Divisions Affected – All divisions

DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, INEQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
02 July 2024

Automatic Fire Alarm Attendance Policy – Post Consultation

Report by Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety

RECOMMENDATION

1.   **The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:**

    Note the results of the consultation exercise as set out in this report and the consultation report attached at Appendix Two, and delegate authority to the Chief Fire Officer to:

    a)   **select amongst the proposed automatic fire alarm response options as deemed appropriate following discussions with other Thames Valley fire and rescue services; and**

    b)   **to elevate building types into a higher risk category, either temporarily or on a permanent basis, to manage an identified risk posed by that type of building in the future.**

Executive Summary

2.   This paper provides as update following the recent public consultation that has been conducted concerning changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's automatic fire alarm mobilisation policy and procedure. The paper highlights that general agreement with the proposals was amongst the consultation feedback and that there is sufficient support for each of the options to give latitude to enable either of the proposed options to be selected. Furthermore, that the decision regarding which option to pursue is driven as much by the need to ensure operational alignment across Thames Valley and therefore that the Chief Fire Officer requires the delegated authority to select the appropriate option in negotiation with other Thames Valley partners.

Background

3.   The Fire and Rescue Service's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2022-2026 identified that we would be working with our fire and rescue partners across Thames Valley to reduce the number of false alarms that we attend.

4.   At a delegated decisions meeting on 09 January 2024, the Cabinet Member for Public Health Inequalities and Community Safety authorised the Chief Fire Officer to proceed to a public consultation for changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's

automatic fire alarm attendance policy. This decision was underpinned by the service demonstrating a need to reduce the number of false alarms from automatic fire alarms that it attends for reasons of efficiency, effectiveness, and economy. The report underpinning this decision can be found at appendix 1.

5.   This decision followed several months of discussion, incident data analysis and policy proposal development amongst the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services as part of an agreed collaborative approach to aligning fire alarm mobilisation procedures through their joint Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS).

6.   A public consultation took place in Oxfordshire between 4 March 2024 and 13 May 2024 with the primary target audience being employees of the Fire and Rescue Service together with business, non-profit and local/central government organisations. A post consultation report has been completed that describes the approach taken in the consultation and sets out an analysis of the responses and feedback received. Some metrics and feedback relevant to this delegated decision will be taken from that report which can be found embedded at appendix 2.

Key Issues

7.   In total, we received 135 responses to the public consultation, of which 131 responded directly via the online survey. The make-up of the respondents was broad with, amongst others, business, residents and employees of the Fire and Rescue Service represented.

8.   The majority of respondents agreed that there was a need for the Fire and Rescue Service to change its approach to attending automatic fire alarm activations. A similar proportion also agreed with the proposals for categorising building risk and the proposed approach to attending all fire alarm activations in high-risk buildings.

9.   A smaller majority of respondents also agreed with proposals for not attending fire alarm activations in low-risk buildings at any time of the day.

10.   Respondents were asked to offer their views about the three discrete fire alarm response options in table 1:

Table 1 - Fire alarm response options from public consultation

Option A	• Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in **higher-risk and medium-risk** buildings. • Not attend **low-risk buildings 24 hours a day** unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.
Option B	• Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in **higher-risk** buildings. • Not attend **low-risk buildings 24 hours a day** unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. • Not attend **medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only** unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.

	• Attend automatic fire alarm incidents in **medium-risk** buildings outside of these times unless the building is occupied and there are no signs of fire.
Option C	• Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in **higher-risk** buildings. • Not attend automatic fire alarm systems for **both low and medium-risk buildings 24 hours a day** unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.

11. The survey responses indicated that there was support for all options although this was not evenly distributed. Due to the absence of a 'do nothing' option in the survey, those 16 respondents that either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the need for change generally expressed a desire for an attendance by the fire and rescue service to still be made. With their responses removed from the figures, the feedback indicates that Option B was the most popular with 65 preferences, Option A was the second most popular with 21 preferences and Option C was the third most popular with 26 preferences.

12. The Fire Brigades Union's (FBU) provided a written response to the consultation (see letter embedded at appendix 3) which did not provide responses to the questions posed in the survey. However, their response was not in favour of the proposals, citing a risk to firefighters, fire control staff and local communities. They also indicated that rather than not attending fire alarm activations, fire and rescue services should *"demand more resources and extra capacity to deal with [Automatic Fire Alarms] AFAs safely and properly"*. The Fire Brigades Union also voiced concern that the public were consulted at the same time as themselves rather than pre-public-consultation arrangements being put in place for themselves.

13. The service has since responded back to the FBU following their feedback and to address the concerns they raised (see appendix 4).

14. Survey respondents also clearly outlined that, should any of the proposals be taken forward, there is a strong need and desire for there to be a high-profile campaign and strong stakeholder support to ensure that organisations are aware and ready for the changes.

15. The Fire and Rescue Service believes that the public consultation feedback supports the adoption of either of the proposed options. Due to the collaborative nature of the project, the need to ensure operational alignment via TVFCS is felt to the biggest driver as to which option is ultimately selected. This requires an element of negotiation amongst the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services. It is therefore recommended that the Chief Fire Officer is given delegated authority to select amongst the consultation options as deemed appropriate following discussion and negotiation with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services. Furthermore, that the Chief Fire Officer also be given the authority to elevate building types into a higher risk category, either temporarily or on a permanent basis, to manage an identified risk posed by that type of building in the future.

Benefits

16. The benefits that would be realised by implementing a revised automatic fire alarm policy will clearly be dependent on which of the proposals is taken forward. 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

17. Changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's automatic fire alarm attendance policy will 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 by the service which will contribute in a small way to help the council address the climate emergency (priority 1).

Financial Implications

18. 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 shared across the Thames Valley collaboration with the local costs funded within existing service budgets.

    Comments checked by:

    Stephen Rowles, Finance Business Partner, Stephen.rowles@oxfordshire.gov.uk (Finance)

Legal Implications

19. 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

20.   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, paul.grant@oxfordshire.gov.uk (Legal)

Staff Implications

21.   The staff resources 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 fire and rescue services as well as Thames Valley Fire Control Service.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

22.   An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been drafted and will remain a live document throughout the decision-making process, implementation and during evaluation. 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

23.   A Climate impact Assessment has been drafted and will remain a live document throughout the decision-making process, implementation and during evaluation. 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

24.   The main risks associated with the implementation of the any of the proposed changes remain those highlighted in the consultation document which are as per the following table along with the proposed control measures:

Potential Risks	Measures we will take to mitigate any risk

Increased risk of building damage	• There are very few fires linked to automatic fire alarms with only approximately 1% leading to a fire and the majority of these require minimal firefighting activity from our firefighters. We will monitor these figures to understand the impacts that any changes to our policy might be having, learn, and adapt our approach. • We will provide responsible persons with advice and guidance. This will include providing advice on considerations for fire protection, evacuation, and the importance of calling 999 if a fire is confirmed. • We will ensure the call challenge process is designed around asking the most relevant questions of the caller and all such calls received will be treated as a priority and should not result in a notable delay in sending fire engines where they are genuinely required.
Increased risk to building occupants	• There are very few casualties linked to automatic fire alarm activations and we will monitor these figures to understand the impacts that any changes to our policy might be having, learn, and adapt our approach. • The most likely risk to people is when they are asleep and such properties are not within scope within options A or B and would therefore continue to receive an automatic response. • For the other option (C) we regularly check and test the fire safety arrangements of buildings where there is a sleeping risk through our risk-based inspection programme.
Increased risk to firefighter safety if faced with a more developed fire	• Our ongoing firefighter training will ensure that we can safely, competently, and effectively deal with the risk of a more developed fire and we will monitor and review incidents, to ensure any lessons are learned. • Increased road risk associated with responding to automatic fire alarms could be argued to exceed any risk to firefighters from more developed fires.
Fire and rescue reputational damage	• It is felt that because we are pursuing a policy of non-attendance which already exist in several other fire and rescue services, the risk of reputational damage is already minimised. • We will ensure that our final decision considers the feedback of stakeholders and reflects any significant concerns they have. • Any changes we implement following consultation will be done through a carefully planned and managed approach, which will include working with and preparing stakeholders who may be directly affected.
Increased difficulty to recruit and retain firefighters on the On-Call duty system	• While a reduction in incident may impact firefighters on our on-call duty system who are paid for each call they attend, thereby reducing pay, there are opportunities to reinvest this in other work that they do. • Reduced false alarm incident may also improve retention and recruitment issues due to reduction in disruption to their primary employment and a better work/life balance.

	• We are actively working with representatives of firefighters on our On-Call duty system, and with our wider employee group, to manage any such risks.

Rob MacDougall
Chief Fire Officer and Director for Community Safety

Contact Officer: Area Manager Jason Crapper, Fire and Rescue Service, jason.crapper@oxfordshire.gov.uk, Tel. 07766498055

June 2024

Annex 1 – AFA Attendance Policy - Delegated Decision Report (Jan 2024)

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Annex 2 - Engagement – Fire Alarm Consultation Report

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Annex 3 – Consultation Written Response from FBU

Fire Brigades Union
submission - AFA atte

Annex 4 - Written Response Back to the FBU Following Their Consultation Feedback

KOxfordshire
Response to FBU AFA

Annex 1 – AFA Attendance Policy – Delegated Decision Report (Jan 2024)

Divisions Affected – All divisions

CABINET MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

09 January 2024

Automatic Fire Alarm Attendance Policy

Report by Jason Crapper

RECOMMENDATION

25. **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

26. 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

27. 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

28. 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

alarms[1].

Proposals for changes to automatic fire alarm attendance policy

29.   A review of automatic fire alarm policies from other fire and rescue services in the UK highlight that a number[2] 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

30.   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

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[1] Data taken from the national Incident Recording System.
[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.

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

Financial Implications

32. 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:

    Thomas James, Finance Business Partner, thomas.james@oxfordshire.gov.uk (Finance)

Legal Implications

33. 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

34. 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, paul.grant@oxfordshire.gov.uk (Legal)

Staff Implications

35. 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

36. 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

37. 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

38. 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.

Rob MacDougall
Chief Fire Officer

Contact Officer: Area Manager Jason Crapper, Fire and Rescue Service, jason.crapper@oxfordshire.gov.uk, Tel. 07766498055

December 2024

Annex 2 – Engagement – Fire Alarm Consultation Report

OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL

Proposed changes to the way we respond to automatic fire alarms – consultation report
March 2024

Contents

1 Executive summary

1.1 This report sets out an analysis of the responses and feedback provided via the public consultation that Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service conducted between 4 March 2024 and 13 May 2024. The public consultation invited views regarding proposals for the service to reduce false alarms by changing the way in which it responds to reports of fire alarm activations. In total, we received 134 responses to the consultation, of which 131 responded directly via the online survey hosted on Let's Talk Oxfordshire.

1.2 The analysis indicates that there was general agreement with the proposals amongst survey respondents with support for the need for change, the approach to categorising building risk and the proposals for how we attend high and low-risk buildings. The respondents clearly outlined that, should any of the proposals be taken forward, there is a strong need and desire for there to be a high-profile campaign and strong stakeholder engagement to ensure that organisations are aware and ready for the changes.

1.3 Nevertheless, a number of survey respondents, along with the Fire Brigades Union, did not agree with the proposals and a number of notable comments were made, some of which have received a service response within this report.

1.4 The feedback from this consultation will be considered by the service to help inform its future intentions.

2 Introduction

2.1 This report analyses and summarises the public consultation that primarily explored views regarding new arrangements for the Fire and Rescue Service to reduce the attendance at false fire alarms caused by automatic fire alarms systems. This public consultation took place between 4 March 2024 and 13 May 2024 with the primary target audience being business, non-profit and local/central government organisations.

2.2 Attending false alarms costs the council money and diverts our fire engines away from more valuable work such preventing fires, community safety activities for the most vulnerable, and taking part in critical training. It also impacts our part-time firefighters and their employers when they are released from their normal employment to attend incidents.

2.3   Our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2022-2026 identified that we
       would be working with our fire and rescue partners across Thames Valley to reduce
       the number of false alarms that we attend. The policy proposals were therefore
       developed with Royal Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Services as
       part of the principles of our Thames Valley collaborative workstreams and based on
       us not attending automatic fire alarms in some types of buildings until we have
       spoken to someone using a call challenge process.

3 Methodology

3.1   The public consultation focused on an online survey that was hosted on Let's Talk
       Oxfordshire between 4 March 2024 and 13 May 2024. Participants were provided
       with an information document that described why change is needed, our current
       procedures and the proposal options, and the risks and benefits associated with the
       proposals. A frequently asked questions section was provided to answer the likely
       commonly asked questions.

3.2   A key ambition of the public consultation was to target our own employees as well
       as business, non-profit and local/central government organisations as these were
       key stakeholders being affected by our proposals. Furthermore, we wanted to
       maximise the reach of the public consultation to ensure a high number of
       respondents.

3.3   The main approach taken to fulfil this brief was to email a contact list of Oxfordshire
       businesses that totalled approximately 16k contacts. Additionally, LinkedIn was
       used as the primary social media channel to raise the profile of the consultation
       although Twitter was also used as a secondary means, accepting that it did not
       allow us to focus as easily on the key stakeholder organisations mentioned. We
       also wrote to key partner organisations such as bordering fire and rescue services,
       Oxfordshire local authority Chief Executives and Thames Valley Police. Specific
       communications were also sent to fire alarm receiving centre companies.

3.4   Internally within the county council and fire and rescue service, the weekly
       councillor briefing was used four times to raise the profile of the consultation. We
       also engaged with the On-Call Duty System employee forum within the Fire and
       Rescue Service, the Fire Brigades Union and sent out several emails internally and
       requested posters to be displayed on stations to engage our employees.

4 Response rate and demographics

4.1   In total, we received 134 responses to the consultation, of which 131 responded
       directly via the online survey. The make-up of these respondents was as follows:

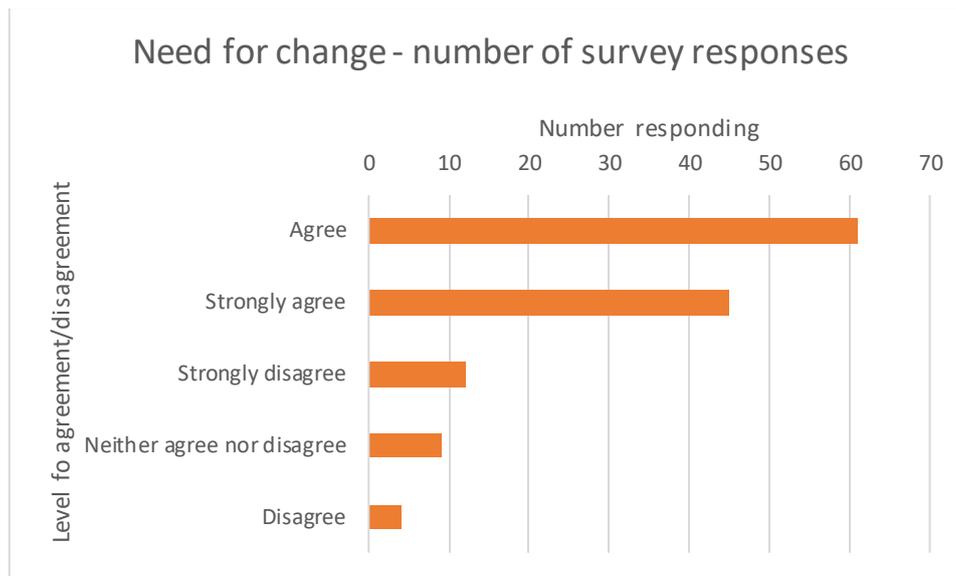|	
a business representative	34
an Oxfordshire resident	24
a representative of a group or organisation	16
an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	16
an Oxfordshire resident, a business representative	14
an Oxfordshire resident, an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	7

Other	6
Neighbouring fire and rescue service	3
an Oxfordshire resident, a representative of a group or organisation	3
a member of the public living outside of Oxfordshire	3
a parish, town, district, or county Councillor	2
an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, an employer of a part time firefighter(s) on the On-Call duty system	1
an Oxfordshire resident, a representative of a group or organisation, a parish, town, district, or county Councillor	1
an Oxfordshire resident, an employer of a part time firefighter(s) on the On-Call duty system	1
an employer of a part time firefighter(s) on the On-Call duty system	1
an Oxfordshire resident, a business representative, a representative of a group or organisation	1
Fire Brigades Union	1

4.2   Of the notable respondents that identified themselves as 'other', three were from Thames Valley Fire Control Service and one was from a fire alarm receiving centre company. We also received three responses to the consultation from three neighbouring fire and rescue services, of which two were written emailed responses. We also received a written response from the Fire Brigades Union.

4.3   For those respondents that identified themselves as being employees of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, seven identified that they were non-operational, 12 identified that they were on a Wholetime duty system and five identified that they were on the On-Call duty system.

5 Findings

i)   Need for change

5.1   Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed that there was a need for change to way that Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service respond to automatic fire alarms activations given the consultation proposals. The majority of respondents to the survey (106) either agreed or strongly agreed that there was a need for change.

Need for change - number of survey responses

Number responding

Level fo agreement/disagreement	
Agree	(bar to ~61)
Strongly agree	(bar to ~45)
Strongly disagree	(bar to ~12)
Neither agree nor disagree	(bar to ~9)
Disagree	(bar to ~4)

5.2 Those respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with the need for change were representative of the various groups that responded to the survey, as illustrated by the table below.

a business representative	30
an Oxfordshire resident	19
an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	13
an Oxfordshire resident, a business representative	11
a representative of a group or organisation	11
Other	7
an Oxfordshire resident, an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	5
an Oxfordshire resident, a representative of a group or organisation	3
a parish, town, district, or county Councillor	2
a member of the public living outside of Oxfordshire	2
an Oxfordshire resident, a representative of a group or organisation, a parish, town, district, or county Councillor	1
an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, an employer of a part time firefighter(s) on the On-Call duty system	1
an Oxfordshire resident, a business representative, a representative of a group or organisation	1

5.3 Of those that agreed or strongly agreed that there was a need for change, some mentioned that false alarms waste valuable resources and time, while others mentioned their personal experiences with false alarms. Some respondents also mentioned the need for better engagement between business owners and fire alarm installation companies to reduce the incidence of false alarms. One respondent stated that *"automated systems are great for alarming workers and inhabitants of a building but should not in most cases need the automatic calling out of an emergency service".*

5.4   16 respondents to the survey, who identified as being from various responding groups, disagreed or strongly disagreed that change was required (see breakdown below):

an Oxfordshire resident	4
an Oxfordshire resident, a business representative	3
an Oxfordshire resident, an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	2
a business representative	2
a representative of a group or organisation	2
an employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	1
a member of the public living outside of Oxfordshire	1
an Oxfordshire resident, an employer of a part time firefighter(s) on the On-Call duty system	1

5.5   Of these that disagreed or strongly disagreed that there was a need for change, some mentioned concerns about the risk of not attending a fire alarm, whilst others mentioned the need for better fire alarm systems and engagement between businesses and fire alarm installation companies. Some respondents also mentioned the impact on recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters. One respondent stated that *"it's hard enough to get [On-Call] recruits in the door to keep them when they don't turn out for a month will be even harder"*.

5.6   9 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the need for change. Some mentioned that they could see both sides of the proposal, whilst others mentioned the need to consider all aspects of the fire service, including financial constraints. Some of these respondents also mentioned concerns about the impact on recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters.

ii)   Categorisation of building risk

5.7   Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the building risk categorisation that was offered in the proposal. The majority of respondents (101) to the survey agreed or strongly agreed with (see breakdown below).

Agree	70
Strongly agree	31
Disagree	14
Neither agree nor disagree	10
Strongly disagree	6

5.8   One respondent stated that they "*agree with the rationale for categorising the risk, it acknowledges the things that matter - when and where people are at their most vulnerable and which premises represent high value and/or significance*". Another felt that "*It seems logical enough. Maybe there could be exceptions made for*

example, a medium risk could be upgraded to high risk based on specific information (such as a history of arson maybe)".

5.9   20 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the building risk categorisation and highlighted their concerns. For example, one respondent suggested that buildings with large amounts of flammable material should be considered higher risk, while another suggested that schools should be classified as high risk. Another respondent felt that *"Entertainment and major sporting stadia have vulnerable groups, immense numbers of people and in my experience can have sketchy fire safety management".* One respondent questioned the underlying approach to the risk classification of medium risk buildings, suggesting that the approach put forward in the consultation was *"too arbitrary"* and that *"greater work is needed to assess building value outside of infrastructure and life risk".*

5.10   One employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service stated that *"if we don't respond to alarms, we then wait for it to be a confirmed fire that is a business gone which could put people out of work and destroy livelihoods".* An Oxfordshire business representative stated that they *"disagree because our business appears to be automatically classified as 'low risk' despite often having 100s or 1000s of people in it at a time. We would want as a minimum to be contacted to check if attendance is required, and if no answer to assume we have an incident requiring attendance".*

iii)   Proposals for responding to fire alarms in high-risk buildings

5.11   Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with our proposals to attend fire alarm activations in high-risk buildings 24-hours a day. The majority of respondents (122) agreed or strongly agreed with these proposals (see breakdown below).

Agree	66
Strongly agree	56
Disagree	4
Neither agree nor disagree	3
Strongly disagree	2

5.21   One employee of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service stated that they would *"agree with continuing however during the day I think we should call challenge all buildings that would be occupied. Most of the above buildings would have staff and would call 999 following their investigation if they felt it was necessary".* A business representative felt that the approach to high risk buildings *"Applies the precautionary principle to the highest risk".*

5.22   Of the 6 respondents that disagreed or strongly disagreed with our proposals to attend fire alarm activations in high-risk buildings 24-hours, one actually agreed with the overall approach to but felt that *"some of these high risk properties, such as private homes, school boarding and high profile buildings such as university accommodation always have people around that have mobile phones, a non attendance at these would reduce your attendance at false alarms even more".* A representative of Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service stated that they would

not call challenge fire alarms received from high risk buildings and that they would make an immediate response.

iv) Preferences for medium-risk buildings

5.23 Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate what their preferred approach would be for our approach to attending fire alarms in medium-risk buildings and to also provide a reason for their answer.

Option B: Not attend medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.	68
Option A: Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in medium-risk buildings.	40
Option C: Not attend automatic fire alarm systems in medium-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.	23

5.24 For some of those respondents whose preference was Option B (Not attend medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only, 67), they felt that during working hours, businesses are responsible for investigating their own fire alarm activations. Others felt that Option B is a reasonable compromise with a healthy percentage of false alarm reduction. Some respondents suggested that this approach should be applied initially, and then after time, conduct a review to analyse the findings and then make a decision on whether to move to not attending fire alarms in medium-risk buildings 24-hours a day.

5.25 For those respondents whose preference was Option A (Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in medium-risk buildings, 25), one respondent felt that this was necessary *"for the sake of the schools"*, whilst another respondent felt that medium-risk buildings still presented a significant level of risk.

5.26 For those respondents whose preference was Option C (Not attend automatic fire alarm systems in medium-risk buildings 24 hours a day, 23) one respondent felt that whilst they agreed with this option, they felt that schools should still receive an attendance outside of school hours. An employee of Thames Valley Fire Control Service, which provides the emergency call handling for the three Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Services, gave a practical response by stating that Option C is *"simple, straight forward, effective and easy to follow".*

v) Proposals for dealing with low-risk buildings

5.27 Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate what extent they agreed with our proposals to not attend fire alarm activations in low-risk buildings 24-hours a day unless there is a fire or signs of fire. The majority (88) agreed or strongly with the proposals (see breakdown of responses is provided in the table below).

Agree	58
Strongly agree	30

Neither agree nor disagree	19
Disagree	13
Strongly disagree	11

5.28 For those respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with the proposals regarding low-risk buildings, some felt that low-risk sites such as those outlined have alarm systems and monitoring arrangements including areas such as security. Also, that people on site that may be better placed to check alarm activations compared to some high-risk buildings. Others felt that this is a reasonable area in which to save resources in case of need to respond to an alarm in a higher category. Some respondents suggested that this is a sensible risk-based decision.

5.29 For those respondents that disagreed or strongly disagreed (24) with the proposals regarding low-risk buildings, some disagreed because they believe that all activations need to be attended and the fire and rescue service should have the staff required to do so. Others felt that some of the perceived low-risk buildings are really important to both the local economy and community and a significant fire at these venues could affect both significantly. Some respondents suggested that repeat offenders should incur charges, not increased risk.

5.30 For those respondents that neither agreed nor disagreed (19) with the proposals regarding low-risk buildings, some were unsure about the proposal because they felt that low-risk buildings still carry a level of risk that needs to be considered. Others were wary of the proposal because they were concerned that low-risk buildings could be allowed to burn down if no one could confirm if there was a fire. Some respondents suggested that the call challenge protocol should be worded and operated carefully.

vi)   Overall option preferences

5.31 Respondents were asked to indicate which of the proposal options was their preferred option to take forward. The breakdown of responses is provided in the table below in brackets. It should be noted that due to the absence of a 'do nothing' option in survey, those 16 respondents that either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the need for change generally expressed a desire for an attendance by the fire and rescue service to still be made. Their responses have been removed from the figures in brackets to provide a more truthful account of the responses. Respondents were also asked to outline why they felt their chosen option was their preferred approach.

Option B	• Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk buildings. • Not attend low-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. • Not attend medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. • Attend automatic fire alarm incidents in medium-risk buildings outside of these times unless the building is occupied and there are no signs of fire.	(69) 65

Option A	- Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk and medium-risk buildings. - Not attend low-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.	(36) 21
Option C	- Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk buildings. - Not attend automatic fire alarm systems for both low and medium-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire.	(26) 26

5.32   Of those that preferred Option B (65), many respondents felt that it was a good compromise and a reasonable option. Some respondents felt that it was a good place to start and that it offered a good balance between reducing false alarms and maintaining a strong level of responsibility for medium-risk environments. Others felt that it was a less drastic step as a first attempt to reduce the spend and time on attending false alarms. Some respondents also suggested that after seeing the results of Option B, the service could move to Option C.

5.33   Of those that preferred Option A (21), many thought that although it was the best option, they expressed concerns about the challenge of convincing the public and businesses that any reduction in response would still deliver a high level of safety. Some respondents felt that Option A was the least risky option and that it could be reviewed in the future to see if a move to Option B or C would be appropriate. Others felt that Option A was the best of three but that the current approach taken by Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service should be maintained and that none of the options were appropriate.

5.34   Of those that preferred Option C (26), many felt that it was their preferred option because it gave the biggest reduction in false alarms as supported by the data. Some respondents felt that this option would be the simplest to follow without confusion and that it would free up more time for the firefighters to train and carry out prevention activities. Others felt that this proposal increased the likelihood of the correct resource being available at the right time.

vii)   Suggestions for supporting stakeholders to prepare for any future changes

5.35   Respondents were also asked to offer any suggestions that they might have regarding any ways that the service could prepare for any changes should any of the proposals be introduced. 66 respondents either did not have suggestions or stated that this was the case. The remaining 65 respondents provided various suggestions. One respondent suggested that we need to have *"Consultation with larger companies so that clear instruction can be given to staff"*. Another suggested that "*the general public will need reassurance that they can continue to rely on the fire service to attend whenever they need it. If the messaging is wrong then they will lose confidence and not be convinced".* One business representative suggested that we could *"set up a dedicated email box that is monitored and responded to promptly, also an attended phone line people can ring if they have queries".* The

general theme was in the need to engage further and raise the profile of impending changes through multiple channels to ensure that stakeholders are prepared.

viii) Further comments

5.36 Respondents were also asked to offer any further comments they had about the proposals. The majority of respondents (86) either did not have further comments to make or stated that this was the case. Of the 45 respondents who offered further comments, some felt that the proposals were a positive step forward, while others expressed concerns about the impact on On-Call crews and the need for businesses to take more responsibility for preventing false alarms.

5.37 The two fire and rescue services that emailed us separately agreed with the proposals without providing specific responses to the questions posed in the survey.

5.38 The Fire Brigades Union's written response also did not provide responses to the questions posed in the survey. However, their response was not in favour of the proposals, citing a risk to firefighters, fire control staff and local communities. They also indicated that rather than not attending fire alarm activations, fire and rescue services should *"demand more resources and extra capacity to deal with [Automatic Fire Alarms] AFAs safely and properly"*. The Fire Brigades Union also voiced concern that the public were consulted at the same time as themselves rather than pre-public-consultation arrangements being put in place for themselves.

6 Conclusion

6.1 General agreement with the proposals was amongst the survey responses with support for the need for change, the approach to categorising building risk and the proposals for how we attend high and low-risk buildings.

6.2 There was support for all options although this was not evenly distributed across the options.

6.3 The respondents clearly outlined that, should any of the proposals be taken forward, there is a strong need and desire for there to be a high-profile campaign and strong stakeholder support to ensure that organisations are aware and ready for the changes.

6.4 The feedback from this consultation will be considered by the service to help inform its future intentions.