

LANCASHIRE COMBINED FIRE AUTHORITY

Meeting to be held on 28 June 2021

UNWANTED FIRE SIGNAL POLICY (UWFS) – PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE (Appendix 1 refers)

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

This paper and accompanying presentation (attached as appendix 1) provide an overview of the current policy relating to fire engine attendance at False Alarms caused by Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) actuations and the high proportion of these which are subsequently categorised as Unwanted Fire Signals (UWFS). The March 2021 Performance Committee meeting considered the implications of the current policy and the resultant performance, endorsing two options for change which are now presented for full Fire Authority consideration.

False alarm mobilisations consistently account for approximately 50% of all Lancashire Fire & Rescue Services' (LFRS) attendances compared to 42% nationally. This disparity was noted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in their last inspection, observing that "*LFRS is attending more false alarms than necessary and that call challenging protocols employed by LFRS are out of step with the other Fire and Rescue Services using North West Fire Control (NWFC)*". It is reasonable to expect further scrutiny in this area during the next round of HMICFRS inspections later in 2021.

UWFS mobilisations present many risks and challenges: diverting essential resources from emergencies, increasing road risk, disrupting operational training and impacting upon the delivery of community and business safety activities. Furthermore, there are environmental, financial, and broader effectiveness implications of the current approach.

This paper provides the Fire Authority with two options for change, framed around non-attendance to non-sleeping risk premises and the development of a new policy relating specifically to domestic false alarms (which are growing at pace due to increased use of Telecare in Social Care provision for the most vulnerable). A third option, 'charging for attendance at UWFS', was considered by Performance Committee but discounted as ineffective due to the disproportionate financial impact on other Public Sector organisations and the failure of the policy to address the underlying need to reduce unnecessary mobilisations.

The proposals would bring LFRS into greater alignment with other NW services and with sector direction of travel.

Recommendation

The Authority is asked to:

i) consider and endorse for public consultation a recommendation made by the Performance Committee at its meeting held 17 March 2021 (45/19 refers) to remove

attendance to Automatic Fire Alarms at Non-Sleeping premises staged over 2 years; to be introduced during the day in year 1 and during the night from year 2;

ii) consider and endorse for public consultation the development of a new policy relating specifically to domestic false alarms.

Information

In place since April 2016, the current AFA policy defines:

- The impact and risks associated with Unwanted Fire Signals;
- What constitutes an Unwanted Fire Signal;
- The role of Alarm Receiving Centres (ARCs);
- The call handling role within NW Fire Control;
- The information and data gathering role of Operational Crews; (to correctly categorise the incident and populate the Incident Recording System);
- The policy position on LFRS staff not resetting Fire Alarms;
- Trigger points for Fire Protection staff intervention;
- A proportionate enforcement route which starts with the provision of business support & escalates to formal enforcement action to resolve unsatisfactory premises.

LFRS continues to attend higher volumes of AFAs than many other fire and rescue services, as noted by HMICFRS during their first inspection. False alarm mobilisations consistently account for approximately 50% of all LFRS attendances compared to 42% nationally¹. In 2020, LFRS attended 5824 AFA's (out of 8397 False Alarm Incidents) of these; 30% were in sleeping risk premises and 70% in non-sleeping risk.

In addition to the national disparity, LFRS is also out of step with other services operating from North West Fire Control, all of whom have taken a risk-based approach to reduce mobilisations to AFA's, typically framed around building types and/or time of day or night.

LFRS' current approach poses several challenges to the Service in that it:

- Diverts essential resources from actual emergencies;
- Creates risk to crew and public whilst responding [to false alarms];
- Disrupts Community and Business Safety activities;
- Creates disruption for businesses employing On-Call firefighters;
- Reduces operational training time and impacts upon planned exercises;
- Creates environmental impact;
- Constitutes a draw upon public finances;
- Causes call handling delays in NWFC impacting wider performance levels.

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) publishes guidance to assist fire and rescue services in reducing the risks created by Unwanted Fire Signals citing options such as:

- Undertaking call challenge in Control rooms (NWFC do this);
- Ensuring Fire Alarm Monitoring Organisations undertake call-back (NWFC do this);

¹ [Fire and rescue incident statistics: England, year ending December 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92422/fire-and-rescue-incident-statistics-england-year-ending-december-2020.pdf)

- Sending reduced or no attendance under risk based and defined conditions (LFRS partially does this).

NFCC also endorses:

- Setting reasonable expectations for UWFS (LFRS applies these);
- Providing Business Advice to continually nudge compliance (LFRS does this);
- Using Fire Safety Enforcement to secure compliance (LFRS does this);
- Exercising capability to Raise Charges (LFRS does not do this).

The current approach to management of AFA's combines business safety advice and legal enforcement measures (under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005). Business Safety Advisors deliver engagement / education and deal with poor AFA performance using a series of triggers to help premises owners and operators to comply.

Where business safety advice is not followed the case is escalated and a full Fire Safety Audit is undertaken and Fire Safety Order legal powers used (Enforcement Notices issued to secure compliance, if for example, the Fire Alarm is deemed not suitable). To withstand legal scrutiny and appeals, LFRS Inspectors have to demonstrate the fire alarm system generating the AFA is poorly installed, defective or poorly managed against criteria in British Standard, BS5839:1.

These reactive approaches to supporting premises owners to comply will continue. However, pro-active improvement options exist which could fundamentally reduce fire appliance mobilisations, thereby reducing service wide impacts, providing increased operational efficiency and better value for money.

Building on information presented to Performance Committee, work has been undertaken to explore policies utilised by other services within the region and beyond, to examine the differing approaches, benefits, and risks, in order to shape LFRS proposals. The two options presented are those which are likely to derive maximum service benefit, optimising performance whilst encompassing an incremental and risk-based approach.

Remove attendance to AFAs at non-sleeping premises.

Performance Benefits

This option would immediately realise c.40% reduction in attendances to AFA's;
It aligns LFRS to other FRS in NW Fire Control;
It improves NWFC call handling process and associated KPI; and
It improves availability and speed of response to real emergencies.

Timeline

Introduction could be staged i.e. during the day in year 1, adding during the night from year 2. Alternatively, full implementation over the 24-hour period could be delivered in one policy change.

Resource Implications

Public Consultation (as part of IRMP consultation and media campaign).

Risks

Failing to attend a fire which is occurring in a non-sleeping risk premises.

The frequency of this is low (see table 1).

The mitigation comes in the form of effective business engagement emphasising the importance of making back-up 999 calls from occupied premises and 'double knock' systems in unoccupied ones. Double knock systems are those which will only autodial if two separate fire detection devices activate (recognised in the fire protection industry as being highly unlikely to happen in false alarm conditions).

Table 1 – AFA incidents in non-sleeping risk premises classified as a fire on arrival by year

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Automatic Fire Alarms actuations	4599	4815	4608	4700	4086	22808
Number of Primary Fires	17	14	8	6	3	48
% of Primary Fires	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2

Introduce a Domestic False Alarm Policy

This would be a very different type of policy as AFA's from domestic dwellings are predominantly generated from Telecare systems incorporating smoke alarms.

Numbers of actuations are increasing year on year and so the policy would focus on close collaboration with Lancashire's Social Care Providers.

Proposed Objectives

To reduce UWFS and simultaneously reduce risk to vulnerable persons who rely on Telecare systems for their safety. Focus would be on poor installations and identifying improvements that reduce UWFS without increasing risk to vulnerable occupier/s.

Financial Implications

Medium – Financial benefits to Service in increased productivity of operational crews through reduced disruption, reduced fuel costs, vehicle wear and road risk liability. Increased availability of Fire Safety Inspectors to inspect high risk premises.

Prior to implementation extensive engagement would be undertaken with commerce and owners of non-sleeping risk premises to inform them of the benefits of the new approach and the changes needed to their fire alarm investigation procedures.

Similarly, extensive engagement would be undertaken with the main Telecare Commissioners (upper tier Authorities) and their contracted providers.

Sustainability or Environmental Impact

Medium – significant reduction in appliance movements across Lancashire representing reduced carbon footprint.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Low

Human Resource Implications

Low

Business Risk Implications

High – should the Service not act to refine the AFA and UWFS policy there is a high probability that our next HMICFRS inspection could see a deterioration in outcome, from ‘good’ to ‘requires improvement’ across both Efficiency and Response areas of inspection.

Low – Failing to attend a fire which is occurring in a non-sleeping risk premises. The frequency of this is low (as detailed in table 1). The mitigation comes in the form of effective business engagement emphasising the importance of back-up 999 calls from occupied premises and ‘double knock’ systems in unoccupied ones. Double knock systems are those which are agreed to fire alarm systems which will autodial only on actuation of two fire detection devices.

The non-attendance policy proposed has been used by all other FRS’ in the NW for several years.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact
Performance Committee Unwanted Fire Signals (UWFS) Proposals for Change	17 March 2021	DCFO Steve Healey
Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate:		