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Public safety could be put at risk if local fire and rescue services, already fully stretched, are unable to cope with a major disaster this winter.

Fears of widespread industrial action, severe weather conditions and even a possible flu pandemic could seriously disrupt the effectiveness of the emergency services, claims an official report.

An investigation by the Audit Commission has revealed that while the majority of fire and rescue authorities have the necessary plans, vehicles, equipment, training and support to deal with any emergency they might not be able to cope if other factors resulted in a shortage of manpower.

In previous years the fire services were able to call on military help for back up in the event of a major incident or industrial dispute but, with the war in Afghanistan and other global commitments, that is no longer an option.

Although most fire services could cope with localised incidents on a major scale the Audit Commission found there could be a risk to public safety if there was any widespread disruption affecting several fire service areas at once.

"It is reassuring to find that most areas have robust plans in place to cope with loss of staff. Of concern, though, is that public safety may be at risk if major disruption occurs across several fire and rescue authorities and lasts for a long time," said Michael O'Higgins, Chairman of the Audit Commission.

As well as tackling fires and rescuing people from car crashes or collapsed buildings, they work to prevent deaths, injuries and property damage caused by fire.

Fire and rescue teams are in the front line of responding to weather emergencies and flooding, and the results of terrorism such as the July 7 bombings in London five years ago.

"The majority of fire services have excellent procedures in place to deal with all sorts of emergencies. However, there are circumstances, like the ones outlined in the Audit Commission report, which could mean many businesses and organizations having to face the initial stages of an incident on their own," said Richie Wilson of Premier Fire & Safety Training.

"The possibility of industrial problems this winter are very real, as is the chance of another harsh winter like last year. If that happens the emergency services could find themselves stretched. It is vital that any business with more than five employees makes sure that their annual fire risk assessment is carried out properly and is up to date.

"If there was to be an incident and the paperwork isn't in order it's possible that any insurance policy wouldn't pay out and the directors could find themselves prosecuted in court.

"Any workplace with more than five staff has a duty to provide first aid facilities, properly trained marshals to handle a building evacuation if needed, and even basic fire fighting training. However, as many as 60 per cent of firms have probably never had a proper fire assessment carried out and haven't kept their emergency training for staff up to date.

"Too many firms gamble on the emergency services being on hand fast enough to save them and

sort out their problem. But, as the Audit Commission report points out, that may not always be a safe bet."

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