Automatic Fire Alarms - 2024

A consultation on proposed changes to the way we respond to automatic fire alarms

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Foreword

We are committed to ensuring we provide excellent services to the people of Royal Berkshire.

Our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) sets out key areas of work to reduce risk to people, places the environment and the economy in Berkshire. To do this, we need to prioritise the delivery of our essential services.

False alarms account for 45% of all the incidents we attend and the majority of these are the result of Automatic Fire Alarm systems (AFAs). 99% of these AFA incidents require no action by the Service. False alarms can be caused by several issues, for example, aerosol sprays, cooking fumes or a fire alarm system that hasn't been serviced properly.

Attending false alarm calls creates significant disruption to other more risk critical activities. Changing the way the Service responds to these types of incidents could provide significant benefits to communities and firefighters. The proposed changes do not offer monetary savings. Our focus is solely on reducing risk by minimising disruption to key activities.

Therefore, we are asking you to consider three options. For all the options we are consulting you on, we are proposing the same change to how we respond to category A buildings. For category B buildings, we propose a number of options for your consideration.

We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications at higher risk buildings, where anyone sleeps, such as hotels, hospitals, care homes, houses, and flats.

Most importantly, we will continue to maintain our emergency response to 999 calls, confirmed fires and to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

No decisions have been made and your feedback will be vital to the decision-making process. Please take the time to consider the proposed options. 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 4 March 2024 until 13 May 2024.

Chair of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
Councillor Jeff Brooks

Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive
Wayne Bowcock

Why Are We Consulting?

In Berkshire, false alarms make up 45% of the incidents we attend. Most of these calls come from commercial automatic fire detection systems. We refer to these as automatic fire alarms (AFAs).

In 2022-23 alone, we attended 2,294 AFAs. On 99% of these calls (in the buildings we are consulting on), no action was required by the Service as there was no fire.

Attending false alarm calls creates significant disruption to other more risk critical activities. Changing the way the Service responds to these types of incidents could provide significant benefits to communities and firefighters, further improving the service provided to the people of Berkshire.

The proposed changes do not offer monetary savings. The focus is solely on reducing risk by minimising disruption to key activities.

The impact that automatic fire alarm calls have on fire and rescue services has been recognised. It remains clear that there is still the need for significant improved action associated with the management of false alarms.

Nationally (2022-23), 39% of 999 calls to fire and rescue services were false alarms. We want to bring our service in line with, or below, this percentage.

No decisions have been made yet. We want to hear what you think of our proposals in this document. Once you have read the document, you can respond to the consultation in a variety of ways. Details on how to have your say are on our website: rbfrs.co.uk/haveyoursay

Automatic Fire Alarm Notifications

In Berkshire, false alarms make up 45% of the incidents we attend. Most of these calls come from commercial automatic fire detection systems. We refer to these as automatic fire alarms (AFAs).

In 2022-23 alone, we attended 2,294 AFAs. On 99% of these calls (in the buildings we are consulting on), no action was required by the Service as there was no fire.

The 1% of automatic fire alarm notifications that were confirmed as fires resulted in no injuries or deaths. No significant property damage was caused by these incidents. Attending these types of incidents disrupts the essential daily activities of our Firefighters.

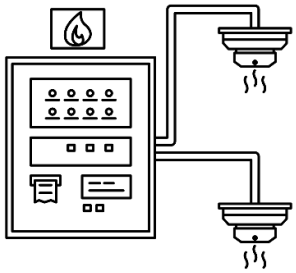
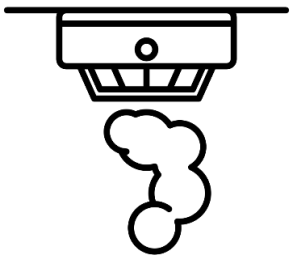
According to the law, Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA) must make provision for extinguishing fires and for protecting life and property in the event of fires. They must also make arrangements for dealing with calls for help when there is a fire. **There is no legal duty on a fire and rescue service to respond to notifications from automatic fire alarm systems for the purpose of establishing whether there is a fire.**

In non-domestic premises covered by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, the employer, the owner, or someone else who has control of the premises (the 'Responsible Person') must ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that the buildings are safe for its occupants in the event of a fire. When an alarm system is fitted, these arrangements include maintenance of the system and providing the actions to be taken if the automatic fire alarm system was activated.

This consultation reflects a change to how we respond to automatic fire alarm calls in the buildings categorised below, where the Responsible Person cannot confirm there is a fire.

We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm calls at buildings where anyone sleeps, such as hotels, hospitals, care homes, houses, and flats. We will also **continue to attend fire alarm notifications at** a range of existing known **higher risk sites,** including regulated sites and heritage properties.

We will continue to maintain our emergency response to 999 calls, confirmed fires and to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

		
45% of all our calls received were false alarms	**99%** of the automatic fire alarm notifications received are false alarms	**1%** of automatic fire alarm notifications were confirmed as fires. There were no injuries, deaths, or significant property damage

We will continue to send fire engines to 999 calls and confirmed fires.

We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

Responsible Persons

Responsible Persons/ Building occupiers have legal responsibilities to ensure they manage and maintain their automatic fire alarms.

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 prevent an unneeded fire engine response, which we know is currently leading to 99% of these calls being false alarms.

Why Do We Want to Reduce Attendance at False Alarms?

Every year, we attend around 2,300 false alarms generated by automatic fire alarms. Attending these types of incidents disrupts essential daily activities undertaken by our firefighters.

Risks

We know that 99% of automatic fire alarm notifications (in the buildings we are consulting on) are false alarms. We need to change the way we respond to automatic fire alarm notifications. If we do not, we are unable to address the following risks:

- We want to carry out more in person fire safety visits to our most vulnerable residents and businesses to help them live and work safely. Every time a fire engine is sent to an automatic fire alarm notification during a visit it disrupts the business, delays us giving vital advice to residents, and increases risk to the public.

- Being called to automatic fire alarm notifications can divert firefighters from real emergencies, potentially putting life and property at risk. Additionally, driving to false alarms under emergency conditions puts our residents at unnecessary risk as well as having an environmental impact.

- If we do not change the way we respond to these false alarms, it will have a longer-term impact on the delivery of critical training. It is essential that our teams can train, exercise, and develop their skills and knowledge to deal with known and emerging risks in our communities. It is vital that we can respond effectively when there is a real incident. Dealing with false alarms regularly disrupts training and exercises.

- Firefighters carry out familiarisation visits at high-risk buildings so that we are well prepared to respond to real incidents. It is a legal duty for firefighters to gather this information. Maintaining up to date risk information helps us minimise the risk to our staff and the public. Attending false alarms disrupts us gathering the information we need and creates unnecessary risk.

Last year, we spent around 2,900 hours responding to false alarms. While this is an indicative figure, we know that attending these types of incidents causes significant disruption to the delivery

of our essential services and training. These activities are carefully planned throughout the year and the disruption caused by false alarms has a compounding effect.

We need to change the way we respond to automatic fire alarm notifications to ensure our communities and our firefighters are kept safe.

How we Currently Respond to Automatic Fire Alarms

Our current policy is that we will send a fire engine to all automatic fire alarm notifications in buildings that are high-risk, occupied buildings. For example, buildings such as care homes, hotels, houses, and flats (where anyone sleeps).

We call-challenge all reports of automatic fire alarm notifications in lower risk buildings that are reasonably assumed to be occupied. Currently, the Service successfully challenges around a quarter of these calls. We will send a fire engine if we cannot contact a person, or if the cause of the alarm is not confirmed by the building occupier. For all automatic fire alarm notification calls, we will always use our discretion. If Fire Control have reasonable doubt about the call, or a cause for concern, they will send a fire engine. We will always send a fire engine to 999 calls and confirmed fires.

We carried out consultation in 2022, about how we challenge calls to automatic fire alarm notifications. The subsequent changes that we made had a minimal impact on the disruption caused by responding to false alarms.

Building Categories

We have separated all buildings into categories. This helps us explain how we want to change our response to automatic fire alarm notifications. Detail of the building types in each category are available on our website.

It is important to note that the consultation does not affect the way we will respond to buildings in category C. We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications at these addresses at any time.

The consultation presents options to consider changing the way we respond to automatic fire alarm notifications in buildings in category A and B only.

Buildings in category A

	Examples
Commercial non-residential	Shops, offices, warehouses
Entertainment	Leisure centres, cinemas, theatres
Education non-residential	Colleges, universities
Stadium	Sports grounds, pavilions, stadiums

Buildings in category B

	Examples
Community properties	Libraries, town halls, museums
Education non-residential[1]	Primary and secondary schools
Medical	Doctors' surgeries, health centres

Buildings in category C

	Examples
Residential homes	Houses, bungalows, flats
Sleeping risk	Care homes, hotels, hostels, hall of residences, hospitals
High risk	Where there are site specific risks (i.e. controlled hazardous materials etc).

Options for Consultation

We have three proposed options to consult on. These options explain how we plan to reduce our response to automatic fire alarms in the buildings categorised below, addressing the risks identified in this document. The proposed changes do not offer monetary savings. The focus is solely on reducing risk by minimising disruption to key activities.

We will continue to send fire engines to alarms at higher risk buildings, where anyone sleeps, such as hotels, hospitals, care homes, houses, and flats.

We will always send a fire engine to 999 calls, confirmed fires and to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

For all the options we are consulting you on, we are proposing the same change to how we respond to category A buildings. For buildings in category B, we propose different options for your consideration. This is to enable us to reduce the number of unnecessary false alarms attended and disruption caused by these, further improving the service we provide to our residents.

The number of automatic fire alarm notifications in the options below are taken from 2022-2023 data for Berkshire. The hours saved are indicative, but do demonstrate the significant disruption caused by false alarms to the delivery of our essential services and training. The estimated number of productive hours gained are a conservative estimate and do not account for the disruption to our service caused by AFAs. We expect a higher return of productive working hours.

We recognise that the adoption of any of the changes proposed in this consultation poses a low risk to the identified buildings, for example where buildings are unoccupied and a fire occurs, there could be a potential delay in alerting the Fire Service if we do not respond to the initial automatic fire alarm notification. However, we know the data tells us that on 99% of occasions, these calls were false alarms and no action was required by firefighters that attended. This causes significant disruption to the delivery of essential services and training, therefore on balance, and in line with national changes to how all fire and rescue services respond to automatic fire alarms, we recognise that that we need to change the way we respond to automatic fire alarm notifications to ensure our communities and our firefighters are kept safe.

No decisions have been made yet. We want to hear what you think of our proposals.

Proposed Process

Alarm goes off notifying the Alarm Receiving Centre or Responsible Person

Alarm Receiving Centre/ Responsible Person should notify TVFCS* to confirm the cause of the alarm

TVFCS answers the call and takes the appropriate action

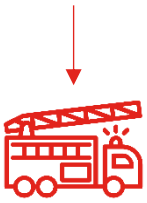
In buildings in category A or B

No fire confirmed or response from Responsible Person

No fire engine is sent

In buildings in category A or B

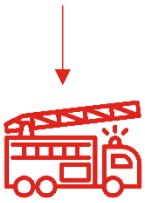
Fire confirmed



A fire engine is sent

In buildings in category A or B

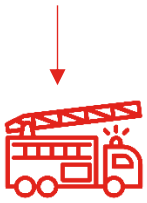
A person calls 999 because there is a fire



A fire engine is sent

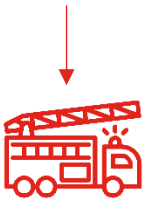
In buildings in category A or B

Where the mobilising officer uses operational discretion



A fire engine is sent

In residential homes and other high-risk buildings



A fire engine is sent

* TVFCS – Thames Valley Fire Control Service

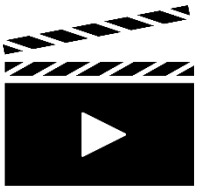
Option 1

We will **stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification** at buildings in **Category A when there is no confirmed fire, 24 hours a day, 365 days** of the year.

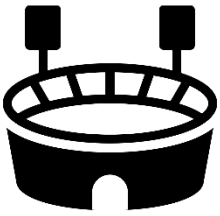
If a fire is confirmed or we receive a 999 call, we will immediately send a fire engine. We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

Types of Buildings Affected

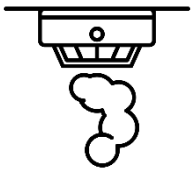
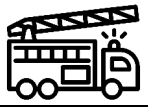

Shops


Cinemas


Universities


Sports stadiums

Change Proposed

	**Category A buildings** We will **stop automatically sending a fire engine** to an automatic fire alarm notification **when there is no confirmed fire**	 24 hours a day  365 days
 	**We will continue to send fire engines to 999 calls and confirmed fires.** **We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.**	
Estimated number of automatic fire alarm notifications affected by Option 1		725
Estimated productive hours gained for critical activities		986 hours

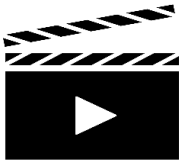
Option 2

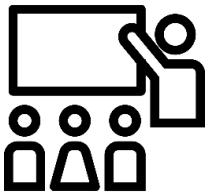
We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in **Category A when there is no confirmed fire**, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. **We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in Category B between 9am and 6pm,** 365 days of the year, when the buildings are likely to be occupied and therefore the Responsible Person can confirm if there is an emergency response needed.

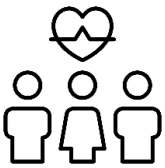
If a fire is confirmed or we receive a 999 call, we will immediately send a fire engine. We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

Types of Buildings Affected

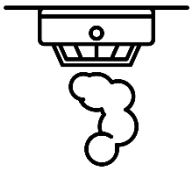
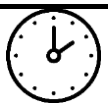

Shops


Cinemas


Schools


Doctors' Surgeries

Change Proposed

	**Category A buildings** We will **stop automatically sending a fire engine** to an automatic fire alarm notification **when there is no confirmed fire**	 24 hours a day  365 days
	Category B buildings We will **stop automatically sending a fire engine** to an automatic fire alarm notification **when there is no confirmed fire**	 between 9am and 6pm
 	**We will continue to send fire engines to 999 calls and confirmed fires.** **We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.**	
Estimated number of automatic fire alarm notifications affected by Option 2		810
Estimated productive hours gained for critical activities		1,074 hours

Option 3

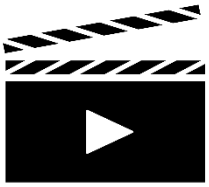
We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in **Category A when there is no confirmed fire**, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification at buildings in Category B when there is no confirmed fire, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

If a fire is confirmed or we receive a 999 call, we will immediately send a fire engine. We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.

Types of Buildings Affected


Shops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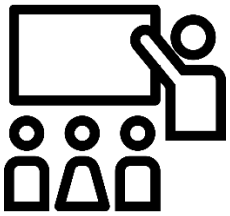
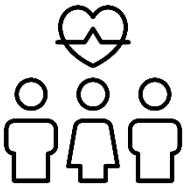

Schools


Doctors' Surgeries

Change Proposed

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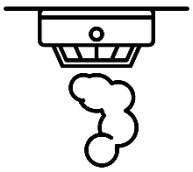
<tr><td rowspan="2">  </td><td>Category A buildings
We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification when there is no confirmed fire</td><td rowspan="2"> 
24 hours a day

 
365 days</td></tr>
<tr><td>Category B buildings
We will stop automatically sending a fire engine to an automatic fire alarm notification when there is no confirmed fire</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">  
We will continue to send fire engines to 999 calls and confirmed fires.
We will continue to send fire engines to automatic fire alarm notifications from residential homes.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Estimated number of automatic fire alarm notifications affected by Option 3</td><td>894</td></tr>
<tr><td>Estimated productive hours gained for critical activities</td><td>1,228 hours</td></tr>
</table>

How to Have Your Say

The automatic fire alarm consultation will run from 4 March 2024 until 13 May 2024.

No decisions have been made yet. We want to hear what you think of our proposals.

Following the consultation, we will offer a mechanism for all Responsible Persons and Building Owners whose premises falls under the consulted categories the opportunity to request a review by the fire and rescue service.

We are committed to providing all members of our communities with the opportunity to give feedback.

This document is also available in Easy Read, large text, plain text form and a web version.

The web version has been created to be more accessible, easier to search, and can be translated into different languages using the Google Translate tool on RBFRS' website. If anyone would like a hard copy or require assistance with accessing the information in an alternative format, please contact us using any of the methods below.

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

Writing to us 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 X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn

Find out more about us and how we consult

- Visit our website to find out more about our Service.
- Visit our website to find out more about Automatic Fire Alarms and False Alarms.
- Read through our Frequently Asked Questions for this consultation.
- Visit our website to learn more about our CRMP and our priorities for the next four years.
- To find out more about how we carry out consultations you can read our Consultation Strategy. This helps us to ensure we meet our legal obligations.
- To find out more about how we analysed the data for this consultation, please visit our Data and Analysis Sources Document.

Next Steps

Consultation period – The 10-week consultation and engagement with residents, staff and key stakeholders will run from 4 March 2024 until 13 May 2024.

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 will meet in June 2024 to conscientiously consider the results of consultation and make decisions on the options.

Implement decision – Once the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority has made its decision it will be implemented.

Evaluation – The impact of the decision will be evaluated after a year of implementation and reported back to the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority.

ROYAL BERKSHIRE
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

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