

FAQ- External

Time for Change: Reducing Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals (UFAS)

Consultation on Options for Responding to Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs)

What is UFAS?

An unwanted fire alarm signal (UFAS) is a false alarm generated from an automatic fire alarm activation, that has **not** been caused by a fire, that the fire service responds to.

What is AFA?

An Automatic Fire Alarm system (AFA) is installed to raise the alarm, either by detectors or break glass call points, to give as much time as possible for people to escape from a building prior to a fire developing.

Within non-domestic properties (such as public buildings, offices, shops and factories) they form a vital part of any fire safety strategy and remain one of the most effective ways to keep businesses and persons safe from fire. However, most activations of these systems are not from actual fires – they are false alarms, and if transmitted to the fire and rescue service, will generate a UFAS which subsequently leads to fire crews being called out unnecessarily.

Why is SFRS reviewing the current process?

Reducing UFAS incidents is a priority of the Scottish Government. Despite efforts of SFRS and partners, reducing this type of false alarm continues to be a challenge and has an unnecessary impacted on our service, our partners, the business sector and local communities.

The challenges placed on the SFRS through the changing risk profile in communities, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the future vision of the service, requires us to manage the demand of these by finding innovative ways to build capacity and improve flexibility in our response.

Is this a change of legislation?

No, it isn't a change of legislation, it is a change in response. Historically, the service responded to all AFA system actuations. However, there is no legal responsibility for us to respond to these systems to establish if there is a fire. It is the legal responsibility of duty holders to take appropriate action in the event of an AFA activation, including the safe evacuation of persons within, investigate the cause of the alarm and to notify us of any fire. This should be informed from an appropriate Fire Risk Assessment as required by Part 3 of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005.

Are other UK Fire and Rescue services taking this approach?

Yes, most other UK Fire and Rescue Services have amended their response to AFA incidents over the past decade. Varying approaches have been taken and the service has engaged with a number of these services and will continue to do so, to further understand options, lessons learned and best practice.

Have we undertaken a consultation process?

Yes, although not required to do so, we have already consulted with our staff and industry stakeholders. This 12-week public consultation is the next step in that process.

Online surveys and staff engagement sessions identified that by changing our response we could make better use of our resources, improve safety and create capacity for more meaningful workstreams.

An independently facilitated stakeholder workshop event took place in February 2021, which allowed representatives from the fire industry, commerce, large public-sector organisations as well as SFRS staff, to evaluate different models for responding to AFA actuations, and offer an informed opinion.

A range of five options were explored, with consensus that significant benefits could be delivered. Three options were identified as being the most appropriate and we are now progressing to the public consultation phase.

What does more meaningful workstreams mean?

The time taken to attend these incidents is disruptive to the working day, interrupting other tasks that our station-based personnel are required to conduct e.g., training and development sessions, prevention and safety initiatives in local communities, and intelligence gathering and inspections.

It further impacts and causes unnecessary disruption to primary employers and self-employed Retained (on-call) and Volunteer staff.

What are the benefits of reducing UFAS?

The main benefits are summarised in the list below:

- improved firefighter and community safety through the reduction of blue light journeys
- improved availability of resources for attending real emergencies
- increased time available for training, prevention and other activities
- extra capacity to meet future challenges and risks, and do so much more for the communities of Scotland
- reduced costs
- reduced carbon emissions
- reduced time away from work for retained and volunteer firefighters from primary or self-employment

Has the Service undertaken any kind of trial of this change in response?

Like all organisations, the COVID-19 pandemic meant we had to change our practices to ensure we maintained our core services to keep our staff and communities safe, as well as protecting the NHS. One of the changes we made was in our response to AFAs.

From May 2020, we began sending a single fire appliance to AFAs of certain property types. This reduced blue light journeys by an average of 21%. As of 30 April 2021, we had reduced blue light journeys by 10,409. We reviewed the overall impact of this interim response during January 2021 and there was no evidence that its implementation had any detrimental

impact. In fact, we found that there were 14 less vehicle accidents associated with responding to false alarms, which is a drop of 29%.

What are example causes of UFAS?

The most common examples of the cause of these false alarms are:

- Cooking Fumes
- Steam
- Smoking materials
- Dust
- Hot works
- Aerosols
- Testing or maintenance of system
- Accidental or malicious activation of a manual break glass call point

Is UFAS really an issue?

Based on the five financial years from 2015/16 to 2019/20, SFRS has attended an average of 28,479 UFAS incidents every year, which accounts for 31% of all incidents attended. Over these years, only 2% of AFA actuations from non-domestic properties that were received by us were actual fires. Notably, of this 2%, the majority required no firefighting, as they were small and extinguished prior to our arrival.

In addition, a minimum of two fire appliances are currently mobilised to any AFA.

This makes UFAS incidents the biggest contributor to the Service's operational demand, exceeding the number of other types of false alarms, actual fires and special service incidents attended every year. On analysis of the demand, the figures approximate as follows:

- 15 minutes recorded as spent at each incident (from leaving station to cause of alarm being identified) although to deal with the call takes twice as long
- A total of 64,000 hours of productivity lost annually; and
- Around 57,000 unnecessary blue light journeys per year

How do we know if it's a false alarm or not until we attend?

From the data analysis and subsequent information, we can identify that the likelihood of there being a fire that requires some form of intervention is very low. In fact, for the majority of AFA calls, no equipment or action is required by fire crews. In the event of a fire or any physical signs of a fire, staff should dial 999 for an immediate emergency response.

Are there benefits for businesses/organisations in reducing UFAS?

UFAS incidents create disruption for businesses. Business employees can be interrupted, and a loss of productivity occurs due to evacuations, but examples can be found in other environments, from customers/clients being disrupted in commercial premises, to elderly residents being disrupted in care homes. There is also a very real risk of complacency setting in amongst staff with high numbers of false alarms – “oh it is just another false alarm” – and staff may be less willing to act when an alarm does activate.

Although this consultation focusses on the response element, SFRS officers will still be proactive in providing specific advice to reduce instances of UFAS and organisations should be focussed on reducing unnecessary alarm actuations for these reasons.

Does SFRS have a preferred option?

No, at this stage we do not have a preferred option and may consider any additional feasible options, or variations of the existing options, which arise during the consultation exercise.

How does a proposed change in response affect domestic households?

A change in our response only relates to non-domestic premises. It will not affect the way we respond to alarms activating in a domestic setting or linked through a domestic telecare provider. We are only reviewing how we respond to false alarms in workplaces that have fire safety responsibilities under the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005.

If the fire alarm is activating due to a fire, will it become a larger fire if we do not attend?

We will always attend a confirmed fire or any physical signs of a fire. If the premises are occupied and someone investigates the alarm activation, a 999 call will immediately trigger an emergency response. When premises are unoccupied, perhaps at night, the person responsible for the premises should have arrangements in place to investigate why the fire alarm has activated and call 999 if a fire is discovered.

AFA systems are designed in such a way that should further detectors indicate a fire developing activate, this information would be available and passed to our Operations Control (OC), who could decide on an immediate response.

Does any delay in attending put persons at risk?

The options we are consulting on should not cause any notable delay in a response to a confirmed fire.

In terms of the safety of the safety of occupants, organisations should have measures in place to ensure fire safety is being regularly risk assessed and managed accordingly, and that suitable procedures are in place for persons to evacuate safely and notify us if there is a fire. An AFA system is the earliest method of detecting and alerting persons within to a fire and they should react promptly.

In relation to firefighter safety, ongoing core skills training will ensure firefighters can safely, competently and effectively deal with any potential risk of a more developed fire. Following implementation of the chosen option, we will be monitoring and reviewing incidents closely to assess the impact and address any emerging issues that could compromise firefighter safety.

Will this process also result in less appliances attending an actual fire?

No, if an actual fire is discovered our appropriate response to the specific building type will be mobilised, as is currently the case.

What is meant by call challenging?

OC asks the caller a series of questions and following set criteria, determines whether an emergency response is required following an AFA actuation. No response is mobilised, if questioning from OC confirms there is no fire, or physical signs of fire.

What if we discover a fire?

An immediate 999 call should be made, and an appropriate emergency response will be mobilised.

Will this affect building insurance?

This is not something that SFRS can comment on, each organisation should seek expert advice.

What is meant by exempt premises?

In some of the options presented, certain premises would be exempt from the call challenging process or non-attendance and an immediate response would be mobilised. For example, this would apply where it is likely people would be staying or sleeping within the premises.

When will a new response option be decided and implemented?

It is hoped that a decision will be made by the end of 2021, following full consideration of the consultation results, with a view to implementing it in early 2022.

Is this the start of cutbacks within SFRS?

No, reducing unnecessary mobilisations will allow for our staff to maintain their competency and to improve response preparations to actual incidents.

This approach may in fact encourage more primary employers to allow more of our RVDS colleagues to be on call during their working hours because if alerted, there is more chance it is a real emergency and not a false alarm.

This in turn may also better support the recruitment of RVDS firefighters.

What are Equality Impact Assessments?

To meet the requirements of the Public-Sector Equality Duty, the Service must be able to demonstrate that the UFAS Review Project and final business case for decision has had due regard to the General Equality Duty. To do this, the SFRS are assessing impact (both positive and negative) through an Equality Impact Assessment process.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is an evidence-based approach designed to help organisations ensure that their policies, practices, events and decision-making processes are fair and do not present barriers to participation or disadvantage any protected groups from participation.

Engagement to date has highlighted potential positives but also potential negative impacts for RVDS employees and employees in the Scottish Islands are rural areas. These were mainly around financial implications, response times and the benefits of UFAS being dependent on geographical location.

Likewise, engagement to date has also highlighted potential positives but also potential negative impacts for OPS Control employees. These were mainly around training implications, and low morale due to potential additional pressures around call challenging.

We need you to provide us with further evidence and identify any gaps in our current knowledge. What can the service do to help negate any of these impacts? This is an important element of the Equality Impact Assessment process and it will help the service to determine viable options moving forward.

Equality Impact Assessment Executive Summaries to date can be accessed [here](#)

Is there a legal obligation for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to attend all call outs?

The legal obligation for a workplace automatic fire alarm alert doesn't lie with the SFRS. It is the responsibility of the duty holder of the property to confirm if there is a fire or sign of fire.

We will always respond to a call confirming an actual fire or sign of fire.

The purpose of this consultation process is to address the current need for attendance to AFAs calls where there are no fires or signs of fire. This is for the benefit of the SFRS to use its resources more efficiently and effectively.

Why hasn't the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) included the status quo of one pump response to Automatic Fire Alarm's (AFAs) as an option for consultation?

We've adopted an interim response during COVID which sees us sending a reduced response to AFAs to minimise the risk of virus transmission. Although it delivers many positives it hasn't been included as an option for consultation as it doesn't deliver the significant benefits the other three options do.