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## Criminal Prosecution for Inmates Who Start Fires Urged

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— Categories: Crime



Prisoners who deliberately set fires in their cells should face criminal prosecution rather than internal disciplinary measures, councillors have been told, as fire-related incidents inside West Yorkshire prisons continue to surge.

The West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (WYFRS) has responded to a staggering 127 prison fires so far in 2024/25, compared to just 27 two years ago. Many of the fires are being started using vape pens, which inmates manipulate either through the heating element or with charging cables to create ignition.

During a West Yorkshire Fire Authority's Community Safety Committee meeting on Friday, Leeds District Commander Lee Miller addressed councillors on the escalating issue, warning that arson had become a common tactic behind bars.

"Prisoners being prisoners, they are inventive," Mr Miller said. "They'll find new ways to set fires."

## Growing Concern

The meeting heard that fires are often used to threaten other inmates, settle disputes, or as a means for prisoners to get moved to a different wing. There are also cases where new arrivals, with fewer personal belongings to lose, are more likely to start fires without fear of consequence.

At present, the prison governor deals with many prisoners caught setting fires internally. This process can result in minor punishments, such as losing privileges, confinement to the segregation wing, or a maximum of 30 additional days on their sentence. However, members were told that this soft-touch approach fails to act as a real deterrent.

For a case to be referred to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), the financial damage must exceed £2,000. This bar has rarely been met due to inconsistent or inaccurate fire damage assessments. In response, the Prison Liaison Officer has introduced a new incident reporting form. This document is now being used to capture proper valuations of damage and relevant details that would support a criminal investigation.

The new reporting method has already begun to impact the prison system. By providing clear breakdowns of repair costs and other consequences of the fires, prison staff hope more cases will meet the CPS threshold for prosecution.

The issue of contaminated belongings also came under scrutiny. In previous incidents, prisoners were transferred to new cells with their possessions, including clothes and shoes that had absorbed toxic smoke and carcinogens. This posed a serious health risk. Following advice from the Prison Liaison Officer, contaminated items are now sent for decontamination or disposal. Staff have since noticed a drop in the number of repeat incidents.

However, Mr Miller pointed out that inmates are finding ways to avoid losing their property. “Prisoners quickly realised that if they put their belongings in a bag before they start the fire, their clothes don’t get contaminated,” he said.

Councillor Charlie Keith (Labour), chair of the committee, said: “I’ve visited high-security prisons before and the ingenuity of people in there is phenomenal. I’m surprised at what they can do.”

The committee agreed that the current system lacks the teeth needed to properly tackle the issue. Mr Miller and other fire service leaders hope that harsher penalties, including potential custodial extensions of up to two years, will soon be applied in West Yorkshire.

“If a serious prosecution happened in Leeds, it could send a strong message,” the report concluded.