



COMBINED FIRE AUTHORITY

17 MARCH 2020

EVALUATION OF CHARGING FOR UNWANTED FIRE SIGNALS TRIAL

REPORT OF ASSISTANT CHIEF FIRE OFFICER SERVICE DELIVERY

Purpose of the report

1. This report evaluates the 12-month trial which commenced on 1 April 2019, to charge for repeated Unwanted Fire Signals (UwFS) in premises that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (FSO) applies to. Due to the success of the trial, it also recommends that Members approve the implementation of this process on a permanent basis.

Background

2. A paper detailing the arrangements for a trial to charge for repeated UwFS in premises that the FSO applies to was presented to the Combined Fire Authority (CFA) on 22 February 2019 at which, Members approved the trial to commence from 1 April 2019 for 12 months. Progress of the trial has been reported to the Performance Committee on a quarterly basis.
3. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) categorise calls to a fire, where on attendance, there is found to be no fire as 'False Alarms'. These calls include:
 - calls from individuals which are made with genuine intention but turned out to be incorrect are recorded as a 'false alarm - good intent';
 - calls from individuals deliberately providing false information are recorded as 'false alarm – malicious';
 - automatic fire alarm and detection systems may be activated deliberately by a person for either good intent or malicious reasons, however, where alarms operate due to a mechanical or electrical fault, or false activation by non-fire conditions e.g. cooking fumes, dust, cigarette smoke etc. and the fire service attend, these are recorded as UwFS.
4. The Localism Act 2011 introduced amendments to the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 which enabled a Fire Authority to recover costs for attending repeated UwFS.

5. CDDFRS recognises the value of fire detection in protecting people from fire and reducing the numbers of fire deaths and injuries. CDDFRS's objective through this cost recovery process was to reduce the number of UwFS by encouraging the correct use and management of these systems and ensuring that those responsible have a suitable system with appropriate management processes in place.
6. Fire alarms which actuate when there is no fire can be an indication of poor fire safety management in the premises, those false alarms that result in an attendance by CDDFRS have a significant impact on the availability of operational resources.

Application of cost recovery charges for repeated UwFS

7. During the trial, the charge for attending an UwFS is based on the rate that CDDFRS levy for a chargeable special service, which is currently £291 per appliance, per hour or part thereof. The special service charge is reviewed regularly by the Service and is based on recovering salary costs for the crew and other associated costs such as fuel and wear and tear to the vehicle.
8. Cost recovery is applied to all non-domestic premises where the FSO applies, these being:
 - all workplaces and commercial premises;
 - all premises the public have access to;
 - the common areas of multi-occupied residential buildings.
9. The following alarm actuation causes do not generate a charge under the cost recovery process:
 - false alarm incidents resulting from the testing of the system;
 - false alarm incidents resulting from the activation of a break-glass call point.
10. The responsible person for the premises receive a letter after one UwFS in a rolling 12-month period stating the charging policy. To allow time for improvement, a charge is applied to a premises on the third and any subsequent UwFS generated over a rolling 12-month period.
11. The responsible person for the premises can appeal against the charge if they feel there are circumstances which need to be considered by the Area Manager for Community Risk Management and the Business Fire Safety Manager. If the appeal is upheld, the charge is removed on that occasion and the invoice is cancelled.

Evaluation of the trial

12. The data in relation to the trial between 1 April 2019 to 31 January 2020 is as follows:
 - Number of UwFS 604
 - Number of chargeable incidents 406
 - Number of first letters sent 320
 - Number of charging letters sent 33
 - Number of appeals lodged 14
 - Number of appeals upheld 8
 - Total sum of invoices raised £15,481 (Excl. VAT)
 - Total paid £7,449 (Excl. VAT)

- Total unpaid / outstanding £4,540 (Excl. VAT)
- Total cancelled following appeal £3,492 (Excl. VAT)

13. Table 1 below shows the figures for performance indicator (PI) 14 which measures all false alarms caused by automatic fire detection systems (including good intent, malicious and UwFS). The figure for each year only includes those incidents between 1 April and 31 January to ensure they are comparable:

Table 1: PI 14 False alarms caused by automatic fire detection systems

Year	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
PI14 figure	606	626	663	708	604

14. The figures in table 1 above show a year on year increase in PI 14 for the previous four years, however following the introduction of cost recovery charges for repeated UwFS, a significant reduction has been seen during 2019/20.
15. The purpose of introducing the cost recovery process was also to encourage improvements in fire safety management practises in premises. Below are two examples which demonstrate the positive impact of the trial in this area.
16. A School and Sixth Form Centre
The school had 3 chargeable UwFS within 2 days in September 2019. This equated to the 3rd, 4th and 5th actuations in all. The school appealed the charges stating that they were going to replace the fire alarm system and had instructed a company to do the work following these UwFS and the charges that the Service applied. The school requested the Service to waive the charges so they could put them money toward the new fire alarm system as it was costing in excess of £25,000. The Service agreed to this as the school was improving fire safety in the premises by upgrading the fire alarm system and had shown a desire to minimise any future alarm activations. No further activations have been recorded for these premises.
17. NHS Properties
For many years the Service has asked the NHS to consider initiating a 5-minute delay to the call out of the fire service following an alarm activation. This would not delay any evacuation but would allow investigation time on site to ascertain if there was a fire and allow the alarm to be reset without our attendance if there was not. This was always rejected in the past by the NHS / Hospitals, however the introduction of the cost recovery charge resulted in the NHS Trust looking at the amount of attendances the fire service had made in the past and the resulting costs that would be incurred. A 5-minute delay has now been introduced and this has reduced the UwFS to a point where no charge has yet been raised.
18. The reduction in false alarms caused by automatic fire detection systems recorded in PI14 and the positive improvements in fire safety in premises resulting from the implementation of the charge for repeated UwFS, both demonstrate the success of this process.
19. The results of the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) consultation on the trial to introduce a charging system for certain businesses when we attend multiple unwanted fire signals at their premises, showed 91% supported the proposal for this to be implemented on a permanent basis. Due to the positive impact this is having, it is recommended that this process is implemented on a permanent basis from 1 April 2020.

Recommendations

20. CFA members are requested to:

- a) **note** the content of the report;
- b) **approve** the implementation of the cost recovery process for repeated UwFS in premises that the FSO applies to, on a permanent basis from 1 April 2020.

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