

Fatal Fires Report

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report provides an overview of the circumstances of the fire fatalities that have occurred since April 2011 in the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin areas.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to note the contents of the report

3 Background

Shropshire Fire Rescue Service's (SFRS) most critical aim is to reduce the numbers of deaths and injuries resulting from fire. Our objective is to meet SFRS key aim in the Service plan to

“Reduce the number of fire related deaths and injuries”

Aim 3; SFRS Service plan 2011

During the period April to October 2011 the Service area experienced six fire deaths in dwellings and two fire deaths in vehicles. This represents the highest number of fire deaths experienced in the SFRS area in thirteen years, with four months of the reporting year still remaining. This paper gives an overview of the circumstances of the fire deaths and the activities undertaken to prevent further tragedies.

A full analysis of the deaths is contained in the Appendix to the report. Please note that due to the nature of the information contained in the Appendix, it will be received by Members in exempt session.

4 Were the Deaths Preventable?

A brief analysis of the circumstances of the deaths is given below.

- Six of the deaths have occurred in five property fires.
- Of the five properties involved only one has been confirmed to have had a working smoke alarm.
- Although two of the properties were visited by SFRS personnel undertaking Home Fire Safety Visits, entry was gained into only one property.
- All the victims were known to other agencies, e.g. the Primary Care Trust.
- Five females and one male have died in five fires in dwellings.
- Four females in the dwellings fires were fifty five years or over.
- Cause of death is yet to be confirmed in all cases but asphyxiation is likely to be the predominant, if not sole, cause.
- Of the deaths, three occurred in Telford and three in Shropshire.
- Three deaths were in rural areas; and three in built-up areas.
- One female and one male have died in vehicle fires.

From this brief analysis it would seem likely that the deaths were preventable, principally by individuals ensuring that they have working smoke alarms in their homes. The continued liaison between all agencies, working to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in society, can assist this aim.

5 Anticipating the Next Fire Victim

By analysing the current spate of deaths and circumstances of previous fire fatalities we can anticipate that the profile of the next fire victim is likely to be:

- An elderly woman
- Living alone
- In a house with a smoke alarm that is probably not working
- Cause of death is likely to be suffocation from toxic gas
- It is likely the person will be dead before the Fire Service is alerted
- The persons will be known by other public sector groups, e.g. local healthcare agencies

It is with the benefit of this insight that we can tailor our fire prevention activities, an important aim of which is to continue the work of SFRS with partner agencies.

6 Prevention Activities

The Service has a comprehensive Fire Prevention and Community Safety Programme. SFRS's principal method of preventing fires in dwellings is the Home Fire Risk Visit (HFSV). Approximately 80, 000 HFSVs have been completed in the SFRS area from 1995 to date, targeted at the most vulnerable members of the community.

The overall impact of the Fire Prevention and Community Safety Programme has been a reduction in the numbers of accidental dwelling fires within the SFRS area. It has also resulted in a low number of deaths from fires, as shown in Table 1

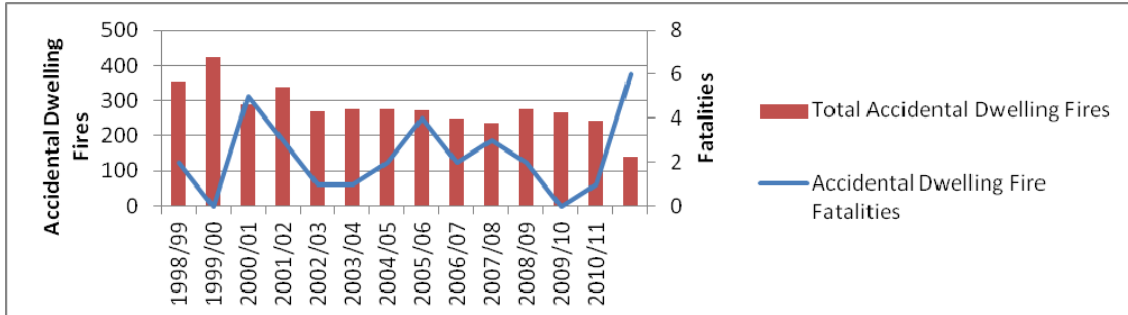


Table 1

As can be seen in Table 1 the rate of fire deaths has fallen as has the numbers of persons dieing in fires. It is noticeable that in 2 years there were no fire deaths, the most recent being 2009/10. The figures shown for 2011/12 are, of course, for only part of the year.

Causes of Fires and Contributory Factors

The causes of the most recent fires in the five dwellings (to be confirmed following fire investigations and Coroners’ reports) were due to either electrical items or cooking. The marketing, education and prevention campaigns delivered by the Service are consistent with these findings and are focussed on reducing the number of fires involving cooking and electrical apparatus.

Publicity Campaigns

In addition to the extensive work in the vicinity of each of the fatal fires, the Service has mounted campaigns to increase awareness of the need to remain vigilant following the tragedies that have occurred, via extensive coverage in the media including:

- Midlands Today TV
- BBC Radio Shropshire
- Shropshire Star
- Severn Radio
- Shropshire Live
- Numerous news websites, including the BBC, ITV and Sky

The principal theme of our message is to raise awareness amongst those people identified in section 5 above.

The campaign has attracted attention from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), who want to run one of the case studies we used as part of a national fire safety campaign.

A fire death is a shocking experience for any community and our role is to inform the public of actions that they can take to reduce the risk of suffering fires in their home and to reassure them that the incidence of fire deaths, though devastating, is relatively low. Over 2,500 properties have been visited (in addition to our usual HFSV programme) as a result of the post-fire work following the fatalities.

7 Residential Fire Deaths and Casualties - Context

The number of deaths occurring in the whole of the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin area due solely to fire is very low compared to the overall mortality rate. There are an average of approximately 5,000 deaths from all causes during any twelve-month period (source: HM Coroner) in the SFRS area. As can be seen in Table 1 above, the number of fatalities has been consistently low during the previous 13 years. In addition the number of accidental dwelling fires has also fallen by over a third in the same period.

It is worth looking at the rate of fire deaths, which SFRS has experienced, in comparison with the trigger points identified in the past.

The judgements used for trigger points have been based on the level of “intolerability” that society is deemed to accept with regard to the rate of people dying in fires. The judgements made were laid out in a report to the Home Office by Entec UK in the 1990s¹. It showed that the “intolerable” rate of fire deaths was at a rate of about 1 death for every 50,000 population.

The logic for the risk categories was derived from studies in the report, which showed that:

- When the number of fire deaths per annum in the UK approached 1,000 (a rate of 1 in 50,000) in the 1980s the Government enacted regulations to mandate improved fire safety (1988 Furniture and Furnishings Fire Safety Regulations) to reduce these fire deaths.
- Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) were advocated in the 1990s, where the rate of fire deaths for some categories of HMOs exceeded 1 in 50 000 occupants.

Therefore the rate of 1 in 50 000 people was judged to be the level deemed by society to demand action, i.e. the upper limit of tolerability and considered to be a rate of fire death “**well above average risk**”.

¹ “Fire Cover Risk Criteria and Cost Effectiveness; Initial proposals, Michael Wright and Peter Waite, October 1999 report for the Home Office”

Using the same approach, a fatality rate of 1 in 100,000 was judged to be the level that would require scrutiny (i.e. “**above average risk**”).

- This is the rate the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) applies to the regulation of public safety in some sectors;
- A rate of 1 fire death in 100,000 was judged to being tolerated in the UK in the late 1990s, with fire safety interventions being voluntary in nature
- The rate was based on the average rate of fire death in the UK in the 1990s.
- In addition, a rate of less than 1 in 1, 000,000 per person per year is classed as negligible by the HSE.

In comparison the rate experienced in Shropshire with the unusual levels of fire deaths this year equates to a rate of 1 in 75, 600 (accidental dwelling fire deaths) or 1 in 56,750 including all fire deaths this year.

It can be seen that, using the comparator generated via Entec UK, we are not in the “intolerable” (i.e. “well above average”) category. We are, however, “above average risk” on the same sliding scale. Our current increase in prevention activity reflects this assessment.

8 Losses Averted

It is worth recognising the extremely positive impact of our ongoing HFSV campaign. During the period from April to October 2011 there was a total of 44 occasions, where a smoke alarm alerted the occupants to the presence of a fire. It is likely that more than one person was in the premises on each occasion, so the number of people, who have been alerted to the presence of the fire and, therefore, could act to protect themselves from it will be higher than 44. This represents a great saving to the community in terms of potential injury or possible death. It also likely that because the fires were discovered early in their development they caused less damage and, therefore, cost less. The smoke alarms will have been installed by the occupier, the house builder, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service or its partners.

9 Performance

Questions have been raised in the media as to whether the increase in the numbers of fire deaths is related to the cuts being experienced in the Fire Service as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). The Service has undertaken an extensive community safety programme since the mid 1990s and the general trend during that period is a fall in incidents, deaths and injuries.

The significant changes in funding for the Service and consequent changes in budget began in April this year. There have been reduced levels of staff in the Prevention Department due to the loss of posts and vacancies as a result of the Public Value process. These vacancies are being addressed as part of the review of the Department.

Reviewing our performance during the same period shows that our targets are being met and we are forecast to meet our performance outcomes this year. The number of deaths is, however, of serious concern to us.

10 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

11 Legal Comment

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

12 Equality Impact Assessment

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2) and have decided that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

13 Appendix

Fatal Incidents April to November 2011

The Appendix will be received in exempt session due to the nature of the information contained within it.

14 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.