



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Meeting and date: Fire Authority, 14 February 2024

Report title: Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) mobilising policy review

Lead Member: Councillor Simon Rouse (Chairman)

Report sponsor: Deputy Chief Fire Officer Mick Osborne

Author and contact: Assistant Chief Fire Officer Simon Tuffley

Action: Decision

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

1. The commencement of an Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) mobilising policy review project be approved, to include a six-month pilot trial during Q1 to Q3 of 2024.
2. It be noted that the pilot trial will be a trial of one of the suite of options A-E.
3. The Chief Fire Officer be delegated the authority which option to pilot.
4. It be noted that data obtained through the pilot trial period will be used to inform proposals for the Authority's 2025-2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

Executive summary:

The Authority's [2025-30 Public Safety Plan](#), (PSP) which came into effect from 1 April 2020, included the following:

'We may change how we mobilise to incidents, the capabilities we use, and where we mobilise from. Specifically, we will review our approach to attending reports of automatic fire alarm (AFA) systems operating.'

'If the outcome of the review recommends significant changes to our current policy, we will consult with affected stakeholders before making any decisions.'

At the time of the PSP's publication Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) was one of only two fire and rescue services that routinely attend such reports, which are predominantly found to be false alarms.

The perceived benefit from reviewing this policy was primarily to free up capacity to deal with an increase in higher risk incident types. However, since publication of the PSP, further potential benefits have been identified, which include but are not limited to; improved utilisation of work time for activities such as Prevention, Protection and Training, reduced inherent road risk from fewer blue-light appliance

movements, reduced costs and environmental impacts through fewer appliance movements and reduced use of over the border appliances, as well as applying more efficient and effective business rules within the joint Thames Valley Control Service.

To help facilitate this project and to effectively evaluate future proposals, a pilot period to obtain sufficient data for assessment would be beneficial in future decision making, to consider a long-term solution to the identified risk. Therefore, approval is being sought to run a six-month pilot.

Financial implications:

It is anticipated that any direct costs associated with the project will be met by existing budgetary provision.

Any identified financial savings and other success criteria will be captured as part of the project evaluation.

Financial savings are unlikely to be significant and the main success criteria will instead be the extent to which staff time can be redirected to more productive activities.

Risk management:

High risk buildings

No changes are proposed for high-risk buildings. For these buildings a fire appliance would still be sent to an AFA activating. However, should the building occupiers confirm to us that it is a false alarm before our arrival, resources would be stood down before arrival.

High
Risk

High risk buildings are those that specifically house vulnerable people or provide sleeping accommodation for people or, they represent a critical community asset that would be locally, nationally or internationally damaging if lost or seriously damaged by fire. High risk buildings are also those that might pose a significant risk to firefighter or community safety or to the safety of animals and the environment. High risk buildings include:

- Private homes/dwellings including residential flats
- Residential care homes, nursing homes, children's homes
- Sheltered housing for more vulnerable persons
- School boarding accommodation
- Secure facilities including prisons, young offender institutions and detention centres
- Hospitals and hospices

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hotels ➤ Buildings housing animals such as kennels or veterinary surgeries ➤ High profile heritage buildings such as Blenheim Palace ➤ Buildings that we have determined represent a high or very high risk due to the potential impact on the environment, local community or economy. ➤ Critical community infrastructure such as telecoms and utilities infrastructure (e.g., pumping stations, substations, exchanges)
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Medium risk and low risk buildings

For medium risk and low risk buildings, officers are proposing a policy of non-fire appliance attendance, either during the daytime (9am to 6pm) or on a 24-hour basis, unless the Service receives confirmation of a fire or because there are signs of fire. The Service would consider more than one smoke detector activating, visible flame/smoke or smell of burning to constitute a sign of fire.

Medium risk and low risk buildings are defined as per the below:

Medium Risk	<p>Medium risk buildings are those that are considered to be important community assets. Medium risk buildings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Police & ambulance stations ➤ School and pre-school education ➤ Health centres ➤ Local and central government buildings ➤ Major transport hubs such as train stations
Low Risk	<p>Low risk buildings include those that do not house people sleeping and which do not otherwise pose a significant risk to firefighter or community safety or to the safety of animals and the environment. Low risk buildings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Commercial buildings (unless classified as a medium or high risk for another reason) ➤ Further education buildings ➤ Major sporting stadia ➤ Entertainment buildings such as cinemas, theatres and night clubs

➤ Other buildings not classified elsewhere in this table

For these types of buildings, officers have developed four options to consider which present slightly different approaches to when the Service would apply call challenge. Each has a different estimated impact on how much it will reduce the number of false alarms that the Service attends.

Options

Please note that the anticipated false alarm reductions below are based on Oxfordshire fire and rescue statistics, so are for illustrative purposes only.

A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk and medium-risk buildings. Not attend low-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. Attend automatic fire alarm incidents in low-risk buildings outside of these times unless the building is occupied and there are no signs of fire. 	28% reduction in attendance to false alarms
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk and medium-risk buildings. Not attend low-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. 	49% reduction in attendance to false alarms
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk buildings. Not attend both low and medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. Attend automatic fire alarm incidents in low and medium-risk buildings outside of these times unless the building is occupied and there are no signs of fire. 	32% reduction attendance to in false alarms

D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk buildings. • Not attend low risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. • Not attend medium-risk buildings between 9am and 6pm only unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. • Attend automatic fire alarm incidents in medium-risk buildings outside of these times unless the building is occupied and there are no signs of fire. 	53% reduction in attendance to false alarms
E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to attend automatic fire alarm activations in higher-risk buildings. • Not attend automatic fire alarm systems for both low and medium-risk buildings 24 hours a day unless there is a fire or there are signs of fire. 	59% reduction in attendance to false alarms

Legal implications:

When a public authority has stated that it will engage in consultation before making a specific decision or a specific type of decision, the public authority is required to comply with that stated intention. ([Council for Civil Service Unions v Minister for the Civil Service \[1985\] AC 374](#)).

Privacy and security implications:

None identified directly by this report. Implications will be considered throughout implementation of the project.

Duty to collaborate:

Responding to AFAs has been identified by the Thames Valley Collaboration Steering Group as a priority workstream and collaborative opportunity.

Officers have been working closely with colleagues in Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Services to identify opportunities and develop an aligned proposal for consideration as a collaborative Thames Valley AFA mobilising policy.

An agreed position has been reached across the three services in relation to categorising premises by low, medium, or high risk, and a range of options for

amending the mobilising policy have also been developed in collaboration, and for consideration by respective Authorities.

Health and safety implications:

There remains a low risk that during the pilot period, the Service does not respond to an AFA activation as it would have under its current mobilising policy, which subsequently turns out to be a real fire. This could mean that firefighters are called to a fire later than they would normally, which could have developed further and be more severe. This could present a higher risk to firefighters and the public. The risk to the public is further mitigated by the risk categorisation of premises to ensure higher risk premises continue to receive a normal response following an AFA activation.

There is also potential for reducing the inherent risk associated with emergency response driving, for firefighters and the public, due to fewer appliances being deployed to false alarms under emergency conditions.

Environmental implications:

The anticipated environmental benefit from attending fewer incidents is a reduction in fuel emissions and reduced wear and tear on vehicles. The full environmental impact can be assessed as part of the pilot period.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion implications:

Consideration has been given to ensure that premises most likely to be occupied by more vulnerable people in the community continue to receive an emergency response throughout the pilot.

A full equality impact assessment will be completed as part of the project.

Consultation and communication:

The pilot seeks to obtain suitable and sufficient data to inform the consultation on the Authority's next CRMP, which is scheduled to run alongside the pilot period.

The project will consider the appropriate level of business engagement, to ensure local business stakeholders are aware of the pilot period and are able to feed into the consultation process.

The collaborative theme will also feature, and partners will be encouraged to feed back into the consultation.

Background papers:

[2025-30 CRMP](#)