



Risk control

Managing your fire alarm system



Introduction

This article is intended to inform clients of a approaches being taken by UK Fire & Rescue Services which may maintain implications where there is a failure to manage levels of Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals (UFAS).

A UFAS can be defined as 'a fire alarm activation resulting from a cause other than a fire'. When a person activates an alarm in good faith believing there to be a fire but there isn't one, then this event would not be classified as a UFAS. No-one should be deterred from this action where they believe this to be the case.

According to the Home Office Statistical Bulletin 16/18¹, the total number of false alarms attended by English Fire & Rescue Services was 40%. No comparable figure is given to UFAS, however, in 2015/16 UFAS activity accounted for 31% of all incidents attended by the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS). For more information please visit your local Fire & Rescue Service Website. These events redirect Fire Rescue Service resources away from other emergencies and often cause considerable disruption to businesses and other organisations across Scotland, and the UK.

¹ [Fire and Rescue Incident Statistics: England, Year ending March 2018](#)

Over the past 12 months some of our clients have been subject to action by their local Fire & Rescue Services and the implementation of their new policy approach.

Legal Issues, Policy, and Procedures

Whilst Fire & Rescue Services (FRS) have no legal duty to 'require' clients to implement certain procedures in the event of a fire alarm signal, there is a 'power' within UK fire legislation to 'charge' for attending UFAS. Currently, there are no reports of any client being charged, however, they are taking action to reduce the burden upon them when called to such incidents.

In January 2017, the SFRS issued an internal Awareness Briefing instructing officers and the Fire Brigades Union of their intention to introduce a pilot procedure to manage attendances at automatic fire alarm incidents within lower/ non-sleeping accommodation properties. This was initially aimed at the West Service Delivery Area; however, if it proves successful, it would be expected to be extended across all three Service delivery areas, affecting all Scottish Local Authorities and businesses. This would mean commencement of their 'UFAS Pre-determined Attendance Reduction Matrix Procedure'.

The process for the reduction of appliances in attendance is dependent on the number of UFAS that a premise has experienced. There are 4 stages;

— **Stage 1** – Premise occupiers are likely to be advised by the SFRS after a UFAS to contact their fire alarm engineer to determine the cause of the alarm and take appropriate action to prevent a recurrence. It is likely that the occupier of the premise will be informed of the consequences of repeated incidents at this stage.

— **Stage 2** – Where a premise has experienced 5 or more UFAS within a 3 month period, the occupier may receive a letter from the SFRS advising that continued failure to manage UFAS may result in a reduced attendance and a response at normal road speeds in future. This may have the effect of delaying evacuated occupants from returning to the building as there will be a delay in the SFRS arriving at scene and declaring the premise safe for reoccupation.

— **Stage 3** – Where a premise has experienced 10 or more UFAS within a 6 month period, SFRS senior officers may conduct a critical examination of the circumstances surrounding the UFAS to determine if any further action is to be taken. This can include enforcement action by the SFRS if deemed appropriate.

— **Stage 4** – Where a premise has experienced 20 or more UFAS within a 9 month period, the following reduction in service may result:

'In the case of frequent UFAS incidents, a decision may be made to stage the PDA by dispatching one appliance at normal road speed for "inspection purposes" only on all occasions when a call is received, whether from an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) or 999/112 where no fire is confirmed.

'This will be a temporary measure which shall be reviewed once corrective steps have been taken.'

The process further indicates that enforcement action may result in these circumstances.

Client Impact

At the time of producing this article it had been reported that the SFRS has advised at least 2 RMP clients within the West Service Delivery Area that they intended to reduce attendance to a single appliance at normal road speeds to named premises. This was due to evidence of failure to manage UFAS resulting in multiple attendances to these premises. These cases seem to have mainly involved school premises, however, clients should be aware that this action is potentially applicable to most buildings, excluding sleeping risk premises.

It needs be stressed that the SFRS policy decision will not result in a reduction or changes to their attendance at any sleeping risk premises.

The SFRS are advising clients that it is their duty under BS5839-1 2013 (Standard for Fire Alarm Systems) to investigate the cause of the fire signal. It should be noted that BS5839-1 2013 is an industry standard and guidance document, and so, where there is conflict with health and safety legislation, then the latter must take precedence.

Currently, many occupiers are calling the fire service immediately an alarm signal is given by their fire alarm system, either via a remote alarm receiving centre or directly from the affected premise. Clients are being advised by the SFRS conduct a brief investigation into the cause of the evacuation signal prior calling the fire service if there is a confirmed fire or otherwise.

It is worth noting that there is no compulsory requirement to call the fire service in all cases where an alarm is activated. Both health and safety and fire legislation require emergency arrangements to be put in place for summoning the fire service when it is required. This may mean that the occupier can investigate the cause of the alarm signal, and where they determine it to be a false alarm, reset the alarm, and allow occupants to return to the premises.

It must be stressed that only where an occupier has completed a thorough review of its fire risk assessment using competent advice should this be considered, and only adopted once all control measures identified by the fire risk assessment are implemented.

Controls measures identified by the risk assessment to protect the safety of those conducting the initial fire source investigation typically include: training to establish competency and safety in the investigation task; and communication equipment. It would be advisable that investigations are undertaken in teams of a minimum of two people.

Unless a two-stage alarm system is in place, it is imperative that all occupants of premises must be evacuated on the activation of a fire alarm.

Current and Future Considerations

Two-stage alarms

Two-stage fire alarm systems are becoming more common but the benefits of these are not yet widely appreciated. There are some subtle differences in how the system is set up, but in general the first stage of activation of this type of system initially provides a warning signal, frequently an intermittent alarm within the affected compartment. At this stage, no evacuation is necessary. This allows staff a predetermined timeframe of around 2 to 3 minutes to investigate the activation source before the system moves to full evacuation. If a member of staff fails to report within the timeframe the system automatically defaults to a full evacuation. If, either before or during the investigation period, a second device operates then the system will automatically default to full evacuation. Generally, where a sprinkler head operates it will sound the full evacuation alarm with no investigation period.

As may be appreciated, there are tangible benefits to a two-stage system as it can significantly reduce disturbances to organisations where there are frequent false alarms.

Single stage alarms

Most premises will be provided with a single stage alarm system. In the event of the alarm operating it is expected that the building will be fully evacuated. There should be no deviation from this procedure. Whilst the evacuation is underway the origin of the signal may be investigated by two members of staff. The investigation should include information received from occupants of the affected compartment, including from Fire Wardens.

Pager systems linked to the fire alarm panel to alert relevant staff to the zone of the signal should be considered. With a pager there is no need to report to the panel to source the zone where the signal is activated. This will reduce the time in reporting a false alarm or confirming a fire.

Investigation prior to calling the fire service

As previously stated, there is no legal requirement placed upon an occupier to call the fire service on each occasion that a fire alarm activates. Occupiers may choose to manage the signal without calling them. If this is the decision we would advise the following:

- The procedure should be approved corporately.
- Competent advice must be utilised in designing the procedure. This advice may be from internal or external sources.
- The fire risk assessment, and any other relevant risk assessment, must be reviewed and updated to specifically ensure that 'persons especially at risk' are considered and the risks addressed. This would usually include those investigating the fire and any controls required to ensure their safety.
- Liaise with any external or internal alarm receiving centres to ensure the new procedure is fully communicated and understood.
- Liaise with any property and casualty insurer(s) or representative(s) to ensure they are aware of the change in procedure.
- Ensure all staff and any other occupants are fully trained in all aspects of fire safety awareness, including means of escape, fire evacuation procedures, and significant findings of the relevant risk assessments. Records of training, risk assessments, and fire evacuations (including drills) must be well documented.

Conclusion

With the SFRS attending UFAS on a scale of 31% of all incidents, it is perhaps understandable why they are seeking improvement in the management of such disruptive and expensive events. No organisation would wish to distract the attention and resources of the SFRS away from where they are truly required in times of emergency. With this in mind, it may only be a matter of time before the number of occupiers advised of future action taken against them increases. Each client, as a responsible person/person with a duty, maintains a requirement to manage their fire alarm systems.

Occupiers of premises must continually monitor and manage any UFAS, and take action to reduce or control the number being experienced. In all cases, a false alarm should be fully investigated, the cause identified, and preventative actions fully implemented. Documented evidence to this effect should be maintained.

If major refurbishments or new builds are being considered, then the installation of two-stage alarms may well be beneficial in the long term as they may save money through less disruption to premises from UFAS and negate the need for enforcement action to be being taken by the SFRS.

People safety must be of paramount importance. In all cases where the evacuation alarm sounds, evacuate.

Should you need further advice contact your risk control consultant.

Links to Further Information

[Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals - The Scottish Fire & Rescue Service](#)

[Unwanted Fire Signals - Chief Fire Officers Association](#)

[Reducing False Alarms - The Fire Industry Association](#)

Further RMP Resources and Articles

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the [RMP Resources](#) or [RMP Articles](#) pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our [LinkedIn](#) page. Additionally we have specific discussion groups for the [Education](#), [Emergency](#) and [Government](#) sectors.

Get in touch

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