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## *IRMP Guidance Note 7: Revised Response Policies for Dealing with Unwanted Fire Signals from Automatic Fire Alarms*

### Issued by:

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### Addressed to:

**The Chief Executive to the County Council**  
**The Clerk to the Fire and Rescue Authority**  
**The Clerk to the Fire and Civil Defence Authority**  
**The Clerk to the Combined Fire and Rescue Authority**  
**The Commissioner of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority**  
**The Chief Fire Officer**

### Please forward to:

**Those people in your organisation who you consider need to have this information.**

### Summary

**This Circular sets out guidance for fire authorities when considering their policies with regard to the receiving of automatic fire alarm (AFA) calls.**

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### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This note sets out guidance for fire and rescue authorities when considering their policies with regard to the receiving of automatic fire alarm (AFA) calls and the associated response arrangements. False alarms due to apparatus have continued to rise year on year and it appears that responses to the thematic review published by HM Fire Service Inspectorate in March 2001 have had little effect in reducing these unwanted calls. The steady rise in the number of AFA systems deployed has also contributed to the increase.
- 1.2 The impact of unwanted fire signals (UFS) is well known to the Fire and Rescue Service:
- responding to UFS is a considerable drain, both financially and in terms of time lost. It is also disruptive to other, more productive work and availability for other emergency calls
  - responding to AFAs can account for a significant proportion of the operational workload
  - up to 98% of such calls do not require the involvement of the service.
- 1.3 Chief Fire Officers have for many years called for more flexibility to enable them to be more proactive and dynamic in the use of resources. This guidance note is intended to support authorities in their efforts to reduce the cause and effect of this waste of resource.

### 2.0 General principles

- 2.1 When considering appropriate arrangements, fire and rescue authorities should have regard to the need to:
- comply with the duty to make provision for firefighting and, in particular, to make arrangements for dealing with calls for help and for summoning personnel
  - reduce the number of UFS received
  - reduce the risk to the public/firefighters from unnecessary appliance/vehicle movements, particularly under 'blue light' conditions
  - maintain public and business confidence that any response policy changes will not increase the risk to life and property
  - achieve improved management of fire safety/protection arrangements in premises by their owners and occupiers
  - maintain safe working practices for crews attending fire alarm actuations

- maintain and enforce the agreement between the fire and rescue authority and the alarm receiving centre (ARC)/protected premises. (The CFOA Remotely Monitored Fire Alarm Policy refers).

### **3.0 Risk assessment of revised response policies**

**3.1** Authorities should risk assess their policy or any revision of policy concerning their response to calls generated by the actuation of AFA's as part of the IRMP. This is to ensure that any changes made do not increase risk of death or injury to the public, taking into account the risk of injury from road traffic collisions while responding under blue light conditions. While the policy and experience of another fire and rescue authority may be used to inform this process, it does not remove the responsibility of an authority to make its own assessment taking into account relevant local factors.

### **4.0 Verification of fire alarm actuations**

**4.1** Under the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulation 1997, employers have a duty to:

- take measures for fire-fighting in the workplace, and nominate employees to implement those measures
- ensure that the number of employees, their training and the equipment available to them are adequate
- arrange any necessary contacts with external emergency services, particularly as regards rescue work and fire-fighting

in order to safeguard the safety of their employees in case of fire.

**4.2** Fire and rescue authorities are for the most part the relevant enforcing authority for these Regulations.

**4.3** An authority may consider it appropriate that, in some circumstances, employer/occupiers should verify the cause of fire alarm actuations. Where this is the case the FRA policy should take account of the restrictions and requirements imposed on employers.

**4.4** An authority should satisfy itself that any request for entry into the affected premises or area would not undermine the employer's policy or procedures by placing their employees at risk. In some cases an employer's policy may preclude them from sending their employees into a hazardous environment. This is particularly relevant in the case of commercial premises for lone employees such as security guards.

- 4.5 Regulation 3(1) of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW) requires an employer to undertake a suitable and sufficient assessment of the health and safety risks to which employees are exposed to while at work. This includes any additional risk from lone working as well as process fire safety risks. These risk assessments should normally be recorded, regularly reviewed and appropriate training should be given under Regulation 11 of the 1999 Regulations. The Health and Safety Executive or relevant local authority will normally be the enforcing authority for these requirements, but the outcome of the assessments should inform any measures taken to comply with the above 1997 Regulations.
- 4.6 Apart from regulation 3(1) of MHSW, other requirements imposed on employers include regulation 8(2)(c). This requires procedures to prevent persons concerned from resuming work in any situation where there is still a serious and imminent danger (other than in exceptional circumstances).
- 4.7 In addition, regulation 8(3)(b) of the Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres Regulations 2002 require an employer to prohibit any person from entering the affected area in the event of an incident related to the presence of a dangerous substance at the workplace (except those persons who are essential for the carrying out of repairs or essential work).
- 4.8 The activity of lone fire and rescue authority employees sent to investigate an unconfirmed call from an AFA would similarly be subject to risk assessment under MHSW by the authority.

### 5.0 **Appropriate arrangements**

- 5.1 Fire and rescue authorities are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach when developing/revising policies for dealing with UFS. Simply dealing with one aspect e.g. a decision not to respond to unreliable automatic fire alarm calls, might reduce appliance movements but may result in delayed or non attendance at an actual fire and/or a loss of public/business confidence. It will be important to achieve an appropriate balance between fire service response to AFA calls and a more proactive approach to improving the fire safety management arrangements of the premises involved.
- 5.2 The following sections offer guidance on:
- receipt of calls
  - response options
  - improved management arrangements
    - preventing unwanted fire signals
    - follow up action for problem premises
  - common agreement between authorities and Alarm Receiving Centres
  - use of enforcement powers.

### 6.0 Receipt of calls

- 6.1 A number of fire and rescue authorities are changing their procedures on call handling from an approach that was prescriptive to one that is more dynamic. CFOA/HMFSI are currently developing guidance on this matter and this will be published shortly. Fire control operators will require training to recognise risk appropriate responses to emergency and non-emergency calls for assistance.
- 6.2 Fire and rescue authorities are encouraged to adopt this flexible approach when dealing with calls generated by AFAs. The procedures should be designed using a risk-based approach, with flexibility for the operator to mobilise a full attendance if considered necessary in the circumstances and appropriate to the risk assessment of the premises.
- 6.3 A risk-based approach should take account of the following factors:
- the occupancy of the premises, i.e. mobility, age, language barriers, number of people
  - the time of day e.g. sleeping risk
  - any special risks within the premises, e.g. process fire safety risks such as use of flammable liquids, cellular foam
  - history of fires in the premises or similar types of premises
  - the societal, cultural or historical importance of the property
  - the history of the management arrangements for the premise e.g. where there has been a history of UFS or conversely one that has had no previous or a good UFS history
  - adoption of any voluntary accreditation scheme for remotely monitored fire alarm systems (RMFAS)
  - calls being received from alarm receiving centres (ARC), occupiers, others e.g. passers-by hearing the alarm sounding inside the premises
  - the reliability of the information in any initial or confirmatory voice contact from or near the premises
  - consideration of prevention of property damage as well as loss of life and injury. (Many premises that are unoccupied for significant periods will be protected by AFA systems specifically to ensure prompt fire service attendance and early intervention in the event of an actuation).

### 7.0 Response options

- 7.1 Response options should be proportionate to the level and type of risk determined by the risk assessment and the reliability of information received by the call operator. These options might include the following:

- a confirmed fire should attract a full or enhanced emergency response (multiple calls to a confirmed fire might warrant dispatch of additional resources above the normal locally pre-determined response - in these circumstances the reliability of information received is high)
- a reduced emergency response determined by premise risk
- keeping appliances available for other emergency calls when attending AFAs
- some other risk assessed alternative that is robustly evidenced based (e.g. a voluntary accreditation and registration scheme).

**7.2** Policies should include relevant advice to personnel dealing with such calls. This may include:

- contacting key holders
- checking for signs of fire
- not resetting alarms
- silencing of alarms
- contacting engineers
- any follow up actions such as further visits and the maintenance records for monitoring purposes.

**7.3** Consideration should also be given to decisions taken by neighbouring authorities, which should be discussed and agreed by Regional Management Boards. FSC 6/1994 refers.

### **8.0 Improved management arrangements at AFA premises**

**8.1** As with emergency incidents the best way of dealing with UFS from AFA systems is to avoid them occurring in the first place. Systems that are designed, installed and maintained in accordance with recognised standards e.g. BS 5839-1 should help minimise the number of UFS from automatic fire alarms. UKAS accredited third party certification schemes can offer additional confidence that standards have been met. Authorities should be prepared to offer advice to premises on these matters through fire safety officers or visits by operational personnel.

**8.2** In the future a voluntary scheme for chargeable registration of remotely monitored fire alarm systems (RMFAS) in problem premises may be implemented. Each registered premise would be given a unique reference number (URN) on receipt of evidence that the alarm system is being maintained.

**8.3** Fire and rescue authorities and Regional Management Boards considering such an approach may obtain further details from CFOA.

### 9.0 Follow up action for problem premises

9.1 Occupiers or owners of premises that generate repeated UFS will be identified by incident history. They should be offered guidance and support in reducing these calls based on that provided in the ODPM/CFOA/BFPSA booklet 'A guide to reducing the number of false alarms from fire-detection and fire-alarm systems'. Advice might include:

- the suitability of detector type and siting (there may have been a change of circumstances since the original installation)
- improved management arrangements for alarm testing and maintenance (BS5839-1 requires a suitably trained and empowered responsible person to look after all aspects of the fire alarm system including its testing and maintenance)
- ensuring correct management action when an alarm actuates including evacuation arrangements and establishing the cause of the actuation before the brigade is called
- the encouragement of regular maintenance and testing.

9.2 The National Health Service monitors fire incidents at national level, whereas Strategic Health Authorities are expected to monitor at local level. Where individual NHS trusts are seen to be under achieving in reducing unwanted fire calls, the matter will be addressed within the NHS by the Strategic Health Authority.

9.3 Use of a competent person is a requirement of the fire regulations and the Government's proposals for the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order. UKAS accredited third party certification schemes can provide evidence of competence but should not be regarded as a one stop shop or made a requirement as competence may be demonstrated in other ways. Authorities should be prepared to offer advice to premises on these matters through fire safety officers or visits by operational personnel.

9.4 A history of difficulties with alarm systems may indicate other fire safety problems at the premises. Authorities may wish to offer advice for improvements in fire protection and fire safety arrangements. This may include issues of staff training, fire marshal training, fire risk assessments and other risk reduction measures.

### 10.0 New buildings

10.1 There are also occasions where the design of a building is varied and the use of a RMFAS is offered as a compensatory feature. Authorities should ensure that their officers dealing with fire precautions work and consultations with Building Control Bodies are fully apprised of their AFA response policies for dealing with RMFAS.

### 11.0 Use of enforcement powers

11.1 Many premises protected by AFA systems will be subject to the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 (amended 1999) and in future all premises are likely to be covered by reformed fire safety legislation. The HMFSI thematic review supported the application of legal enforcement action against premises with a poor record of false alarms. In cases where UFS indicate that the alarm is not functioning correctly resulting in people being put at risk authorities will wish to consider the use of enforcement powers.

### 12.0 Managing change

12.1 When considering changes to policy, fire and rescue authorities will need to take account of their existing arrangements. Any changes to current arrangements will need to be evidence led; they must also be fully communicated and explained to all relevant stakeholders. For example, where the current policy has been to send a full pre-determined attendance to an AFA, an immediate change to no attendance unless there is a confirmatory call may create a loss of public/business confidence.

12.2 In such circumstances a fire and rescue authority may consider;

- visiting the problem sites
- an incremental approach to reducing PDAs in response to AFAs, i.e. reducing response in the short term but maintaining a minimum response to give duty holders the opportunity to improve their management arrangements
- increasing proactive fire safety management in the premises or area
- some other risk assessed alternative that is robustly evidence based.

### 13.0 Management information

13.1 Authorities should maintain records of all RMFAS calls in their area. This information should assist in the identification of problem premises; enable remedial action to be targeted and help inform their policies and assess the outcomes of revised arrangements.

13.2 Authorities should advise employers/occupiers that it is their responsibility to keep the information held on key holders and responsible persons up to date, although authorities should be proactive in encouraging this training and development.

13.3 Authorities will need to ensure that any revised policy is clearly communicated to staff and any associated training and development needs have been identified and addressed.

#### **14.0 Monitoring and review**

- 14.1** Fire and rescue authorities should ensure that any policy in relation to AFAs is monitored and kept under regular review to ensure that it is meeting the outcomes and principles described in this guidance note.

#### **15.0 Consultation**

- 15.1** In line with the recommendations of Guidance Note 2 on Integrated Risk Management Planning, any changes in policy and procedures related to operational service delivery should be included in future consultation. The extent of this should be proportionate to those most affected by any proposed changes. In this respect it is likely that the business community, Education and Health Departments, insurance industry, ARCs, and premises covered by AFAs will feature prominently in such consultation.

#### **16.0 Legal advice**

- 16.1** Fire authorities are recommended to seek their own legal advice regarding any policy changes to their response strategies.

#### **17.0 Further information**

- 17.1** For further information on this guidance note please contact staff in FSED6 on 020 7944 8093 or e-mail: [fsed6@odpm.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:fsed6@odpm.gsi.gov.uk)

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