



Resident Experience Board  
22 November 2016

## **Changes to how Surrey Fire & Rescue Service responds to Automatic Fire Alarms**

**Purpose of the report:** Policy Development and Review

This report explains the current procedure for attending Automatic Fire Alarms and explores changes that Surrey Fire and Rescue Service will propose to Cabinet.

### **Introduction:**

- 1) Automatic Fire Alarms are alarm systems that are designed to react automatically where heat or smoke is detected to alert the occupants of a building of a potential fire situation. They are typically found in buildings of multiple occupancy, like care homes or hospitals and new-build houses, as well as in commercial premises, like factories or offices.
- 2) Due to the increasing number of call outs to automatic fire alarms that have proven to be false alarms, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) is reviewing how it responds to these calls. This is because when the Service is responding to what turns out to be a false alarm, they are not available to deal with real fires and rescue situations, and it may disrupt training and prevention work. In addition, using resources in this way and responding on 'blue lights' creates a risk to crews and to the public.
- 3) The proposal to review how the service responds to automatic fire alarms formed part of the consultation on the draft Public Safety Plan in 2016.

### **What do we do at the moment?**

- 4) Since the last review in 2008 call challenge has been used by SFRS successfully, for calls from automatic fire alarms in commercial premises. The current levels of attendance are:

### **Attendance Level One – Always Respond**

- 5) The service currently always respond by sending fire engines on blue lights to the following:
- a) Domestic premises
  - b) Hospitals
  - c) Care homes
  - d) Prisons
  - e) Warden assisted sheltered housing, local authority housing
  - f) Any unoccupied building that is not detailed in attendance level 3

### **Attendance Level Two – Call Challenge**

- 6) The service will ask the caller if there is any sign of fire, and if not, to check the building and confirm while they stay on the line. If there is no confirmation call via 999, SFRS will make an attendance, based on our risk assessment of what may need to be sent to that premises. We may make this attendance under non-emergency conditions, to keep resources available for confirmed emergencies and to reduce risk to the public and to our staff. This is used between the hours of 0700 and 1900:
- a) Hostels and hotels, other sleeping accommodation
  - b) Further education premises
  - c) Public buildings
  - d) Licenced premises
  - e) Schools
  - f) Shops
  - g) Other premises open to the public
  - h) Factories and warehouses
  - i) Offices and workplaces
- 7) Outside of the hours of 0700 and 1900, any of the above premises will receive the attendance level one response.

### **Attendance Level Three – No response unless call received**

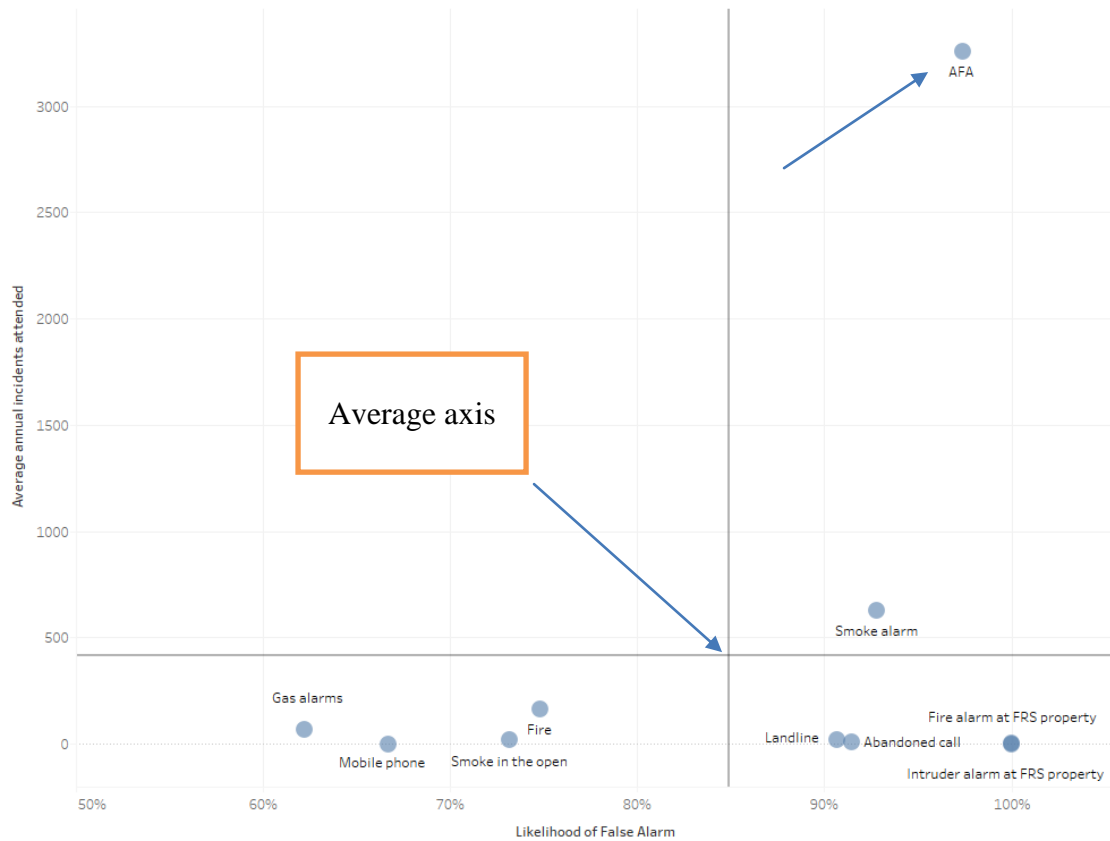
- 8) We will not attend premises that have frequent false alarms caused by automatic fire alarms unless a call is received confirming any positive signs of fire. Once confirmed, we will send a full emergency response.

|   |
|---|
| <b>Why do we need to change how we respond?</b> |
|---|

### **The majority of false alarms we attend are to automatic fire alarms**

- 9) The image below displays the likelihood of false alarms by incident type. The majority of false alarms that we attend are caused by automatic fire alarm systems.

Likelihood of the incident the Service is mobilised to being a false alarm



10) The trend of false alarms being triggered is likely to continue and place more demands on the service, with more properties being built over the coming years that will have automatic fire alarm systems fitted.<sup>1</sup>

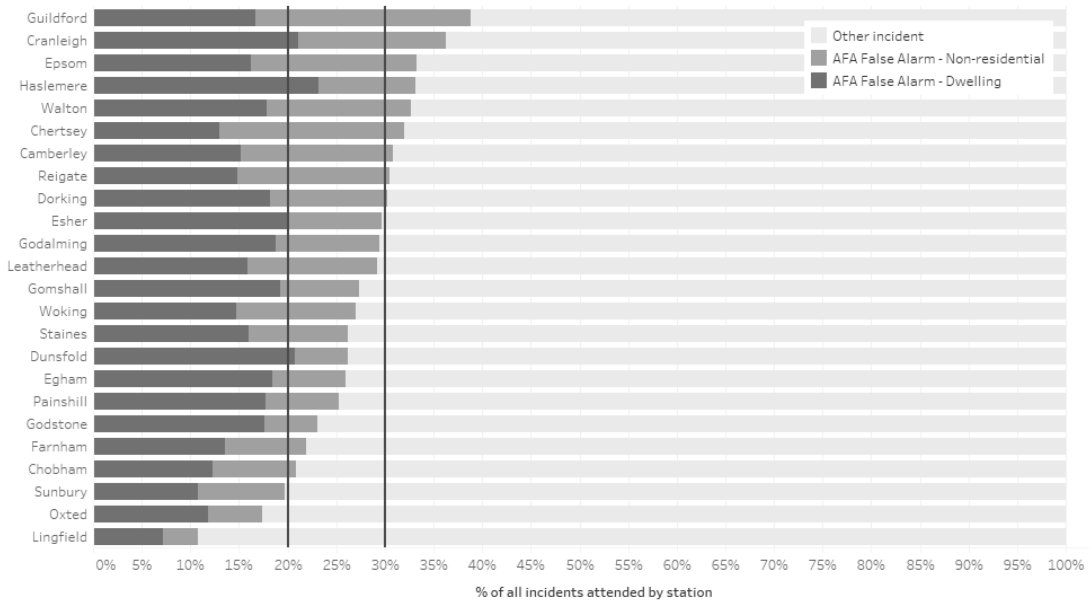
**Preserving our resources for real emergencies**

11) Responding to false alarms means there is a risk that the service may not be able to respond to genuine emergencies. It also increases the occasions when risk is posed, both to the public and to staff, by vehicles travelling on ‘blue lights’.

12) Nine of our 26 fire stations spend more than 30% of their time responding to automatic fire alarms that turn out to be false alarms. The graph below shows the detailed information. Reducing the number of false alarms that the service attends will free resources to focus on prevention and protection activity, a statutory requirement under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

<sup>1</sup> Surrey Infrastructure Study  
Page 3 of 7

### False alarms due to Automatic Fire Detection



- 13) [Nationally, 95% of all automatic fire alarm attendances are to false alarms](#) and in Surrey this is 98% of all automatic fire alarm attendances, In 2014/15 Surrey was in the bottom quartile of national performance relating to attendances at automatic fire alarms including those that are false alarms<sup>2</sup>. SFRS would need to reduce by approximately 1400 incidents a year to move into the highest quartile of national performance.
- 14) From April 2011 to April 2016, we attended 16,272 automatic fire alarms, of which 15,843 were false alarms.
- 15) In 2015/16, we attended 11,707 incidents, of which 3031 were to automatic fire alarms. Of this number, there were 3,000 emergency responses to automatic fire alarm systems that proved to be false alarms. This accounts for around 26% of all SFRS emergency incident attendances (excluding co-responding attendances).

### Learning from other services

- 16) Other Fire and Rescue Services have successfully implemented policies and procedures on automatic fire alarms applying to a wider range of premises than before. This has significantly reduced their emergency response attendances. For example some Fire and Rescue Services have reduced their response to all automatic fire alarms, requiring a confirmation phone call before a response is sent (see Annex A).

### Making savings

- 17) The extra wage costs for on-call staff, and wholetime staff on overtime, to attend automatic fire alarms that are false alarms, equates to approximately £13,000 a year, across the different duty systems.

<sup>2</sup> DCLG Fire Statistics Monitor, April 2014 – March 2015, Table 3d(i)

- 18) SFRS estimates that approximately £10,000 a year is spent on fuel costs for responding to and returning from automatic fire alarms.
- 19) Capacity gained through appropriate management of attendance at automatic fire alarms will allow SFRS to attend other emergencies and undertake further prevention and protection work to reduce risk and save life.

#### **What are the proposals for change?**

- 20) SFRS proposes a policy on how it responds to automatic fire alarms. If the service is unsure of a call or does not receive any information from the person responsible for the building, a response will still be sent.
- 21) It is proposed that this is adopted in three phases. In this way, the service can review the results of each phase and see if there's any additional work needed to prepare for the next phase. It will also allow businesses and residents to change their procedures in line with advice from SFRS.

**a) Phase 1 – Implementation in early 2017 with review after 6 months**

During the day: This would involve non-attendance to all calls for assistance to automatic fire alarm systems at lower risk commercial premises during the day, e.g. offices, shops, industrial units and sports centres, where additional information is not given (e.g. a verbal report of smoke or fire seen).

During the night: Lower risk commercial premises during the night would undergo call challenge, to determine if there is enough information to warrant an attendance.

The following premises would still receive automatic attendance:

- Critical national infrastructure
- Major heritage
- Control of Major Accident Hazard (COMAH) sites (2 lower tier in Surrey)
- Health care
- Residential care
- Residential multi occupied dwellings
- Residential individual dwellings

SFRS estimates that this could reduce the number of calls to false alarms by automatic fire alarms by up to 1000 calls a year.

**b) Phase 2 – Implementation in 2017 following outcome of review of Phase 1, with review after 6 months**

As above, plus below, which will attract call challenge during the day time as well as at night.

- Critical national infrastructure
- Major heritage
- Control of Major Accident Hazard (COMAH) sites (2 lower tier in Surrey)

- Health care
- Residential care
- Residential multi occupied dwellings
- Residential individual dwellings

It is estimated that this could reduce the number of calls to false alarms by an additional 1000 calls per annum.

**c) Phase 3 – Implementation in 2018 following outcome of review of Phase 2**

At all times, all premises will attract a call challenge to establish if sufficient intelligence can be gained to mobilise the appropriate response. It is estimated that this could reduce the number of calls by an additional 1000 per annum.

- 22) In total, once all the phases have been introduced, there will be a reduction of an estimated 3000 calls per year to false alarms due to automatic fire alarms based on historical data.
- 23) In order to begin educating the public and to pave the way for these changes, by the end of 2016, the service will offer a Safe & Well Visit to all instances of a false alarm caused by an automatic fire alarm. This will ensure that residents and businesses are proactively offered the right advice to make changes. Where the calls are to commercial premises we will also complete an Initial Premises Survey if required. This is where the service visits and gathers risk information to help crews know what they would come across if there were an incident at the premises. Crews undertaking these tasks will remain available for emergency calls unless they encounter serious risks to life or property which are dealt with by other service protocols.

|   |
|---|
| <b>What are the implications of this proposed change?</b> |
|---|

- 24) The service has ensured through its review, that a risk-assessed response is provided, and the risk assessment is appended to this paper (Annex B). The Service is aware of the risks associated with premises that house vulnerable people, such as care homes or hospitals and will ensure that a risk-assessed response is given. SFRS will engage with relevant stakeholders and communicate the proposal to them, to enable them to make changes to their processes and procedures.
- 25) SFRS's proposal ensures that the vulnerability of occupants is the key factor in deciding on how it responds to an automatic fire alarm. If the service is unsure of a call or does not receive any information from the person responsible for the building, a response will still be sent. The Equalities Impact Assessment (Annex C) has more information on the impact of the proposal on groups with protected characteristics.
- 26) If the service receives a call or responds to an automatic fire alarm, it will offer a Safe & Well Visit to give advice to help reduce future calls and improve safety within the business or home.

27) At the end of each phase, senior officers within the service will review the findings and will share the outcomes of the review of each phase and make any changes as necessary to the procedure before starting the next phase.

#### **Recommendations:**

28) That the Resident Experience Board

- a) Reviews the report and makes any comments or recommendations on Surrey Fire and Rescue Service's proposal to amend how it responds to automatic fire alarms.
- b) Supports the proposal outlined in this paper.

#### **Next steps:**

SFRS will note any recommendations or comments from the Resident Experience Board and reflect these in the paper to Cabinet.

SFRS will recommend that Cabinet approves this policy change on 13 December 2016.

SFRS will report back to the Board with learning points from the review of each Phase.

---

**Report contact:** Russell Pearson, Chief Fire Officer

**Contact details:** Ian Houseman, Area Commander, Prevention and Protection  
01737 224000

#### **Sources/background papers:**

Annex A – Neighbouring authorities automatic fire alarm process  
Annex B – Risk Assessment  
Annex C – EIA  
Annex D – other sources and reports used as background

This page is intentionally left blank