

AFA – Frequently Asked Questions...

1. What are AFA's?

An AFA (Automatic Fire Alarm) is a fire alarm system usually found in commercial premises.

2. What are AFA's for?

They are intended to warn occupants of a property to a potential fire situation, they are not installed to alert the fire service.

3. Why are they a problem to the Fire Service?

The Service receives thousands of calls each year to commercial premises where there has been an activation of an AFA as a result of an accidental or 'unwanted' fire signal (UWFS).

Between 1st November 2009 and 31st Oct 2010 there were a total of 3,900 AFA calls received, of which 78 % (3,059) were false alarms.

Within the same period of time 26 % (3059/11827) of the total number of calls received were in response to UWFS, of these, 1067 UWFS were received from commercial premises and the Service made a full attendance to each.

UWFS take appliances away from real emergencies, cause unnecessary 'blue light' road movements and cost the tax payer money.

4. What exactly is the Service planning to do?

By analysing data the Service will no longer respond to AFA calls at certain types of premises.

Breaking down the call figures AFAs are spread over the following types of property:

Sleeping risk 3,583

Commercial risk 1,797

Schools risk 248

Total 5,628

When the Service receives an AFA call to a commercial risk, unless there is a confirmed risk the Service will not make an attendance.

The Service will still respond to AFA calls where there is a sleeping risk or it affects a school or domestic property. The impact of reducing attendances will be a reduction of up to 1,067 mobilisations to commercial risks, freeing up resources to respond to real emergencies.

5. If it is a false alarm, surely you won't know until you get there?

From the data analysis and subsequent information, we are able to identify that the chances of there actually being a fire that requires some form of intervention is very minimal. This very slight increase in risk is acceptable when considered alongside the AFA that has actuated, the occupant's subsequent awareness of the alarm and opportunity to evacuate, and active and passive fire precautions managed under workplace fire safety legislation. Should someone confirm that a fire has occurred then the attendance will be instantly mobilised in the normal way

6. Surely more people will die as a result of us not attending?

Once again reiterating the evidence that is available within the statistical data, we recognise that the number of incidents requiring some form of intervention is minimal. It is also very important to note that an AFA is a system devised to provide the occupants with an early warning of fire, and thereby saving lives through early

detection. The management of the system itself and the safe evacuation from the property is the responsibility of the owner/occupier and this is their legal obligation under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

7. If it is a fire they will be larger when we do attend and as a result this will pose a greater risk to the H&S of firefighters?

On that rare occasion, should it happen, where a fire may have developed within a property, we are confident that the personnel responding are professional firefighters who have the best equipment, they are highly trained and they will operate within clear defined safe systems of work. This is exactly as they have done in the past and will continue to do so in the future; each incident being responded to will be assessed by the Incident Commander and the appropriate level of intervention will be in accordance with the risk.

8. What will the Service be doing to assist owners of commercial premises in order to reduce their risk?

It is not our intention just to implement this new procedure without considering our communities. Prior to implementation the Service will undertake a communication strategy that will focus on the commercial sector. The strategy will provide information on the actions that should be taken in the event of an AFA and remind owners/occupiers of their obligations with regards to Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The strategy will be delivered through the following channels:

- Prepare for anticipated calls from businesses for advice – Supported by Website and Corporate Communications team.
- Communicate to businesses in the first instance – using local media channels, Local Authority publications, posters etc. Allowing enough time for them to get equipment checked and maintained and to make contingency plans and seek advice;
- Individual mailing to premises that often have Alarm actuations as follow up. Solicit details from Commands and prepare mail based on queries coming in after first tranche announcements.

9. What are the advantages of this, why are we trying to mend something that isn't broken?

The advantages of this Policy are:

- Appliance movements will be reduced by approximately 1,067 per year;
- Appliances will be available for other emergency calls for more of the time instead of sitting outside factories or offices awaiting key holders;
- Road risk through 'blue light' mobilisation will be reduced;
- Fuel and mobilisation cost will be reduced;
- Appliance wear will be reduced;
- Opportunity for 'other' work is increased

10. Will the reduced number of calls influence the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) and result in Fire Station closure or reduced number of appliances on Stations?

The reduction in calls to stations will have a number of effects:

- Fire crews will be available for actual calls more often;
- Increased time for training;
- With regards to the IRMP it will have no influence over the outcomes other than providing us with an understanding of the activity levels at each station and the impact increasing the availability and potentially reducing the costs of each station against call type;

- It must also be borne in mind that we are reducing road risk to crews and the public along with the wear and tear and fuel costs of appliances;

11. How will this affect Retained calls and reduced pay for firefighters?

Obviously if calls go down then this will affect pay. However, the service is taking steps through various measures to reinforce pay and conditions for staff and this should be a consideration for all.

12. Do other Fire & Rescue Services do the same?

Many other Services have either adopted or are adopting similar policies and the Chief Fire Officers' Association has produced protocols on this.

13. Have there been any problems in these FRS as a result of non attendance at AFA's?

We are aware of some cases where there has been legal discussion regarding this and the opinion is that the AFA is for the owner/occupier to alert them to incidents of fire. The FRS needs to make arrangements to receive a fire call and determine if they should attend.

Speed and weight of attack is for local determination under the auspices of the Authority's IRMP.

14. Will this reduction in calls mean that an alternate crewing system on some Stations will be introduced?

This is of course always an option and not solely confined to AFA issues. However the level of activity at any station may reduce remain constant or even increase with the introduction of a number of other initiatives.

15. Are there any legal implications in what we are doing?

As a creature of statute and a public service there are of course legal implications which ought to be considered. However, having done so, the Service does not believe there to be any legal barriers preventing the implementation of the proposals.

16. Have the Representative Bodies been consulted in this process?

We have conducted a consultation process as part of the IRMP, prior to the Unwanted Fire Signals policy going live the Representative Bodies were consulted.

17. Have the public been consulted in this process?

The public were consulted as part of the Services IRMP process. We are running an extensive communications campaign to inform the public of the impact and their responsibilities with regards to the maintenance of AFA systems.

18. Will firefighter's lives be put at risk?

Calls to fire will attract the appropriate PDA for the fire risk in order for a Safe System of Work to be deployed. In fact risk to firefighters will most likely be reduced through a reduction in road risk through reduced appliance blue light