



# **Review of COVID-19 Interim Response to AFA Actuations**

**January 2021**

**Safety. Teamwork. Respect. Innovation.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

During September 2020, the Prevention and Protection function commenced a review of the overall impact of the interim mobilisation arrangements for responding to Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) actuations at non-domestic premises during COVID-19.

These interim arrangements were implemented on 8 May 2020 and involve a one-pump pre-determined attendance (PDA) being mobilised to all AFA actuations at non-domestic premises, except for premises classed as sleeping accommodation and other specific high-risk premises.

As well as getting feedback from operational staff (station based/Control/Flexi-Officer), via a short online survey, the review also covered comments from external stakeholders (e.g. Duty holders), internal feedback via the Operational Assurance OA13 COVID-19 Review Form and analysis of incident data to quantify the impact of the interim mobilising arrangements on blue light journeys.

The review concluded at the end of December 2020, and this report outlines the responses to the review and key findings. Moving forward, key findings will be considered and incorporated into the wider UFAS Review currently underway.

## RESPONSES TO STAFF SURVEY

The staff survey involved participation from three distinct groups of employees who were involved in the service's interim response to AFA actuations during COVID-19, namely:

- Station based staff
- Operations Control (OC) staff
- Flexi-officers

A total of 12 questions were set, with two specific training based questions (Q2 & Q3) aimed at OC Staff and the remaining questions asked of all above staff groups. In total, 319 staff responded to the survey, the split being as follows.

	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>% of this group</b>
Operational (Control staff)	61	32%
Operational (Station based staff)	206	3%
Operational (Flexi-duty staff)	52	19%

### Key Points

The key points to be drawn from the responses to the staff survey are categorised and outlined below.

#### Delivering Intended Priorities

64% of the 319 responses agreed, that the blanket one-pump response to AFA's was delivering its intended priorities of reduced operational demand, increased capacity, reduced road risk and reduced potential exposure of staff and the public to COVID-19.

#### OC Training

Just over half of the OC staff responding (34), felt there was adequate OC specific training prior to going live. Of the remaining OC staff (27) who felt that training was inadequate, their responses to what could have been done to improve training concentrated on a need for more structured training and more time to prepare before going live.

#### Communicating the Change

Over three quarters of all staff responding (248) felt the change was communicated effectively prior to going live. Of the remaining staff who felt that the change wasn't communicated effectively (57), their responses to what could have been done to improve communications concentrated on earlier communication to help prepare for the change and the use of different methods of communication such as awareness briefings, consultation with staff, management briefings, direct contact with Retained Duty System (RDS) Managers and use of PDRPro.

## Exemptions

Many responses (82%) agreed that, if maintaining the blanket one-pump response to AFA actuations, the premises exempt from this response (i.e. sleeping risk premises and other high-risk premises) should stay the same.

For the remainder who didn't agree (18%), the question branched to ask what changes needed to be made to the exemptions. From these, the main theme emerging was that exemptions should consider many factors including time of day, premises type, size of premises, crewing levels and frequency of UFAS calls at individual premises.

## Positive Impacts

Respondents were asked to state their views on the key positive impact of introducing the blanket one-pump response at AFA actuations. 88% of 319 respondents provided an answer to this question. The themes that emerged were:

- Reducing contact -therefore reducing risk to personnel and public from COVID-19;
- Improved use of time for training and other productive station tasks;
- Maintaining resilience and operational readiness;
- Less disturbance and cost in relation to RDS and their other commitments, and
- Overall cost reductions.

## Negative Impacts

Respondents were asked to state their views on the key negative impact of introducing the blanket one-pump response at AFA actuations. 89% of the 319 respondents provided an answer to this question. The key themes that emerged were:

- Potential impact on firefighter and public safety;
- Delays in response/insufficient resources in the event of a fire situation, in rural areas;
- Insufficient crewing levels for dealing with AFA actuations;
- Impact on RDS/VDS in terms of less calls and therefore reduced turn-out payments;
- Perceived reduction of standards, stations and personnel, and
- Negative public and business perception damaging reputation of service.

## Further Comments

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to add any further relevant comments. A total of 122 (38%) staff took this opportunity. In general, the responses indicate satisfaction with the interim blanket one-pump response, and that the arrangements should continue. Other themes emerging from the 122 responses were:

- Reinforcing the positive and negative impacts of introducing the blanket one-pump attendance;

- Having regard to a range of factors when determining the weight of response to AFAs (e.g. time of day and premises type), and
- Perceptions that reducing the response to AFAs is a cost cutting exercise.

## **STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS**

A total of five stakeholders contacted the SFRS, to feedback their views on the implementation of the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations. Each stakeholder who submitted feedback received a response from the service. Feedback was received from:

- Schools (2)
- Universities (2)
- NHS (1)

On review of the feedback received, NHS and universities shared the same concern around certain high-risk premises within their property estates not being exempt from the interim response arrangements; therefore, requesting that exemptions apply and reinstatement of full pre-determined attendance (PDA) to all AFA actuations. The nature of the feedback from schools was more acknowledging the change in response to AFA actuations and confirming their fire safety management arrangements for dealing with AFA actuations. SFRS consistent messaging was used to respond to all feedback from stakeholders.

## **OPERATIONAL LEARNING (COVID-19 OA13 FORMS)**

Where operational learning arises as a direct result of COVID-19, the matter(s) arising should be submitted to the Operational Assurance Department on the Operational Assurance Reporting & Recording System (OARRS). This procedure was highlighted within the COVID-19 guidance, published in response to implementing the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations

To ensure any relevant operational learning was being considered during the review, the Service's Operational Assurance Team reviewed OA13 forms that had been submitted since implementation of the interim response arrangements. This specific piece of work, was particularly important given the theme emerging from the staff survey of some respondents feeling that the interim response arrangements would impact on firefighter safety. As of the end of December 2020, it was found that there was no operational learning directly linked to the implementation of the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations.

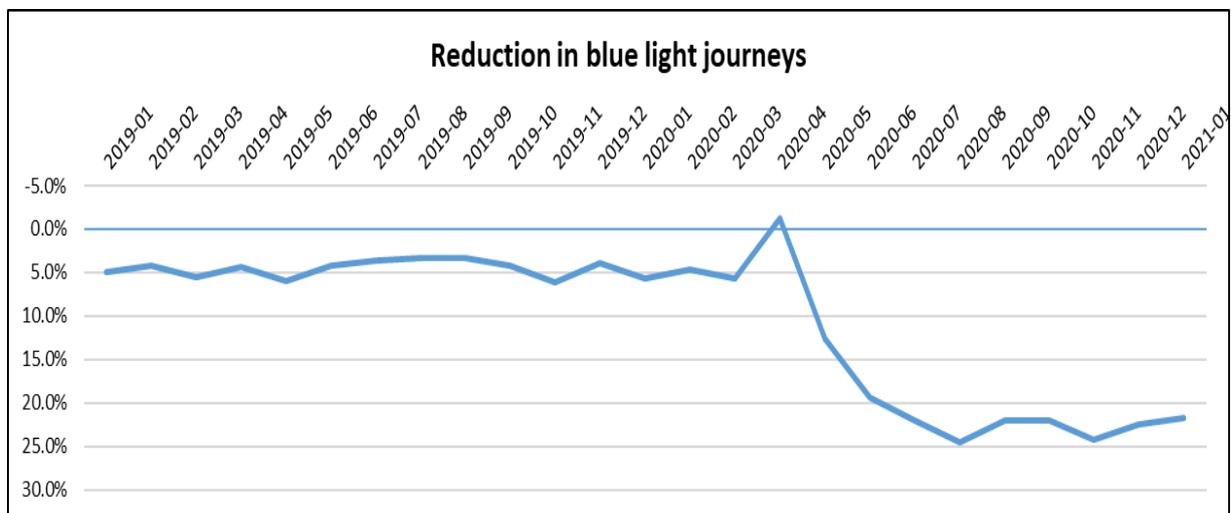
Moving forward, operational personnel should be encouraged to use the debriefing process and associated OARRS, to enable the collection of information on the efficiency and effectiveness of COVID-19 Interim Blanket One Pump Response to AFA actuations. This will help the service to assess if the positive and/or negative impacts identified by respondents are being encountered.

## INCIDENT DATA – BLUE LIGHT JOURNEYS

A review of incident data up to end December 2020 was conducted to estimate the impact of the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations on reducing the number of blue light journeys.

From commencement of the interim arrangements up to the end of December 2020, the SFRS had responded to 16,645 AFA actuations within non-domestic premises, resulting in a total of 26,084 blue light journeys.

We estimate our response to 16,645 AFA actuations would have generated 33,572 blue light journeys, if we had maintained the Pre-COVID-19 average PDA of two pumps for every UFAS incident attended. By implementing the COVID-19 Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations, the SFRS has therefore reduced blue light journeys by 7206 which is an overall reduction of 21%.



H&S figures up to end of December 2020, show a 32% reduction in vehicle accidents associated with responding to all false alarm incidents. Furthermore, with the average total time spent by fire crews calculated at 30 minutes<sup>1</sup> for every UFAS incident, implementation of the blanket one pump response has potentially reduced fire crew's exposure time to the virus by over 1800hrs (75 days) since its introduction. Based on these aspects, we therefore believe that the implementation of the blanket one pump response to AFA actuations has had a positive impact on firefighter safety and public safety during the pandemic.

Using IRS data from 2015/16 to 2019/20, we have estimated, that if a blanket one pump response to AFA actuations was implemented permanently under a steady state, it has the potential for realising a maximum reduction in blue light journeys of 32% per year<sup>2</sup>. The potential positive impact of this reduction is therefore estimated in the table below.

<sup>1</sup> Figure based on average of two fire appliances responding to every UFAS incident and the time fire appliances were mobilised until time they were made available. This doesn't include the travel time returning to the station and any associated administration and recording.

<sup>2</sup> The maximum reduction of 32% does not take into account discretionary mobilising by Operations Control Staff. This explains the difference between the maximum reduction and what was actually achieved (21%) up to end of December 2020.

<b>Pre COVID-19 Situation</b>	<b>Blanket One Pump Response - Max Reduction of 32%</b>
Average of 57,000 blue light journeys per year to AFA actuations.	Max estimated reduction of <b>18,240</b> per year
Average of 36 vehicle accidents responding to AFA's per year,	Max estimated reduction of <b>12</b> per year
Average of 14,235 hrs of fire crew time spent at UFAS incidents per year.	Max estimated reduction of <b>4555hrs</b> per year

A detailed assessment of the potential positive impacts of implementing the interim COVID-19 Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations permanently, is being conducted through the wider UFAS Review Project.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The key findings below have been drawn from what has been found through the staff survey, stakeholder feedback, operational learning and analysis of incident data.

### Staff Survey

- Staff believe that the blanket one-pump response to AFA's is delivering its intended priorities of reduced operational demand, increased capacity, and reduced road risk and the potential exposure of staff and public to COVID-19.
- OC training lacked structure and insufficient lead-in time prior to the change taking effect. The COVID-19 situation was fast moving and a factor in this.
- Overall, communication of the change, prior to go live was effective. Consideration to using a wider range of communication methods, to reach all affected staff would have been beneficial.
- If maintaining the blanket one-pump response to AFA actuations, the majority agree that the premises exempt from this should stay the same. However, there is a sound rationale for looking at various factors when determining the weight of response to exempt premises (e.g. time of day and premises type).
- The themes identified as being apparent positive and negative impacts of implementing the blanket one-pump attendance provide a good basis for more detailed assessment through the wider UFAS Review.
- In general, the responses to the staff survey indicate satisfaction with the interim blanket one-pump response during COVID-19, and that the arrangements should continue.

### Stakeholder Comments

- Current exemptions are causing concerns for some stakeholders who feel certain premises within their property estates should also be exempt from the interim blanket one-pump response to AFA's.

### Operational Learning

- It was found there was no operational learning directly linked to the implementation of the COVID-19 interim blanket one-pump response to AFA's. Crews should be encouraged to use the SFRS OA13 debriefing process to identify areas of operational learning. The key aim of this, is to improve performance and ensure firefighter safety. This will therefore be monitored closely going forward and any operational learning that stems from the interim response arrangements acted upon.

#### Incident Data – Blue Light Journeys

- The SFRS has reduced blue light journeys by an estimated 7206 which is an overall reduction of almost 21% since introducing the interim blanket one-pump response to AFA's. We believe this reduction has improved firefighter and public safety during the pandemic, through reduced road risk and a reduced risk of exposure to the virus.
- There is the potential for realising further reductions, if the interim blanket one-pump response to AFA's was implemented permanently during a steady state. This will be further explored, as part of the wider UFAS Review Project currently underway.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

As per the [SFRS's response framework to the Scottish Governments COVID-19 Protection Levels](#), we will continue to maintain the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response to AFA actuations. Alternative response options outlined in Service Delivery Directorate's procedures for responding to AFA Actuations during COVID-19 can be phased-in should the prevailing circumstances relating to the COVID-19 situation require this. The findings of this review, will help the service to consider any changes to these alternative response options during COVID-19 and supporting implementation plans.

Longer term, the findings of this review will inform the UFAS Review Project which is currently ongoing. This is a wider review that focuses on transforming our approach to managing UFAS demand, including how we respond to AFA actuations in the future. An options appraisal, evaluating different AFA response models, is being conducted and as a shortlisted option, the COVID-19 Interim Blanket One-Pump Response will be subjected to detailed assessment.

The findings of this review, will support the options appraisal that is underway and the Service wants staff and stakeholders to be part of any decision-making process. Relevant staff and key stakeholders have therefore been invited to an online workshop on 24 February 2021. This workshop will explore a range of options for responding to AFA actuations, including assessing the benefits and risks of each. The most recent UFAS Review Project Update, can found on the SFRS website by [following this link](#).