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Peterlee Named County Durham's Arson Epicentre as Over 1,700 Attacks Recorded

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— Categories: Crime



Peterlee has emerged as the worst-hit area for arson in County Durham, with new figures showing the town accounts for more than one in four of the county's total recorded incidents. Firefighters and police are now working together in an urgent bid to tackle the rising tide of deliberate fires across the region.

Between April and June this year, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) responded to 1,238 deliberate fires. Many of these were at known hotspots, including Maidendale Nature Reserve in Darlington, which has seen multiple incidents. The

fire service categorises blazes as either primary fires (involving buildings or vehicles) or secondary fires (such as bins and grass). Police, however, record arson under criminal legislation.

Data obtained by the claims service Legal Expert reveals that from January 2022 to early 2024, Durham Police recorded 1,704 arson offences. Peterlee was by far the worst affected, with 459 incidents. A deeper look shows Peterlee West topped the list with 205 cases, followed by Peterlee Town (168) and Peterlee East (86). Other areas frequently hit include Darlington (125), Bishop Auckland (113), Crook Town (80), and Ferryhill (65).

Despite the volume of cases, only 85 resulted in charges or cautions. That puts the charge rate at just 5 per cent, barely higher than the national average of 4.83 per cent. In practical terms, nearly 19 out of every 20 arson cases in County Durham end without anyone being held responsible.

Young Offenders

Durham Police are determined to clamp down on those behind the attacks. A spokesperson confirmed that 82 percent of identified suspects were male, and worryingly, 62 percent were aged 20 or younger. Six children under the age of 10 have also been either charged or identified in connection with the crimes.

The force attends regular “arson suppression” meetings with partners, including Durham County Council, housing associations, Crimestoppers, and victim support charities. These meetings aim to share intelligence, review open cases, and identify opportunities for education and prevention.

A police spokesperson said, “These acts of recklessness can destroy lives, properties, and communities. We are doing everything within our power to investigate each incident and prevent further harm. While arson is notoriously difficult to investigate, that does not mean we will stop trying.”

The fire service has echoed this warning, adding that time spent dealing with deliberate fires can delay responses to serious emergencies such as house fires or road traffic collisions. To help combat the issue, CDDFRS has expanded outreach in schools and supported anonymous tip-offs through local reporting tools.

A spokesperson for the service noted that identifying why people set fires on purpose is complex, but efforts are ongoing. CDDFRS is currently working with a PhD researcher at Northumbria University to better understand the motivations behind fire-setting behaviour.

Meanwhile, many victims are left suffering without justice. Between 2022 and 2024, 464 victims of arson in County Durham applied for financial help through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA). Only 76 were successful. So far this year, just £2,400 has been paid out across 79 claims, with nearly 200 more still awaiting decisions.

Ellie Lamey, a criminal injury expert at Legal Expert, said: “Victims are often left feeling powerless, especially when few cases lead to charges. But even if no one is convicted, those who suffer physical or emotional harm from arson have a right to seek compensation.”

The Ministry of Justice said eligibility for compensation depends on meeting strict criteria, including proof that the fire was a violent crime that caused injury. While 464 claims have been submitted, only 270 have been resolved so far. The rest remain under review, often for more than a year.