

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Meeting Scrutiny & Audit Panel

Date 22 July 2021

Title of Report The Reduction of False Alarms and Unwanted Fire Signals from Automatic Fire Detection – A Risk Based Approach

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Background Papers None

Appendices None

Implications

CORPORATE RISK	✓	LEGAL	
ENVIRONMENTAL		POLICY	✓
FINANCIAL		POLITICAL	
HEALTH & SAFETY		OTHER (please specify)	
HUMAN RESOURCES		CORE BRIEF	
EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT			

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to set out the strategy to reduce Service resource commitment to Unwanted Fire Signals (UwFS) from automatic fire alarm systems. This report results from the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) decision to implement a 'nil response to automatic fire alarms from commercial premises'. The adoption of this strategy will achieve a step reduction in this type of call, whilst minimising risk and in turn address the improvement needed in this area highlighted by HMICFRS and the specific commitment in the Service IRMP to adopt a 'nil attendance' to Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) calls from certain premises.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS) Reduction was highlighted specifically as an area for improvement in the Service Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report (2019) and as a result ESFRS committed to implement a 'nil response' to AFA's actuating in commercial premises through the IRMP.

This strategy seeks to address the HMIFRS concern and considers the current data*, recent trends and progress of the current reduction initiatives. In addition it provides clear actions to support further reductions and, in particular, explores the opportunity for a step reduction in UwFS using a risk based approach to the adoption of 'nil attendance' to calls to AFA's actuating in commercial premises between set times to which the Service committed to in its IRMP.

The resource commitment and, specifically, the opportunity and financial cost to East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service (ESFRS) through On-call and Wholetime fire crews attending UwFS is considerable. It is estimated that although each UwFS response and investigation is estimated to take approximately 20 mins the impact of each UwFS is nearer 1 hour per crew when the return journey, administration and other activity disruption is taken into account. That equates to more than 3,500 hours of crew time and 14,000 hours of disruption or opportunity cost to the individual firefighter's working day per year. If ESFRS were to apply a financial impact based on the chargeable amount for ESFRS special services per crew this equates to more than £1,050,000 per year to ESFRS. In addition the impact on the environment through vehicle emissions, fuel costs and the risk of accident costs and resultant firefighter injuries are also substantial. The unnecessary impact of On-call crews being called away from their families and workplaces should also be considered. Any reduction in UwFS would therefore reduce these impacts and release capacity within the operational workforce that could refocussed on other activity e.g. prevention and protection. Further analysis is required to establish the scale of any cashable savings.

Ultimately ESFRS the Service is committed to supporting the development of a culture in commercial and managed residential premises. This will ensure that when a premises is occupied the fire alarm is managed by the Responsible Person for the safety of the occupants and business continuity and the fire service is called only if a fire is confirmed. When the premises is unoccupied the fire alarm is monitored remotely to protect the premises and business and to give early warning of fire. This limits property and business losses, contributes to firefighter safety and protects the environment through early detection of fire and alerting of the fire service. This report describes a holistic approach to the reduction of false alarms but also recognises the unique risks associated with the built environment in the Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Scrutiny & Audit Panel:

- a) note the content of the report and
 - b) considers whether any further information or assurance is required from officers.
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1. **INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Between 1st January 2018 and the 31st December 2019* an operational response was mobilised to 7,123 calls to fire which were passed to the Service as an automatic fire alarm actuating that the vast majority of which subsequently turned out not to be fires and were therefore UwFS. The calls were passed through a number of mechanisms including building occupiers with AFA Systems, Fire Alarm Monitoring Organisations or members of the public.
- 1.2 The Service has long recognised the demands placed on its service by attendance to UwFS from automatic fire detection and alarm systems, in cost, time and absorption of resource. The Service further believes that UwFS create an increased risk to the public and firefighters through the generation of an emergency response and recognises the concern expressed in the HMICFRS report, State of Fire and Rescue: The Annual Assessment of Fire and Rescue Services in England 2019.
- 1.3 Between 2011 and 2016 there were year on year reductions in the number of UwFS attended by the Service however since then there has been a gradual increase for a number of reasons not least from the high, and increasing, fire detection coverage in the built environment and changing cultures regarding fire safety and risk perception. In addition the profile of UwFS has changed considerably with the highest call premises no longer being the main focus of the issue. Over a two year period only 18 commercial premises had more than 10 repeat AFA calls whereas 798 premises produced only one AFA call each. If significant reductions are to be made, any strategy will have to target the high number of premises producing a low number of AFA per year in addition to the high repeat call premises.
- 1.4 In order to further reduce the number of UwFS it requires the Responsible Person (RP) and the fire alarm stakeholders (alarm designers, installers, maintainers and alarm receiving centres) to adopt a cultural change in fire alarm management and procedures to prevent a false alarm being passed to the Service as an UwFS. To support this cultural change more robust call filtering and supportive guidance is required by Control Operators to prevent known false alarms receiving an operational response.
- 1.5 It should be noted that the reduction of UwFS will not necessarily reduce the number of false alarms being created at the premises and therefore there could still be an occupant complacency issue even if fire crews never attend the premises.
- 1.6 The strategy, therefore, has two distinct parts:
 - Promoting the prevention of a false alarm occurring at a premises and being sent to ESFRS as an UwFS (Pro-active) and
 - Minimising the impact of an UwFS on Service resources (Reactive).

2. OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- 2.1 This report details the ways in which we can support and encourage businesses to manage their fire detection and alarm systems more effectively and to reduce the impact of and attendance to UwFS caused by false alarms being forwarded to the Service when premises are occupied and local investigation by onsite staff is possible.
- 2.2 The profile of the number of premises and how many UwFS each produce is significant in the choice of strategy and this profile has changed over the years. Over a two year period only 18 commercial premises had more than 10 repeat AFA calls. The number of properties generating between 6 - 10 UwFS just 24. The number of properties generating between 1 - 5 UwFS is 1131 accounting for 1756 of the 2314 calls from low risk commercial premises. There is no deterrent currently for these low call premises and the scale of the number of premises mean that individual targeting for improvement is virtually impossible. The only realistic options for the large number of low volume premises UwFS is through a 'nil attendance' policy, robust call filtering or a change to the charging legislation as a deterrent to premises occupiers and alarm maintainers creating these type of calls. Both these options should be considered as a way of encouraging and supporting a change in the culture of fire alarm management rather than as a punitive or income generation measure.

3. POLICY CHANGE IN DETAIL

- 3.1 **Following approval by the Fire Authority in September 2020, ESFRS will adopt a 'nil attendance policy' for AFA calls from non- residential properties (with exceptions) between 0900hrs and 1700hrs Monday to Friday. (To be reviewed after 6 months).**
- 3.2 With increasing rates of UwFS in ESFRS and the need to reduce the impact on resources, particularly to the large number of low volume call premises, it is now appropriate to introduce a risk based 'nil attendance' policy to calls generated by AFA systems in commercial premises, unless a fire is confirmed, between the hours of 0900hrs and 1700hrs Monday to Friday. We have chosen not to extend this to weekend days as the number of AFA calls during the weekend is less and therefore the impact on the Service is less. However this is a first step and if successful it is likely that this policy will extend both in hours and in the days it applies. The basis of this policy decision is the business is likely to be operating 'normally' during the hours of 0900hrs-1700hrs from Monday to Friday, with staff present to implement all required fire safety management and emergency plans. There are also less likely to be lone working situations and people sleeping.
- 3.3 In addition the application of the nil attendance should be flexible enough, by exception, to remove premises from the nil attendance protocol due to the potential risks i.e. nil attendance applies to all industrial sites but a COMAH site is exempt from the nil attendance protocol due to potential for Firefighter and Community risk.
- 3.4 It is reasonable to suggest that as data quality improves and the Service and its staff become more comfortable with the call filtering improvements a review of the need

to extend the 'nil attendance' into Saturday and Sunday should take place after 6 months and be implemented if deemed appropriate.

- 3.5 **By implementing this change the Service aligns its UWFS policy and specifically our 'nil attendance' with Surrey and West Sussex in advance of and as part of the P21 project.**
- 3.6 **We will ensure training is provided for all staff groups including Business Safety Inspection staff, Control Staff, and Operational managers so that UwFS reduction becomes a responsibility for all staff.**
- 3.7 The reduction of UwFS has primarily been the role of Business Safety Inspecting Officers. The role includes the application of fire safety expertise to reducing UwFS through investigating the circumstances of AFA/UwFS events at premises that are deemed to be the highest call generators (those producing 10 or more calls per year). The number of properties generating 10 or more UwFS in each of the past 4 years has been approximately 18, and these account for approximately 319 calls per year. The Business Safety team will continue to work with these occupiers and affect reduction through driving improvements in their local response to the alarm and alarm management practices.
- 3.8 Inspecting officers will be developed in how to use the legislation and guidance to achieve change in the built environment. In turn they will upskill other officers to enable them to carry out reduction and education activities directly with the premises.
- 3.9 We will also review our call challenging process and implement any upskilling and training required for Control room staff in how to deal with the event of an AFA actuation, the associated risks and the risk perception in order to give them confidence in call challenge and call filtering processes.
- 3.10 **Cost recovery charging will remain a possible future option for reconsideration following the completion of the Government consultation on the Fire Safety Order and other legislation related to false alarm charging and the subsequent outcomes.**
- 3.11 A cost recovery option for AFA unwanted alarms was made available following amendments to the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 which came into force in 2012. This was intended to give Fire and Rescue Services the power to charge for attendance at calls generated by Automatic Fire Alarm systems (in non domestic premises only) when very limited circumstances and criteria applied.
- 3.12 There were considerable limitations to the circumstances and criteria for charging to apply and it would be difficult to accurately identify or evidence these to make a case for individual charging. It is apparent that few if any FRS have successfully applied a charging policy.
- 3.13 The Service look forward to the forthcoming Home Office consultation on revisions to the legislation to remove the barriers imposed by the current wording.

- 3.14 **We will review our current operational policy and resultant training material to ensure it is reflective of the new policy and provides our crews with the information and training required to assist in driving down UwFS.**
- 3.15 **We will also review the recording and reporting methodology for AFAs to enhance our understanding of the production of false alarms and UwFS (including human behaviour and the risks associated with them in addition to gathering evidence for the anticipated changes to charging legislation.**
- 3.16 **We will produce an appropriate communications strategy that will ensure affected premises have time to review their risk assessments, train their staff and inform their alarm monitoring services and maintainers. This in addition to general communication to the public about actual and perceived risk.**
- 3.17 A communications strategy and the accompanying messages needs to reflect the different elements of this strategy including but not limited to:
- Businesses and Business representative forums
 - Alarm receiving centres
 - General public
 - ESFRS staff
 - Media
 - Fire Industry trade bodies
 - ARC Trade bodies SSAIB, NSI etc.
- 3.18 We will closely monitor and review the process to be set up to measure the key deliverables in addition to any downside risks such as an increase in fires, fire severity etc.

4. FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT

- 4.1 The resource commitment and, specifically the opportunity and financial cost to the Service through On-call and Wholetime fire crews attending UwFS is considerable. It is estimated that although each UwFS response and investigation is estimated to take approximately 20 mins the impact of each UwFS is nearer 1 hour per crew when the return journey, administration and other activity disruption is taken into account. That equates to more than 3,500 hours of crew time and 14,000 hours of disruption or opportunity cost to the individual firefighter's working day per year. If the Service were to apply a financial impact based on the chargeable amount for special services per crew this equates to more than £1,050,000 per year to the Service (clearly this does not represent a cost that could be recovered through charging under the current legislation nor will it necessarily result in a financial saving as the bulk of the response is provided by shift and day crewed stations).
- 4.2 In addition the impact on the environment through vehicle emissions, fuel costs and the risk of accident costs and resultant firefighter injuries are also substantial. The unnecessary impact of On-call crews being called away from their families and workplaces should also be considered. Any reduction in UwFS would therefore reduce these impacts and release capacity within the operational workforce that

could refocussed on other activity e.g. prevention and protection. Further analysis is required to establish the scale of any cashable savings and this will be carried out as the project progresses.

- 4.3 The actual impact of these changes will be monitored by the Service to ensure that any released capacity is utilised quickly and effectively to achieve our Strategic aims and objectives. The monitoring will take place by the local management teams utilising our end of month reporting processes. This will then be overseen and holistically assessed by the Assistant Director Safer Communities during the established governance meetings. This will allow a timely response to any freed up capacity and an appropriate redirection of resources to priorities determined at that time.

5. CORPORATE RISK

- 5.1 The implementation of 'nil attendance' and improved call filtering and challenge procedures brings a small but not insignificant risk to the Service corporately as it has to all FRS who have adopted similar methodology. It is important that as various elements of this strategy are put in place a monitoring and review process is in place to measure the key deliverables i.e. a reduction in commercial AFAs becoming UwFS but also any downside risks such as increase in fires and severity of fires, decrease in fires i.e. not getting called to fires all out for recording purposes, confidence in filtering, AFA 'near misses' etc.

6. TIMESCALES FOR DELIVERY AND DEPENDENCIES

- 6.1 Several of the changes detailed in this report support a cultural change in the expectation of the way that the RPs of commercial premises manage their fire detection and alarm systems and call the Service.
- 6.2 It is anticipated that the communication strategy for commercial (and domestic) fire alarm management and training of staff to support the communications in this area can start immediately and be progressed over the next six months to promote the change in culture the Service desires and in addition explain the 'nil attendance' changes. The communication strategy will encourage RPs to alter their emergency plans and encourage them, where necessary, to contact their risk assessors, fire alarm engineers and alarm receiving centres to advise on the appropriate actions to take in anticipation of the 'nil attendance' changes. It is expected that this will lead to a reduction in UwFS in advance of the adoption of the nil attendance policy.
- 6.3 The implementation of a 'nil attendance' policy and more robust call filtering by fire control operators have a number of dependencies including the implementation of the joint fire control, the alignment of the AFA reduction policies across ESFRS, SFRS and WSFRS and the capacity for control staff training in addition to the joint fire control implementation training.
- 6.4 It is therefore anticipated that the implementation of these actions will happen progressively over the next 9 months with full implementation and benefit realisation by the 31st March 2022.

7. SUMMARY

- 7.1 The above changes represent a specific package of measures underpinned by the holistic approach outlined in the NFCC Guidance for the Reduction of False Alarms & Unwanted Fire Signal to achieve a significant reduction in the Service resource commitment to UwFS. NFCC and Fire and Rescue Services continue to strive to develop improvements in fire detection and alarm system standards and fire alarm monitoring standards to raise the profile of the false alarm problem within the industry and encourage a partnership and collaborative approach to continuous improvement through representation on various national forums and British Standards. The strategy and changes above aim to encourage the improvement in the culture of fire alarm management by RP's and fire alarm designers, installers and maintainers, and to take a risk based approach to the mobilisation of Service resources to calls from these systems. There is a small Corporate risk if fires in commercial premises effected by this policy increase. This will be mitigated by way of engagement and education as well as by monitoring the impact of this policy for the first 6 months.