ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

CONSULTATION

RoyalBerksFRS @RBFRSOfficial RoyalBerkshireFire
Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service www.rbfrs.co.uk

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FOREWORD

We are committed to ensuring we provide excellent services to the people of Royal Berkshire. Therefore, we are asking you if we should change the way we respond to automatic fire alarms (AFAs) in lower-risk, occupied buildings.

Our data tells us that over 99% of the automatic fire alarm notifications received end up being false alarms. False alarms can be caused by a number of issues, for example, aerosol sprays, cooking fumes or a fire alarm system that hasn't been serviced properly.

Therefore, we are asking you to consider two options, one which reflects a change to our current policy and one in which our current policy remains the same.

No decisions have been made and your feedback will be vital to the decision-making process.

Please take the time to conscientiously consider the proposed options and the implications of adopting them as set out in this document.

Your comments will help inform the decision which will be made by Royal Berkshire Fire Authority on which proposal to adopt. The consultation will run for 10 weeks from 17 January until 28 March 2022.

Councillor Colin Dudley
Chairman
Royal Berkshire Fire Authority

Wayne Bowcock
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive
Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The Automatic Fire Alarm consultation will run from 17 January 2022 until 28 March 2022.

Over the next few pages, we will be outlining the proposed changes to the way in which we respond to AFAs in lower-risk, occupied premises.

No decisions have been made. We want to hear your views on our consultation proposals, which will assist in the decision-making that follows.

We are committed to providing all members of our local communities with the opportunity to provide us with their feedback. This document is also available in EasyRead, large text and plain text form, as well as in a variety of languages. Should you require help with accessing the information in a different format, please contact us using any of the methods below.

You can get in touch by:

Responding to the consultation on our website: www.rbfrs.co.uk/consultations

Writing to us with at: Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, Consultation, Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire, RG31 7SD

Emailing us at consultations@rbfrs.co.uk

Phoning: 0118 938 4331

Following us on social media on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn

ABOUT US

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) is responsible for an area of around 486 square miles, from Slough and Langley in the east to Lambourn and Newbury in the west. It employs more than 600 members of staff, who serve a population of approximately 917,000 people.

The Service's highly-trained fire crews deal with incidents ranging from road and rail accidents to fuel and chemical spills, aviation and waterway accidents, collapsed buildings, large animal rescues and, of course, fires.

Along with providing a swift and effective response to incidents, one of the Service's aims is to educate people on how to prevent fires and other emergencies. It works with schools, businesses, residents and community groups throughout Royal Berkshire to raise awareness and educate people about a wide variety of safety issues.

The Service joined forces with Oxfordshire County Council Fire and Rescue Service and Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Service in 2015 to establish a shared emergency call handling centre - Thames Valley Fire Control Service.

24 hours a day
7 days a week
365 days a year

486
square miles of land are covered in Royal Berkshire

We are responsible for Slough and Langley in the east, to Lambourn and Newbury in the west

17
fire stations across the County

917,000
we serve a culturally diverse population

Over 600
members of staff in total

Over 450
are on a shift pattern

In our Corporate Plan and Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2019-23, Royal Berkshire Fire Authority set RBFRS six public facing commitments:

- We will provide education and advice on how to prevent fires and other emergencies.
- We will ensure a swift and appropriate response when called to emergencies.
- We will provide advice, consultation and enforcement in relation to fire safety standards in buildings.
- We will seek opportunities to contribute to a broader safety, health and wellbeing agenda, whilst delivering our core functions.
- We will ensure that RBFRS provides good value for money.
- We will work with Central Government and key stakeholders in the interests of the people of Royal Berkshire.

For 2020-21, RBFRS set an additional four objectives:

- We will recruit, train and develop our people to ensure we create a safe, professional and capable workforce that are supported to become the best public servants they can be for the residents of Berkshire.
- We will manage RBFRS in accordance with best practice, understanding and continuous improvement, learning from events and being transparent in our compliance.
- We will be strong and visible in our leadership in developing a diverse and inclusive ‘one team’ culture where everyone’s contribution is valued and positive behaviours are recognised.
- We will explore collaboration opportunities to ensure we deliver effective and efficient services to the people we serve.

OUR LEGAL AND STATUTORY OBLIGATIONS

The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 provides the Statutory Instrument that requires fire and rescue services to have due regard for the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England. The Framework provides guidance on community risk management planning and states that a Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) should:

> *Reflect effective consultation throughout its development and at all stages review with the community, its workforce and represent-ative bodies, and partners.*

At RBFRS, we have developed a Consultation Strategy, which aims to:

- Outline the legal and statutory context of public consultation.
- Explain clearly RBFRS' procedures and plans for engaging and consulting with the public.
- Create a Strategy which reflects good practice in public consultation.
- Depending on the nature of the proposals we are planning to take forward, we have set out the following principles for consultation:

Public consultations: we will consult with a wide range of stakeholders, including the public on any changes, which are high-level issues that have a material impact on the performance of the services we provide, in accordance with our Consultation Strategy.

In carrying out any consultation, RBFRS aims to follow the four Gunning Principles (R v London Borough of Brent [1985] 84 LGR 168), which govern how public bodies should consult. They specify that:

- Consultations should be carried out when proposals are at the formative stage.
- Sufficient information is provided for intelligent consideration.
- Adequate time is given for response.
- Responses are conscientiously taken into account.

We strongly recommend that you read this document in full, in order to provide informed feedback about our proposed changes to the way we respond to lower-risk, occupied premises automatic fire alarms (AFAs).

WHAT ARE WE CONSULTING ON?

We would like your feedback on how we respond to **automatic fire alarms (AFAs) in lower-risk, occupied buildings** for example shops, factories or office blocks.

While we may respond to a variety of automatic fire alarms in houses, flats, hotels and student accommodation, amongst others, there is no change proposed to how we respond to AFAs in higher-risk buildings, where we will send a fire engine response. Under both options in this consultation, a fire engine will always be sent when there is a confirmed fire. **The difference between these two options is removing the second call back after 20 minutes.** As part of this consultation, there are two options:

Option A - When the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room receives a notification of an automatic fire alarm sounding, we will make contact with the building occupier and ask them to confirm the cause of the alarm. After making contact, the Fire Control Operator will ask the occupier to do their necessary checks as part of their fire safety measures and let us know if there is a fire. If a fire is confirmed, we will send a fire engine immediately. If they can't confirm the cause of the alarm, we will not send a fire engine at that time, based on there being no confirmed fire.

Option B - When the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room receives a notification of an automatic fire alarm sounding, we will make up to two attempts to confirm the cause of the alarm. If at the point of the first telephone call, the building occupier can't confirm the cause of alarm, we will make a second telephone call to the occupier (after 20 minutes). If the cause of the automatic fire alarm is not confirmed at this stage, we send a fire engine.

Lower-risk, occupied buildings

This consultation only applies to these types of buildings. This could be shops or office blocks.

We are consulting on a proposal to remove the second call back (after 20 minutes) as detailed in Option B.

Higher-risk buildings

There will be **no change** to the way we respond to automatic fire alarms in these buildings. This could be homes, hotels and student accommodation.

Our data tells us that over 99% of the automatic fire alarm notifications received end up being false alarms.

Under both options, if we can't establish contact with the building occupier OR a fire is confirmed, we will always send a fire engine.

WHAT IS AN AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARM?

An automatic fire alarm (AFA) is an alarm that, when it sounds, will automatically alert the occupants of the building, who should manage the response to the alarm. It may also notify a remote Alarm Receiving Centre depending on the local arrangements, who will contact the Fire and Rescue Service on behalf of the person responsible for the building.

Different premises have their own procedure for responding to AFAs:

In some buildings, if there is a person onsite, they may investigate the source of the alarm before deciding whether they need to call 999 for the Fire and Rescue Service. This may be because the AFA is not linked to an Alarm Receiving Centre.

In other cases, the Alarm Receiving Centre may ask the building occupier to investigate the cause of the alarm before deciding whether to make contact with the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room on a designated emergency phone line. Often, however, the Fire and Rescue Service is contacted by the Alarm Receiving Centre without the check being made with the building occupier.

Where a building is unoccupied, the Alarm Receiving Centre will notify the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room that there is a fire alarm activating.

An automatic fire alarm will detect a possible fire through changes in the building, which could include smoke and heat, and then notify the occupants to evacuate should there be a fire or other emergency.

Building Occupiers Responsibilities

Business occupiers and managers have legal responsibilities regarding fire safety.

Building occupiers should consider how to reduce the number of automatic fire alarms and respond in a prompt manner when an automatic fire alarm goes off. This would be supported by an up-to-date fire risk assessment and evacuation plan, as well as training or staff designated as fire wardens.

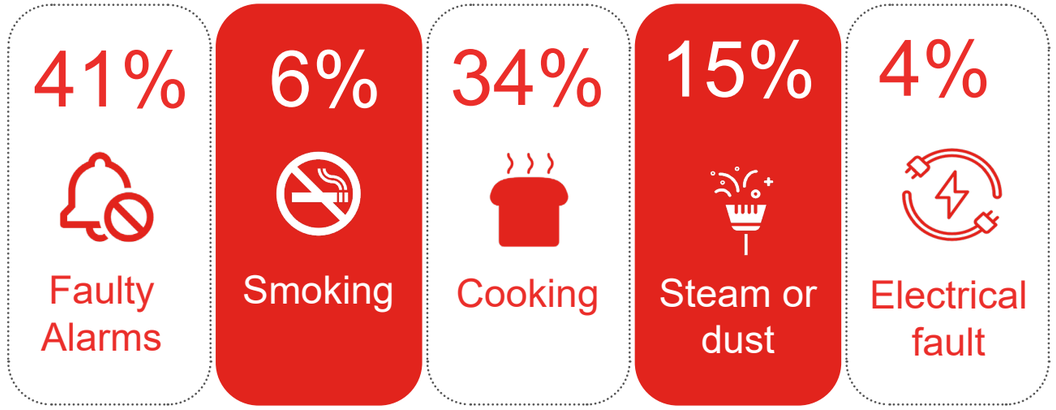
WHAT CAUSES FALSE ALARMS?

There are many causes of false alarms in the workplace. Here are the more common causes of false fire alarms:

- **Lack of effective management** - in taking responsibility for the fire alarm system, being proactive and reactive to causes of false alarms and managing an initial investigation into the cause of an alarm before the fire and rescue service are called is essential. Ineffective management is a key cause of a fire engine responding to automatic fire alarm calls that are false alarms.
- **Cooking fumes** - being recognised by a detector in a nearby area. e.g. a smoke detector located in a corridor outside a kitchen.
- **Steam and aerosol sprays** - activating smoke detectors.
- **Incorrect type of detector** - a typical example is where a room that is protected with a smoke detector has its use changed and a toaster or kettle is introduced.
- **Work completed onsite** - causing dust or electrical disturbances.
- **Failure to notify the alarm receiving centre** - when the system is being tested.
- **Unsatisfactory maintenance** - where detectors are rarely cleaned and serviced.
- **Incorrect placement of a detector** - in an area where there is excessive air movement due to mechanical heating, ventilation or open windows.

Our data tells us that of the 15,000 automatic fire alarm notifications assessed over a five-year period, 99% are false alarms. Of these, around 1,500 had the specific reason for false alarm recorded. This showed that:

- 41% of false alarms were caused by deliberate or faulty alarms that were not properly maintained.
- 34% of false alarms were caused by cooking (e.g. burnt toast or cooking fumes).
- 15% of false alarms were caused by steam or dust.
- 6% of false alarms were caused by smoking.
- 4% of false alarms were caused by a small electrical fault, such as electrical devices.



HOW WE CURRENTLY RESPOND TO AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

Our current policy on whether we send a fire engine to a report of a fire from an AFA activating is:

We will attend all reports of automatic fire detection in high-risk, occupied buildings (including buildings, such as care homes, hotels and other properties that are presumed to be occupied).

We will attend all reports of automatic fire detection in dwellings (a house, a high-rise block, or other place of residence).

We will attend all reports of automatic fire detection in unoccupied buildings (including buildings that are presumed to be unoccupied).

We will call-challenge all reports of automatic fire detection in lower-risk, buildings that are, or are reasonably assumed to be, occupied and only attend if contact has not been made or the cause of the alarm is not confirmed by the building occupier. Currently, if the cause is not confirmed at the point of the first call, we will call back after 20 minutes.

When a call comes in to the Fire and Rescue Service stating there is a report of an alarm sounding from an AFA, our Fire and Rescue Service Control Room already has procedures in place that can ‘filter’ some of the calls by asking the premises, under their fire risk assessment to confirm if there is a fire or not. Often, they will have onsite fire wardens who will manage the fire safety of the building, which will include the buildings response to automatic fire alarms. When these calls are challenged, if the cause of the alarm is confirmed to be a fire, we will send a fire engine immediately. If the cause is confirmed not to be a fire, a fire engine is not be sent because there is no requirement for it at that time.

We would like to consider a new way to respond to AFAs. This is because we think that there is an opportunity to reduce the number of false alarm calls we attend with a fire engine. By reducing the number of times a fire engine responds to automatic fire alarm calls, we would be able to make sure fire engines and crews are more available for other emergencies across the County where lives are at risk, as well as freeing up more resources for critical fire and rescue activities, such as delivering fire safety advice to our communities and firefighter training.

We will respond to a variety of automatic fire alarms, as shown below. We will still always maintain a response to automatic fire alarms where one or more of the following applies:

There is a known fire in the premises.

The building is known or presumed to be unoccupied.

The premises is a residential property.

The premises has a sleeping risk, including all domestic premises, halls of residence and hotels.

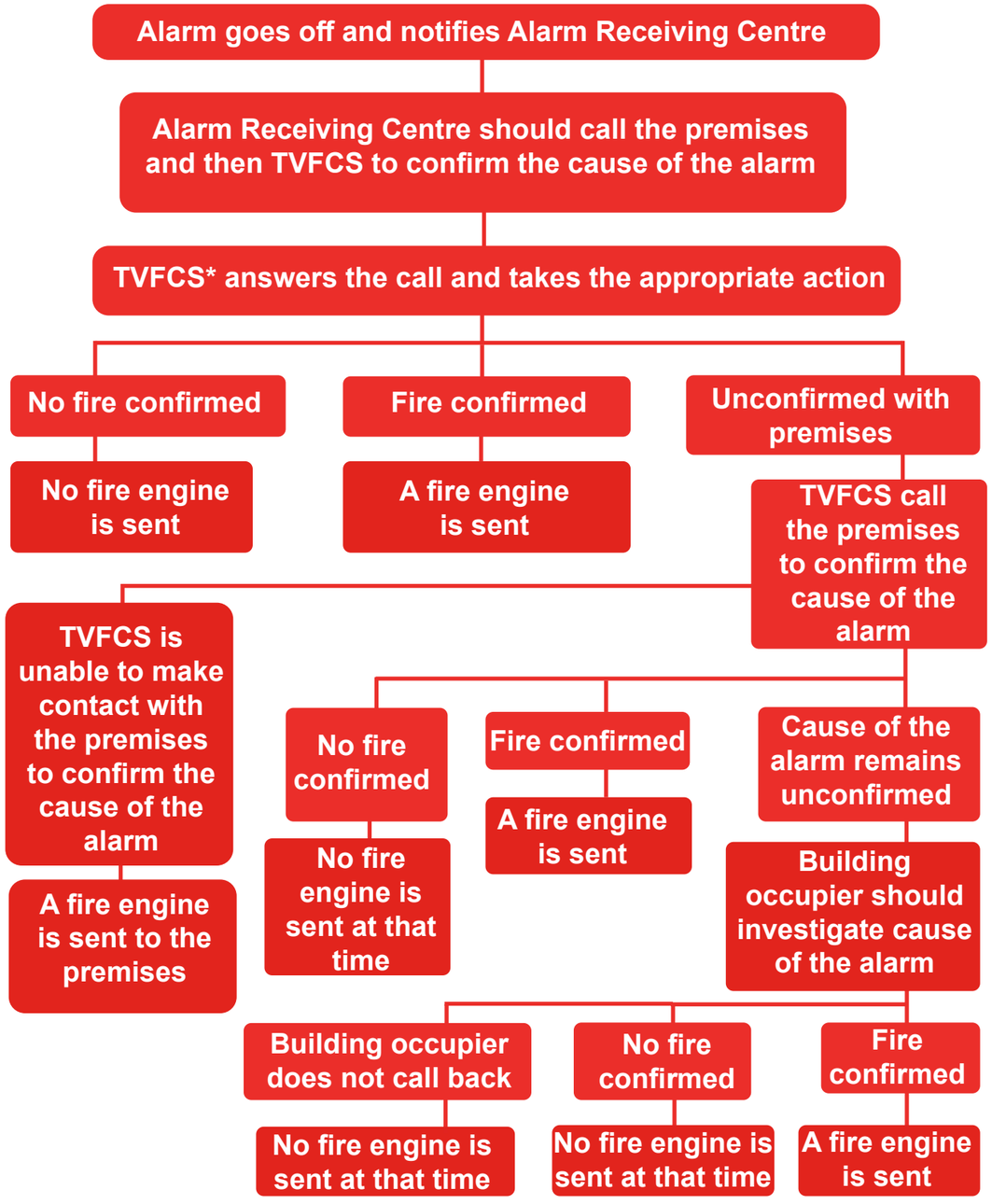
The premises is a high-rise building with the top floor over 18 metres above access level.

The premises is a known or presumed high-risk premises due to the characteristics of the occupants or the processes within the building.

Where the mobilising officer has reasonable doubt or cause for concern and chooses to use their discretion.

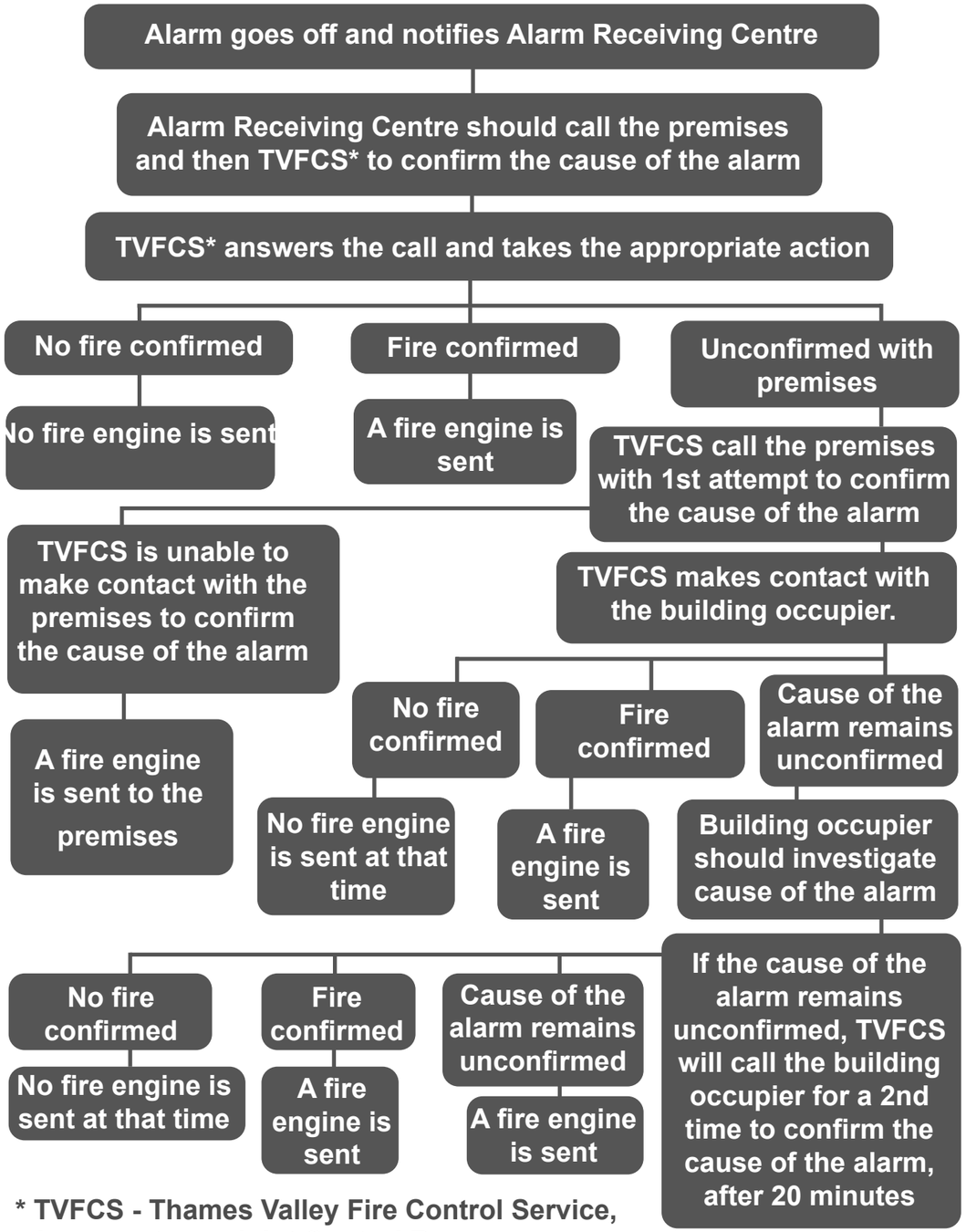
This consultation only focuses on the way we respond to automatic fire alarms in lower-risk, occupied buildings (for example office blocks, shops or factories).

OUR PROPOSED PROCESS - OPTION A



* TVFCS - Thames Valley Fire Control Service, who operate our joint Control Room.

OUR CURRENT PROCESS - OPTION B



* TVFCS - Thames Valley Fire Control Service, who operate our joint Control Room.

THE IMPACT OF AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

To provide informed feedback about our proposed changes to the way we respond to automatic fire alarms, we analysed five years of data, which established:

- There were over 2,900 automatic fire alarm calls on average per year.
- Of those, over 99% of the automatic fire alarm calls to Royal Berkshire end up being false alarms.
- Of the 2,900 notifications, we attend about 2,200 automatic fire alarm calls in all building types on average per year.
- Of those 2,200 we attended, 99% ended up being false alarms.
- Based on previous data and the analysis undertaken, if we were to change the way we respond to AFAs, then 650 of these notifications, which come from lower-risk, occupied buildings may not require the attendance of a fire engine. This could lead to this time being used for other priority work, such as prevention work in the community, risk-critical training activities, other operational preparedness activities such as familiarisation visits and more fire engines would be available for other emergency incidents.
- We spend an average of around 30 minutes dealing with each of these notifications (approximately 650 of which may not require an attendance under consultation

Option A) and at least four firefighters will take the time to respond, so by reducing our call outs to false AFAs, this could lead to a saving of up to 1,300 hours of firefighter time each year, which could be spent on prevention and protection activities.

- With 650 of these notifications per year, over the past five years we responded to 3,250 automatic fire alarms that may not have required an attendance under Option A. Out of these 3,250 responses, there were 17 incidents in total that were confirmed fires.
- Of these 17 incidents, three required firefighting action and the remaining 14 fires were out on arrival. Of these three fires, there were no casualties and they were put out using a fire extinguisher. If Option A were to be approved, incidents similar to these would continue to be call-challenged under Option A. We will still always maintain

METHODOLOGY STATEMENT

Five years of data was analysed to give the yearly averages, in line with our standard reporting process for AFAs.

The 650 AFA calls per year likely to require confirmation before attending was calculated by assessing the alarm type and the time of the call, and using this information to classify the data as “Occupied” or “Unoccupied.”

This value was used to calculate the potential maximum savings alongside the following; the average time spent attending an AFA call calculated at around 30 minutes from the five years data; the average number of appliances in attendance of an AFA is one which will have four firefighters aboard.

To assess the potential impact if Option A if the consultation was agreed, the data was classified as “Occupied” or “Unoccupied” for AFA incidents that ended up being confirmed fires.

This returned 17 incidents, which were then assessed manually to identify whether any firefighting activities were carried out, of which, three incidents were identified. This is the total for the five-year period. A full version of the methodology can be made available upon request.

THE BENEFIT OF ATTENDING FEWER AFA CALLS

If we were to change the way we respond to AFAs, then we would end up with more time to deliver other key priority work, such as:

- Delivering valuable fire safety advice in the community;
- Carrying out vital training;
- Visiting high-risk properties to help prepare firefighters should they need to respond to an incident there; and
- More fire engines would be available for the other emergency incidents.

99%
of automatic fire alarm calls to RBFRS end up being false alarms.

650
fewer notifications with an attendance could be attended each year under the consultation (Option A).

If the consultation option were to be agreed, the saved time could be used for other priority work:

- Prevention work
- Risk-critical training activities
- More fire engines would be available for emergencies

2,900
automatic fire alarm calls are received on average per year.

automatic fire alarm notifications are attended on average by a fire engine each year. **2,200**

1,300
hours of firefighter time each year could be saved.

We will still always maintain our emergency response to **999** calls

OPTIONS FOR CONSULTATION

We would like you to look at the two options below and to choose which one you prefer, so that we can better understand your thoughts and views. This will support the Fire Authority to make a decision about **how we respond to AFAs in lower-risk, occupied buildings**.

The below consultation option offers a minimal change to the way we deliver our Control handling service for automatic fire alarms in lower-risk, occupied premises only when the premises is unable to confirm the cause of the alarm. **The difference between these two options is removing the second call back after 20 minutes**. The options are:

Option A

When the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room receives a notification of an automatic fire alarm sounding, we will ask the premises to confirm the cause of the alarm. As part of Option A in this consultation:

- The second call back after 20 minutes is removed because the occupier will do their necessary fire safety checks and let us know if there is a fire.
- If it is confirmed that there is no fire, we won't send a fire engine.
- If there is a fire, we will send a fire engine.
- If we can't make contact with the building, we will send a fire engine.
- If they don't call back, we won't send a fire engine at that time based on there being no confirmed fire.

Option B

When the Fire and Rescue Service Control Room receives a notification of an automatic fire alarm sounding, we will continue to apply our current policy and will not change the way we respond to AFAs. As part of Option B in this consultation:

- If it is confirmed that there is no fire, we won't send a fire engine.
- If there is a fire, we will send a fire engine.
- If we can't make contact with the building, we will send a fire engine
- OR if the alarm goes off and the occupier is unable to confirm the cause on the first call, we will ask them to check if there is a fire as part of their necessary fire safety checks. If a fire is still not confirmed, we will call again for a second time, after 20 minutes, and if it's still not confirmed, we will send a fire engine.

QUESTIONS

The below shares our core question set for the proposed consultation. To make an informed decision on the below options, please ensure you have read the consultation document thoroughly.

1. Please choose your preferred option

Option A		Option B
Change the way we respond to Automatic Fire Alarms in lower-risk, occupied buildings as outlined in the consultation document.	OR	Keep the way we respond to Automatic Fire Alarms in lower-risk, occupied buildings the same as outlined in the consultation document.

2. Why have you chosen the option you selected?

3. Do you have any other suggestions or comments about this consultation?

RESPOND TO THE CONSULTATION

Complete the survey

Phone: 0118 938 4331

Email: consultations@rbfrs.co.uk

NEXT STEPS

The flow chart opposite illustrates the Automatic Fire Alarm Consultation timeline we are working towards. This includes:

- **Consultation period –** The 10-week consultation and engagement with residents, staff and key stakeholders begins. The consultation will run from 17 January 2022 until 28 March 2022.
- **Consultation closure -** Consultation closes and work begins on analysing and compiling the responses into a summary report for decision makers.
- **Conscientiously consider the results -** Royal Berkshire Fire Authority meeting to conscientiously consider the results of consultation and make decisions on the options.
- **Implement decision -** Implementation of chosen options commences.

January - March

Consultation period

The 10-week consultation and engagement with residents, staff and key stakeholders begins. The consultation will run from 17 January 2022 until 28 March 2022.

28 March

Consultation closure

Consultation closes and work begins on analysing and compiling the responses into a summary report for decision makers.

29 April

Conscientiously consider the results

Royal Berkshire Fire Authority meet to conscientiously consider the results of the consultation and make the decision on the options.

Summer 2022

Implement decision

Implementation of the chosen option commences.

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Newsham Court, Pincents Kiln, Calcot, Reading, Berkshire, RG31 7SD

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