

## Taking Fire Safety Further: At School

Schools have one of the highest risks of arson of any type of property in the UK. Surveys reveal that nearly one in eight schools experience arson or suspected arson during the year.

### Arson Control Forum

Communities and Local Government ([www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)) have agreed to fund the Arson Control Forum (<http://www.arsoncontrolforum.gov.uk/>) from April 2008, for two years with third year funding dependent on the Forum making good progress to achieving its objectives. The Arson Control Forum aims to achieve a sustained reduction in the number of deliberate fires and related deaths, injuries and property damage.

Because of the strong relationship between arson and other anti-social behaviours, the Arson Control Forum is encouraging schools that are experiencing other criminal damage or burglary, to think about their precautions against arson.

Below is a letter from the chair of the Arson Control Forum, and Chief Fire Officer for West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, Max Hood and one from the chair of the Arson Prevention Bureau, and a Zurich Insurance Property Underwriting Manager, Larry Stokes.

### A Message from Max Hood – Arson Control Forum Chair

Hello,

In my capacity as Chief Fire Officer for West Sussex and Chair of the Arson Control Forum, I'm delighted to be given the opportunity to say a few words of support for the second annual National Schools' Fire Safety Day, and, in particular, about the problem of arson in schools.

The Government is committed to tackling crime in all its forms. This includes Arson – a crime that has serious consequences. It costs the economy around £2.2 billion per year and the human cost is high. In the last decade there have been about 1.8 million deliberate fires resulting in 22,000 injuries and 1100 deaths.

Of course, the effects of fire can go far beyond the loss of life and injury. In the case of a school fire – where sadly many of the fires are started deliberately, the disruptive effect such events can have on a child's education can be extremely traumatic. Fire can destroy the project work of many months and can be a terrible experience for pupil, parent and teacher alike. The Insurance industry estimates that over 50,000 children are affected by fire every year.

Head teachers, teachers and others responsible for the educational buildings will know they have to carry out - and maintain - a fire risk assessment under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and may have seen the guidance that has been made by CLG to help them. For those wanting to know more, this can be found at [www.communities.gov.uk/firesafety](http://www.communities.gov.uk/firesafety).

I would also like to take this opportunity to remind parents of the importance of having a working smoke alarm installed in your home. Working smoke alarms provide those vital few minutes early warning which will allow you and your family to escape before a fire can take hold. Similarly, I would urge all parents to keep matches and lighters out of children's reach.

And finally, I wish you all a successful National Schools' Fire Safety Day.

Best wishes

Max Hood  
Chair - Arson Control Forum

## **An Insurers' Perspective – Larry Stokes – Arson Prevention Bureau Chair**

I am a Property Underwriting Manager with Zurich Insurance, the leading schools insurer in the UK and I am happy to lend my support to the second annual National Schools' Fire Safety Day.

During my long career in Public Sector insurance, I have been closely involved in initiatives to reduce the level of losses in the schools sector. The problem goes back to the early 1970s and has continued with various peaks and troughs to the present time.

Each year, almost 2000 fires on school premises are reported to the Fire and Rescue Service, whilst research by the Arson Prevention Bureau has indicated that this figure could be doubled if all fires were reported. Whilst many of the latter are small fires - in the school, in external bins and the school fabric - the fact that they are not reported to the Fire and Rescue Service, the Local Education Authority or Insurers may mean an opportunity missed in preventing subsequent, bigger incidents, as it is rare for a large school fire to occur 'out of the blue'.

There are approximately 100 school fires each year costing over £100,000 for building repair, loss of contents, coursework and teaching materials. The largest of these (each year there is at least one fire costing over £10million) are very disruptive, result in stress for children, parents and teaching staff and often result in a rebuilding period of 3 years or more when the school will be housed in temporary structures, often placed on available school playing fields. In some cases, schools are split between different sites for a period, relocated to premises near the end of their useful life, or never re-opened.

What have I learnt over my career?

First, it is possible to improve protection at schools, with better control of waste, with better security such as fences without turning the school into a fortress, although in some cases this is necessary, and welcome by those at the school.

Second, fire protection equipment in most schools, bearing in mind their propensity for fires struck by arsonists, is minimal. This has changed with recent legislative moves which make it a recommendation, following a risk assessment, that fire sprinklers are installed (DfCSF Building Bulletin 100). We have received reports recently where 2 schools fitted with such protections have been 'saved' by the action of this fixed form of fire fighting, tried and tested in commercial premises for over 100 years, and we are pleased that an increasing number of new schools are protected in this way.

Finally, there must be a realisation that protection of school is not just a target hardening exercise, but that it is essential to work hand in hand with an education programme that teaches the consequences of fire setting.

My best wishes on a successful National Schools' Fire Safety Day.

Larry Stokes  
Chair - Arson Prevention Bureau, Schools Working Group