



Service Procedure

POLICE ACTION AT HOUSE FIRES

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ABSTRACT: This applies to all operational police officers who may come upon a house fire or who arrive on the scene of a house fire prior to the Northern Ireland Fire Rescue Service (NIFRS)

Personal

Professional

Protective

NOT PROTECTIVELY MARKED

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1. AIM OF SERVICE PROCEDURE

The aim of this Service Procedure is to provide operational officers with guidance on their response to attendance at the scene of house fires.

2. INTRODUCTION

(1) Executive Summary

The Service Procedure outlines legal powers available to police officers; it also provides them with operational guidance and actions at the scene of a fire. These procedures will not affect the bureaucratic burden on front-line policing.

(2) Origin

The Service Procedure was originally issued to provide guidance to police officers at the scene of a fire.

(3) Implication of Service Procedure

It is impossible to be prescriptive on the police response to each fire. Police officers attending such an incident should fully assess the situation and conduct a dynamic risk assessment before taking appropriate action based on the circumstances.

(4) Application

This procedure will apply to all operational police officers who may come upon a house fire or who arrive on the scene of a house fire prior to the Northern Ireland Fire Rescue Service (NIFRS).

3. LEGAL BASIS

The Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.
Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as incorporated into United Kingdom law by the Human Rights Act 1998.

4. POLICY LINKS

Health and Safety Bulletin 11/06 – General Order 34/04
Policy Directive 14/06 – Health and Safety.
Safety Alert Notice 06/10 – Detergent Suicides.
Safety Alert Notice 11/10 – Revised Chemical Detergent Suicides.
Safety Alert Notice 07/12 – Agricultural Risks.
Safety Alert Notice 08/12 – Gases and Fumes.
Safety Alert Notice 03/14 – Carbon Monoxide Poisoning.

5. CONSULTATION

Operational Police;
Health & Safety Branch;
Northern Ireland Fire Rescue Service;
Contact Management;
Legal Services;
PSNI HR.

6. HUMAN RIGHTS/UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNCRC)/EQUALITY/CODE OF ETHICS/FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

This Service Procedure is deemed to be Human Rights compliant and has no United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) issues. It has been screened for Section 75 considerations and complies with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Code of Ethics. It is considered suitable for release under Freedom of Information.

7. PROCEDURE

(1) Introduction

- (a) Fire-fighters require training and specialist equipment to be successful in a world where construction, furniture and fittings of the typical house create increased risk when fire occurs. In particular they need high levels of physical protection, including breathing apparatus and detailed knowledge of the behaviour of fire. An experienced off duty firefighter would find it extremely difficult to tackle a fire without the equipment and the back-up they would normally have whilst on duty.
- (b) Police officers do not have the advantage of this experience, training and equipment and are ill equipped to tackle a well developed fire. A standard 9 litre water fire extinguisher will only extinguish a relatively small fire involving solid combustible materials such as wood or paper. The presence of synthetic or highly flammable materials will significantly increase the dangers due to the toxic gases produced.

(2) Operational Guidance

- (a) Operational guidance for police attending fires must be as follows:
 - (i) Ensure that the NIFRS are summoned immediately;
 - (ii) Control public and traffic to assist the NIFRS during their arrival and deployment;
 - (iii) Do not attempt to extinguish a well developed fire;
 - (iv) Do not attempt to rescue unless you believe it is safe to do so.
- (b) The primary advice given by the NIFRS is that no-one except properly equipped and trained firefighters should enter burning buildings. Experience however has shown that police officers can arrive at the scene of a fire before the NIFRS. On most of these occasions no lives are in danger and only property is threatened. When this is the case the guidance given above is extremely understandable.
- (c) There are however other occasions when people are in imminent and mortal danger. These are situations where only those present can decide upon the right actions to take and assess the risk primarily to themselves and others. If those police officers present believe the NIFRS arrival is imminent then shouts of reassurance to the occupants may actually be the most useful and safest course of action.
- (d) It is acknowledged that the pressure on police arriving at the scene to "do something" will be intense. The course of action chosen must be based on an assessment of the risk and the options available at the time. It would be a false premise to assume that in these situations police officers would never attempt rescues. It is vital that the balance of the decision-making process, by definition frequently a split-second one is tipped firmly in favour of not attempting any action which is likely to place officers or others in extreme and/or mortal danger or to make a dangerous situation worse.
- (e) As every fire is different it is impossible to describe all the conceivable circumstances officers are likely to find themselves exposed to. No guidance should therefore be considered exhaustive.

(3) Points to Consider

Officers should consider the following points which may improve the chances of success by highlighting particular risks and suggesting possible courses of action.

(a) In a house fire:

- (i) only very small fires can be extinguished by portable fire extinguishers. They will have little or no effect on a well developed fire;
- (ii) smoke debilitates with as little as one breath, unconsciousness can follow rapidly;
- (iii) temperatures can be high enough to instantly ignite non fire-retardant clothing (800°C plus);
- (iv) temperatures can be high enough to cause ignition of an entire house in seconds;
- (v) a fire which has become starved of air can rapidly and explosively develop if adjacent doors are opened or windows broken. To take this action may actually worsen conditions and reduce the chance of survival of those in need of rescue.

(b) Rescues:

- (i) do not attempt a rescue if you believe it will put your personal safety at risk in any way;
- (ii) hot gases and smoke rise, if you choose to enter stay as low as possible;
- (iii) double glazing is difficult to break, strike the corner using a pointed tool, only break windows if the room is not smoke logged or contains a fire;
- (iv) mortice locks rarely give way, bypass them if possible by using a glazed or panelled area;
- (v) a casualty is easier to drag than lift, pull them (face up) by clothing if possible;
- (vi) if people are on upper floors use anything suitable to cushion a possible fall or position vehicles up to the face of the building if it will allow you to reach them;
- (vii) advise people on upper floors to keep doors closed, with gaps filled by sheets, blankets etc. This can hold fire back for some time. If possible shout instructions to those awaiting rescue, but also prepare for them falling. As a last resort tell them to hang and drop rather than jump.

(c) Carbon Monoxide:

- (i) The sound from a Carbon Monoxide detector can be similar in sound to that of a Smoke a well-ventilated area
- (ii) Officers should be aware of possible visual indicators, some examples are listed below;

The presence of capped chimney flue combined with a fuel burning fire/stove.

Yellow or orange rather than blue flames (except fuel effect fires or flue less appliances which display this colour flame).

Soot or yellow/brown staining around or on appliances.

Pilot lights that frequently blow out.

Increased condensation inside windows.

- (iii) Carbon Monoxide is a toxic, odourless, flammable gas that can rapidly render an officer unconscious. If an officer experiences any of the following symptoms;

Headaches

Dizziness

Nausea

Vomiting

Tiredness

Confusion

Stomach pain

Shortness of breath/difficulty breathing

Chest pain

Erratic behaviour

Visual problems

They should leave the building/call immediately as these symptoms could have occurred as a result of exposure to Carbon Monoxide

8. MONITORING/REVIEW

This Service Procedure will be reviewed on a bi-annual basis. This Service Procedure can also be reviewed following implementation of the procedures in an emergency or as an aspect of an emergency exercise which identifies areas for improvement. This Service Procedure can be reviewed if there are amendments in legislation or procedures. Feedback should be forwarded to Superintendent, Operational Policy and Support, Headquarters.