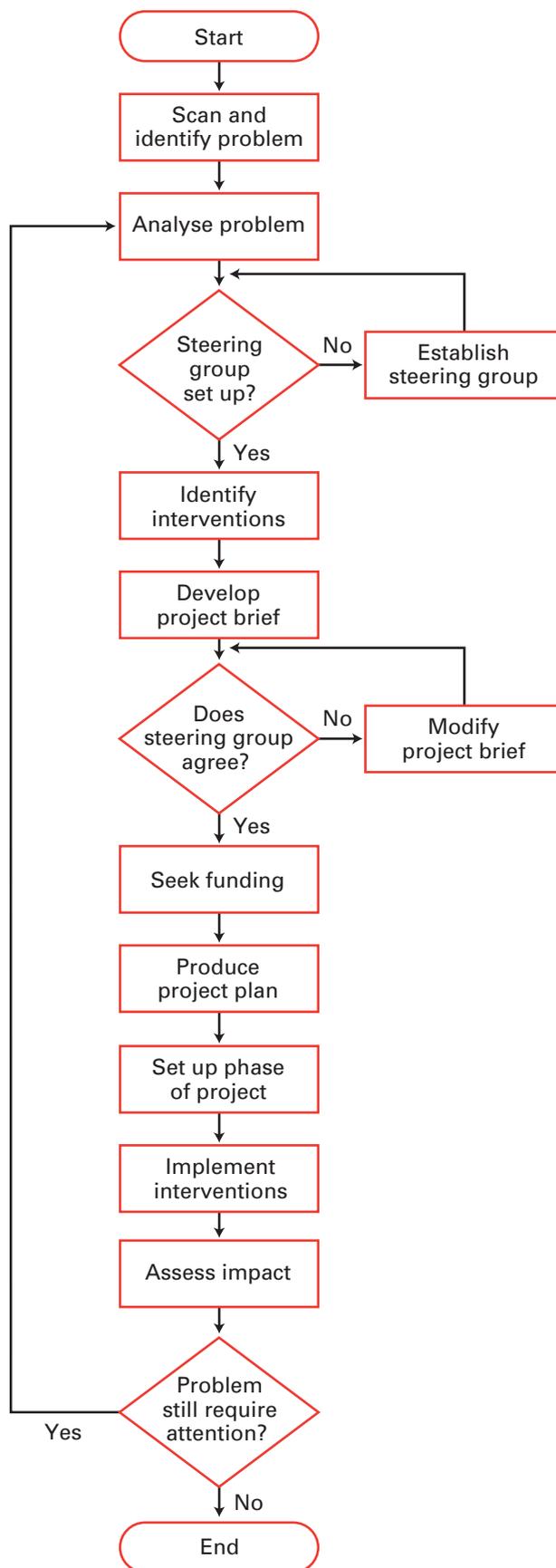
Generally, crime reduction projects follow a distinct process (see for example, Bullock & Tilley, 2003). These processes have often been outlined by using the SARA analytical framework (scanning, analysis, response, assessment). This framework is normally associated with 'problem orientated policing' projects (see Bullock & Tilley, 2003; Goldstein, 1990; Leigh et al, 1998) though it is used here to outline the process of implementation in the NPI projects. The key elements of the SARA framework include:

- **Scanning:** How was the initial arson/ deliberate fire problem identified?
- **Analysis:** What further analysis was conducted to identify the key features of 'hotspots' that could inform possible responses?
- **Response:** What interventions were implemented to address these problems?
- **Assessment:** Did these responses work? How did they work? Why didn't they work?²

The projects evaluated under the NPI all followed a similar process. However, the amount of time it would take a project to bid for funding from ODPM and eventually implement strategies to reduce arson would vary considerably. A rough outline of the process from initial scanning to assessment is outlined in Figure 1 below.

The flow chart above shows the progression from the initial scanning and analysis of a problem

Figure 1
The project process



¹ A third round of projects commenced in 2004.

² This is not the primary focus of this bulletin, but it is covered in detail in the full evaluation report that will be published later this year.

through to the development of interventions in association with a steering group. This steering group could be a group set up for the project, or could be an existing Arson Task Force. A project brief should then be developed in association with the steering group. This project brief will contain sufficient detail about the project (nature of problem, link with interventions, budget required, timescale etc.) upon which to seek funding from programmes such as the NPI. Once funding has been secured, a detailed project plan should be produced (although in reality these were seldom produced), which provides a breakdown of the key activities to be undertaken and the timescale over which they will be implemented. The project will then enter a set up phase in which staff are recruited, materials purchased etc., prior to the commencement of the interventions. Monitoring and evaluation arrangement will also be established at this stage. Following implementation, decision will be made about whether to continue to tackle the problem, or to move on to new issues.

It is important to note that this is an 'ideal type'. In reality stages may occur at different points, or skipped altogether. The length of time these stages took in the NPI projects varied considerably, depending on local factors, such as previous experience of implementing an intervention and the availability of existing staff.

The stages from 'seek funding' to 'implement interventions' in Figure 1 represent the *response* in the SARA framework and it is this phase that is primarily dealt with by the following paragraphs, though it is also recognised that scanning and analysis can have a significant bearing on the successful implementation of a project. For example, initial scanning will highlight that a problem of some magnitude exists (thus identifying *what* the problem is) and further analysis will both highlight the contexts and key features of the identified problem (*why* the problem exists and *what* is generating it). Therefore, thorough scanning and analysis are essential ingredients in the implementation process. Each of these issues (scanning, analysis and response) are addressed in turn.

Scanning for arson problems

Scanning for problems began at the bidding process. Partnerships were encouraged to bid for resources on the strength of the fact that a

problem could be identified and that they intended to implement suitable interventions. There is much evidence of projects conducting thorough scanning of arson data to identify problems. For example, one partnership had conducted a scoping exercise, prior to the commencement of the project, that included substantial scanning and analysis of data. This exercise firmly established what the particular problems were across the county and the locations that could be classified as 'hotspots'. There were however, examples of projects where initial scanning was less thorough. Here there was evidence that:

1. Some project bids were made on the basis of speculation or the partnership having a 'hunch' that a problem existed.
2. Partnerships had anecdotal evidence that a problem existed though data systems were not robust enough to provide reliable supporting empirical evidence.
3. Initial scanning was not particularly important as bidding was being made for the continuation of a project that had already been partly or wholly in existence.

Ongoing analysis of data

A number of systems were identified within partnerships that were able to identify numbers of deliberate fires, locations of fires and types of buildings where fires occurred. The quality of data across projects was variable and where systems were particularly poor it was often a remit of the project to improve data quality. The projects generally appeared to recognise the importance of ongoing analysis. It was recognised that identifying the key factors that generate problems within local areas could aid both current and further implementation.

The information used by projects tended to be fire and rescue service data and police data. There was also widespread use of Geographical Information Systems that facilitated the easy identification of 'hotspots'. Box 1 provides an example of detailed problem analysis.

There were numerous examples of projects conducting regular data analysis of fire trends and monitoring data pertinent to their projects. Problems with data systems were, however, apparent. The following problems could all potentially have an impact upon the successful scanning and analysis of arson:

Box 1: Northumberland Arson Initiative Scoping Study

The Northumberland Arson Initiative Scoping Study is an example of thorough scanning and analysis of arson problems. This was a multi-agency exercise involving representatives from the Fire and Rescue Service, Police, District Councils and the Youth Offending Team. The resulting report, which was based largely on analysis of fire data, produced a number of important findings, including those indicating that:

- Northumberland had a higher rate of arson than the national average.
- The south-east corner of the county was experiencing the highest increases in malicious fires.
- Motor vehicles were most likely to be the target of deliberate primary fires.
- The peak times for deliberate vehicle fires were between 23.00 and midnight.
- The highest proportion of deliberate secondary fires was for undergrowth fires. There were also a high number of rubbish fires, bonfires, bin and skip fires. These increased at school holiday times and in the run up to bonfire night.

The report resulted in a number of recommendations for ways to address the problem and these were used to develop a strategy for reducing arson. Funding was subsequently obtained from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister under the Arson Control Forum's New Projects Initiative.

- **Differences between the total numbers of arson incidents recorded by fire and rescue services and the police:** Only around half of arson incidents attended by fire and rescue services are eventually recorded as such by the police (Canter & Almond, 2002). This has clear implications for the investigation and detection of arson.
- **Identification of key types of premises where incidents occur:** Data systems appear to be able to count the number of deliberate fires, though often these systems are not sophisticated enough to analyse data in certain ways. For example examining fires by certain types of premises (such as schools, shops, houses etc.) or within certain areas of towns (such as police beat areas) proved to be difficult for a number of projects.
- **Identification of geographical patterns of incidents:** A number of brigades had geographical information systems. These enable 'hotspots' of incidents to be quickly and easily identified. However, some fire and rescue services where such systems were not available were still using 'pin board' maps or not conducting any geographical analysis.
- **Problems analysing data for assessment:** Both the internal and external evaluation of the projects were dependent upon being able to make 'before' and 'after' comparisons of fire data for certain premises, areas or types of fires. A number of fire and rescue services were able to produce such data quickly, though for others, such tasks proved time-consuming, or the systems were not robust enough to perform such tasks.

Responses to arson problems

Most of the projects examined in the evaluation were clearly focused, in that they had strong evidence as to what the main problems were in their area and had developed an outline of the measures they wanted to implement to tackle the problem.

Project managers and staff invested a considerable amount of time and energy into setting up various strategies. One of the defining features of the NPI projects was the level of resources devoted to capacity building activities (such as partnership working, training etc.). Indeed, up to the end of June 2003, 114 (44%) of the 262 interventions launched by the 31 projects evaluated could be described as 'capacity building'.

Partnership working

Much of the set-up phase of projects was spent in meetings with different agencies to develop protocols and agreements over what to implement and how to implement it. In many cases, projects were successful thanks to the strong partnership working that was forged between organisations. Box 2 provides an example of strong partnership working.

However, the evaluation found that, while partnership working was a key success factor for some projects, a number of problems were encountered in developing such approaches. Many of these problems have also been identified in previous research (see for example Stokes-White, 2000). In relation to the NPI projects the key problems included the following:

Box 2: Luton Arson Task Force

The Luton Arson Task Force was a multi-agency partnership consisting of a range of organisations, including the Fire and Rescue Service, the Police Force, the Borough Council, the Youth Offending Team and DVLA. Information was shared on a daily basis between partner organisations and this meant that reports of abandoned refuse/vehicles could be dealt with quickly.

The Task Force also co-ordinated multi-agency Environmental Action Days, in which 'hot-spot' areas were targeted for systematic clean up. This included the removal of abandoned vehicles and refuse, securing of derelict buildings and checks on pavements and street lamps. Local schools and businesses were also offered fire safety advice and risk assessments.

- **Recognising arson as a problem:** Arson was often low on the list of priorities of many agencies. For example, many Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships did not include arson in their Crime and Disorder Strategies. In some cases, this was because, until recently, the Fire Service had not been a key member of such partnerships. In other cases, this was due to a focus on crime types that had higher incidence rates or that were perceived to generate higher levels of fear of crime.
- **Understanding how arson affects local partner organisations:** One project manager interviewed as part of the evaluation suggested that highlighting the potential financial and human consequences of arson was a useful lever for encouraging partners to take action. For example, the financial costs of arson could be extremely high when compared to other crime types, while human costs included the loss of life.
- **Alternative priorities:** Many agencies simply had more pressing concerns to deal with than arson and though willing to help, it was low on their list of priorities.
- **Limited resources:** Some partners simply did not have the time or resources to help with such initiatives, even when the evidence for arson reduction activity was compelling.
- **Bureaucratic and cumbersome processes:** It was sometimes difficult to gain access to people/departments who were able to make quick decisions about issues relating to project interventions. One experienced project manager explained that at the beginning of the project he made contacts with people in agencies who he knew would be able to deliver quickly.
- **Staff recruitment:** The start of a number of projects was delayed because of staff recruitment problems. Some projects were simply slow at recruiting staff to fill positions, whereas others had problems in recruiting staff with the correct qualifications and experience for the role.
- **Reliance on the actions of a target audience:** Many projects were reliant on gaining public support to ensure that implementation was successful. Almost 30% of interventions were designed to raise awareness among a target audience, who were, in turn, expected to take action. For example, the rural arson audit project in Cumbria and the schools audits project in West Yorkshire were both successful in giving advice through audits to a specific target group. However, any associated reduction in arson was dependent on the target audience taking action to address the points raised in arson audits. This, in turn, often depended on the availability of funding.
- **Time constraints of project managers:** The project managers often tended to be exceptionally busy and some were managing the ODPM funded project as well as undertaking other activities. This not only affected their ability to set up the project interventions, but also to implement them successfully. Generally, projects successfully implemented their planned interventions, though pressures on the time of managers often led to implementation delays and a prioritisation of which interventions to implement first.
- **Over ambitious aims:** Occasionally projects would attempt to implement too many interventions. The original bids would promise a number of interventions without fully planning for how long it would take to organise and implement the interventions. However, it should be noted that implementation failure was rare.
- **The cost of implementation:** Some projects found that the cost of implementation was

Project inhibitors

In addition to the problems associated with partnership working, there was a range of other factors that appeared to inhibit the extent to which projects were successfully implemented. These included:

Box 3: Merseyside Ethnic Minorities Arson Awareness and Reduction Team

This project recognised the diversity of the population with which it was dealing and the importance of tailoring the delivery of interventions accordingly. Previous attempts at community fire safety work in the area had found messages difficult to deliver due to language, religious and cultural barriers, along with a general suspicion of such interventions among local communities.

The project employed three 'advocates' to work with different local communities. One spoke Somali, one spoke Cantonese and one spoke Yemeni Arabic. These advocates played a key role in building links with the local communities and delivering fire prevention advice.

higher than anticipated. In many cases, funding was used primarily to employ individuals to focus on arson reduction. This took no account of the 'working capital' needed to actually run interventions and meant that fund-raising (e.g. from other partners) became an important element of some projects.

- **Clarifying legal issues:** A number of legal issues relating to project implementation were also raised. This was particularly evident in vehicle removal schemes where there were particular concerns over liability for compensation claims from owners of removed vehicles.
- **Unexpected obstacles to implementation:** There were some examples of problems that impacted upon the implementation of projects that could not be anticipated. For example, the completion of arson audits in farms in the Cumbria area was adversely affected by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. In this case, the project shifted its focus towards rural businesses in general. No prior planning or foresight can predict such obstacles to implementation.
- Some of these problems are generic to most crime reduction initiatives. For example, staff recruitment and insufficient project management time are recurring themes in implementation failure. These should, as far as possible, be planned for in advance. Other problems, such as unforeseen costs and unexpected obstacles may not be planned out so easily. This highlights the importance of good project monitoring and the need to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances.

Project facilitators

Despite the problems outlined above, there were a number of factors observed in the projects that aided implementation. These may give some potentially useful pointers for project replication:

- **A clear project focus:** Projects that were successfully implemented tended to have a

clear perception of the problem and of what needed to be done to address it. This was achieved by focusing resources on a small number of well-implemented interventions, thereby avoiding the 'scatter-gun' approach in which too many interventions were implemented, with too few resources.

- **Understanding the nature of the problem:** It was important for projects to not only identify whether they had a problem, but also to understand its characteristics. This helped in shaping effective interventions to tackle the problem. Here, it was also important to understand the 'mechanisms' by which a given intervention would impact on a problem.
- **Understanding the target audience:** Successful implementation also depended on projects having a good understanding of their target audience. For example, in the ethnic minorities project in Merseyside, an understanding was required of the cultural problems that would be encountered. Box 3 provides further details of this project.
- **Employing project staff with good local knowledge:** There were three types of local knowledge that would appear to have been important in the implementation of projects. First, there was a benefit in employing staff who knew how fire and rescue services operated and who (preferably) knew the personalities involved. This was felt to be advantageous when trying to raise the profile of a project in the fire and rescue service and for drawing upon help from contacts with specialist areas of knowledge.

Second, projects that involved partnership working benefited from employing staff with good contacts in other agencies. This was felt to speed up the initial process of knowing whom to contact and meant that formal processes (that could be overly bureaucratic) could sometimes be circumvented, thereby assisting rapid implementation.

Third, employing staff with good knowledge of the geographical area was helpful, as they were likely to know the 'hotspot' locations and to have a perception of the general local problems that existed.

- **Co-operation of partners:** As previously noted, the co-operation of partners was an essential ingredient in the projects. Arson reduction and prevention is potentially an area in which a number of agencies could become involved and many of the projects were dependent upon some form of partnership working.
- **Processes that work properly:** Successful implementation was dependent upon processes working together. For example, vehicle removal schemes were dependent upon vehicles being reported, and then being removed by a vehicle contractor to a car pound. This required a systematic approach to mapping the processes involved and ensuring each stage was suitably addressed.

Summary of implementation process

Overall, the successful implementation of the projects appears to be dependent upon a number of factors. Particular obstacles revolved around staffing issues, unhelpful partners, having an unresponsive target audience, time constraints of project managers and having over-ambitious aims or spreading resources too thinly. Projects that were quickly and successfully implemented tended to be those that were:

- Clearly focused.
- Had a clear understanding of the nature of the problem.
- Understood the target audience.
- Employed staff with knowledge of the fire service and how it works.
- Employed staff with good local area knowledge.
- Had staff with good contacts within key partner agencies.
- Had the co-operation of partners.
- Had project processes that worked well.

Though it is unusual to find projects where all of these factors were evident, they provide an 'ideal-type' towards which project managers should aim.

Assessment of implementation

The final stage in the SARA framework is assessment. In the case of the projects examined in the NPI, relatively few had undertaken their own evaluation. This is understandable, given the fact that external evaluators were employed by ODPM to assess the impact of the projects. Nevertheless, this assessment process is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it may help to assess whether the arson problem still exists and whether further intervention is required. It may also help a steering group to decide whether the particular approach taken to address an arson problem has been effective, or whether changes need to be made. Finally, it may help with securing future funding – interventions that are shown to work (through careful evaluation) may generate more interest from funding agencies than unproven interventions. This assessment phase completes the SARA cycle and will in turn help to inform subsequent scanning of the arson problem by providing a greater understanding of its various facets.

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Textphone: 0870 1207 405

E-mail: odpm@twoten.press.net

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