

Putting out the false alarms: Fire and Rescue Authorities' responses to Unwanted Fire Signals

Report of the Auditor General for Wales

October 2023



The Auditor General is independent of the Senedd and government. He examines and certifies the accounts of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, including NHS bodies. He also has the power to report to the Senedd on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which those organisations have used, and may improve the use of, their resources in discharging their functions.

The Auditor General also audits local government bodies in Wales, conducts local government value for money studies and inspects for compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Auditor General undertakes his work using staff and other resources provided by the Wales Audit Office, which is a statutory board established for that purpose and to monitor and advise the Auditor General.

© Auditor General for Wales 2023

Audit Wales is the umbrella brand of the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office, which are each separate legal entities with their own legal functions. Audit Wales is not itself a legal entity. While the Auditor General has the auditing and reporting functions described above, the Wales Audit Office's main functions are to provide staff and other resources for the exercise of the Auditor General's functions, and to monitor and advise the Auditor General.

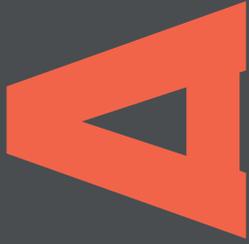
You may re-use this publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium. If you re-use it, your re-use must be accurate and must not be in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Auditor General for Wales copyright and you must give the title of this publication. Where we have identified any third party copyright material you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned before re-use.

For further information, or if you require any of our publications in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us by telephone on 029 2032 0500, or email info@audit.wales. We welcome telephone calls in Welsh and English. You can also write to us in either Welsh or English and we will respond in the language you have used. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay.

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

Contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Key findings from local reviews	11
3	Looking to the future	22
4	Examples from elsewhere	24
	Appendices	
1	Audit Approach and Methods	27



Introduction

01

Audit Wales draws on its recent reviews to consider how reducing false alarms and overcoming key challenges can help the role of firefighters to grow

- 1 During 2022-23 Audit Wales reviewed the way in which Wales' three Fire and Rescue Authorities' (FRAs) are managing false fire alarms. We examined false alarms due to the significant numbers responded to by FRAs and the consequent impact on FRAs' resources. We focused primarily on their approach to reduce attendance at non-domestic premises but also considered the overall impact of false alarms on each FRA. Our audit included reviewing FRA policies, how these were developed and are being implemented. We also reviewed how FRAs manage, monitor and evaluate performance to drive improvement.
- 2 The reports summarising the local findings for each FRA are published on our website.
 - [North Wales report](#)
 - [Mid & West Wales report](#)
 - [South Wales report](#)
- 3 This national summary highlights our key findings and provides a comparative picture of performance across Wales.

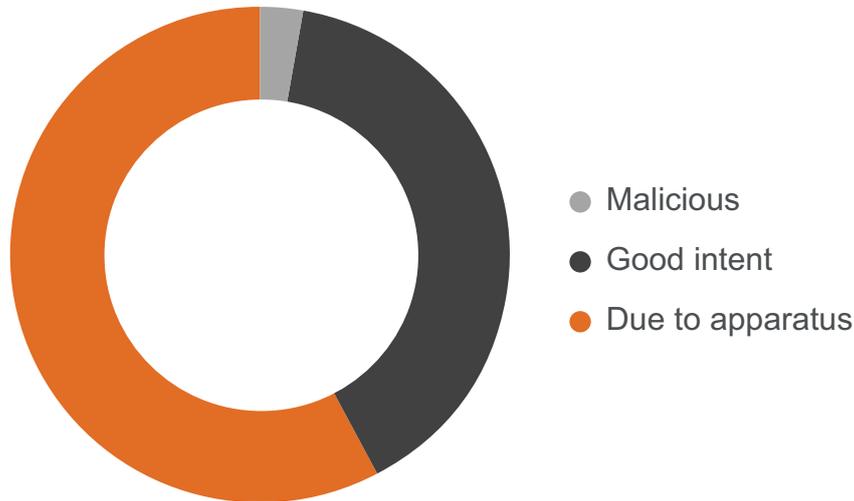
What are false alarms and why are they important

Definition and types

- 4 Within the Home Office Incident Reporting System (IRS), false alarms are categorised into three types:
 - Malicious – a call made with the intention of getting a response to a non-existent fire-related event.
 - Good intent – a call made in good faith that a response would be needed.
 - Due to apparatus – a call initiated by a fire alarm or firefighting equipment (including accidental initiation).
- 5 **Exhibit 1** shows that, nationally, false alarms 'due to apparatus' is the biggest category, accounting for just under 60% of total false alarms.¹ This data consists of domestic and non-domestic false alarms.

1 Note – this includes both domestic and non-domestic false alarms due to how data is reported.

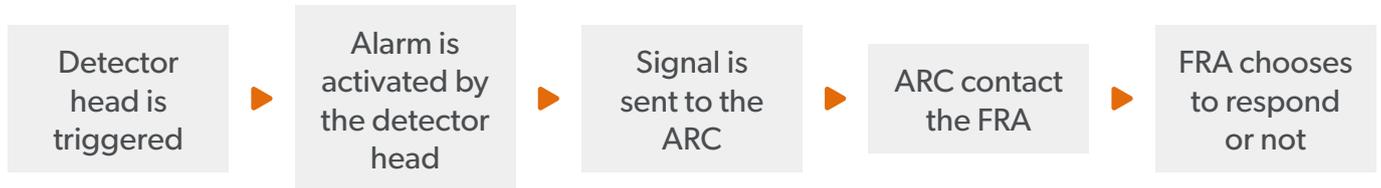
Exhibit 1: share of total false alarms in Wales by type, 2021-22



Source: [StatsWales](#)

6 False alarms due to apparatus are typically caused by Automatic Fire Alarm systems (AFAs). These are networks of detector heads in buildings that are connected to an alarm system. The alarms are linked to Alarm Receiving Centres (ARCs). Due to technology not requiring on-site management, ARCs can be located anywhere in the world. However, ARCs are required to register with each FRA in the areas they operate within. **Exhibit 2** sets out the AFA process when activated.

Exhibit 2: automatic Fire Alarm Process



Source: Audit Wales

- 7 When a false alarm is received via an AFA, it is typically referred to as an Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS). Because UwFS form the largest share of false alarms, they are the key focus of reduction efforts across the UK². Consequently, the focus of our reviews has primarily been on the three Welsh FRAs approaches to reducing UwFS, whilst also covering other types of false alarms.

National framework requirements

- 8 The Welsh Government's National Framework for Fire identifies the reduction of false alarms as a key efficiency saving available to FRAs³. It notes that responding to false alarms incurs significant financial and time costs, both for FRAs and building occupiers, whilst yielding no benefit whatsoever. In 2021-22, around half of all incidents attended by FRAs were false alarms, illustrating the significant burden they place on fire and rescue services. Consequently, the Welsh Government has set out in the National Framework that FRAs should 'Identify the main sources of false alarms and take all reasonable and practical steps to reduce their incidence'.

2 For example, see the [National Fire Chiefs Council guidance](#)

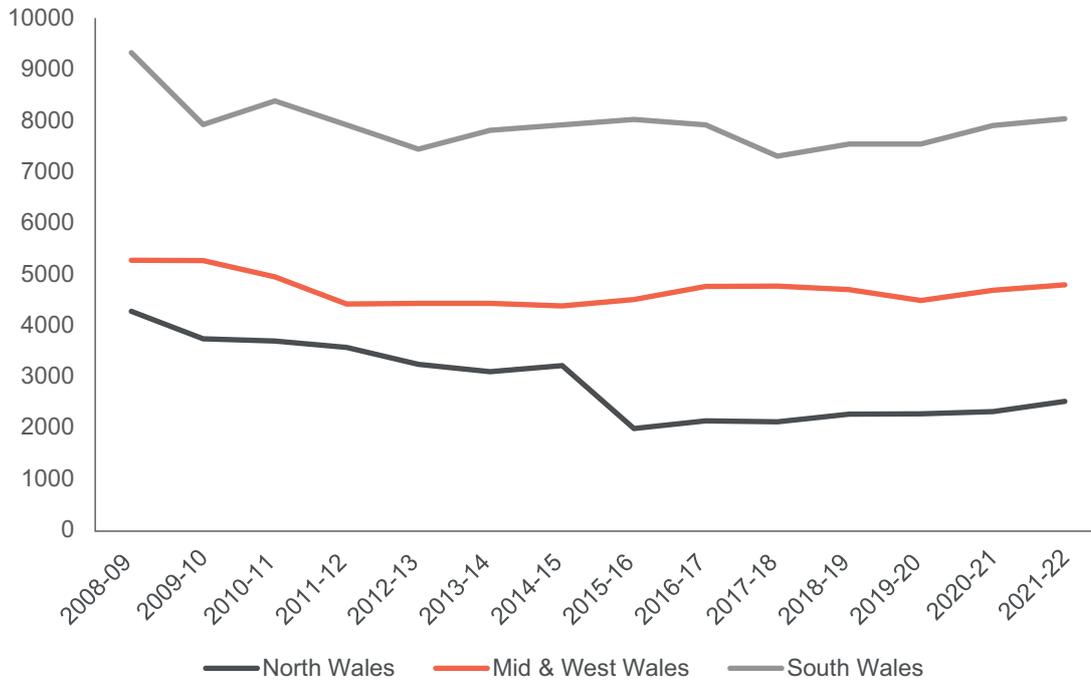
3 [Welsh Government, Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016, November 2015](#)

- 9 In shaping their approach, FRAs must also demonstrate they are implementing the sustainable development principle, in line with the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This means that FRAs are required to deliver services that meet the expectations of the five ways of working. For example, by:
- balancing short-term responses with the need to deliver long-term priorities;
 - taking an integrated approach, ensuring they consider how their work may impact upon each of the national well-being goals, on their individual wellbeing objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies;
 - involving people with an interest in their work, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of their area of operation;
 - collaborating with others to help meet their wellbeing objectives; and
 - working preventatively to stop problems occurring in the first place, or getting worse.
- 10 The sustainable development principle and five ways of working provide a framework to navigate decision making and can help FRAs to optimise their approaches to managing false alarms. In turn, effectively managing false alarms can help FRAs to generate the capacity needed to realise Welsh Government's wider ambitions for broadening the role and work of fire and rescue services in Wales.

Demand over time

- 11 Data showing the total number of false alarms responded to by each FRA is recorded and published annually by Welsh Government. **Exhibit 3** shows that FRAs attended over 15,000 false fire alarms in 2021-22, with over half of these being in the South Wales FRA area. This data consists of domestic and non-domestic false alarms.

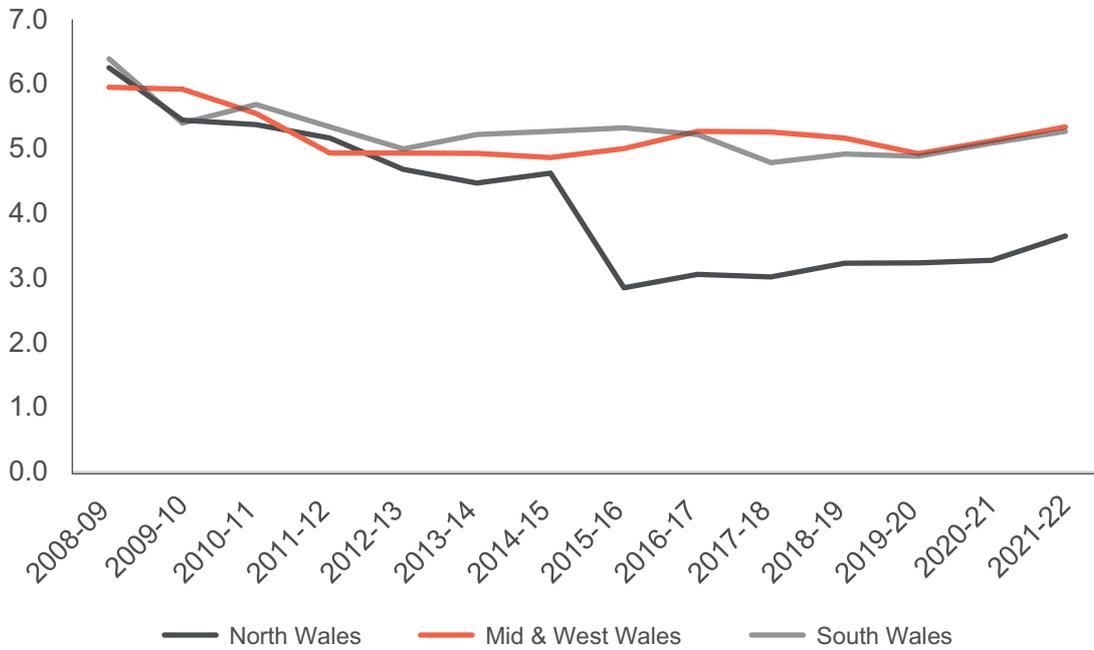
Exhibit 3: Number of false fire alarms responded to annually by Welsh FRAs since 2008-09



Source: [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

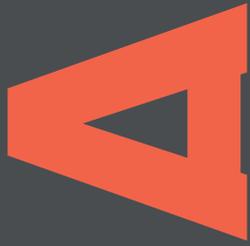
- 12 The biggest reduction in the number of false alarms between 2008-09 and 2021-22 is in North Wales, which recorded a 41% reduction. Over the same period, false alarms in South Wales reduced by 14%, and Mid and West Wales experienced a 9% reduction.
- 13 Our analysis summarised in **Exhibit 4**, shows that North Wales FRA has the lowest number of false alarms per 1,000 population.

Exhibit 4: False alarms per 1,000 population, 2008-09 to 2021-22



Source: Audit Wales analysis of [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales \(gov.wales\)](#) by ONS population estimates (up to 2020) and [Census figures for 2021](#).

14 The number of AFA actuations that occur in any given year is, to a greater extent, out of the control of FRAs. Although they have a role in educating and advising responsible persons as to how unwanted actuations can be reduced, ultimately all that is really in the control of the FRAs is how or if they choose to respond. The next section of this report explains the different approaches taken by each FRA.



Key findings from local reviews

02

A challenging operating environment

- 15 False alarms cannot be considered in isolation. Their impact on FRAs' resources is far reaching and different approaches to reducing their prevalence can, in different ways, have a knock-on effect on incident response and fire safety. Understanding the FRAs' operating environment and funding challenges is therefore key in assessing the impact of false alarms and the options available to reduce their incidence.
- 16 FRAs have had to deliver within significantly reduced budgets in recent years and, as all public bodies, continue to adapt and find more efficient ways of delivering services to address their financial pressures. In real terms⁴, FRAs experienced a significant reduction in revenue expenditure between 2009-10 and 2021-22⁵:
- North Wales FRA experienced a 6.3% decrease (£2.6 million) in revenue expenditure.
 - Mid & West Wales FRA experienced a 0.9% decrease (£0.5 million) in revenue expenditure.
 - South Wales FRA experienced a 16.8% decrease (£15 million) in revenue expenditure.
- 17 Over the same period, the total calls received across FRAs fell by 16.6%⁶ and the number of incidents attended reduced by 25%⁷. The reduction in attendance at incidents is a reflection of FRAs rebalancing their emphasis from responding to incidents, to preventing fires and improving safety.
- 18 The number of staff employed by each FRA also fell between 2009-10 and 2021-22, as detailed in **Exhibit 5**:

4 This is based on HM Treasury data calculated during fieldwork for each local report (2021-22) and is not in current real terms. This will be different due to the current levels of inflation.

5 StatsWales, [Revenue outturn by authority](#)

6 StatsWales, [Calls handled by fire control watch FTE by call type and financial year](#)

7 StatsWales, [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales](#)

Exhibit 5: FRA personnel headcount by employment type, 2009-10 to 2021-22

Role	2009-10	2021-22	Change
Wholetime uniformed staff	1,658	1,474	-11.1%
Retained staff	1,963	1,642	-16.4%
Fire control staff	124	95	-23.4%
Non-operational staff	643	680	5.8%
All staff	4,388	3,891	-11.3%

Source: [StatsWales](#)

Reducing false alarms – what a good approach looks like

19 Our reviews have focused on evaluating the impact of each FRA’s policy choices and how these are impacting on their resources. Ultimately, applying criteria to determine whether to respond to suspected false alarms requires FRAs to make a judgement based on risk. We therefore assessed how effectively each FRA is making risk-based decisions to optimise their approach – how they gather and use intelligence and data; how they communicate their policy choices; and importantly, how they know things are working as they should, and working as well as they could.

A good approach to managing fire false alarms will:

- be based on a good understanding of the locations, causes and impacts of false alarms;
- set out in a clear and appropriate plan or strategy which shows how the FRA will improve its performance on false alarms;
- be shaped by risk and suitable evidence;
- be regularly evaluated and performance monitored; and
- will be helping to reduce the volume of false alarms responded to.



Source: Audit Wales

No Authority has a comprehensive approach to quantify the impact of responding to false alarms

- 20 As with any response made by FRAs to any incident, there are financial, operational, environmental, and safety impacts when responding to false alarms. We found that no FRA has a comprehensive approach to quantifying the impact of responding to false alarms at this time.
- 21 This is important because, taken together, the impacts of responding to false alarms are significant and they highlight the importance of having an effective approach to reducing their prevalence. Any improvement in performance in this context can help FRAs to better manage their resource pressures and increase capacity to undertake additional training and other priority tasks.
- 22 We found that all three FRAs present some information to key committees regarding false alarms. However, information is not always reported in a format aligned to false alarm reduction policies that would enable a conclusion on effectiveness to be drawn. Our review of the minutes of full Authority and Audit Committee meetings in all FRAs over the last two years found little evidence of Members actively seeking to challenge performance on false alarms to help support financial and operational improvement. Without comprehensively demonstrating their impact on resources and the overall reduction in false alarm attendance, this information is not as rounded as it should be. This limits Members' ability to scrutinise performance.

Financial impact

- 23 The overall financial impact of responding to false alarms is difficult to quantify. In most cases, the cost of deploying an appliance to attend a false alarm would be similar, if not identical, to that of an actual incident, as crews are deployed in the expectation of a genuine fire. The cost varies by FRA and is determined by a range of factors including geography, travel distance and whether the response is by wholetime firefighters or a retained duty system crew.
- 24 Knowing how much it costs to respond to false alarms is important to understand the overall impact on resources. In the context of FRAs challenging operating environment and reducing budgets, this can help drive efficiency and better inform the potentially difficult decisions facing FRA members as they navigate the next few years.

- 25 We found that quantifying the financial impact when wholetime firefighters respond to false alarms is difficult because the costs of activities are absorbed into their overall salaries. Our research shows that generally FRAs in other parts of the UK have calculated the cost of attendance to be in the region of £350-400 per hour⁸.
- 26 The cost impact of responding to false alarms in rural areas is easier to quantify accurately. This is because FRAs can use the call-out fees that they pay on-call firefighters as the basis for their calculation. In reality, however, not many false alarms occur in rural areas – the majority of false alarms happen in built-up, urban areas where fire stations are mostly either wholetime or day crewed. For example, North Wales FRA estimated in 2014 that its on-call firefighters responded to just 15% of the overall number of AFAs it responded to. The remaining 85% were responded to by its wholetime crews, the cost impact of which it has struggled to quantify. Both Mid & West Wales and South Wales FRAs have calculated estimates and unit costs as a basis for their cost analysis for wholetime crews. This is giving them a greater understanding on the cost impact on their resources.
- 27 To counter the financial impact of responding to false alarms, some FRAs in England have prescribed charges for premises that produce multiple false alarms. For example, Cleveland FRS charge premises £345 (excluding VAT) from their fifth call.⁹ Similarly, Humberside FRS charge a minimum of £365.75 from the fourth false alarm.¹⁰ We found that FRAs in Wales have little appetite to pursue the option of charging problem premises, with many officers citing a lack of clarity around the legal basis for doing so. The National Fire Chiefs' Council has published guidance on charging and enforcement action to help reduce false alarms.¹¹

8 For example, [Devon and Somerset FRS' standard charge](#) of £364.27 or [Buckinghamshire FRS](#) estimate of £305 plus VAT.

9 Cleveland FRS, [Fire Alarms](#)

10 Humberside FRS, [Call out charges 2022-23](#)

11 CFOA_Guideline_for_the_Reduction_Brochure_June__2014.pdf (nationalfirechiefs.org.uk)

Operational

- 28 Aside from the financial impact, responding to false alarms causes unnecessary disruption to FRAs' work. It can divert people from training, prevention work, or premises familiarisation, which are all critical tasks for a crew to maintain operational capability. Disruptions to training are particularly costly, as highlighted by the Welsh Government's most recent report¹². The report highlights a risk of staff competencies not being maintained where crews are regularly responding to false alarms.
- 29 The operational impact is potentially significant for on-call firefighters, whose capacity to attend training is less compared to wholetime crews. In addition, as the RDS model relies on the goodwill of employers to release staff to attend a call during their work hours, increasing responses to false alarms risks deterring businesses from supporting their staff to take on a RDS role. This may negatively affect staff retention.
- 30 Conversely, our interviews highlighted a potentially perverse incentive to reducing false alarms, affecting RDS staff. Given that the money saved from reducing false alarms in rural areas is mostly in the form of reduced call-out fees for on-call firefighters, reducing attendances at an incident could be perceived negatively. For example, it reduces the remuneration for RDS staff, which can potentially exacerbate recruitment and retention challenges. Rightly, all officers we interviewed emphasised that this incentive, in itself, does not negate the need to reduce false alarms. Regardless, it highlights the importance of applying the sustainable development principle and considering the five ways of working in tackling the issue of false alarms. This does not affect South Wales FRA to the same extent as others, due to the fact that all operational staff, including RDS firefighters, are salaried.

Environmental

- 31 As set out in our local reports on Carbon Emissions Reduction¹³ in 2021-22, there are significant environmental impacts incurred in delivering fire and rescue services. This includes the use of fuel for a response, as well as the environmental impact of firefighters travelling to their station. Given that almost half of all incidents attended by FRAs in 2021-22 were false fire alarms¹⁴, it is an area where a significant reduction in carbon emissions could be made. At the time of our reviews, FRAs in Wales were not measuring the environmental impact of responding to false alarms and how reducing attendance could contribute to their efforts to reduce their carbon emissions.

12 Welsh Government, [Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services](#), October 2022

13 [Carbon emissions reduction, Audit Wales, 2021-22](#)

14 [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

Safety

- 32 False alarm reduction is crucial to reducing safety risks. The prevalence of false alarms has potentially significant impacts on the safety risks of communities, such as road risk and complacency.
- 33 Road safety risks are present whenever the emergency services respond to an incident. Driving at speed or under blue light conditions can generate significant risks to both crews and other road users. For example, data shows that across Great Britain, 79 people were killed or seriously injured in 2021, with an emergency vehicle on a call being a contributory factor in these collisions.¹⁵ This risk is also present at normal road speed, due to the significant size and weight of fire appliances.
- 34 High volumes of false alarms can also lead to complacency among building occupants and citizens. For example, it may lead to a lack of response during a real incident, placing both the occupants and the responding crew at increased risk. False alarm reduction, therefore, helps to reduce the safety risks to both FRAs crews and to communities. We found that the safety aspects and impact of false alarms were well understood and articulated by all three FRAs.

FRAs in Wales all approach false alarms reduction differently

- 35 All three FRAs in Wales have different approaches to managing false alarms. Their respective policies are mostly focused on reducing the prevalence and attendance following AFAs. In summary, North Wales FRA's starting premise is to not attend non-domestic AFAs, but to go by exception. Mid & West and South Wales FRAs' default positions are to attend but seek to establish reasons on a case by case basis to de-escalate their response. Their respective policy approaches are as follows:
- Mid and West Wales FRA's starting premise when receiving a call from Alarm Monitoring Centres is to establish the level of response required through pre-determined attendance plans, which can range from one fire appliance attending at normal road speed to no appliance at all when the incident is assessed as highly likely to be a false alarm. Staff in fire control have the discretion to change the level of a pre-determined response by assessing additional information gathered during a call challenge stage.

¹⁵ Reported road collisions, vehicles and casualties tables for Great Britain - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

- When South Wales FRA receives a call, control staff are encouraged to filter incidents by challenging the caller and/or seeking confirmation from the premises on the nature of the incident and whether there is a need for the fire and rescue service to attend. This can then enable either escalation, recall, or complete attendance prevention. South Wales FRA adopted a new policy for targeting UwFS reductions from high-volume premises in 2020. This created a four-stage system for monitoring, building on data recorded by attending crews. Each stage is based on the volume of alarms at each premises in a rolling 12-month period. A UwFS working group also supports interventions to help reduce the volume of alarms from repeat offenders.
 - North Wales FRA's policy is to not send an emergency response to AFA actuations unless a back-up 999 call is received confirming that there is a fire. Exemptions to this policy include domestic premises and high-risk properties. The current iteration of the Authority's policy was adopted in September 2022, following a review. The review centred on an evolving risk profile due to changes in building occupancy as a result of the pandemic. For example, a reduced likelihood of someone being present in a public building who would normally be expected to make a back-up 999 call to confirm a fire. Apart from reviewing some exemptions, the current policy broadly reinforces the approach adopted in 2014.
- 36 The number of false alarm calls that FRAs receive from AFAs are rising but there are differences in how authorities are responding. For example, across Wales there has been a 13% increase in the number of false alarms from AFAs (both domestic and non-domestic) received by FRAs since 2008-09. The biggest increase has been in South Wales, where the FRA received 25% more false alarms from AFAs in 2021-22 compared to 2008-09.¹⁶ In Mid & West FRA, however, the overall number of false alarms from AFAs received reduced by 2% over the same period. **Exhibit 6** shows the number of false AFAs received by FRAs, using 2008-09 as a baseline.

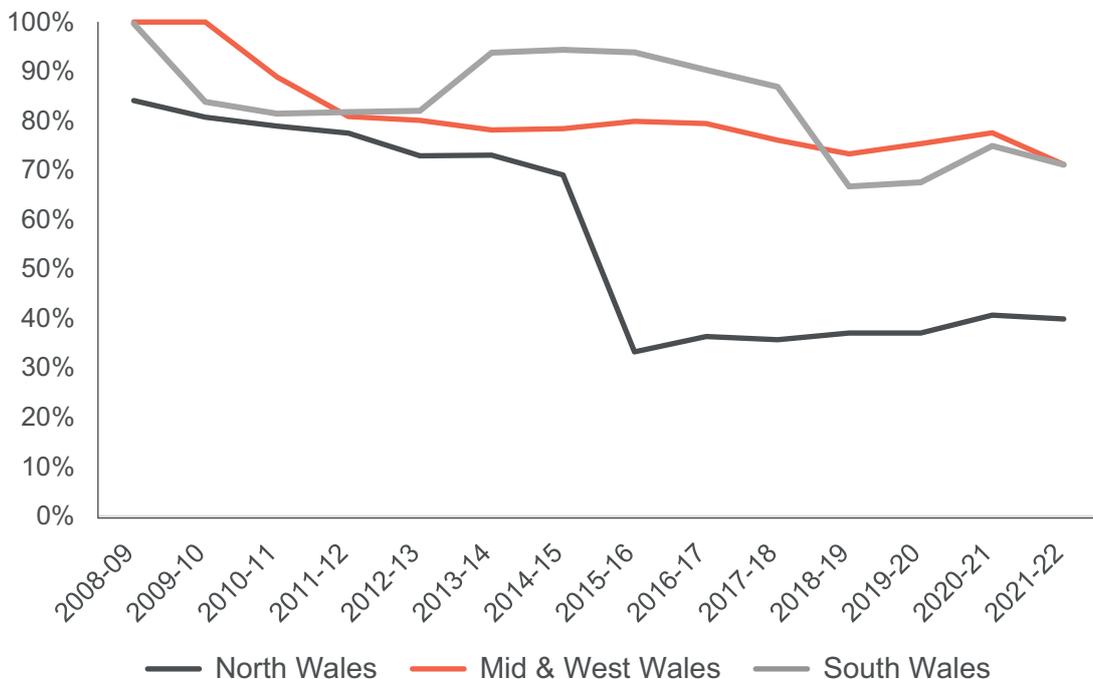
Exhibit 6: The number of false AFA calls received by FRAs

Total number of false automatic alarm (AFA) calls received	2008-09	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
All Wales	12,395	13,130	13,598	12,897	13,955
North Wales	3,286	3,057	3,271	2,984	3,501
Mid & West Wales	3,564	3,728	3,677	3,641	3,506
South Wales	5,545	6,345	6,650	6,272	6,948

Source: [Calls handled by fire control watch FTE by call type and financial year \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

37 North Wales FRA's different approach has seen it reducing attendance at false alarms by a significantly bigger margin than the other two Welsh FRAs. The impact of its approach is best illustrated by analysing the data on AFA false alarms and attendance, published by Welsh Government. **Exhibit 7** shows the number of AFAs false alarms that each FRA has attended as a proportion of the overall number of AFA false alarms it received.

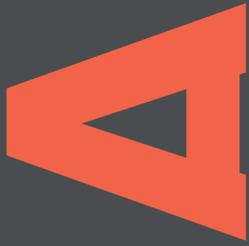
Exhibit 7: AFAs attendance in non-domestic properties as a proportion of the number of false AFAs received, by FRA since 2008-09



Source: Audit Wales analysis of [Calls handled by fire control watch FTE by call type and financial year \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/calls-handled-by-fire-control-watch-fte-by-call-type-and-financial-year)

- 38 It is clear from **Exhibit 7** that the approaches adopted by all three FRAs are making a difference and are all reducing attendance at AFAs. However, the different policy approaches are having different levels of impact – for example, the marked reduction by North Wales between 2014-15 and 2015-16 is in response to its revised AFA policy. South Wales also experienced a smaller reduction in 2017-18.
- 39 This highlights that reviewing and adopting a managed approach to attendance at non-domestic properties can improve efficiency and effectiveness without compromising risk. However, the different approaches raise a number of key questions. For example, if North Wales FRA can take a risk-based approach to reduce their attendances so dramatically, why have South Wales and Mid & West Wales FRAs not followed suit? And, if reducing attendance at non-domestic AFAs is deemed too risky for communities in South, Mid & West Wales, what is driving North Wales FRA to manage this potentially increased level of risk for communities in their area?

- 40 Ultimately, it is for each FRA to determine its risk appetite and balance this with the need to be prudent in their use of resources. But given the success of North Wales FRA in reducing the amount of non-domestic AFAs it attends when demand is rising, there are opportunities for the other services to learn from this approach.
- 41 Health boards facilities continue to place the biggest demand on FRAs in terms of AFA false alarms. This is because all three FRAs are taking a risk-based approach to inform their pre-determined attendance at these sites and continue to focus on collaborating with health board colleagues to encourage a reduction in actuations, rather than adopting a policy of not responding, or pursuing enforcement action.
- 42 One of the benefits of continuing to attend AFA false alarms in non-domestic properties cited by Mid & West Wales and South Wales FRAs, is the opportunity to gather intelligence on properties to improve their fire safety prevention work. For example, a pattern of AFA actuations may indicate a poorly managed building, which can present a higher fire safety risk. While this insight is potentially useful in itself, it is questionable if it requires a firefighting crew and fire engine to respond in an emergency and there are other less resource intensive ways of gathering this data. For instance, utilising fire safety and business education teams, who regularly audit fire safety arrangements in non-domestic settings.
- 43 In North Wales, our reviews found that the FRA's policy of not responding (in the main) to non-domestic AFAs inadvertently increased the emphasis on how fire safety and business education teams develop and deliver their work programs. We made recommendations aimed at improving the way in which the FRA uses data on AFA actuations not attended, to provide a more integrated response and ensure it keeps abreast of risks.



Looking to the future

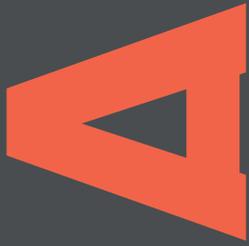
03

The bigger picture and changes on the horizon

- 44 Since its National Framework was published in 2015, the Welsh Government has set out a broader policy direction for FRAs. This involves expanding the role of firefighters to support the health and social care system, such as responding to non-injured falls. This was approved by the Cabinet in 2020. Reducing false alarms can help to generate the additional capacity needed to realise this ambition, but this requires effective collaboration across FRAs, Welsh Government and wider public bodies within the health and social care sectors.
- 45 In 2021, the Welsh Government published its assessment of whether the role of firefighters could be expanded without causing detriment to the core fire and rescue service. Even without delivering a broader role, the review concluded that a 'fundamental review of station work routines is required to ensure that activity is appropriately scheduled to maximise output'. Analysis found that there was no unallocated capacity during the day shift of wholetime crews, which would coincide with peak hours of demand for the Welsh Ambulance Service Trust (WAST) between 7AM and midday.¹⁷
- 46 A lack of adequate training time was also identified by the Welsh Government and led to a second thematic review focused on operational training¹⁸. It concluded that there was insufficient training time available, particularly to firefighters under the Retained Duty System (RDS). The report recommended that FRAs 'undertake an unconstrained analysis of the amount of time required for firefighters to train'.
- 47 Given the broad impact across the service, a reduction in false alarms responses can help increase capacity, which is needed to help grow role of the fire fighter. This is alongside other requirements, such as leadership from senior officers and members, effective collaboration, robust data analysis, and effective scrutiny.

17 Welsh Government, [Broadening of the role of firefighters in Wales](#), November 2021

18 Welsh Government, [Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services](#), October 2022



Examples from elsewhere

04

What others are doing

- 48 FRAs across the UK have devised different solutions to address the volume of false alarms. They are a significant burden on the local stations and limit the time that can be spent on other issues. Home Office research¹⁹ found that 63,000 hours were wasted in England during 2017-18 due to responding to false alarms.
- 49 As a result, English fire and rescue services have developed a range of approaches to help reduce the number of false alarms attended, which vary in their usage (**Exhibit 8**).

Exhibit 8: example approaches taken by English FRAs in 2018

Approach	Description	Proportion of English FRAs adopting the approach in 2018
Call challenging	Where fire control staff ask questions to those making a call to confirm if a fire is real to prevent a first response.	93%
Education and information initiatives	Information or materials are given to building occupants on the need to reduce false alarms.	93%
No confirmation needed	A normal response is sent without confirmation.	76%
Adapted responses	An immediate response is made but reduced from the Pre-Determined Attendance (PDA), e.g., one appliance is sent to investigate rather than three.	74%
Requiring confirmation (or 'double knock')	A response is only sent if a call to confirm a fire is received, or if multiple alarms are triggered.	60%
Enforcement action	A legal enforcement action is taken against premises that often trigger false alarms, such as a fire safety audit or fine.	33%
Fines	A monetary charge is made for premises with repeat false alarms.	24%
Non-attendance	After a warning, no response is made to premises that repeatedly trigger false alarms.	13%

Source: [Home Office research](#)

19 Home Office, [Trends in fire false alarms and fire false alarm policies](#), November 2022

- 50 The National Fire Chiefs Council has published a toolbox²⁰ to support FRAs with their management of false alarms and the potential options to be considered. These include:
- no response being made to AFAs during daytime hours unless there is a higher level of risk (e.g. sleeping risk or high-risk premises like a hospital).
 - charging the occupants of a building that repeatedly cause UwFS.
 - requiring premises to register their AFAs to enable enhanced monitoring to help call handlers make better informed decisions.
 - establishing thresholds for an adapted response based on the number of detector heads in a building (e.g. a building with 500 heads would get a full response with ten UwFS whilst a building with 100 heads would not).
 - prioritising work on educating and informing people of their responsibilities and having dedicated officers to help facilitate change in buildings/organisations with high numbers of false alarms.
 - engagement with ARCs to improve call handling and encouraging bodies to undertake visual checks to confirm there is a fire.
- 51 Both the toolbox and research demonstrate the breadth of approaches available to FRAs, reflecting their local circumstances and risk appetite.

20 National Fire Chiefs Council, Unwanted fires signals toolbox

Appendix 1 - Audit approach and methodology

Approach

Our approach was to understand each FRA's approach to false alarm reduction, focusing in particular on non-domestic settings. The review sought to answer the question 'Is the Authority doing all it can to reduce the prevalence and responses to non-domestic fire false alarms?'. Our focus was on the actions of the FRAs, not the actions available to building managers or responsible persons.

We completed our fieldwork across all three FRAs separately, using the same audit team across all three bodies. This enabled insights to be drawn into each FRA, as well as informing this national output.

We sought to be flexible to fit around officers when organising and delivering our fieldwork, ensuring that our work did not detract from the operational work of the FRAs.

Methodology

Our reviews were completed between November 2022 and March 2023. We used a range of methods to draw conclusions for our reviews:

- document review – we reviewed policies and documentation provided by each FRA, as well as reviewing their published information, such as their website. In addition, we also reviewed documentation from the Welsh Government, NHS Shared Services Partnership (NWSSP), and representative groups.
- data analysis – we analysed both data provided by the FRAs and publicly available data. This included management data, Incident Recording System (IRS) data, and other available data from StatsWales.
- local interviews – we interviewed officers nominated by the FRAs that covered a range of different areas, both corporately and locally. This included the lead officer for false alarms, Business Fire Safety (BFS) officers, senior officers and Authority Members.
- national interviews – we interviewed representatives of local health boards, the NWSSP, and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).



Audit Wales

1 Capital Quarter

Tyndall Street

Cardiff CF10 4BZ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English.

Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.