

Southern Region Fire Brigades Union submission

Thames Valley Brigades: Consultation on Options for Responding to Automatic Fire Alarms



03 April 2024

Introduction

This is the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) submission to the Thames Valley (Buckinghamshire, Berkshire & Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Services) consultation on Options for Responding to Automatic Fire Alarms. The FBU is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across the UK. The union represents the vast majority of wholetime (full-time), retained (part-time, on-call) and volunteer operational firefighters and operational fire control staff across the UK.

As a collective response to the three fire and rescue services within the region, this document reflects a thorough review conducted through the structures of each brigade committee and collectively the Southern Region of the Fire Brigades Union. We have coordinated our response, aligning with the consultation processes and associated documents from each service. The committees acknowledge that this initiative stems from directives by HMICFRS and NFCC and has been adopted by various fire services across the UK. In evaluating the proposed changes, we have analysed the number of Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs) attended in each service and engaged with station representatives to gauge their views and insights.

Consultation with FBU representatives

The FBU, the representative staff body of firefighters and those within the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services in our view have not been adequately consulted and normal channels for consultation have been bypassed. Not allowing for meaningful dialogue prior to public consultation is an indication that the views of staff have not been fully considered at this point in time. As this is a proposal that covers the three fire and rescue services a discussion involving the FBU in each brigade we believe would have assisted in providing productive feedback and the ability to explain our position to our members and the service.

Significant proposals such as those detailed should in our view be based on a review conducted over a period of time. Yet the consultation signposts to a public “survey” that will be carried out in two of the three services and allowing staff engagement at the same time - those that understand in detail what these proposals mean and how they will impact / change the response being provided to the public.

Moreover, we expect the review process detailed in each service to fully involve the Fire Brigades Union, to review openly the feedback from different organisations such as schools, universities, NHS establishments and others listed in the three categories of risk detailed in the proposals. It would be informative to learn how many organisations feed back into this process and what lengths each service has taken to consult and reach out to key stake holders in their respective counties.

Risks to wholetime and retained firefighters

The FBU locally do not feel we have been consulted on this proposal nor had the opportunity to feed in our concerns through the recognised processes and we feel these proposals represent a

significant risk to firefighter safety and to the communities we serve. We will outline some of those concerns in this response.

The consultation notes that only a small per cent of automatic fire alarms (AFA) actuations that are received are actual confirmed fires, and many of these requiring no action – what this does mean is a number of incidents did require action and intervention by fire crews, clearly the risk remains but now it is being proposed that the three services should not address and manage this risk fully but should ignore it – firefighters and the public would be concerned if this were to be the case.

The FBU also has issues with the back to front argument being made in the consultation. On the one hand, the consultation complains that despite attending AFAs the service has no legal duty to attend. On the other hand, it sees the solution, as not providing statutory footing and resources to aid these efforts but to place more responsibility on duty holders, whose judgements on AFAs is clearly an area of concern. Additionally, the argument we have seen before that the majority of other UK fire and rescue services now require a confirmed fire before they send fire appliances is a part of a race to the bottom and we propose that each of the three fire and rescue services demand more resources and extra capacity to deal with AFAs safely and properly.

Attendance at AFAs are never unwanted nor would we imagine unwelcome to the vast majority of occupiers. The reassurance of knowing a professional response is on its way to assist, advise and if necessary commence an early attack on a fire, cannot be overstated. Seconds save lives and a reduction in responses only increases the chances of fires going undetected until it is too late, or a delayed call for assistance when an incorrect assessment is made by a member of the public as opposed to the judgement of a professionally trained, qualified and experienced Firefighter.

AFAs are a sizable portion of a firefighter's work and aid familiarisation of premises in the station's grounds; they can conduct fire safety checks and disseminate fire safety advice to the duty holder. This is valuable work that serves our communities and protects the public.

Firefighters have raised over many years, concerns around reductions in crewing levels, appliance availability, non positive crewing of specialist vehicles such as ALPs in some brigades and changes to responses and PDAs. What is needed is an urgent injection of funding into the fire and rescue service that will bring numbers back to at least 2010 levels. We've lost a fifth of our workforce nationally – in no sector could you do that without it having some impact.

The fire and rescue service needs more resources and pursuing these proposals, kicks the can for more resources down the road and puts our members and the public at risk.

The prevalence of false alarms from automatic fire alarm is acknowledged; however, it's imperative to recognise the potential risks associated with low-risk premises listed in the consultation. Factors such as complex layouts, those that are scientific in nature, and high-value contents can significantly elevate the risk in such settings. The time delay in attending to alarms could result in more developed fires, posing hazards to both firefighters and the public. The financial implications of a more developed fire are substantial and can lead to severe consequences for businesses, potentially resulting in total loss. It's crucial to emphasise that expecting untrained individuals to confirm a fire before involving the fire service contradicts established safety protocols and sound advice provided by the fire service themselves, "to get out, call the fire service out and stay out". This delay increases the risk of greater damage and endangers both property and lives.

Risks to control staff

The FBU has issues with the impact of the proposals on firefighters in control. These include moral pressures, increased workload from increased call challenging, and the potential for increased stress and lower morale. Given that the FBU has not had prior consultation - our control staff members have not been consulted widely on these proposals and lack the thorough and considered consultation they deserve.

The issue we consider regarding the 'call challenge' system in relation to AFAs. The main purpose of call challenging is to ascertain if there is a fire within the premises. This is currently the legal responsibility of the duty holder but custom has resulted in this investigation being undertaken by fire crews – without fire crews on the ground. Call times will likely increase due to call challenging, diminishing the ability of control firefighters to respond to other emergencies. The call challenge approach arguably puts undue pressure and responsibility on control members, relying on the public to spot signs of fire and building damage and therefore the three fire and rescue services are potentially abdicating responsibility.

We are planning to meet and discuss these proposals with our Control members to ascertain any concerns regarding the robustness of the system and current practice and potential impact these proposals will have. As staff utilise a flow chart to the letter, there are no assurances that alarm companies and switchboards can answer all questions being asked of them which at present they are often unable to do. Also, there are no assurances that every alarm company/stakeholder will be made aware of these proposals, made their staff aware and confirmed this to the service as potentially we could see control staff having to explain the process to alarm company staff. It is clear that these proposals lack the robustness and rigour to ensure our control members are best able to perform their role.

Conclusion

The FBU has not been properly consulted on this proposal nor had the opportunity to feed in our concerns through the recognised processes. They don't improve the management of risk or protect firefighters and public safety. It is worth noting that firefighters don't get turned out to UFAS; they only know that it's an unwanted/false alarm once they leave the incident, having established and confirmed that conditions in and around the premises are safe. These proposals will ultimately put public safety at risk for alleged efficiencies when what is required, is more resources and investment in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire fire and rescue services.

The broader context of declining resources within the fire and rescue service nationally is a significant concern. With over 12,000 firefighters lost since 2010 and longer response times for attending incidents, there is a pressing need for investment in frontline firefighters and fire protection/prevention roles. The current practice of crews riding appliances with four members compromises firefighter safety, particularly in the absence of a dedicated Breathing Apparatus Entry Control Officer (BAECO). Given these proposals, the critical necessity of crewing fire appliances with five riders becomes apparent. Plus ensuring there is no downgrading of fire cover and the number of fire appliances available during the night as is being proposed in the region is also of grave concern based on the concerns we have raised in this response. Investment in the fire and rescue service is essential to ensure the safety of both firefighters and the public they serve. We ask for the three services to look again at these proposals and consult properly with the FBU to ensure firefighter and public safety are not negatively compromised.

