



AGENDA ITEM: 6

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

2 December 2014

ATTENDANCE AT AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

Report by Richard Fairhead, Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

- 1 To provide members with information on the potential implications of introducing a more robust policy for responding to 999 calls initiated by automatic fire alarms.

Background

- 2 Automatic fire alarms (AFAs) are complex, electrically based systems fitted to non-domestic property such as offices, factories, hotels and residential homes. Their purpose is to warn all occupants of a fire at an early stage. Although these systems are generally installed in non-domestic premises regulated through the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2006, in recent years, there has been an increased use of these systems by 'care companies' in premises occupied by frail, elderly people.
- 3 The number of AFA installations has increased dramatically over the years with a range of different systems. Whilst many are appropriately specified, well designed, properly maintained and correctly used, others result in numerous unnecessary actuations due to non-fire related accidental reasons or system faults. These can be triggered by, for example, a fault on the system, insects, aerosol spray, dust or accidental damage to a detector.
- 4 Research over the last three years confirms that 96-97% of fire alarm actuations are not as a result of fires. During each year there have typically been over 2,000 AFA calls within North Wales. Moreover, due to the high rate of false alarms generated by automatic alarms, experience has shown that occupiers do not rely solely on the AFA to confirm an actual fire.

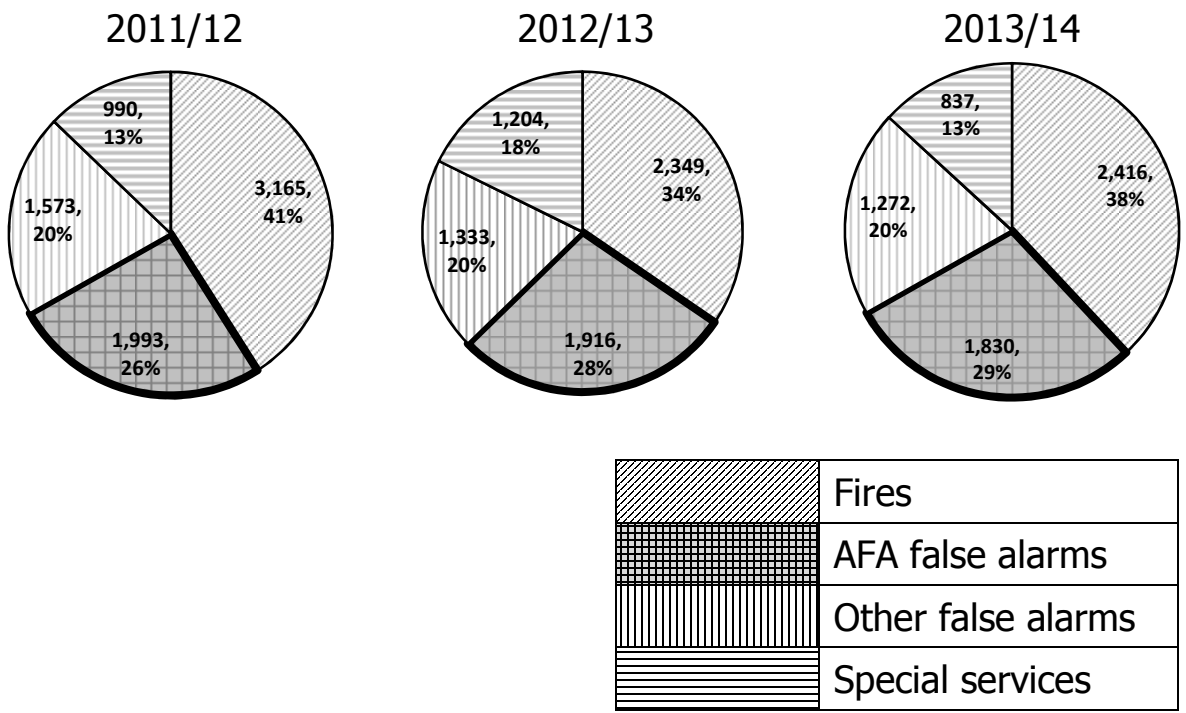
5 NWFRS Control staff, as part of their call handling, already question AFA calls, resulting in a decision being taken not to attend around 16% of the AFA calls currently received.

Information

6 The table below presents information on the AFA calls received by NWFRS in the past three financial years

Year	AFA calls received	AFA calls attended	AFA calls not attended	% of all AFA calls that were not attended
2011/12	2,220	1,993	227	10.2%
2012/13	2,275	1,916	359	15.8%
2013/14	2,177	1,830	347	15.9%

7 The charts below illustrate how AFA false alarms attended make up almost a third of all emergency calls attended annually.



- 8 The table below presents information on the number of fires attended that were reported to NWFRS Control following an activation of an AFA system:

Year	Total fires	Fires notified via activation of an AFA system	% of all fires notified via activation of an AFA system
2011/12	3,165	51	1.6%
2012/13	2,349	71	3.0%
2013/14	2,416	76	3.1%

- 9 The table below presents information on the number of AFA calls received that turned out to be actual fires.

Year	Total AFA calls received	AFA calls received that turned out to be fires	% of all AFA calls received that turned out to be fires
2011/12	2,220	51	2.3%
2012/13	2,275	71	3.1%
2013/14	2,177	76	3.5%

- 10 Sending an emergency response to a false alarm is both costly and raises a number of concerns:

- the reduced availability of operational crews for genuine emergencies
- the impact on primary employers of retained firefighters of releasing people for false alarms
- the increased risk to the public, fire service personnel and other road users of 'blue light' mobilisations in response to AFAs
- the potential complacency of managers and occupiers from unreliable alarm systems
- the cost of attending unwanted fire signals where funding could be better utilised elsewhere
- the disruption of business continuity to occupiers and to training and other work for the Fire and Rescue Service.

- 11 The cost to the Authority of responding to false alarms from AFA systems can be calculated in terms of wasted time for wholetime crews and call-out fees for retained duty system (RDS) crews. In addition unnecessary vehicle movements incur the cost of fuel and wear and tear on those vehicles. If we apply a notional cost

calculator of £81.50 (which is the salary cost of a crew of four firefighters with a watch manager, for one hour) per AFA false alarm attended, the cost amounts to £158,273, £150,367 and £142,951 for the past three financial years.

- 12 In reality a large number of these AFA calls are attended by wholetime crews whose salaries do not vary by activity. Cashable savings would only be realised in rural areas as a result in a reduction in turn out fees. Based on other Services' experience it might be prudent to estimate that approximately 15% of these calls are in rural areas and therefore we could save in the region of £25,000.
- 13 The experience of other UK fire and rescue services, such as Oxfordshire who have operated this policy for the last decade, and the experience of NWFRS during recent periods of industrial action demonstrate the effectiveness of questioning AFA calls more robustly as a way of reducing the number of times false alarms are attended.
- 14 By robustly questioning AFA calls, and being more insistent about receiving a 999 call to confirm that there is a fire (or at least that there is a genuine suspicion that there is a fire), it would be possible to reduce the number of false alarms attended.
- 15 In applying such a policy, it would be possible to apply different criteria to suit different premises, acknowledging the differences in risk levels between, for example, sheltered housing and commercial sites.
- 16 It should be noted that there are some risks to introducing such a policy which would include:
 - a) the effects of any delay in sending a response whilst establishing that there genuinely is a fire;
 - b) dissatisfaction and adverse publicity, especially when the policy is still new, as the owners of the affected premises realise that they cannot expect the same response to their AFA as previously;
 - c) the possibility of challenge from the representative bodies.
 - d) the potential of loss of retained duty firefighters as a result of a reduction in their turn out fees.

Recommendations

17 That Members:

- (i) endorse the policy of only responding to automatic fire alarm actuations when confirmation is received that there is a fire at the premises. This is subject to the exceptions referred to in paragraph 15, identified by further risk assessments and agreed by the Chief Fire Officer;
- (ii) agree that £25,000 of saving from adopting this policy be used to reduce the budget requirement for 2015/16.