



**SCOTTISH
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Working together for a safer Scotland

ABERDEEN CITY LOCAL SENIOR OFFICER AREA

SCOTTISH FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE THEMATIC REPORT REDUCING UNWANTED FIRE ALARM SIGNALS: APPROVED RESPONSE MODEL FOR AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

Report Ref SFR/22/049

1 RECOMMENDATION

The Aberdeen Public Protection Committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 Consider and note the information provided in this report in relation to how the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) will respond to automatic fire alarms (AFA's) from 01 April 2023.
- 1.2 Following a 12-week public consultation, recommendations were made to the Board that the SFRS should adopt Option A, with some amendments which reflected the feedback received during the consultation.
- 1.3 At its meeting on 16 December 2021, the SFRS Board approved recommendations for implementing a new model for responding to automatic fire alarms in Scotland.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Between 2015/16 and 2019/20, the SFRS responded to an annual average of 28,479 unwanted fire alarm signals (UFAS) that were caused by false alarms from automatic fire alarms (AFAs) in the workplace. This activity made up almost one third of SFRS's total operational demand and led to the Service making around 57,000 unnecessary blue light journeys every year, with levels rising over the past few years despite the concerted efforts of staff and partners to reverse this trend.
- 2.2 It is difficult to determine the underlying causes of rising levels of UFAS, but it is likely to be a range of factors including the number of AFA systems increasing in new builds, advances in system technology and the introduction of the SFRS's national approach to UFAS following reform, which sought to consolidate the policies of eight legacy Fire and Rescue Services.
- 2.3 Tackling this problem is made more complex by factors such as the scale of the number of premises incurring low numbers of UFAS, making individual targeting for improvement very challenging for LSO areas.
- 2.4 The impact of UFAS, particularly the lost productivity is considerable and now more so with firefighters heavily committed to maintaining their skills and developing new ones in highly technical areas, to meet the new demands and risks that Scotland's communities face, and working with key partners to keep homes safe from fire and

deliver other crucial community safety education and advice. In addition, there is the significant impact on the environment through vehicle emissions, fuel costs and the resultant road risk of unnecessary blue light journeys as well as the potential diversion of resources from 'real' incidents. The impact of UFAS on Retained & Volunteer Duty System (RVDS) firefighters by being called away from their families and workplaces regularly, is an indirect effect of this avoidable demand, as is the disruption it causes to businesses, healthcare, educational establishments and other establishments that create the highest numbers of UFAS.

- 2.5 There is so much more the SFRS can do to keep the people of Scotland safe, if UFAS were reduced and resources reinvested into areas that would deliver greater value such as upskilling and training, and more prevention work. Furthermore, by reducing UFAS, SFRS could improve the work/life balance of RVDS firefighters, maximise their role in the community and reduce the impact on their primary employer. There are also benefits for businesses, services and wider commerce through less disruption to their activities.
- 2.6 It is against this backdrop, that the Scottish Government made UFAS reduction a strategic priority and led to the SFRS conducting a detailed review of the effectiveness of its arrangements for reducing UFAS. Known as the UFAS Stocktake Review it identified recommendations for tackling the longer-term challenges of increasing numbers of UFAS and led to the SFRS deciding to prioritise an evaluation of strategies for responding to AFA's that have the potential for realising significant UFAS reductions.

3 CONSULTATION

- 3.1 Between October 2020 and April 2021, the SFRS conducted an options appraisal of various strategies for responding to AFAs, which included reviewing AFA response strategies employed by other UK Fire and Rescue Services, identifying and assessing a long list of options, and risk assessing a short list of viable options at a staff and stakeholder workshop. The outcome of the options appraisal was presented to the SFRS Board, at its meeting on 24 June 2021 and provided the evidence base, for approving plans to consult on three options for responding to AFA's.
- 3.2 The public consultation on options for responding to AFA's ran for a period of 12-weeks from 19 July 2021. A detailed Communications Plan, setting out the approach that would be employed for targeting staff and external stakeholders to raise awareness of the options and maximise responses during the consultation period, was developed.
- 3.3 A formal consultation document and supporting evidence was published. These presented the detailed case for change and background to the three options under consideration, including the process that was conducted to rule out various options. A consultation question set was designed, to ensure maximum value could be gained from the responses in helping to make a final decision around a preferred option.
- 3.4 The 12-week public consultation concluded on 11 October 2021, with a total 567 responses received by the Service and around 200 engagement activities conducted during the consultation period to raise awareness and seek feedback. The full consultation report covering the approach and analysis of the results and feedback, is presented with the report that went to the SFRS Board on 16 December 2021, available on the SFRS website.

3.5 Alternative options for responding to AFA's were suggested by respondents and themed for the purposes of being assessed by SFRS subject experts. Key themes that emerged were maintaining a status quo, and a one appliance response to all AFAs. Other options included utilising business vehicles to respond to AFA's and considering options that had been operating within the legacy services (e.g. the former Fife Fire and Rescue Service).

3.6 **Consideration of the Consultation Responses**

SFRS subject matter experts have reviewed the consultation responses and through the agreed governance route, the outcome of their review was carefully considered by SFRS Senior Management.

4 **PREFERRED OPTION**

4.1 In considering the preferred option, it is worth noting that the majority of respondents (60%) agreed, that to reduce the impact of UFAS, SFRS should stop automatically sending fire appliances to AFA's.

4.2 A full report covering the consultation approach and analysis of the results and feedback was presented to the SFRS Board. Giving due consideration of the consultation findings, Option A with amendment to include an automatic exemption for hospitals, was subsequently approved.

4.3 **Option A**

- Call challenge all AFAs from non-domestic premises, unless exempt.
- No response is mobilised, if questioning confirms there is no fire, or signs of fire.
- Automatic exemption applied to hospitals, is increased to a pre-determined attendance (PDA) of two fire appliances regardless of time of day and shall be subject to periodic review.
- Sleeping risk premises are automatically exempt from call challenging and will receive the following immediate response:
 - Residential Care Homes and hospitals receive PDA of two fire appliances regardless of time of day.
 - All other sleeping risk receive a PDA of one fire appliance between 0700 – 1800hrs and two fire appliances out-with these hours
- Implementation of the preferred option is delayed until April 2023, and,
- The COVID-19 interim response to AFAs will remain in place until go live of the preferred option. (The interim response is a single fire appliance to AFAs of certain property types).

4.4 By adopting Option A, it is estimated that the Service will reduce UFAS by 57%. This additional capacity will provide opportunities for reinvesting into areas that would deliver greater value, such as upskilling staff, training and more prevention work.

4.5 Option A presents an opportunity to reduce carbon emissions and therefore support the Services ambitious carbon reduction targets. Based on an estimated 57% reduction in UFAS and subsequent blue light journey's, SFRS has the potential to reduce their carbon emissions by up to an estimated 337 tonnes per year. This also supports the delivery of **Local Outcome Improvement Plan Stretch Outcome 13:** *'Address climate change by reducing Aberdeen's carbon emissions by at least 61% by 2026 and adapting to the impacts of our changing climate.'*

5 IMPLEMENTATION

- 5.1 The consultation results and findings have provided invaluable information going forward into the implementation phase. Implementation will commence through a carefully planned and managed approach from January 2022 onwards, which will include working with the staff and stakeholders directly affected by any changes.
- 5.2 The establishment of six workstreams, will form the basis of a more detailed implementation plan, which will be coordinated by an implementation working group with oversight from the UFAS Review Project Board.
- 5.3 Local Senior Officer led engagements will aim to provide dutyholders with support and guidance on considerations for fire protection, limiting false alarms, training staff and other relevant measures.
- 5.4 Nationally, dutyholders will be fully supported by the SFRS, through a programme of sector specific fire safety seminars.