

# CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

**MEETING OF:** CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY  
**DATE:** 7 DECEMBER 2016  
**REPORT OF:** HEAD OF PROTECTION  
**AUTHOR:** IAN KAY/MANDY EELES

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**SUBJECT:** UNWANTED FIRE SIGNALS - POLICY PROPOSALS

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## Purpose of Report

1. To present proposed amendments to the Authority's Unwanted Fire Signals (UwFS) policy. The proposals are in keeping with the plan previously agreed by Members to incrementally change our response to Automated Fire Alarms (AFAs). Should these proposals be implemented it would increase non-attendance to a number of buildings, so this report also sets out the rationale behind the proposed policy changes and details the anticipated reductions which could be achieved.

## Recommended that:

- [1] the report be considered; and
- [2] Members approve the adoption and implementation of Option 2 (detailed in paragraphs 29 to 34) to assist the Service in reducing the number of UwFS further.

## Background

2. The Service's original UwFS policy was introduced in 2007. In July 2012 the policy was revised significantly following extensive consultation and briefing sessions with both internal and external stakeholders. The main features of the revised policy were:
  - the introduction of a call-challenge procedure;
  - a change to the pre-determined attendance to AFAs;
  - the enhancement of the advice given in response to single UwFS; and
  - the implementation of more robust ways of managing the Service's relationship with the parties responsible for premises with unacceptably high levels of AFAs.
3. The objectives of the revised policy were:
  - to secure a reduction in the number of false alarms generated by automatic fire detection and alarm systems, by encouraging improved maintenance of systems;
  - to reduce appliance movements, unnecessary costs and disruption to both the Service and the business community; and

- to reduce the risk to the public and Service personnel through unnecessary emergency responses.
4. In February 2014 the UwFS policy was amended again following consideration of the first twelve month's performance and lessons learned. Member's approved a move to non-attendance at non-sleeping risk commercial buildings between 09.00 and 17.00 hours unless the caller is at the building and reasonably believes a fire has broken out. Outside of these hours (17.00-09.00) non-sleeping risk premises continue to be subject to the call-challenge process.
  5. The call-challenge procedure does not currently apply to any sleeping risk premises (sleeping risk premises include hospitals and residential care homes) and these premises continue to receive an emergency attendance.
  6. Industrial sites which are licensed under either the Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) or Radiation (Emergency Preparedness and Public Information) (REPPPIR) regulations are excluded from the non-attendance policy due to their unique risk.

### **Impact of policy changes on performance**

7. The current UwFS policy has now been in effect for almost two years and since 2014 the Service has achieved a reduction of 23%. In the number of attendances to AFAs. We are unlikely to experience further significant reduction in numbers unless we review the policy again and consider alternative ways of responding to AFAs.
8. This report considers and suggests a number of ways in which the Service could achieve further reductions in the number of attendances to AFAs in line with the incremental change policy previously agreed by Members. These proposals will have a positive impact on administrative burdens, increase wholtime crew capacity to carry out other work and contribute to a reduction in on-call costs.
9. The majority of false alarms are caused by faulty alarms, normal human activity within buildings resulting in accidental or careless activation of the fire alarm, dust, cooking fumes and failure to inform alarm receiving centres (ARCs) when testing alarms.
10. Tables 1 and 2 show a 16% reduction was achieved in 2015/16 (compared to the same period in the previous year). During 2015-16 the Service attended 1,048 AFAs which when compared to the total number of 7,718 incidents attended by the Service over the same period, equates to 14% of all calls.
11. The 46% reduction in incidents is equivalent to attending 898 fewer incidents last year compared to 5 years ago, an average of over 2.4 fewer every day.

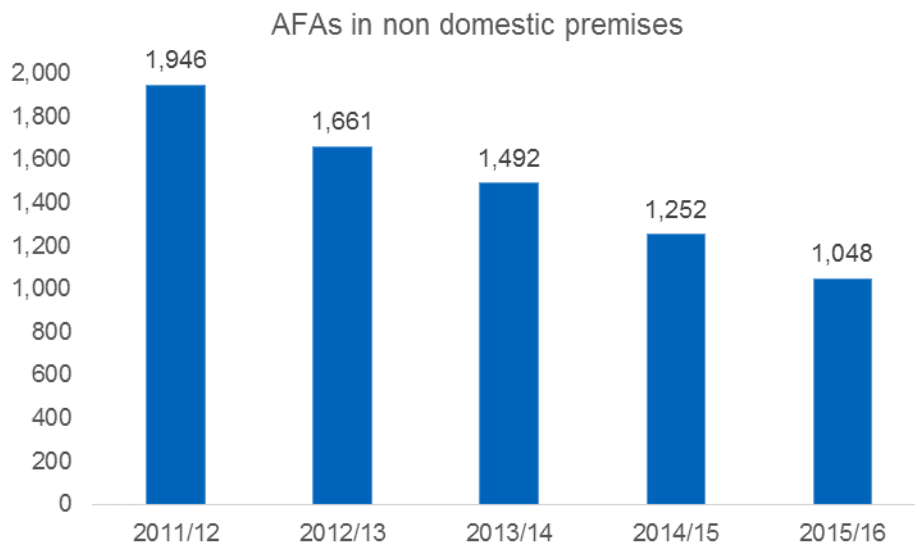
**Table 1: Number of attendances to AFAs over last 5 years (including % reduction)**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Annual Change*	5 Year Change
2011/12	436	538	500	472	1,946		
2012/13	473	432	399	357	1,661	-15%	
2013/14	346	459	408	279	1,492	-10%	
2014/15	283	428	316	225	1,252	-16%	
2015/16	226	306	278	238	1,048	-16%	-46%
<b>Total**</b>	<b>1,764</b>	<b>2,163</b>	<b>1,901</b>	<b>1,571</b>	<b>7,399</b>		

\* Annual Change denotes % reduction on previous year's figures.

\*\* Total number of AFAs.

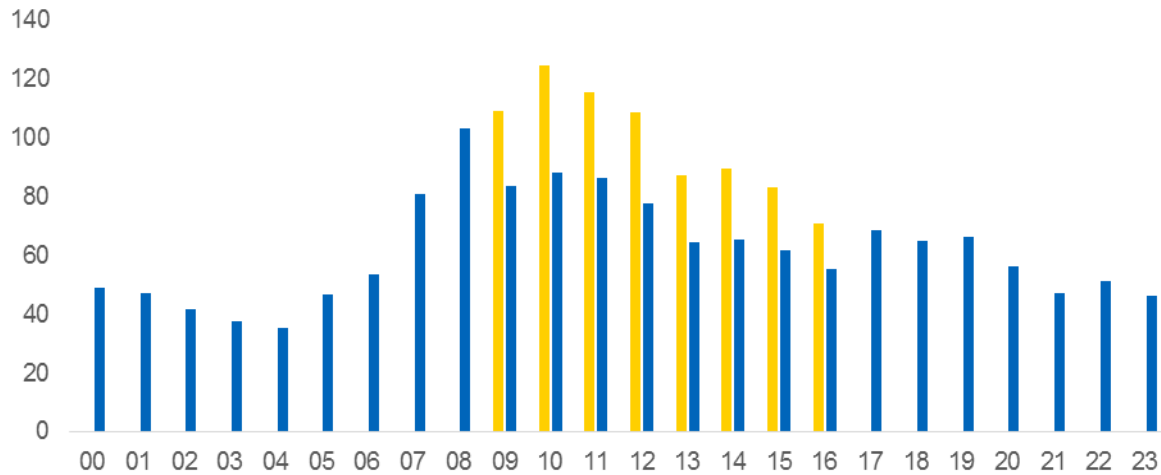
**Table 2: Number of attendances to AFAs over last 5 years**



12. Table 3 shows the hours at which these incidents have happened as an average over the past five years, highlighting the impact the implementation of the 9 to 5 non-attendance has had. It also tells us that previously the majority of AFAs occurred during daytime hours (yellow bars). The implementation of the 9 to 5 element of the UwFS policy has reduced this differential significantly.
13. The premises producing the AFAs during the day are now mostly residential or other policy exempt premises. Therefore, further reduction measures need to be focused either on non-attendance to these types of premises during the day or extending the current policy to a non-attendance at non-residential non-domestic premises 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**Table 3: 5 year average attendance to AFAs in non-domestic premises by hour**

Yellow bars denote the average for 9-5 before the last policy implementation



14. Of the total, 1,048, AFAs in 2015-16, 348 (33%) were in sleeping-risk premises and 700 (67%) were at non-sleeping commercial buildings. Table 4 details the five most frequently attended premises types over the past five years that account for 43% of all activations. Notably, the non-residential premises represent 23% of this total.

**Table 4: The top five property types involved in AFAs**

Property type	AFAs attended	% of all AFAs attended
Hospital	1,045	14%
Purpose built office	677	9%
Infant/primary school	622	9%
Nursing/Care	466	6%
Single shop	388	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,238</b>	<b>43%</b>

### Number of primary fires attended that originated as AFAs

15. Upon receiving a call from an ARC, North West Fire Control (NWFC) will ask the ARC whether it is a confirmed fire. It is the responsibility of the ARC to make contact with the premises and confirm if a fire exists prior to informing NWFC. In the case that calls are received from ARCs which have not completed a 'call back' to the premises the ARC should be asked to make 'call back' and advise the premises to ring 999 should they discover a fire. If the ARC is uncooperative and refuses to undertake a

'call back', they should be informed that the Service will not be attending.

16. Over the past five years, only 0.2% of all incidents attended were to non-domestic primary fires where the original call type was thought to be an AFA. Notably, 69% of these fires required no firefighting as they were small and out on arrival.

## **Impact of responding to UwFS**

17. Mobilising appliances to each AFA call causes a significant impact on the Service for the following reasons:
  - Fire appliances are not available to respond to genuine life threatening emergencies.
  - Responding to AFAs under blue light conditions poses an unnecessary risk to staff and other road users.
  - Operational crews are disrupted whilst undertaking other core tasks such as training and community safety activities.
  - Financial costs are incurred for fuel and there is an associated impact on the environment caused by the appliance movements.
  - On-call firefighters require payment for being alerted and are unnecessarily disrupted from their primary employment.

## **Approach of other North West Fire and Rescue Services**

18. Within the region, Merseyside FRS currently has the most 'stringent' policy as it uses a non-attendance approach (unless the premises is a private dwelling, in which case it receives a PDA of two pumps) and all sleeping risk premises are exempt during night time hours (7.30pm to 7.30am). There is no call-challenge approach to their policy; premises are simply advised that they must ring 999 if they discover a fire.
19. Lancashire FRS, calls received via ARCs are not call-challenged and if unconfirmed fire one pump is mobilised under blue lights to all premises. Manchester FRS's strategy is to send one pump to non-domestic, two pumps to domestic AFAs and four to high-rise premises. Cumbria currently send one pump to residential dwellings and non-domestic sleeping risk 24/7. They do not respond to non-domestic premises unless there is a confirmed fire. Due to the remote location of some non-domestic premises they will send one pump where no contact can be made with the key-holder. They have some exempted premises such as COMAH sites and PFI hospitals because of specific structural issues.
20. A regional approach to reducing AFAs is currently under consideration. However, given local requirements and varying demographics it is unlikely that a consensus of approach will be agreed.

## **Options for consideration**

21. The current UwFS policy includes taking a staged approach to managing premises who hit the relevant trigger points for increased AFAs and in our Service Area as a whole there are only six premises at Stage 1 and four at Stage 2. All of those at Stage 2 are hospital premises (sleeping risk) and

as such are excluded from the Stage 2 requirements and managed in a different way. At this point it must be noted that evacuation from any type of premises (including hospitals) is the responsibility of the occupier and must be controlled by their Risk Assessment process which must allow protection or evacuation of residents safely and not rely on FRS response.

22. The Service continues to investigate ways to actively reduce the total number of AFAs whilst continuing to operate within the policy boundaries. Two possible options to help the Service achieve more significant reductions are detailed below taking into account lessons learnt over the past 12 months and from other FRSs nationally.

**Option 1 - non-attendance for all non-domestic buildings during 09.00 to 17.00 hrs**

23. The introduction of a non-attendance approach to all non-domestic buildings during daytime hours, seven days a week.
24. The proposed change in procedure would mean that the Service will not attend actuations of automatic fire detection systems to all properties if they are not supported by a phone call to confirm a fire service attendance is required. During this time period most premises will have someone available to investigate the cause of the alarm, who can then confirm if a fire has occurred.
25. During weekends there may be some non-residential commercial buildings which are unoccupied, but equally the absence of occupiers will reduce the risk of both AFAs and a fire occurring. The Service will then be able to respond to confirmed fires, not just an alarm sounding and send the appropriate number of firefighters and fire appliances immediately, confident that there is a real incident to deal with.
26. All premises would be included in this option with the exception of high-rise, residential dwellings and COMAH sites. It should be noted that in the case of residential care premises it is common practice during the day to have a greater staff ratio to assist with the evacuation and call-challenge and the residents tend to be awake thus reducing the sleeping risk. Non-domestic sleeping risk premises will receive an attendance during evening and night-time hours.
27. Premises with sleeping risk are by their nature higher risk than non-sleeping commercial risks; this is mainly due to the slower reaction times of the occupants. People who are asleep will be reliant on automatic fire detection to warn them, should a fire break out, therefore between higher risk hours (17.00-09.00) an emergency response will continue to be sent without delay. However, it should be recognised that due to increased number of staff and number of non-sleeping residents during daytime period evacuation times are greatly reduced.
28. This option would realise a 16.8% reduction based on 2015-2016 figures. Resulting in a reduction of 176 attendances. Table 5 illustrates this option and has been reflected over a five year period.

**Table 5: Table showing reductions achieved by Option 1  
(Non-attendance at all non-domestic premises between 09.00 and 17.00hrs)**

	All incidents	Total incidents 09.00-17.00	% reduction if 09.00-17.00 not attended
2011/12	1,946	958	-49.2%
2012/13	1,661	754	-45.3%
2013/14	1,492	675	-45.2%
2014/15	1,252	352	-28.1%
2015/16	1,048	176	-16.8%
Total	7,399	2,915	-39.5%

**Option 2 – Non-attendance for all non-domestic non-sleeping risk premises (extending our current 09.00-17.00 policy to 24 hours)**

29. The introduction of a non-attendance approach to non-sleeping non-domestic buildings twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.
30. The proposed change in procedure would mean that the Service will not attend actuations of automatic fire detection systems to low risk properties, if they are not supported by a phone call to confirm a fire service attendance is required. During weekends and evenings there may be some non-domestic buildings which are unoccupied, but equally the absence of occupiers will reduce the risk of both AFAs and a fire occurring.
31. The Service will then be able to respond to confirmed fires, not just an alarm sounding and send the appropriate number of firefighters and fire appliances immediately, confident that there is a real incident to deal with.
32. This option would realise a 66.8% reduction based on 2015-2016 figures. Resulting in a reduction of 700 attendances. Table 6 illustrates this option and has been reflected over a five year period.

**Table 6: Showing reductions achieved by Option 2  
(Non-attendance at all non-domestic non-sleeping risk premises 24/7)**

	All incidents	Total incidents in non-sleeping risk	% reduction if non-sleeping risk not attended
2011/12	1,946	1,410	-72.5%
2012/13	1,661	1,151	-69.3%
2013/14	1,492	1,065	-71.4%
2014/15	1,252	868	-69.3%
2015/16	1,048	700	-66.8%
Total	7,399	5,194	-70.2%

33. Cheshire is unusual amongst other FRSs in that it has a large number of hazardous premises designated under the COMAH regulations. These sites contain large quantities of dangerous chemicals and therefore they present a risk not only to the site but also the surrounding homes and businesses if a fire were to occur. During 2015/16 the Service attended a very small number of AFAs at COMAH sites, therefore due to the minimal impact of continuing to attend these AFAs these should be excluded from the non-attendance approach.
34. Table 7 (attached as Appendix 1) sets out the Service's current attendance policy and summarises Options 1 and 2.

### **Financial implications**

35. There will be no additional costs as a result of the implementation of either of the proposed options. Non-cashable savings will be made, but it is impossible to fully quantify these savings which would include, for example; direct payment for on-call staff; overtime and fuel costs.

### **Legal implications**

36. The Fire and Rescue Services Act (2004) Section 7 states:
- (1) A fire and rescue authority must make provision for the purpose of:
    - (a) extinguishing fires in its area, and
    - (b) protecting life and property in the event of fires in its area.
  - (2) In making provision under subsection (1) a fire and rescue authority must in particular:
    - (c) make arrangements for dealing with calls for help and for summoning personnel, and
    - (d) make arrangements for ensuring that reasonable steps are taken to prevent or limit damage to property resulting from action taken for the purposes mentioned in subsection (1).
37. There is little case law relating to the activities of FRSs so it is difficult to be certain what these provisions mean precisely. For example, it is arguable that an AFA is not strictly a call for help, nor is there necessarily a fire (as the statistics show). However, notwithstanding this, it is important that the Service's approach is reasonable in all of the circumstances.
38. If the proposals are approved, the Authority would only be operating in a similar way to a number of other fire and rescue authorities. The approach is not novel and has essentially been 'tried and tested' in other FRSs. However, this does not guarantee that there will be no challenge, nor will it provide protection against possible legal liability.



## **Equality and Diversity implications**

39. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has previously been completed for the policy however, should the proposals within this policy be adopted then the EIA will be updated.
40. The new proposals do not impact on any protected characteristics. The appropriate communication channels will be used to inform all affected premises owners/responsible persons of the new approach to AFAs.
41. It is noted that in the last twelve months no equality and diversity issues have arisen.

## **Environmental implications**

42. The reduced number of unnecessary appliance movements will have had a positive impact on the environment, mainly due to a decrease in emissions and fuel costs, contributing to an overall reduction in the Service's carbon footprint. The proposed policy changes will therefore contribute to a further reduction in the Service's carbon footprint.

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**BACKGROUND PAPERS: NONE**