

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AUTHORITY

Meeting	Scrutiny and Audit Panel
Date	19 January 2023
Title of Report	Implementation Update on the 'nil response' to automatic fire alarms (AFAs) actuating in commercial premises.
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Background Papers [IRMP 2020-2025 - Consultation Results Report \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)
'The Reduction of False Alarms and Unwanted Fire Signals from Automatic Fire Detection – A Risk Based Approach Scrutiny and Audit Panel July 2021'

Appendices 1. AFA data between April and September 2022

Implications (please tick ✓ and attach to report)

CORPORATE RISK		LEGAL	
ENVIRONMENTAL	x	POLICY	x
FINANCIAL	x	POLITICAL	
HEALTH & SAFETY	x	OTHER (please specify)	
HUMAN RESOURCES		CORE BRIEF	

PURPOSE OF REPORT To provide the Scrutiny & Audit Panel with an update following a six-month review into the implementation and impact of the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) decision to stop responding to certain fire alarm activations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY Unwanted Fire Signal Reduction was highlighted as an area for improvement in East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service's Inspection Report 2019 and as a result a proposal to implement a 'nil response' to automatic fire alarms (AFAs) actuating in commercial premises was included in the 2020-25 Integrated Risk management Plan approved by the Fire Authority in September 2020.

The Service took the decision to implement a risk based staged approach towards full implementation this was presented to the Scrutiny and Audit Panel in July 2021. The first stage was to stop responding to low-risk commercial premises between the hours of 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

The change was introduced in April 2022 as planned. It was accompanied by a comprehensive communication strategy that helped responsible persons understand their legal obligations. The changes have resulted in 269 calls that we did not send a resource to that we would have previously.

The Service continues to mobilise resources to non-residential premises outside of the times and days of the change. This resulted in approximately 543 mobilisations to an AFA, with only five of these calls being a fire and only two of those being a fire that needed two or more pumps to deal with. After considering the implementation and progress achieved to date, this report sets out the next steps in relation to progressing a nil attendance to certain false alarm actuations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel is asked to:

1. note that after successful implementation of the risk based staged approach, the Service will move to the full implementation of the decision made by the Fire Authority in September 2020 that will result in a 'nil attendance' to Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) calls in low risk commercial premises 24/7;
2. note that cost recovery charging remains a future option for consideration following the completion of the Government consultation on the Fire Safety Order and other legislation related to false alarm charging and any subsequent outcomes; and
3. note that an appropriate communications strategy, internal and external will be developed to ensure that affected premises have time to review their risk assessments, train their staff and inform their alarm monitoring services and maintainers. There will also be communications to staff and the public about the actual and perceived risk.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following on from the decision by the Fire Authority to adopt the Integrated Risk Management Plan - Planning for a Safer Future 2020-25, the Senior Leadership Team, agreed to implement a risk based staged approach, which in time would lead to the full implementation of a nil response to Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) calls in low risk commercial premises. A project team was established to introduce the first step in the approach of not attending AFA calls to non-sleeping or non-residential risk premises between the hours of 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays).

- 1.2 The team identified a raft of work needed to enable these changes to take place. They included risk assessment reviews, equality impact assessment reviews and a review of any training needs. The outcome of this initial gap analysis work was a clear action plan with action owners and contributors. As a result of the work done by the team members, a new policy was introduced along with training materials for all staff, including joint control room staff. A very clear and comprehensive communication strategy was produced that enabled the service to inform and keep informed all stakeholders, both internal and external.
- 1.3 The new policy went live on the 1 April 2022. The data used in this report runs from this date up to the end of September 2022 (6 months).

2. ISSUES WITH IMPLEMENTATION

- 2.1 There were some issues with regards to providing Joint Fire Control (JFC) with enough clarity to enable them to implement the new policy. There was some confusion around the application of incident types and which property type fitted into the non-attendances. This was due to differing information provided by East and West Sussex feeding into JFC. Due to differing processes, it took a little more time to call challenge to those properties with no sleeping risk where the cause of the alarm was not confirmed.
- 2.2 This resulted in the first two months not seeing the level of expected reduction in the number of Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS) calls attended. The issue was rectified by amending policy appendices and control room scripts and referring to and applying national definitions of incident types. From June onwards there has started to be a reduction that is more reflective of the forecasted levels.
- 2.3 There continues to be challenges with regards to being able to comply with three different policies for the same incident type, with further differences dependant on the time of day, day of the week and geographical location.

3. DATA COMPARISON ISSUE

- 3.1 What must be noted is that at the end of 2021 the control room function was outsourced to Surrey Fire and Rescue Service. This has seen a change in mobilising system and processes within the control room. The data is coming from multiple sources, including three mobilising systems (3TC Mobs 2009 – 2017, 4i 2018 - 2021 and Vision providing 2022). Data is also taken from eIRS (our incident recording system) across the 2009 – 2022 period. When we look at the number of overall fires for 2021 this is taken from eIRS only and not from the previous 4i mobilising data due to this not being available, though can have an impact in the eIRS system. It is inevitable that there may be some minor variations in the data for these reasons.

4. OUTCOME OF IMPLEMENTATION

- 4.1 Joint Fire Control, on the most part have been challenging the calls as per the defined policy, between 1 April and 30 September 2022, **269 reports of AFAs that fall into the commercial categories were not mobilised by JFC.** A full breakdown of this can be seen at Appendix 1.

- 4.2 Despite the above, we can compare month by month data since we went live at JFC in November '21. Using December 21 – March 22 data we can see that the average monthly number of reported fires was 11. In the period of April 22 – Sept 22 since the change in policy this figure is 10.2 average calls per month to fires at these property types. Therefore, it has been shown through incident data that the policy change implemented in April has resulted in 269 less mobilisations in 6 months, which brings with it released capacity to carry out other risk reduction activities. It has also been shown that this policy change has not resulted in an increase in fires in the affected premises types. Indeed there has been a slight reduction.
- 4.3 The increased capacity created by not attending 269 calls would have been utilised by staff on the stations concerned to carry out risk reduction activities such as Home Safety Visits (HSV), Fire Safety Checks (FSCs) and firefighting risk gathering using our Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI) process. As this was a new policy that was to be assessed over 6 months, targets for stations were not changed in anticipation of any reduction in calls. Now that we can confirm that calls have reduced and the number of fires has not increased, it would be expected that station targets will be amended to reflect the increased capacity. As the policy is further amended it is expected that station targets and activities would be amended to reflect the total increased capacity for each station. The suggested percentage changes should reflect the percentage of AFA calls that would have been attended by each station. Details can be found in table 10 in the Appendix.
- 4.4 The reduction in emergency calls has resulted in a reduction in road risk and a reduction in environmental pollution.

5. ONGOING MOBILISATIONS

- 5.1 Joint Fire Control have been challenging the calls as per the defined policy, between 1 April and 30 September 2022, **269 reports of AFAs that fall into the commercial categories were not mobilised by JFC**. A full breakdown of this can be seen in the Appendix.
- 5.2 Within the six months since implementation of the initial change in policy, there was still 543 mobilisations to non-residential AFAs. Of these, 83% received an attendance due to being outside the time parameters of Monday – Friday 9am - 5pm as per the current policy. The other 17% were due to human error and the challenges caused by the introduction of a new policy that does not align with the other Service policies being managed by JFC.
- 5.3 Of the 543 mobilisations:
- 91.5% were confirmed as false alarms by attending crews.
 - 7.2% were stood down after mobilisation but before arrival of crews. This is due to repeat calls and further information confirming a false alarm.
 - 1.3% were discovered to be fires. A full breakdown of the times and incident details can be found in the appendices.
 - None of the 543 mobilisations had any victims involved.
- 5.4 Focusing on the 1.3%, 7 in number, of AFAs that were discovered to be fires:

- 1 would be excluded as this was a Hotel so therefore would have not come under the criteria and an alternative incident type should have been used.
- 1 had conflicting information from the stop message and the eIRS report. The Officer in Command confirmed that this was a false alarm and not a fire. Therefore, was it removed from the figures.

5.5 The real number is 5 AFAs that were found to be fires, 0.92%. Of these:

- 2 were made up on arrival of crews to 2 pumps.
- 3 were out on arrival.

5.6 There were an additional two incidents where initial information received from the caller was that there had been an alarm activation and that on both occasions, further information was then taken by Fire Control that indicated a fire was present shortly after mobilising but before the crews arrived. Both incidents were changed to a fire with the full fire pre determined attendance mobilised.

5.7 Had ESFRS not attended the five AFAs that turned out to be fires, three would have caused no escalation as they were out on arrival. The other two would have resulted in the management investigating the cause of the alarm (even out of hours) and calling us to a fire rather than to an AFA. There is also a chance that the public would call us to a smell of smoke or smoke visible. We would then send the appropriate resources to deal with a fire and not to respond to an AFA.

5.8 Our crews are trained to assess the situation on arrival and the incident commander would have made up for additional resources if required and implemented a safe system of work to deal with the fire.

5.9 The small number of fires that we may get in these types of buildings is far outweighed by the increased capacity we will have to reduce risk in the built environment and to train and gather risk information.

6. OTHER RELEVANT MOBILISATIONS

6.1 In addition to the AFA figures, we also had 63 reports of fires to the non-residential properties in this same period of April – September 2022. Though the initial call reported a fire, the final classification was a false alarm on just over 26% of occasions.

7. REGIONAL POSITION

7.1 Our immediate neighbours all carry out slightly different responses to AFA calls, however all have a form of call challenge and all are committed to reducing unjustified mobilisations to unwanted fire signals (UwFS).

7.2 West Sussex and Surrey Fire & Rescue Services have historically had different policies with regards to responding to AFA calls. These differences have caused challenges as mentioned above in the control room with regards to consistent compliance with each of the Service's policies.

7.3 To resolve this, West Sussex and Surrey have agreed to align their policies with that of Kent Fire and Rescue Service. They will not respond to AFA calls from non-residential premises at any time, with exceptions made for heritage, schools and high risk industrial premises such as Control of Major Accident Hazard (COMAH) sites.

8. NEXT STEPS

8.1 We have had initial discussions with both West Sussex Fire & Rescue Service (WSFRS) and Surrey Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS) to establish if the appetite is there to align our response policy to AFA systems. SFRS and WSFRS are committed to implementing a policy that would mean they would not respond to any non-sleeping risk at any time. It is this change that would implement the Fire Authority's decision made in the IRMP. This will provide the clarity of policy across all three Fire & Rescue Services using the Joint Fire Control, which will reduce the likelihood of error in our mobilising response. The next stage in the risk based approach is to align our policy with that of our neighbours in that we stop mobilising to non-residential premises, with exceptions made for heritage, schools and COMAH sites. This policy change would reduce our calls by approximately **90 mobilisations per month, more than 1000 per year.**

8.2 It is also a natural progression from the existing policy change. We stated that we would not attend non-sleeping risks during the day as these businesses would have trained staff on duty as required by current fire safety legislation. We have set out clearly our expectation that Responsible Persons (RPs) must have procedures in place to respond to their fire alarm system activating and to train their staff to investigate their alarm system to establish if there is a fire before calling the emergency services.

8.3 We would also stipulate that we could continue to attend AFAs at high risk sites that include COMAH sites and heritage sites. Work can be completed to add these to the mobilising system to indicate that a response is always required and that the AFA policy of non attendance does not apply.

8.4 We will also continue to attend schools and colleges when they are closed over the evenings, weekends and school holiday periods.

8.5 As this change is implemented, a thorough communication strategy that builds on the one used to implement the changes in April 2022 will be developed. This will require engagement with businesses to explain their responsibilities and to reassure them that should a fire be found we will respond with the appropriate resources without delay.

9. BENEFIT OF IMPLEMENTING THE IRMP PROPOSAL

9.1 Carrying out a further change in policy will align policy across the three Services using JFC. This will make it much easier for JFC staff to comply with policy and will reduce human error.

9.2 Not responding to AFAs in non-residential premises will reduce calls by approximately 90 calls per month. This time can be used by crews to educate the

business community through Fire Safety Checks on how they should be managing their own fire alarm systems and how they should respond to activations in a way that enables any fire to be identified quickly and safely and a call placed to control that will enable the correct resources to be mobilised immediately.

- 9.3 The resulting capacity can also be used to carry out risk visits to familiarise crews with these non-residential premises and to carry out training that enables them to better prepare and respond to any actual fires in these types of premises.

10. FINANCIAL

- 10.1 Every response to an AFA call costs £282 per hour (based on our chargeable rates for special services). This covers the salaries and fuel costs. A reduction in over 1000 calls will be spread across all of our station areas. The percentage reductions are shown in table 10 in Appendix 1. Reducing calls on whole time stations will not result in significant cost savings as staff are already paid for 24/7 coverage. Reductions on day crewed and on call stations however will reduce the number of turn out claims. Using the percentages shown in table 10, on average the number of call out from these 1000 calls attended by retained crews would be 220. The potential savings as a result of this policy change could be approximately £62,040 per year.

11. ROAD RISK AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISK

- 11.1 Approximately 1000 less calls will result in a reduction in road risk due to less blue light runs and less environmental pollution due to less exhaust fumes and use of fuel. This needs to be tempered with a likely increase in risk reduction activities that will require vehicle movements.

12. OTHER RISKS

- 12.1 It is worth pointing out that the potential reduction in calls at on call stations because of further policy changes may reduce moral and make recruitment and retention more difficult. It is suggested that this needs to be monitored by management, with consideration given to using staff in these areas for risk reduction activities.

13. REMAINING WORK TO BE COMPLETED

- 13.1 We still await the Government's report on charging for responding to Unwanted Fire Signals (UwFS) from AFA systems. Once this report is received it is recommended that we review the policy to determine if charging is an option that we would want to consider.
- 13.2 We will review what data we collect from UwFS and why. A national data project is ongoing, and it is recommended that once we have clarity on what data Government will require from us, we will need to consider this together with whatever data we feel we need to inform current and future policy reviews.

14. SUMMARY

- 14.1 The changes introduced in April 2022 have resulted in 269 less mobilisations (to September 2022) and has freed up crews to carry out more effective risk reduction activities in this time. However, some erroneous mobilisations have occurred due to the complexity caused by JFC staff having to implement multiply policies for the same risks.
- 14.2 The data from our systems have shown that the new policy has not resulted in any increase in the number of fires in the premises affected by the policy change.
- 14.3 The data shows that during this same period we have mobilised to over 540 UwFS in non-residential premises outside of normal office hours or in error due to multiply policies with JFC. These non-residential premises may have staff present outside of normal office hours. When they are occupied, they will have trained staff available to respond to their fire alarm activations. When not occupied, they must also have the ability to respond to an activation of an alarm in their buildings.
- 14.4 There is a chance that a fire may develop in these buildings when not occupied and may present a greater risk to our crews by the time we are notified and respond. From the data provided and explained in section 5 above, it is shown that on two occasions in six months did we attend an AFA that turned out to be a fire that needed additional resources to resolve.
- 14.5 All incident commanders are trained to assess the situation and implement a safe system of work in line with policy to safely deal with a fire in a premise. This includes when additional resources are required to implement the required tactics.
- 14.6 The risk posed by not responding to any AFA in a non-residential premises (with some exceptions) is low based on the evidence gathered to date. It is therefore recommended that ESFRS amend our policy to align with our neighbouring Service. This will simplify policy compliance for JFC and will reduce our calls by approximately 90 calls per month. This additional time can be used to carry out risk reduction measures, educate businesses around their responsibilities to respond to their fire alarm systems and to enable crews to gather and check risk information and train more to reduce risk to them should they respond to a fire in these types of buildings.
- 14.7 The risk posed by not responding to any AFA in a non-residential premises (with some exceptions) is low based on the evidence gathered to date. The decrease in calls will likely result in a reduction in road risk and a reduction in environmental damage. The increased capacity will be used to drive down risk in the community by way of risk reduction activities such as HSVs. We will also use this time to further educate businesses around their responsibilities to respond to their fire alarm systems and to ensure that fire safety measures are maintained to protect members of our community. The additional capacity will enable crews to gather and check risk information and train more to reduce risk to them should they respond to a fire in these types of buildings.
- 14.8 It is therefore the intention to amend our policy to align with our neighbouring Services. This will simplify policy compliance for JFC and will reduce our calls by approximately 90 calls per month.

Impact of changes

1. Number of AFAs received but not mobilised

	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Total
AFAs received but not mobilised (non-residential properties)	28	33	54	48	40	71	269
• of which were industrial and commercial properties	8	14	32	19	17	26	116
• of which were retail and public assembly properties	20	19	22	21	26	45	153

2. Total of non-residential AFAs mobilised

	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Total
Total non-residential AFAs mobilised	93	105	85	79	92	89	543
• of which were industrial and commercial properties	33	45	30	31	32	40	211
• of which were retail and public assembly properties	60	60	55	48	60	49	332
• <i>Number of which were outside current 9-5, M-F policy</i>	62	79	83	72	77	80	453

3. Number of AFA mobilised but stood down after further call / information

	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Total
AFAs mobilised but stood down after initial call (non-residential properties)	9	6	4	6	8	6	39
• of which were industrial and commercial properties	7	2	1	1	4	1	16
• of which were retail and public assembly properties	2	4	3	5	4	5	23

4. Number of AFAs mobilised and confirmed as false alarm by attending crews

AFAs mobilised (to non-residential properties) but confirmed as false alarms by attending crews	83	96	79	72	83	83	496
• of which were industrial and commercial properties	26	43	29	30	28	39	195
• <i>Number of which were outside current 9-5, M-F policy</i>	22	43	29	29	25	34	182
• of which were retail and public assembly properties	57	53	50	42	55	44	301
• <i>Number of which were outside current 9-5, M-F policy</i>	34	30	46	35	47	41	233

5. Number of AFAs mobilised and confirmed as fires

	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Total
AFAs mobilised (to non-residential properties) confirmed as fires on arrival	1	3	2	1	1	0	6
• of which were industrial and commercial properties	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
• of which were retail and public assembly properties	1	2	2	1	1	0	6

6. Incident breakdown of 5 AFAs that became Fires

TOC	Call Source	Premises Type	Cause	Notes
Monday 19:14	Alarm Monitoring Company	Car Park	Deliberate	Out on arrival
Sunday 03:10	Alarm Monitoring Company	Fish and Chip Shop	Accidental	Make Pumps 2
Sunday 16:51	Alarm Monitoring Company	Pub / Restaurant	Accidental	Out on arrival
Friday 04:58	Alarm Monitoring Company	Industrial Manufacturing	Accidental	Make Pumps 2
Wednesday 21:04	Caller from nearby property	Shop	Accidental	Out on arrival

7. Reports of Fire on initial call since change in policy

Reports of fires on initial call	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Total
Industrial Building Fire	3	3	4	4	5	1	20
• Of which were found to be false alarms	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Agricultural Building Fire	0	2	0	0	3	0	5
• Of which were found to be false alarms	0	0			0		0
Schools and Colleges Fire	0	1	0	2	0	0	3
• Of which were found to be false alarms	0	1		0			1
Commercial High Rise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
• Of which were found to be false alarms	0						
Public Assembly Fire	3	2	3	8	3	10	29
• Of which were found to be false alarms	1	1	0	2	1	4	9
Electrical Installation Fire (non-residential)	0	1	0	0	3	0	4
• Of which were found to be false alarms		1			2		3
Total	6	9	7	14	14	11	61
Of which were found to be false alarms	1	3	0	0	5	4	13

8. Reports of Fire on initial call before change in policy

Reports of fires on initial call	Dec-21	Jan-22	Feb-22	Mar-22	Total
Industrial Building Fire	3	3	3	1	10
• Of which were found to be false alarms	1	3	1	1	6
Agricultural Building Fire	0	1	0	1	2
• Of which were found to be false alarms		0		0	0
Schools and Colleges Fire	2	0	0	0	2
• Of which were found to be false alarms	1				1
Commercial High Rise	0	0	0	0	0
• Of which were found to be false alarms					0
Public Assembly Fire	6	4	9	7	26
• Of which were found to be false alarms	4	2	3	3	12
Electrical Installation Fire (non-residential)	0	1	2	1	4
• Of which were found to be false alarms		0	0	0	0
Total	11	9	14	10	44
Of which were found to be false alarms	6	5	4	4	19

9. Number of AFAs mobilised with final classification of Fire 2009 - 2017

Inc type at Control	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Alarms - AFA	17	6	6	8	3	8	5	9	5	67
Alarms - Smoke alarm	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Total	20	6	6	8	3	8	5	9	6	71

10. Percentage of AFA calls to non-sleeping commercial premises per station between June and November 2022

Station	% of AFA calls
Barcombe	0
Battle	2
Bexhill	5
Broad Oak	<1
Burwash	<1
Crowborough	4
Eastbourne	15
Forest Row	<1
Hailsham	1
Hastings Bohemia Road	4
Hastings The Ridge	3
Heathfield	<1
Hove	10
Lewes	6
Newhaven	4
Pevensey	1
Preston Circus	25
Roedean	12
Rye	2
Seaford	2
Uckfield	3
Wadhurst	<1