



Safest People, Safest Places

Performance Committee

30 June 2023

Change in Response to Automatic Fire Alarms

Report of the Director of Community Risk Management

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform members of the Combined Fire Authority of an updated approach to County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service's (CDDFRS's) attendance policy to calls for assistance from Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs) in non-residential premises.

Background

2. CDDFRS recognise the valuable contribution that an effective and correctly functioning AFA system can have to public safety. AFAs help to keep building occupants safe by providing early warning in the event of fire.
3. When an AFA actuates for any reason other than a fire condition, this is referred to as a false alarm. The point at which the Fire and Rescue Service is requested and responds to a false alarm is referred to as an Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS).
4. The majority of AFA calls CDDFRS attends are UwFS. A reduction in the number of UwFS will have a positive effect on the business community and will support frontline appliances being immediately available for life risk calls, crews carrying out prevention and protection activities in the community to help prevent fires from happening in the first place and undertaking risk critical firefighter training.

5. There is no legal requirement on the Fire and Rescue Service to respond to calls originating from an AFA system in order to investigate if there is a fire. The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (the Fire Safety Order) states that the 'Responsible Person' at the premises is legally responsible and must have in place a Fire Risk Assessment that details, amongst other measures, what actions are to be taken upon actuation of the AFA system.
6. It is not sufficient that the Fire Risk Assessment relies upon the Fire and Rescue Service to investigate the reason for the actuation of the AFA system but the Fire Risk Assessment should include action to notify the Fire and Rescue Service via the 999/112 system as soon as a fire, or physical signs of fire, are confirmed.
7. Benchmarking highlights that a majority of Fire and Rescue Services do not respond to investigate fire alarm activations in non-residential premises during daytime hours, and indeed many do not respond for the full 24 hour period. In the region all three Fire and Rescue Services have approaches where they do not respond during daytime hours, with Cleveland extending their approach to the full 24 hours.

Current Position in CDDFRS

8. Since January 2019, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service have not automatically responded to investigate fire alarm activations in low and medium risk non-residential premises such as offices, shops and leisure centres between the hours of 09:00 and 17:00 Monday to Friday, unless a call is received via the 999/112 system confirming a fire, or physical signs of fire, at the premises in question.
9. Additionally, since April 2019 CDDFRS have implemented a cost recovery model for attendance to false alarms through the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 as amended by the Localism Act 2011.
10. Despite the excellent work of the Business Fire Safety Team and Emergency Response crews engaging with UwFS offenders and implementing cost recovery, false alarms have continued to increase.
11. From 2020/21 to 2022/23 CDDFRS responded to 1,943 AFA calls from non-residential premises and of these 1914 (98.5%) were UwFS. Only 29 (1.5%) of these calls in the three-year period resulted in a fire. Of these 29 fires, only 4 needed the use of a portable extinguisher, hose reel or greater being needed to extinguish the fire. All 4 of these fires were during weekdays.
12. Analysing the hours between 0800- 1800 over the three-year period, CDDFRS responded to 896 calls from non-residential premises and of these 884 (98.7%) were UwFS. Only 12 (1.3%) of these calls in the three-year period resulted in a fire. Of these 12 fires, only 2 needed the use of a portable extinguisher, hose reel or greater being needed to extinguish the fire.

13. The above figures are represented in table 1 below:

Times of Day	Number of Incidents	Number of UwFS	Number of Fires	Extinguished by extinguisher, hose reel or greater
Full 24 hours	1,943	1,914 (98.5%)	29 (1.5%)	4 (0.2%)
0800 – 1800 hours	896	884 (98.7%)	12 (1.3%)	2 (0.2%)
1800 – 0800 hours	1,047	1,030 ((98.4%)	17 (1.6%)	2 (0.2%)

Table 1

14. CDDFRS believe the time band of 0800 – 1800 hours is important because non-domestic premises are in general occupied during these hours, and therefore a confirmation call can be made to 999/112 if there is a fire.

Updated Attendance Policy

15. There are two main categories of AFA calls. These are to either residential or non-residential premises. CDDFRS are only updating changes to the way the Service responds to AFA calls from non-residential premises and the response to residential AFAs will remain the same.

16. From 1 November 2023, CDDFRS will not automatically respond to investigate fire alarm activations in non-residential premises* between the hours of 08:00 and 18:00 hours, 7 days of the week with the below exceptions.

17. CDDFRS will always respond to calls 24 hours a day if:

- a confirmation call is received through 999/112 reporting a fire or signs of fire (such as a smell of burning). Any call received reporting a confirmed fire or signs of fire will receive the full pre-determined attendance;
- a premise has been granted an exemption by CDDFRS (see sections 21-30)

18. CDDFRS will always respond to:

- Single private domestic dwellings and sheltered accommodation schemes
- Other residential premises such as hostels, hotels and care homes
- Registered Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) sites
- Prisons
- Known heritage sites**
- Premises who have successfully applied to CDDFRS for an exemption (see sections 21-30)

19. CDDFRS will also respond to educational premises such as universities, colleges and schools including pre-schools on weekends, bank holidays and during school holidays (as detailed on the Durham County Council website for education premises in County Durham [School holiday and term dates - Durham County Council](#) and as detailed on Darlington Borough Council website for education premises in Darlington Borough [Darlington BC - School holiday dates](#)).
20. The AFA response policy will apply to calls received directly from premises and calls received through alarm receiving centres.

*A full list of premises classed as non-residential will be listed on CDDFRS's website.

**A full list of known heritage sites will be listed on CDDFRS's website.

Exemptions

21. For premises which are not identified on the attendance list, there are two types of exemption that premises can apply for.
- **Fire Alarm Exemption**
22. To be considered for this exemption, a premises fire alarm system must meet the criteria below. The Responsible Person will need to provide:
- certification confirming that the fire alarm detection system has been installed to BS 5839 Part 1 or equivalent standard (preferably with third party accreditation);
 - evidence that the fire alarm detection system is serviced and maintained in compliance with the recommendations of BS 5839 Part 1 or equivalent standard;
 - certification confirming that a fire signal output is only obtained when at least two independent triggering signals are present at the same time (preferably with third party accreditation). This is referred to as a 'Coincidence Alarm' in BS5839.
23. Where such a system is provided in premises, and submitted documentation approved by the Fire Safety Team, CDDFRS will respond in accordance with the full pre-determined attendance.
- **Exceptional Exemption**
24. This provides a further exemption process for premises that do not fit the above Fire Alarm Exemption criteria.
25. Any Responsible Person can apply for this exemption for their premises if they believe that there are exceptional circumstances.
26. The onus will be on the Responsible Person to explain the exceptional circumstances in full.

27. It is expected that exceptional exemptions will only be a temporary measure and will be reviewed within 12 months.
28. CDDFRS expects the Responsible Person to work towards achieving a permanent satisfactory solution, e.g. upgrading alarm systems to a 'Coincidence Alarm' system or employing staff to manage the risk etc.

Applying for an Exemption

29. All applications will be considered on an individual basis and will also consist of a full audit of the premises under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. A broadly compliant fire safety audit outcome is required as part of the exemption process.
30. For all applications Responsible Persons should note that it is not the responsibility of the Fire and Rescue Service to evacuate their premises. This must be part of their organisation's fire evacuation strategy and evacuation procedures should be practised regularly to ensure that they are timely and fit for purpose. Exemption applications based solely on the need to evacuate users of the premises will not be granted.
31. Exemptions will be reviewed and may be withdrawn following any mobilisation to an UwFS.

Benefits of the Updated Policy

32. It is estimated that the introduction of the new approach will reduce mobilisations to UwFS by between 250 to 300 per year, equating to up to 300 unnecessary blue light journeys per year. Based on the minimum crewing of four this equates to 1,200 hours (50 days) of lost productivity per year.
33. Reductions in the number of mobilisations to fire calls generated by AFA systems would realise the following benefits:
 - Increased appliance availability to respond to life risk incidents;
 - Reduced road risk to the public and staff due to less blue light emergency response journeys;
 - An increase of time available for risk critical training;
 - An increase of time available for community safety and arson reduction activities;
 - An increase of time available for business fire safety activities;
 - An increase of time available for operational crews to gather statutory risk critical operational information;
 - Reduce the Service's environmental impact by minimising blue light journeys.

Implementation Plan

34. An implementation plan for the new approach has been developed. A key component of the implementation plan is the communication plan for key internal and external stakeholders. The communication plan will commence in July and will consist of in person engagement with key stakeholders as well as communication through a variety of media, including emails, letters, website and social media.

Recommendations

35. Members are requested to:

- a. **note** the contents of this report;
- b. **receive** further reports as appropriate.