NORTHAMPTONSHIRE POLICE, FIRE & CRIME PANEL

14th April 2022

Subject: Managing Fire Safety Risks in Residential Properties, Including Risks Associated with Houses in Multiple Occupation

1.   Introduction

1.1   Fires in the home (dwelling) and commercial properties continue to present one of the highest risk: as a risk to life or as a significant economic or environmental impact in the county. Our data analysis shows that fires can occur at any time of day and anywhere within the county; however, is most likely:

- within the urban areas of our towns (where more people live/location of businesses),
- during the evening, and
- most likely to originate in the kitchen.

1.2   Some specific dwelling types present an increased risk of fire and fire injury (including fatality). These premises include Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) where the occurrence of fire is more prevalent than single dwelling fires.

1.3   Lifestyle also has a contributing factor, for example: mobility, age, smoke detection systems, smoking, misuse of cooking and heating appliances can all contribute to the cause of fires in domestic dwellings and survivability factors.

1.4   According to national statistics, you are around 8 times more likely to die from a fire if you don't have a working smoke alarm in your home, read more here: https://firekills.campaign.gov.uk/

2.   Background

Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 identifies the functions of the Fire Authority. For NFRS, this is the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (OFCC). The Authority's core duties include promotion of fire safety, provision for extinguishing fires and protecting life and property in the event of fires,

provision for rescuing people and protecting them from harm in the event of a Road Traffic Collision (RTC) and other emergencies.

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England provides overall strategic direction for the Fire Authority, the latest version in 2018 requires FRAs to:

- make appropriate provision for fire prevention and protection activities and response to fire and rescue related incidents.
- identify and assess the full range of foreseeable fire and rescue related risks their areas face.
- collaborate with emergency services and other local and national partners to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service they provide.
- be accountable to communities for the service they provide; and
- develop and maintain a workforce that is professional, resilient, skilled, flexible and diverse.

The following three key strategic documents provide the strategic direction for the service:

- Police, Fire and Crime Plan - the Commissioner's strategic plan for the service;
- Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP): The Commissioner's strategic resourcing plan based on risk;
- Fire25 – the Chief Fire Officer's (CFO) strategic plan outlining the Fire and Rescue Service's Vision for 2025.

3. **Home Fire Safety (Prevention)**

3.1   Through education and raising awareness about risk in the wider community, we aim to make our residents safer and reduce the number and severity of incidents that occur.

3.2   The overarching risk for Prevention is the increasing population: expected to rise by a further 15.5% over the medium term (2018-2041). Rises are especially centred in the under 19 and over 65 bracket. There are also more people being cared for in their own home, with increasingly complex needs, and an increase in complex safeguarding cases.

To mitigate this, we have adopted the following:

- A Risk Matrix that provides a tiered approach to prioritise the most vulnerable in our community
- Increased data and intelligence from closer working with new unitary partners to understand and highlight those at risk

- Increased Prevention staff numbers including the addition of specialist roles to deal with high risk cases
- The use of station plans to direct operational staff to support prevention work in the communities and to identify those with additional requirements

3.3   Our Prevention Strategy and priorities are based on the risk of fire, and other emergencies in Northamptonshire and its 753,278 (latest figures dated: 2019) residents. Improving Home Fire Safety and reducing accidental dwelling fires remains our top prevention priority.

Prevention Priorities:

- **Improve Home Fire Safety and reduce accidental dwelling fires**
- Reduce Arson and Deliberate Fire-setting
- Provide Road Safety Education to reduce risk
- Engage with young people to improve safety awareness and deter/divert them from anti-social behaviour and fire crime
- Improve Awareness of Water Safety

3.4   Delivery Triangle: We want to make the biggest impact we can with the resources we have. Our Delivery Triangle shows how we create capacity in a tiered approach to prevention and make "Best Use of Our Resources". With specialist support provided at the top of the triangle to mitigate the greatest risk, targeted engagement within the middle and a universal offer that offers core advice to the public if required.

Specialist support: Managing individual risk or risk requiring specialist support. These activities are usually delivered by the Prevention Team and will often involve multi-agency working around vulnerable individuals or localities for a specific time period.

Targeted Engagement: Managing Community Risk identified in the CRMP and through Community Safety and other partnerships, using internal and external data to problem solve and to identify priority groups and/or priority places. Targeted activities can be delivered by prevention specialists or crews as part of the local station plan.

Universal Offer: Advice and guidance is provided to help individuals and groups to help themselves. This will include our website content, educational toolkits, local and social media campaigns and seasonal messaging.

3.5   We know that some people are more vulnerable than others due to a combination of factors such as health, living environment and lifestyle. We also know that the characteristics that put people at greater risk of dying in a fire are different to those that put people at risk of having a fire or being injured.

The factors that increase the likelihood of a fire starting or severity of consequence include:

- Arson threats linked to domestic/honour based violence, hate/organised crime, disputes.
- Hoarding – to the extent that access and egress if affected.
- Fire-setting tendencies or previous near miss occurrences.
- Use of home oxygen and particularly if smoking.
- Use of emollient creams whilst smoking.
- Neglected living environment.

In addition, fire data also shows us that these groups can also be more at risk because of the nature of their accommodation:

- Those living in high-rise rented accommodation
- Those living in rented accommodation in House in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

3.6   Our Home Fire Safety Visit (HFSV) is a direct intervention 'person centred approach'. This involves visiting a person in their home, assessing how vulnerable they are to fire and other emergencies and taking steps to reduce the risk, offering advice and fitting smoke alarms, and where needed providing specialist equipment.

The topics we cover during a HFSV include:
- Smoking
- Cooking
- Electrical
- Safe heating
- Smoke alarms
- Escape plans
- Assistive Technology to help in an emergency

3.7   Other fire concerns include the use of home oxygen/emollients, medication/alcohol and how that affects fire safety, hoarding and clutter, Risk of Falls while escaping, Candles and Naked Flames, Thatched Property, Fire-setters etc.

3.8   HFSV Risk Matrix: In a county of over 750k, it is not possible to visit every resident in their home. We, therefore, prioritise visits to those individuals whom our risk analysis suggests are at greatest risk of fire. In particular, we target those who live alone, individuals and families with care and support needs or frailty, and those who are over the age of 65.

We have incorporated the priority profiles into a Risk Matrix Tool to help with prioritisation of referrals for HFSV and to triage resources. **(Appendix A)**

3.9   Our HFSV policy and risk matrix is consistent with the National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) Person Centred Approach which takes into account that a combination of factors contribute to fire risk.

- **Person factors**: integral to the person/people, can be temporary or permanently a part of them such as their level of mobility.

- **Home factors:** factors integral to the home or physical environment and how the person interacts with it and others within it.

- **Behaviour Factors**: actions, activities or behaviours, things that people do or don't do such as smoking and taking medication.

Our matrix shows our priority profiles and the behavioural and environmental factors that combine to increase risk. This will help to ensure we can triage our tiered approach and prioritise visits effectively, offering advice in different ways to people at lower risk and ensuring a swift or multi agency response to those at highest or complex risk.

In particular we still continue to target those who live alone, those with care and support needs or frailty, and those who are over the age of 65, or as a result of data from our Community Impact Assessments, our serious fire incidents and our own HFSV data.

We also prioritise individuals and families who may be in need of care or some kind of support but are not fully accessing it, this could be for a variety of reasons such as poor mental or physical health, dependency on drugs and/or alcohol, limited understanding and social isolation.

3.10 Generating Visits: HFSCs are generated in a number of ways:

- Occupiers making a self-request (telephone/email/online referral form).
- Referrals to Home Safety Team from a partner agency e.g. Social Services.
- Hot Strikes following a serious or fatal fire.
- Direct Engagement in targeted high-risk areas through partnership activity or direct engagement by crews.
- Generated and completed by a partner agency such as Age Concern.
- A direct request from a customer to a station.

3.11 HFSC Referral Pathways: To help us to reach priority people we promote our Home Fire Safety Visit referral pathway to the organisations that already work with them. This ensures that we have consent to engage which in turn helps to ensure that our contact is successful and effective.

We provide information and guidance to enable frontline workers in these organisations to recognise fire safety concerns and triggers and know when and how to refer. We currently receive referrals from a range of agencies

including adult and children's social care and early help teams, blue light services, housing providers, home oxygen teams, community health teams such as district nurses, mental health support workers and charities.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has already changed our understanding of different risks and we will continue to work with public health partners to those previously on the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable List can be offered a HFSV where living alone, health, mobility and wellbeing has an impact on fire safety.

3.12   Safeguarding: Targeting prevention advice effectively means we interact with more children and adults who may also be at risk from harm and abuse. Safeguarding is, therefore, an increasing part of our role. Since 2019, we have embedded an internal oversight group to develop the learning and audit of this area and employed a specialist officer to support crews who raise concerns and to work effectively with statutory partners. There is a rising number of outward referrals being made and a rising number of adult risk management cases.

3.13   Complex Case and Risk Intelligence: When a HFSV or other specialist intervention identifies complex risk where fire safety is dependent on other factors that cannot easily be mitigated, the Prevention Team will manage outgoing referrals and instigate multiagency working.

3.14   Performance Management: This targeted approach ensures our resources are effectively prioritised to mitigate risk to the most vulnerable within the community. NFRS are currently delivering 76% of its HFSCs within H/VHigh risk premises with 11% non-white British households.

Use of Resources: 32% of HFSCs have been completed by the Home Fire Safety Team (the more complex cases), 62% by Wholetime/ Variable Crewing Staff and 6% within an on-call station area.

4.   **House of Multiple Occupation (Protection)**

4.1   A HMO is a house in multiple occupation (HMO) if both of the following apply:

- at least 3 tenants live there, forming more than 1 household[a]
- you share toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities with other tenants

[a]A household is either a single person or members of the same family[b] who live together.

[b] A family includes people who are:

- married or living together - including people in same-sex relationships
- relatives or half-relatives, for example grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings
- step-parents and step-children

4.2 In some circumstances HMOs are licensable by the local authority. Mandatory licensing is where the premises has 5 or more residents, forming more than 1 household, and additional licensing where the local authority has instigated a local requirement for a specific reason or area.

Additional licensing is in place within Northampton which was initially in response to student housing near the university.

[Additional HMO Licensing | West Northamptonshire Council - Northampton Area](#)

4.3 Legislation: The primary legislation that governs HMO's is the Housing Act 2004 which is enforced by the local authorities within Northamptonshire. This is the legislation that imposes mandatory licensing and contains the requirements for standards covering health, safety and welfare.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, FSO, also imposes legislative requirements upon HMOs but only in their common areas. Kitchens, living rooms and the means of escape (hall, stairs and landing).

The powers of the FSO effectively stop at the door of the individuals private dwelling, their personal bedroom. The requirements for the bedroom are the protection of the escape route, a fire door, and automatic detection within the room to provide early warning to the wider premises in the event of a fire.

4.4 What responsibilities for fire safety does NFRS or NCFRA have in relation to these premises?

As the fire authority we have a duty under article 26, '*Every enforcing authority must enforce the provisions of this Order*…'

4.5 Prevention and protection teams will work closely around HMO's, sharing intelligence and information where necessary to both safeguard the residents and ensure we discharge our legislative duties.

4.6 Fire Risk: Deaths and injuries from fires in HMOs are proportionately higher than in single family homes.

Government figures shows that only 5.4% of the population (3.1million) live in HMOs, but that multi-occupancy properties account for 34.8% of all fire deaths and 39.2% of all fire injuries.

The dynamics within a single household differ from the average HMO significantly. If, at 10am, 5pm or 3am, you ask a resident of a single household/family home who was in the house it is likely you would be told names and locations with a high degree of accuracy.

In HMOs you find independent people/families living their lives with minimal interaction with the other residents.

Experience on protection inspections shows that not only will residents not know who is in or out at the time of our visit, they may never know the names of the other residents. Clearly this exacerbates the risk in the event of a fire, an emergency situation, where crews are trying to identify if persons have failed to evacuate or where they may be located.

Residents will work different shifts, cook at different times and potentially have a higher fire loading and more fire hazards within their own rooms.

4.7   Within protection, we have included HMOs within the risk based inspection programme (RBIP). All premises that have historically undergone formal enforcement action are being reviewed and re-inspected, with a large portion of these being HMOs.

Annually we will plan to undertake 200 audits within HMOs that are new/unknown to NFRS. The concept of targeting unknown premises is supported by the fact that a significant portion of our enforcement action within HMOs is in connection with premises where we have had no previous contact.

In addition to formal action, there has been over 440 informal notification of deficiencies issued since 2016.

In March 2019, NFRS successfully prosecuted a landlord of multiple HMO's. After reaching Crown Court they pleaded guilty to 26 offences, including the breach of a prohibition and the failure to comply with an enforcement notice. They received a custodial sentence of eight months

4.8   The target of 200 is linked to the average increase in the number of known HMOs in Northamptonshire.

Number of HMOs

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
1,788	1,961	2,265	2,478	2,668
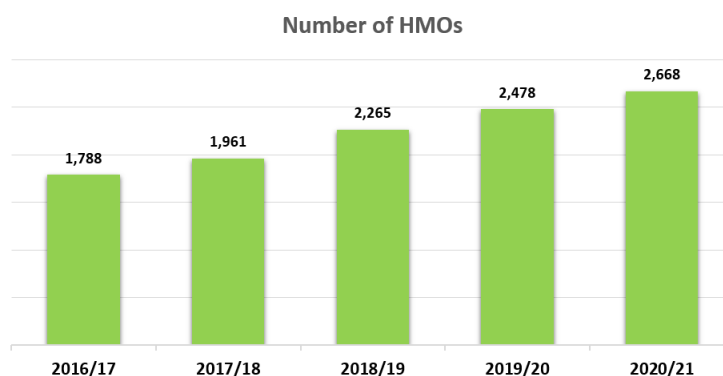
The outcome is such that:

- Our qualified and competent fire protection officers are targeted towards the portion of HMOs where the risk is likely to be highest and our ability to significantly reduce the risk gap is greatest.

  Local authority will also be involved and/or informed in relation to this activity, regardless of if the HMOs are licensable and non-licensable.

- Local authorities undertaken the inspection and administration for the licensable HMOs, enforcing their primary legislation. Their work is not limited to licensable properties and with their intelligence lead approach, they will respond and act upon risk in all properties.

- Crews will target protection checks towards the lower risk, non-licensable HMOs.

Intelligence and intervention within unknown HMOs can commence and/or occur in a number of ways:

- Proactive contact with owners undertaking renovation or new development work. Very effective at ensuring standards are correct prior to occupation and presents FPOs as a trusted agency, providing of professional advice (in accordance with section 6 of the Fire Services Act). This promotes future contact and good word of mouth referrals to other landlords.

- Concerns from members of the public e.g. residents and neighbours. Again, the fire service is seen as a trusted agency, approachable when referring concerns and have a reputation for acting upon them.

- Concerns from the compliant landlords. A benefit of NFRS having positive working relationships with the 'good' landlords is that they are personally impacted by landlords who do not provide safe homes. These 'rogue' landlords, who do not abide by the rules, subsequently take rent but do not spend any of it on what is legally required.

- Fires and emergency incidents. Crews are aware of general fire safety requirements and will flag issues and concerns through to the duty fire protection officer, who provides 24/7 cover.

- The use of article 27 letters, formal requests to owners and agents to disclose premises they have responsibility for which are used as HMOs.

- Inter-agency working with the private sector housing teams in the local authorities. This again could be for the reasons above or the application of a license for a new HMO, work around an investigation into a particular owner/managing agent and other proactive activity.

4.9 Increasing capacity: Training has now been rolled out to crews so that they can begin to undertake protection checks with HMOs. These checks are targeted at the HMOs which have previously been audited by a competent FPO and found to be compliant.

The protection check will take significantly less time to undertake, which is beneficial to the landlord, and allows for the qualified FPOs to be targeted towards our RBIP.

The training for crews was designed and delivered internally and provides sufficient input to allow these checks to be effective. In the event of issues being highlighted, that are outside of the crew competency, the availability for escalation to the protection team is always an option.

Whilst there is a time saving for the landlord, a person we could consider to be historically compliant, there is also the clear advantage that the crew can complete the protection check of the common areas and then proceed to give home safety advice to the individual residents/families. This can occur immediately after the check or at a later date as is convenient.

Whilst this will primarily attract the compliant landlords it presents opportunity for crews to access the community in their homes but more specifically those who live in accommodation and in a manner that increase their risk from fire.

4.10 Additional Support: The creation of only two unitary authorities has improve our inter-agency working going forward.

Historical there were clear challenges in modifying our approach and working practises to meet those within any particular authority.

We have had instances and times where there was no real access to local authority support, out of hours. This has been key in situations where we are issuing a prohibition notice and residents may become homeless.
This issue appears to have been improved immediately by a single point of contact, out of hours, via emergency planning.

We have recently met with managers for private sector housing teams, within the two authorities, and there is clearly work ongoing.

In recent meetings with the private sector housing managers we have raised and discussed the importance of reinvigorating landlord events. Historically we have attended events, primarily in what was the NBC area, and these proved useful. We would have an opportunity to present to the proactive landlords, thus improving/sustaining fire safety awareness, but also we would receive intelligence from these landlords about premises they have become aware of that are not compliant with fire safety.

Local authorities would lead on these events, as they have previously, but ideally remove the historic local authority boundaries. Landlords clearly cross internal county (local authority) borders and opportunities should be open to as many as possible.

5.   Recommendations:

5.1   That the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel considers the content of the report.

Stephen Mold
Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner