

Divisions Affected – All divisions

CABINET MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, INEQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

9 January 2024

Automatic Fire Alarm Attendance Policy

Report by Corporate Director for Public Health and Community Safety

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to

Authorise the Chief Fire Officer to proceed with a public consultation for changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's automatic fire alarm attendance policy.

Executive Summary

2. This paper outlines the national and local issues with respect to the high incidence of false alarms from automatic fire alarms systems and proposes a public consultation regarding changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's policy for attending automatic fire alarm incidents. The paper highlights that several efficiency and effectiveness benefits could be delivered for OCC through reduced incidents being attended by the Fire and Rescue Service, financial efficiencies, reduced associated vehicle mileage, reduced vehicle emissions, higher productivity for Fire and Rescue Service employees and a reduction in unnecessary blue light mobilisations that pose a risk to the public.

Background

3. The Fire and Rescue Service published its Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2022-26 which sets out how the service will continue to manage and reduce the fire related risks to Oxfordshire, as well as contributing to our broader community safety work within Public Health. There are several challenges that the service continues to face including financial pressures, availability of our On-Call firefighters, meeting our response standards, and providing an agile service that addresses current and emerging risks such as climate adaptation, increased population, social deprivation, and changes to County infrastructure.

Community Safety Services, which includes the Fire and Rescue Service, is currently undertaking a fundamental internal review, encompassing all departments and service-areas, to identify changes to services which provide opportunities for improvement in efficiency and effectiveness and economy. This wider programme of review is inherently linked to supporting the principle of constant learning and

improvement within Community Safety Services and supports the fiscal health of the wider council.

One area that presents itself as an opportunity as far as the Community Safety Service's review is concerned is the high rate of false alarms that has been a theme of fire and rescue service inspection since His Majesty's Inspector of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) began the modern era of fire and rescue inspection in 2018. In the very first 'State of Fire' report in 2019, HMICFRS identified that *"False alarms continue to be the biggest demand services face. In 2018/19, across England 40.1 percent (231,067) of all incidents attended by [fire and rescue services] FRSs were fire false alarms"*. HMICFRS also identified that *"nearly two-thirds (65 percent, 150,967) [of these fire false alarms] were due to apparatus such as a smoke alarm or sprinkler being triggered"*. This report will focus on this subset of false alarms from automatic fire alarm systems.

Within Thames Valley, the subject of false alarms has been the subject of 'areas for improvement' following each of the two inspections that each of the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services received in 2018/19 and 2021/22 respectively. In the year to 31 March 2021, the percentage of all incidents attended by each of the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services that were false alarms was 50% (Oxfordshire), 39% (Buckinghamshire) and 48% (Royal Berkshire). False alarms ultimately represent an inefficient use of fire and rescue resources.

This report focuses on the intention for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS) to implement a revised automatic fire alarm attendance policy and procedure with a view to adoption across Thames Valley. This policy and procedure will be based on a review of mobilisation policies that have been implemented in other fire and rescue services around the UK.

Key Issues

Oxfordshire False Alarm Performance

4. OFRS has twice been told by HMICFRS that we need to effectively address the burden of false alarms. Our most recent attempts at improvement since September 2021 have been to weight our interventions more heavily towards persistent problem premises including the allocation of single points of contact for those premises to ensure we develop meaningful relationships. Despite this, we have been unable to meaningfully reduce our attendance at false alarms. Analysis of our last five years of incident data indicates:
 - That we attend on average around 1500 false alarms from automatic fire alarms per year.
 - Of these, around 1% are caused by a fire with the remaining 99% being false alarms¹.

Proposals for changes to automatic fire alarm attendance policy

¹ Data taken from the national Incident Recording System.

5. A review of automatic fire alarm policies from other fire and rescue services in the UK highlight that a number² have introduced policies that involve call challenge (effectively asking premises to confirm whether the premises has been checked and whether a fire has been found) and call filtering to identify which incidents will and will not be attended based on the type of building involved. Following this review of automatic fire alarm attendance policies from several other fire and rescue services, it is proposed that OFRS pursue a policy of call challenge and call filtering via Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) and that this is subject to a full public consultation as part of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's Community Risk Management Planning process.

The approach that will be consulted on will involve maintaining a reduced emergency response attendance (generally one fire engine as per the current policy) to the highest risk buildings. For lower risk buildings, the intention is to consult on a policy of not sending a fire engine to reports of automatic fire alarm actuation in these premises unless the call is backed up with a positive indication that there is a fire or that there are possible signs of a fire. The public consultation will propose additional detail and a rationale for how buildings are categorised.

Benefits

6. The benefits that would be realised by implementing a revised automatic fire alarm policy will clearly be dependent on what is implemented following the outcomes of the public consultation. The general benefits for the communities of Oxfordshire are as follows:
- Reduction in false alarms being attended by the Fire and Rescue Service.
 - Reduced pay costs associated with a reduction in the mobilising of crews conditioned to the On-Call and day crewing duty systems.
 - Reduced disruption for On-Call primary employment which could improve the retention of On-Call firefighters over the longer term.
 - Increased fire appliance availability to respond to genuine emergency incidents.
 - Increased productivity of Wholetime firefighter crews.
 - Reduced vehicle costs associated with the attending false alarms.
 - Reduced road risk associated with attending automatic fire alarm activations.
 - Reduced vehicle emissions.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

7. The proposed changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's automatic fire alarm attendance policy will ultimately allow the fire and rescue service to prioritise its limited resources on more productive tasks, including community safety work, which will enable the service to prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents (priority 9). An additional and indirect benefit will be in the reduction of incidents being attended

² Services that have implemented policies of call challenge and incident filtering include Kent, West Sussex, Surrey, Lincolnshire, Manchester and Scotland Fire and Rescue Services.

by the service which will contribute in small way to help the council address the climate emergency (priority 1).

Financial Implications

8. There are currently no significant costs identified for implementing a revised automatic fire alarm policy that is in line with this report. It is possible that some small costs might be associated with the technical implementation of revised policy within the Thames Valley Fire Control Service. Any such costs will be scoped as the project proceeds but are not expected to be significant and would be funded within the existing service budget.

Comments checked by:

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(Finance)

Legal Implications

9. There is no strict duty for fire and rescue services to attend automatic fire alarm activations. Any policy that is based on non-attendance would have to be compatible with the statutory duty to make provision (sufficient personnel, services, equipment, effective arrangements for receiving and responding to calls for help and for obtaining information which the Fire and Rescue Service needs to carry out its functions) for the purposes of:
 - (a) Extinguishing fires in its area, and
 - (b) Protecting life and property in the event of fires in its areas
10. Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, the responsible person has a duty to take general fire precautions. The responsible person includes the owner, employer, landlord, occupier or anyone in a control of the premises. This places the onus on the responsible person to undertake a fire risk assessment and consider if an automatic fire alarm system is required at the premises, ensure it is tested and maintained and take steps to manage false alarms.

Comments checked by:

Paul Grant, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer,
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Staff Implications

11. The staff resources for engaging with stakeholders as part of the public consultation and for implementing any new automatic fire alarm attendance policy and supporting procedures would be drawn from the Fire Protection department within the Fire and Rescue Service and with support from our partner organisation, Thames Valley Fire Control Service.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

12. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been drafted and will remain a live document throughout the internal and public consultation and decision making process. At this stage, the EIA indicates that any policy that is aligned with this report would not have any direct or indirect impact on protected groups.

Sustainability Implications

13. A Climate impact Assessment has been drafted and will remain a live document throughout the internal and public consultation and decision making process. This assessment has indicated that any policy changes stemming from this work are only likely to result in a reduction in the incidents attended by the Fire and Rescue Service which will lead to less mileage being undertaken by fire engines and therefore less vehicle emissions. A net positive environmental benefit is therefore anticipated.

Risk Management

14. There are five areas of possible risk that are introduced by implementing a revised policy and procedure aligned with this paper as follows:
 - i) The risk of a fire, fire-related fatality/injury or serious damage occurring in a premises due to a delayed fire and rescue attendance stemming from a revised fire alarm attendance policy. In the last five years, only around 1% of automatic fire alarm incidents have been caused by fires and these incidents have tended to not require much if any action on the part of the Fire and Rescue Service. However, whilst a very low risk, there is always a chance that a serious incident will occur in a building to which the service was alerted by an automatic fire alarm but did not respond.
 - ii) Damage to the service's reputation by pursuing a change to automatic fire alarm policy that wider stakeholders disagree with. It is felt that by pursuing arrangements that align with those that already exist within the wider fire and rescue sector, coupled with a structured public consultation exercise, the service can manage this risk to a low enough level that would allow it to proceed.
 - iii) Reduced incidents for crews on On-Call terms and conditions resulting in less pay for this group of employees. This loss of incidents and pay could result in reduced morale amongst these employees and exasperate current recruitment and retention issues. There is a possibility that some affected employees may welcome the reduction in disruption posed by attending false alarms.
 - iv) Increased average response times across the service due to a reduction in automatic fire alarm incidents in our more urban areas which has the consequence of our response performance being more influenced by our slightly slower response performance in our more rural areas. As this piece of work is part of a much wider review within Community Safety Services, the intention will be for this risk to be offset by changes and improvements to the operational response model within the Fire and Rescue Service.

- v) Increased risk to firefighter safety if faced with a more developed fire due to a delayed attendance. This is a very low risk for several reasons. Firstly, our ongoing firefighter training ensures that our highly trained crews can safely, competently, and effectively deal with serious fires and we will monitor and review incidents to ensure any lessons are learned. Also, our proposals ensure that the buildings that pose the highest risk to our firefighters are highlighted as requiring an attendance in the event of a fire alarm actuation anyway. Additionally, the increased road risk associated with responding to automatic fire alarms could arguably exceed any risk to firefighters from more developed fires given the training our crews receive.

Ansaf Azhar

Corporate Director – Public Health and Community Safety.

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