

**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL  
CABINET**

**DATE: 13 DECEMBER 2016**



**REPORT OF: MR RICHARD WALSH, CABINET MEMBER FOR LOCALITIES  
AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

**LEAD OFFICER: MR TREVOR PUGH, STRATEGIC DIRECTOR ENVIRONMENT &  
INFRASTRUCTURE**

**SUBJECT: CHANGES TO HOW SURREY FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE  
RESPOND TO AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS**

**SUMMARY OF ISSUE:**

This report explains the current procedure for attending incidents notified through Automatic Fire Alarms and explores changes that Surrey Fire and Rescue Service are proposing. Surrey Fire and Rescue Service ("SFRS") is seeking to expand its 'call challenge' policy in three Phases. Expansion of the policy will enable SFRS to determine more accurately whether emergency attendance is needed following a notification from an Automatic Fire Alarm or if the response can be a non-emergency response or stood down. SFRS will manage its response to calls from Automatic Fire Alarms based on the information received from the caller.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that:

1. SFRS expands on its existing call challenge policy through the three Phases set out in paragraphs 17-20 of this report.
2. Authority is delegated to the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Localities and Community Wellbeing to undertake the reviews of Phases 1 and 2 and make the decision concerning whether to proceed to the subsequent Phase of implementation.

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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 emergency responding to what turns out to be a false alarm, they are not available to deal with real fire 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.

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.

**DETAILS:****Background information**

1. Since the last review in 2008 'call challenging' emergency calls 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**

2. 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 two

**Attendance Level Two – Call Challenge**

3. 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 for the following classes of premises:
  - 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

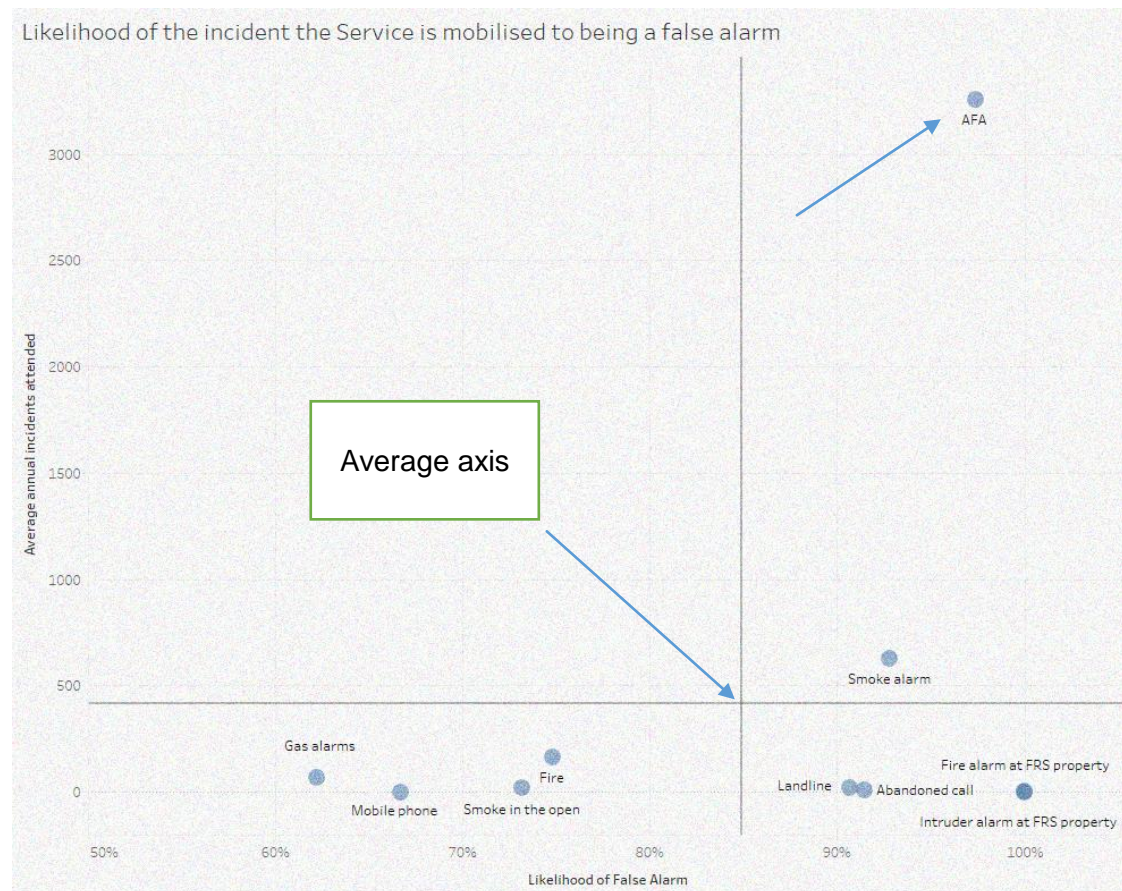
4. Outside of the hours of 0700 and 1900, any of the above premises will receive the attendance level one response.

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

5. SFRS 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, SFRS will send a full emergency response.

**Why do we need to change how we respond?****The majority of false alarms we attend are to automatic fire alarms**

6. The image below displays the likelihood of false alarms by incident type. The majority of false alarms that SFRS attends are caused by automatic fire alarm systems.



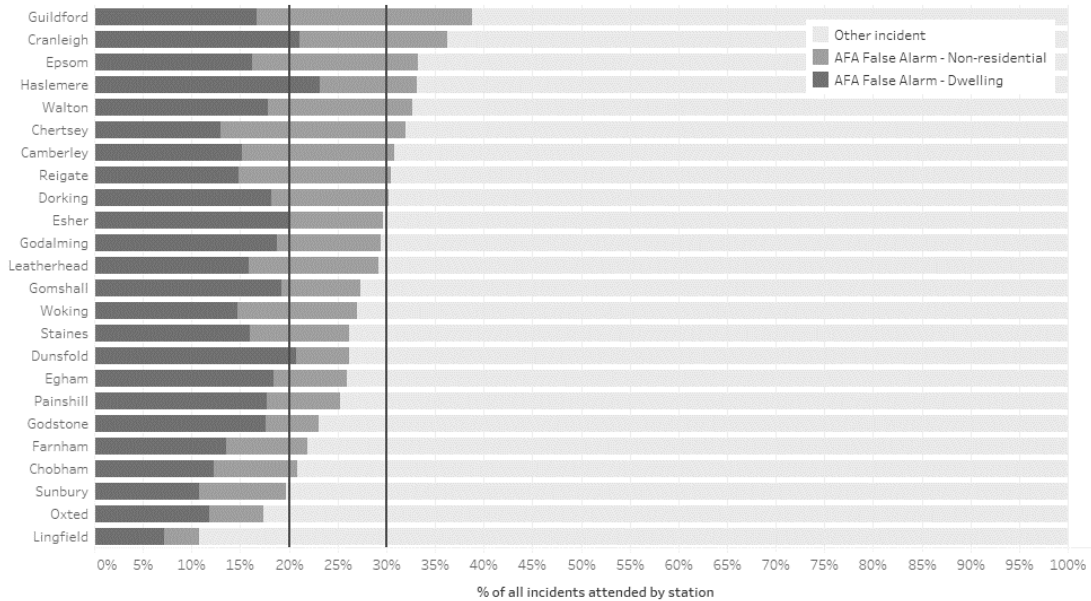
7. The trend of false alarms being triggered is likely to continue and place more demands on the service, with more properties being built over the coming years that will have automatic fire alarm systems fitted.<sup>1</sup>

### **Preserving our resources for real emergencies**

8. 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'.
9. 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

False alarms due to Automatic Fire Detection



10. Nationally, 95% of all automatic fire alarm attendances are to false alarms<sup>2</sup> and in Surrey this is 98% of all automatic fire alarm attendances. In 2014/15 Surrey was among the highest of Fire and Rescue Services nationally relating to the number of attendances at automatic fire alarms including those that are false alarms<sup>3</sup>. SFRS would need to reduce by approximately 1400 automatic fire alarm response incidents a year to move into the top quartile of national performance.
11. From April 2011 to April 2016, SFRS attended 16,272 automatic fire alarms, of which 15,843 were false alarms.
12. In 2015/16, SFRS 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**

13. 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 false alarms. Annex A sets out in more detail how other Fire and Rescue Services treat automatic fire alarm calls.

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/200092/FINAL\\_Facing\\_the\\_Future\\_3\\_md.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/200092/FINAL_Facing_the_Future_3_md.pdf)

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

### **Potential savings**

14. The extra wage costs for on-call staff, and whole time staff on overtime, to attend automatic fire alarms that are false alarms, equates to approximately £13,000 a year, across the different duty systems.
15. SFRS estimates that approximately £10,000 a year is spent on fuel costs for responding to and returning from automatic fire alarms.
16. 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.

### **Proposed changes**

17. SFRS proposes to expand its existing 'call challenge' policy on how it responds to automatic fire alarms. In the event that SFRS is unable to obtain sufficient clarity from the caller or does not receive any additional information an emergency response will still be sent. ([See paragraph 1 – 3](#))
18. It is proposed that in the changes would be undertaken in three phases. In this way, the service can review the results of each phase and see if there is 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. ([See paragraph 1 – 3](#))

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

During the day: The existing call challenge arrangements to lower risk commercial premises would continue.

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

Designated high risk premises would still receive automatic attendance

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

#### **b. Phase 2 – Implementation in latter half of 2017 following outcome of review of Phase 1, with review after 6 months**

The call challenge policy is extended to include the [premises in the current level 1 response](#), (with the exception of Domestic Premises), and the designated high risk premises during below 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 early 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.

19. In total, once all the phases have been introduced, there will be a reduction of an estimated 3000 responses per year to false alarms due to automatic fire alarms (based on historical data).
20. 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 premises subject to 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 survey 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.

**CONSULTATION:**

21. There will be a need for information to be provided to the affected premises' occupiers/owners before the introduction of the revised procedure.
22. The draft Public Safety Plan consultation included the proposal to review the Automatic Fire Alarm policy. 84.11% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the proposal and 7.72% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal. (See Annex E, Page 17 PSP Survey Responses)

**RISK MANAGEMENT AND IMPLICATIONS:**

23. 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 an appropriate 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.
24. 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.

25. When the service receives a call or responds to an automatic fire alarm, it offers a Safe & Well Visit to give advice to help reduce future calls and improve safety within the business or home.
26. 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.

#### **Financial and Value for Money Implications**

27. The associated communications campaign for this change will be funded within existing budgets. There are no other implementation costs.
28. The extra wage costs for on-call staff, and whole-time staff on overtime, to attend automatic fire alarms that are false alarms, equates to approximately £13,000 a year, across the different duty systems. In addition it is estimated that approximately £10,000 a year is spent on fuel responding to these calls.

#### **Section 151 Officer Commentary**

29. This procedural change should significantly reduce the number of false alarm call outs attended by the Fire Service. Whilst the initial resultant cash savings are modest, it has the potential to generate larger efficiencies by freeing up capacity. In the longer term enabling the service to review and reconfigure its service provision.

#### **Legal Implications – Monitoring Officer**

30. Cabinet will want to satisfy itself that the proposed policy changes represent the best interests of Surrey residents in running a safe and efficient Fire and Rescue Service. Furthermore, the Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2011 and is therefore required to have due regard to the impacts of any decisions it makes on those with protected characteristics. The annexed Equality Impact Assessment contains analysis of the proposals and Cabinet will need to consider these carefully.
31. The proposals do not represent a reduction to the level of service provided to Surrey residents, rather a change to way the service is managed. As such, there is no legal requirement for a formal consultation process to be followed. Notwithstanding this, the issue has been considered as part of the draft Public Safety Plan 2016 consultation and Cabinet will need to consider the outcome of that consultation – in making its determination here.

#### **Equalities and Diversity**

32. Please refer to the attached Equality Impact Assessment. (Annex C)

### **Safeguarding responsibilities for vulnerable children and adults implications**

33. As part of the Safe and Well visits undertaken as part of the changed response and offer of advice and education to the public any safeguarding issues will be referred in the normal manner to SCC.

### **Public Health implications**

34. As part of the Safe and Well visits undertaken as part of the changed response and offer of advice and education to the public any safeguarding issues will be referred in the normal manner to SCC.

### **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:**

- **Phase 1 – Implementation in early 2017 with review after 6 months**
- **Phase 2 – Implementation in 2017 following outcome of review of Phase 1, with review after 6 months**
- **Phase 3 – Implementation in 2018 following outcome of review of Phase 2**

#### **Contact Officer:**

**Iain Houseman, Area Commander for Prevention and Protection, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, Tel: 01737 224000**

#### **Consulted:**

Residents Experience Board, SFRS Chief Fire Offices Group, Representative Bodies,

#### **Annexes:**

Annex A Neighbouring authorities automatic fire alarm process  
 Annex B Call Questioning Risk Assessment  
 Annex C EIA for AFDs  
 Annex D References  
 Annex E Page 17 PSP Survey Responses

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

- See Annex D