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Almost 300 fires of varying intensity have occurred at UK fire stations over the last five years, according to data obtained by the Independent.

This ironic toll proves that fire can occur anywhere, at any time, even in the last place it would be expected - a fire station equipped with the latest fire-fighting equipment and manned 24/7.

The figures, obtained through Freedom of Information requests to the UK's 54 fire services, reveal 279 incidents at fire stations and 39 fires on vehicles - an average of nearly six per service. Although many fires were described as minor, some needed dozens of firefighters to extinguish them.

Fires were sparked by domestic appliances including microwaves, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners and toasters as well as by a smouldering cigarette butt, an unattended chip pan and a chair left next to a heater - all circumstances about which the fire service never tires of issuing warnings.

Examples and costs

A carelessly disposed cigarette caused a blaze at a Worcester fire station, one of 16 at Hereford and Worcester Fire Service's stations, that was tackled by nine firefighters.

West Midlands Fire Service, meanwhile, boasts the unenviable record of more incidents than any other service. The 53 incidents included five kitchen fires and six incidents involving fire engines.

An explosion at Epworth Fire Station in 2011, which needed 24 firefighters to bring under control, cost Humberside Fire and Rescue Service more than £184,000.

Water jets and breathing apparatus were required to bring two major fires under control on fire brigade property in Northern Ireland, one of which gutted Rathfriland Station in County Down in 2009. It cost almost £712,000 to repair affected buildings, while three fire engines were also destroyed.

The national cost of fires in fire stations could run into millions. The combined bill for the 16 brigades that collected data on the incidents amounted to £945,875 - not all of which will be covered by insurance payouts.

Not included in the data was the destruction of the Downham Market fire station in Norfolk, in March.

Compromising service

Ben Bradford, director at fire safety specialist BB7 Fire, said he was surprised at the revelations.

"The socio-economic impact of fire hindering continuity of service within the fire and rescue service could be huge," he said. "Like many other large organisations, the fire and rescue services have a large property portfolio spread across a wide geographic area. They should lead by example, commit to best practice and formalise their fire risk management system and go for third-party certification. This would demonstrate to all stakeholders that excellence in fire-risk management matters."

Lessons to be learned

Perhaps the figures are less surprising if one considers the nature of a fire station: occupied by many different personnel 24 hours a day, often with shared cooking facilities. And many stations occupy old buildings constructed with little consideration to fire safety and prone to the spread of fire.

It would be interesting to know if the FRSs in the cases above have formally trained personnel for their stations, whether they have a business continuity plan, whether they have done all they could to mitigate the chances of fire starting and spreading, and whether there are any outstanding remedial works to be done from their fire risk assessments.

The bottom line is that fires can start in any building and all building owners should be prepared for this eventuality, even fire stations themselves.



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