False Fire Alarm Reduction – Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

Contents

The Authority has made progress in its approach to managing false fire alarms (FFAs) but due to reductions in firefighter capacity and stand still budgets, now needs to review how it manages FFAs to ensure services remain resilient.

Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

1   We reviewed the Authority's approach to the reduction of false fire alarms in non-domestic premises. Our audit included reviewing the Authority's policy, how it was developed and is being implemented, how false fire alarms (FFAs) are monitored, and how performance is managed and evaluated.

2   We examined FFAs due to the significant numbers responded to by Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs). This means that they have a significant operational, financial, and environmental impact. They are also a key area for improvement within the Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016[1], set by the Welsh Government.

3   We undertook the review during the period November 2022 to March 2023.

What we found

4   Our review sought to answer the question: **Is the Authority doing all it can to reduce the prevalence and responses to non-domestic false fire alarms?**

5   Overall we found that: **The Authority has made progress in its approach to managing false fire alarms (FFAs) but due to reductions in firefighter capacity and stand still budgets, now needs to review how it manages FFAs to ensure services remain resilient**. We reached this conclusion because:

- the Authority understands the main locations and causes of FFAs but weaknesses in systems and inconsistent reporting limit their ability to fully understand their impact.

- the Authority has a clear policy for managing FFAs and a plan for reducing FFAs which seeks to balance risks and response. However, these could be strengthened with broader stakeholder involvement, as well as formal targets to help assess progress.

- the Authority regularly monitors performance on reducing non-domestic FFAs, but weaknesses in the range and quality of data are not helping to drive improvement.

- despite some past successes in reducing FFAs, performance has marginally dipped in recent years. There are opportunities to build upon positive relationships with public sector partnerships to drive further improvement.

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[1] Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016, Welsh Government

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations
Data driven policy development
R1   The Authority should address weaknesses in data recording of false fire alarms (FFAs) by: • ensuring all staff who report incidents are clear on how to capture information and are consistently recording data; • embedding an ongoing training process to address any inconsistencies identified; and • reviewing the reporting framework to ensure compliance with the process is assessed and demonstrated. R2   The Authority should identify the cost of wholetime responses to FFAs to establish the overall cost of FFAs for the Authority.
Operational learning to aid improvement
R3   The Authority should formalise its learning from false fire alarms to ensure all opportunities for improvement in systems, processes and performance are captured and addressed. R4   The Authority should work with South Wales FRA to review the role of the Joint Fire Control Unit in managing and handling Unwanted Fire Signals to identify opportunities to further integrate and improve call handing efficiency.
Measuring and improving performance
R5   We recommend that the Authority explore and assess other approaches taken elsewhere to identify opportunities to strengthen its management of and performance in reducing FFAs. This should be informed and include the utilisation of data held by the Authority.
Involvement and communication with stakeholders
R6   The Authority should review partnership arrangements, building on previous work undertaken with partners to reduce Unwanted Fire Signals that may have stalled since the pandemic.

Detailed report

Fire and rescue services face the most challenging financial and operational environment in a generation

National framework expectations

6   The Welsh Government's National Framework for Fire identifies the reduction of false alarms as a key efficiency saving available to FRAs[2]. It notes that responding to false alarms incurs significant financial and opportunity costs, both for FRAs and building occupiers, whilst yielding no benefit whatsoever. This is especially impactful as there are more FFAs than actual fires. In 2021-22, 40% of total incidents responded to by the Authority were FFAs, which illustrates the significant burden they place on the limited resources available. Consequently, the Welsh Government requires FRAs to 'Identify the main sources of FFAs and take all reasonable and practical steps to reduce their incidence.'

7   In shaping their approach, FRAs must also demonstrate the Sustainable Development Principle under the Well-being of Future Generations 2016. FRAs are required to show how they are taking a long-term view to improvement that focuses on prevention, involving people, and integrating and working collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.

8   Therefore, the expectation of the Welsh Government is to see a reduction in responses to FFAs in order to free both resources and capacity. This would also put FRAs in a stronger position to realise the Welsh Government ambitions, set out in recent reports.

Growing the role of the firefighter

9   Reducing FFAs is required to provide the additional capacity needed to meet the Welsh Government's policy expectations.

10   Since the 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.

11   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

[2] Welsh Government, Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016, November 2015

with peak hours of demand for the Welsh Ambulance Service Trust (WAST) between 7 am and midday[3].

12   A lack of adequate training time was also identified by the Welsh Government and led to a second thematic review focused on operational training[4]. 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'.

13   Consequently, a reduction in FFA responses would support creation of added capacity 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.

Reductions in resources

14   FRAs have had to deliver within significantly reduced budgets during years of austerity and, as all public bodies, must continue to adapt to respond to the current financial pressures. Consequently, Authorities have had to maintain their services with fewer resources and have long focused on rebalancing their emphasis from responding to incidents, to preventing fires and improving safety.

15   In real terms, the Authority experienced a 0.9% decrease (£0.5 million) in revenue expenditure between 2009-10 and 2021-22[5]. Over the same period, the calls received by the Authority increased by 11.4%[6] and the number of incidents attended fell by 21.1%[7]. The number of firefighters employed by the Authority also declined between 2009-10 and 2021-22 **(Exhibit 2)**:

Exhibit 2: Mid and West Wales FRA personnel headcount by employment type, 2009-10 to 2021-22

Role	2009-10	2021-22	Change
Wholetime uniformed staff	446	390	-12.5%

[3] Welsh Government, Broadening of the role of firefighters in Wales, November 2021

[4] Welsh Government, Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services, October 2022

[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

Role	2009-10	2021-22	Change
Retained staff	715	685	-4.2%
Fire control staff	35	24	-31.4%
Non-operational staff	185	219	18.4%
All staff	**1,381**	**1,318**	**-4.6%**

Source: StatsWales

What are false fire alarms and why are they important?

Definition and types

16 Within the Home Office Incident Reporting System (IRS), FFAs 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)

17 **Exhibit 3** shows that, nationally, false alarms 'due to apparatus' account for just under 60% of total FFAs.

Exhibit 3: share of total FFAs in Wales by type, 2021-22

- Malicious
- Good intent
- Due to apparatus
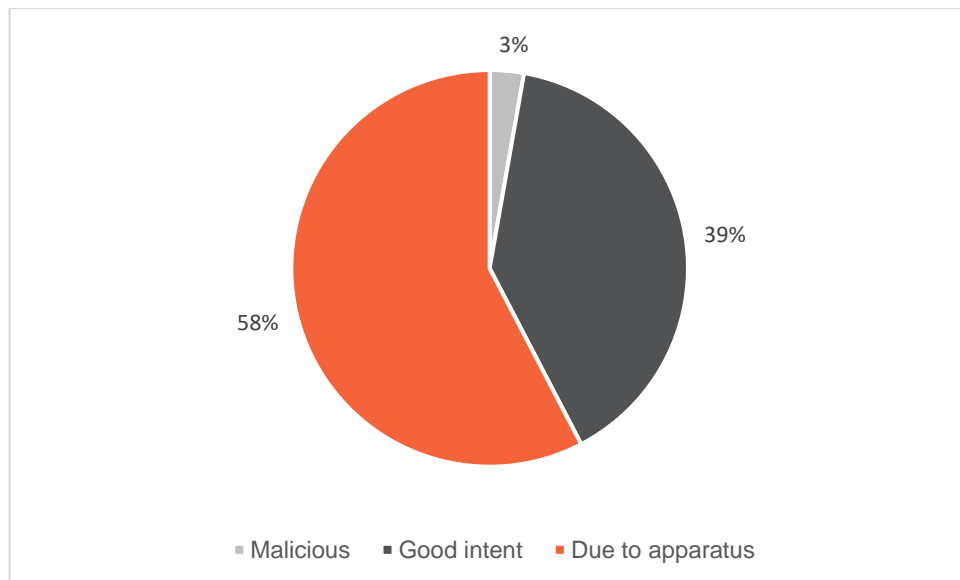
Source: StatsWales[8]

18   These are typically caused by Automatic Fire Alarm systems (AFAs), which are networks of detector heads in buildings that are linked to an alarm system. The alarms are then 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 that they operate with. **Exhibit 4** sets out the AFA process when triggered.

Exhibit 4: Automatic Fire Alarm Process

Detector head is triggered → Alarm is activated by the detector head → Signal is sent to the ARC → ARC contact the FRA → FRA chooses to respond or not

Source: Audit Wales

[8] Note – this includes both domestic and non-domestic false alarms responded to, due to how data is reported.

19   When a false alarm is received from an AFA, it is typically referred to as an Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS). As UwFS form the largest share of FFAs, they are the key focus of reduction activity across the UK[9]. Consequently, the focus of the Authority's approach and this audit has been on UwFS reduction, whilst also covering other types of FFAs.

False fire alarms impact the resilience of Fire and Rescue services

20   As with any response made by the Authority to any incident, there are financial, operational, environmental, and safety impacts when responding to FFAs. When considered together, the impacts generated by the response to FFAs are significant. As a result, any improvement in performance will help the Authority to better manage its resource pressures and increase capacity to undertake additional training and other priority tasks.

Financial

21   The total financial impacts of an FFA response are difficult to quantify precisely. The deployment of an appliance would be equal in responding to a false alarm and a genuine incident as crews are deployed in the expectation of a genuine fire.

22   The Authority estimates the cost of a response to be £126.80 per hour[10], which is much lower than other UK FRAs, which are around £350 to £400 per hour[11]. The Authority's estimate would result in a minimum financial cost of £237,999 for non-domestic false alarms in 2021-22. This will be an underestimate, as we are unable to calculate the cost based on the duration of responses, mileage, or other variable costs.

23   To counter the financial impacts, some FRAs in England have prescribed charges for premises that produce multiple false alarms. For example, Cleveland FRS charges premises £345 (excluding VAT) from their fifth call[12]. Similarly, Humberside FRS charges a minimum of £365.75 from the fourth false alarm[13].

24   In 2021-22, using the Authority's estimated average cost, hospitals turnouts in the MWWFRA area cost the most at £34,941, followed by retail (£34,687) and education (£29,417). Across the seven-year period, the highest jump in costs was for Nurses'/Doctors' accommodation with an increase of almost 900% to £6,408 in

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[9] For example, see the National Fire Chiefs Council guidance

[10] Made up of £125.17 per hour crew costs and £1.63 per hour appliance costs.

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

[12] Cleveland FRS, Fire Alarms

[13] Humberside FRS, Call out charges 2022-23

2021-22. This is followed by student hall of residence (85% increase to £15,831 in 2021-22) and other medical care (59% increase to £7,017 in 21-22) – **Exhibit 5**.

Exhibit 5: non-domestic automatic fire alarm costs 2015-16 to 2021-22 by property type

With the exception of calls to residential homes, offices and call centres, and public administration, security and safety buildings, all costs associated with FFAs in non-domestic settings have risen since 2015-16.
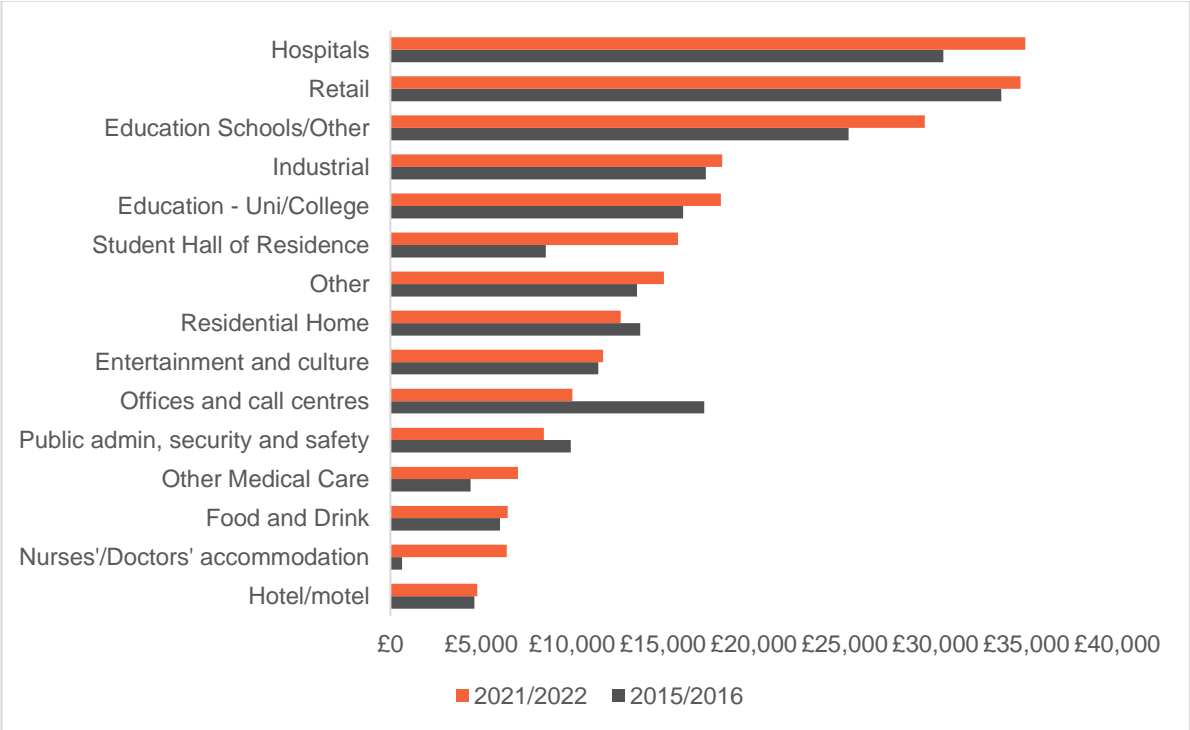
Source: Mid and West Wales, FRA data (unaudited).

25   While the Authority knows the overall costs of FFAs and a more detailed understanding of the costs to on-call stations, wholetime response costs are less clear, as most of the costs are absorbed into core activities. Whilst cost is one of several factors when assessing impact of FFAs, with risk being a key aspect, with more detailed cost data, teams could be more effective in knowing where to target their resources. Despite the high costs to the service, the Authority places more value on the risk of not responding, although Members are basing this judgment on incomplete information, with more scrutiny on the costs of malicious calls, despite the financial risks being substantially greater with FFA mobilisations. Members do not currently receive data on costs of FFA callouts.

Operational

26   Any response by the FRA can result in disruption to the planned activities of the responding station. This 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 can be particularly costly, as highlighted by the Welsh Government's most recent report[14], which notes a risk of staff competencies not being maintained where crews are regularly responding to false alarms.

27   The Authority's policy of responding to all calls (**paragraph 42** below) can result in significant disruption to preventative work in the community and to planned training. This is a significant weakness of the current approach, as it uses critical resources in an unproductive manner.

28   The operational impact is potentially significant for firefighters within the RDS, who usually receive only two to three hours of training per week, which may be removed entirely if required to respond to false alarms during training hours.

29   In addition, as the RDS relies on the goodwill of employers to release staff to attend a call during their work hours, increasing responses to false alarms may deter businesses from supporting their staff to take on a RDS role. This may also negatively affect retainment.

30   To counter the operational impact, some FRAs across Great Britain have adopted policies to prevent a response to AFAs. For instance, from 1 July 2023, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will not respond to AFAs at non-domestic premises unless a 999 call is made or the building has people sleeping on site in the premises, such as hospitals, care homes, hotels, or domestic dwellings. This decision was informed by a public consultation[15] held in 2021.

31   Mid and West Wales FRA have decided to not adopt a non-response policy, despite their current policy setting out the risks and impact of not reducing callouts. We were told that responding to AFAs has additional benefits, as it is important for front line crews to have 'eyes on the ground' so business fire safety risks can be picked up and passed onto relevant teams.

32   However, this view is of questionable benefit, as the information gathered during a call is limited. The inconsistent level of information presented to Business Fire Safety teams demonstrates the limitations of any intelligence gathered, and fire safety risks should already be recorded as part of the existing risk assessment process. We also heard anecdotally of some frustration at training sessions being cancelled due to crews responding to unwanted fire signals.

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[14] Welsh Government, Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services, October 2022

[15] Scottish FRS, Public consultation on Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals, December 2021

Environmental

33   As set out in our report into Carbon Emissions Reduction[16] in 2021-22, there are significant environmental impacts in responding to calls. This includes the use of fuel for a response, as well as the potential environmental impact of a retained firefighter travelling to their station to crew an appliance. Consequently, responding to false alarms will not help the Authority to deliver the Welsh Government's target of being net-zero by 2030 challenging without a change in behaviour.

34   The Authority has quantified this impact as $0.074tCO_2e$ per response[17] or $117.5tCO_2e$ for all non-domestic AFA attendances in 2021-22. Responding to false alarms will make achieving the Authority's and Welsh Government's target of being net-zero by 2030 challenging without a reduction in mileage.

Safety

35   False alarm reduction is crucial to reducing safety risks. The prevalence of false alarms also has potentially significant impacts on the safety risks of communities, such as road risk and complacency.

36   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. This risk is also present at road speed, due to the significant size and weight of fire appliances.

37   Continuing to respond to false alarms can also lead to complacency among building occupants. Not tackling unnecessary false alarms may lead to a lack of response during a real incident, placing both the occupants and the responding crew in additional danger. False alarm reduction, therefore, helps to reduce the safety risks to both the Authority's crews and communities.

What others are doing

38   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 research[18] found that 63,000 hours were wasted in England during 2017-18 due to responding to false alarms.

39   As a result, English services have developed a range of approaches to help reduce the number of false alarms attended, which vary in their usage **(Exhibit 6)**.

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[16] Audit Wales, Carbon emissions reduction – Mid and West Wales FRA, April 2022

[17] Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority, Number of AFA callouts, data for pumps attending non-domestic premises for 2021-22. Total callouts from Welsh Government incident statistics, 2021-22. Emissions data taken from Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority Environmental and Sustainability Annual Report 2021-22.

[18] Home Office, Trends in fire false alarms and fire false alarm policies, November 2022

Exhibit 6: 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), eg 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, the no response is made to premises that repeatedly trigger false alarms	13%

Source: Home Office research

40   The National Fire Chiefs' Council has published a toolbox[19] 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 (eg 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 (eg 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; and

- engagement with ARCs to improve call handling and encouraging bodies to undertake visual checks to confirm there is a fire.

Both the toolbox and research demonstrate the breadth of approaches available for a Fire and Rescue Authority to utilise that reflects their local circumstances and risk appetite.

Managing false alarms in Mid and West Wales FRA

Current policy

41   When an AFA is activated in the Mid and West Wales area, usually an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) will screen the call by calling the premises to determine whether there are signs of fire. If there are signs of fire or where the premises are unattended, the ARC contacts the Authority's control room. Depending on the risk and premises type, the call operator will then determines the level of response in line with pre-determined attendance plans.

42   In most cases, one fire appliance responds to an AFA call at normal road speed. This would change to a full response with 'blue lights and siren' if additional information is received enroute to the incident which elevate the risks. If at any time, an AFA is backed up with a 999 call, then a full emergency response is actioned, with one or more appliances mobilised, depending on pre-determined attendance plans, based on premises type and other risk factors. Likewise, if the incident is confirmed as a false alarm activation, then the responding appliances are stood down and return to their station. This occurs on 14% of incidents.

[19] National Fire Chiefs Council, Unwanted fires signals toolbox

43   Given the challenging operating environment facing Fire and Rescue Services across Great Britain and reductions in resources, it would be timely for the Authority to review its policies and guidance to assure itself that the current model is affordable and proportionate. The current policy for unwanted fire signals was issued in August 2022 and is due for review in August 2025. However officers told us the policy could benefit from a further review, drawing learning from other fire and rescue authority's approaches..

44   Given that the Authority does not routinely present the full impact of responding to false alarms to Members for scrutiny, it is difficult for Members to quantify the risks of the current policy decisions and to prioritise scrutiny accordingly. There is a risk that the Authority could be allowing political considerations of not responding FFAs to influence their decision making rather than being driven by evidence. There is a fear in rural areas that a further reduction in responses would impact on the sustainability of small, local stations. Whilst this may be a consideration, this should not be the driving factor to determine response policy.

Current performance

45   Despite reducing false FFAs attended in non-domestic properties in recent years, the most recent data shows call outs attended have marginally increased. In explaining the recent upturn, officers have cited the increased volume of AFAs installed in buildings following the Grenfell Tower fire and changes in British Standards. However, we were unable to assess this as data is not collected on the number of AFAs installed or the number of premises connected to each ARC. This makes it difficult to quantify this explanation with evidence.

46   Since 2015-16, the volume of total false alarms in non-domestic properties reduced by 1% to a total of 1,595 in 2021-22. In summary, **Exhibit 7** highlights that between 2015-16 and 2021-22, malicious calls fell by 22%, and good intent calls increased by 230%. Over the period, calls due to apparatus being triggered remain the overwhelming cause of AFAs.

Exhibit 7: false alarms in non-domestic properties reported by Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority, 2015-16 to 2021-22
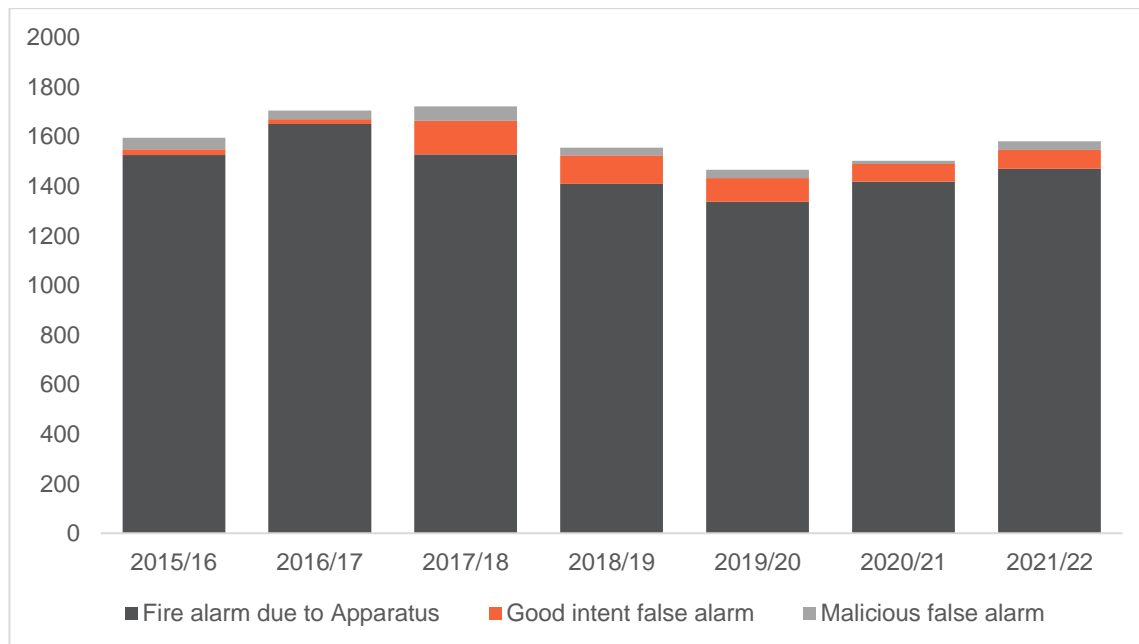
Source: Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority fire alarm data, 2015 to 2022

47   In 2021-22, the total number of false FFAs attended[20] was 45% greater than actual fires attended (4,786) and they are now the single largest reason for incident attendance by crews (**Exhibit 8**).

[20] Note – this includes both domestic and non-domestic false alarms responded to, due to how data is reported.

Exhibit 8: fires, special service incidents, and false alarms attended by Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority, 2015-16 to 2021-22
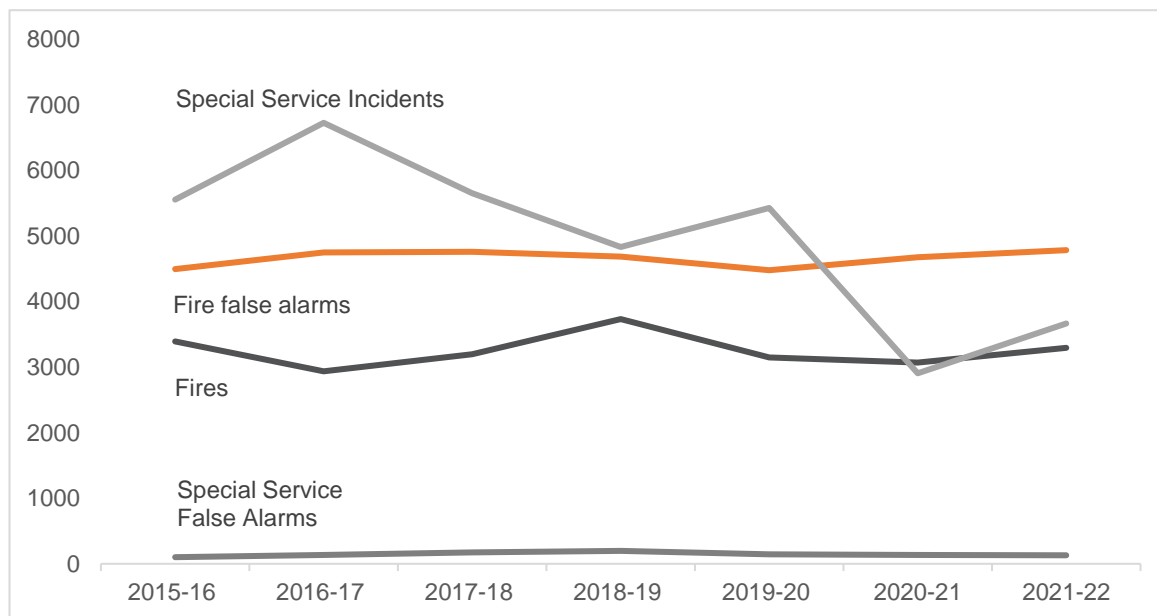
Source: StatsWales

48   Within the data there are some underlying issues:

- activations in residential homes have experienced the largest reduction since 2015-16, falling by 34%, primarily due to property owners investing in modern equipment, including pre-alarms which are responded to by on-site/mobile staff rather than contacting the Authority.

- hospital activations decreased by 21% over the period. However, there remains an ongoing challenge with ageing alarm systems in health settings which need modernisation and are contributing to high numbers of FFA activations. Morriston and Singleton Hospitals are responsible for the most unwanted fire signals in the Authority area.

- student halls of residence activations, despite seeing an overall reduction of 16%, began increasing again in 2019-20. We heard that despite the good progress made with reducing FFA activations at university premises, and a good working relationship between the Fire Authority and building management teams, the Authority are starting to see an increase in calls. Anecdotally, this may be due to a lack of training on modern systems and the need for intensive proactive training and education by Authority staff, which is difficult to resource. Swansea University is responsible for a large number of calls.

49   There are specific challenges within each of these settings that that can trigger greater numbers of false alarms. For instance, procedures that produce spray and challenging patient behaviour. The significant demands on hospital and campus staff can also lead to false alarms due to spaces being adapted for breaks that have not been designed for cooking or distractions leading to food being burnt. This makes the ability of the Authority to reduce alarms completely very challenging.

Data driven policy development

50   The Authority captures detailed information on the volume and type of FFAs through the Authority's Incident Reporting System (IRS) which is then analysed and compiled in a Performance dashboard. However, the manual recording process is labour intensive and does not always record FFAs accurately.

51   Officers highlighted the inefficiency of the current systems and the format of information presented to them. For example, business fire safety teams and watch managers must manually scroll through a list of entries, rather than accessing a report they can interrogate and customise to obtain the level of information they need. Due to the way postal addresses of premises attended are recorded, this has the potential for repeat callouts to be missed if addresses do not match exactly.

52   We heard of some concerns of the quality and inconsistency of information collected after crews have attended false alarms. Historically, the Authority collected information on the cause of an alarm, any advice given and confirmation that a case had been closed. This stopped being collected due to time constraints being placed on crews leading to a lack of clarity on whether there was a need for further investigation. The Authority's UFS policy clearly states the importance of gaining this information and recording it to analyse overall impact. We heard during interviews that Business Fire Safety teams do not always get the level of information they need, and information they do receive from FFA callouts is usually two weeks out of date.

53   Most of the activity dedicated to reducing FFAs focusses on repeat offenders, due to them often being the large institutions that account for a sizeable number of calls. However, from speaking with some of these stakeholders, it was clear these are more likely to be proactively improving their systems with dedicated officers responsible for this, and established relationships with the Fire Authority. However, little has been carried out with smaller organisations who, despite amounting to less proportion of activations, are still likely to be a significant cost to the Authority due to their rural location, and the high mileage crews must travel to get to these. Often these premises will need a full response, due to the site owners having no one present on site to investigate the alarm before crews are mobilised.

54   There are clearly some instances of inconsistent reporting across different frontline crews. Various officers told us information was incomplete and not all crews are completing the necessary paperwork to provide an accurate picture of FFAs. The Procedural guidance document specifies that incident commanders should investigate the causes of all UFS incidents and should provide information relating to the root cause and advice on how to reduce future actuations. Although most watch managers appear to be complying with this, the Business fire safety team sometimes finds the quality and depth of this information can be poor. The team would welcome improved site-specific information, to better inform their understanding of FFAs.

55   The Authority could make more use of partners' data. For example, NHS independent fire reviews are not routinely shared with the Fire Authority.

Operational learning to aid improvement

56   The Authority is not consistently embedding learning from crews, control centres and the organisations it responds to in developing its priorities for action. For progress to be made when addressing learning from incidents and the experience of other partners, Fire and Rescue Authorities must have accountable persons responsible for driving change.

57   The Authority has a UFS co-ordination group to address this. The Group meets quarterly and reports to the Business Fire Safety Manager's Group. They are tasked with 'continually seeking improvement in reducing the number of UFS within the Service by applying a robust reduction programme protocol'. The aim of the Group is to provide a robust protocol for reduction, educate officers of protocol, engage with stakeholders to deliver their mission statement and to share good practice, review and monitor effectiveness of the protocol. Action logs seen from the Group show an accountable person for each action, along with a completion date. However, all actions are marked as ongoing, with most dating back to 2020. There are minimal notes on the document to offer a commentary on progress. Learning from UFS reduction in other regions does take place, but the arrangements for this are mainly informal.

58   Benchmarking is one way of embedding learning from other organisations. We heard the Authority is beginning to explore embedding learning from other approaches but we saw little evidence of this to date. The Authority is open to pursuing learning from others – documents show the Authority intends to explore what other FRAs are doing with UFS information, but action logs are not clear on what was implemented or changed as a result of any exploratory work. We heard of the complexities around benchmarking, with differing operating models and local circumstances given as one reason the Authority has not conducted benchmarking with other FRAs. Despite sharing a Joint Fire Control Centre with South Wales FRA, Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority has an entirely different FFA response model to South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority. Opportunities exist here to further integrate these two models to improve efficiency.

59   Embedding learning on UFS reduction throughout training programmes across the Authority ensures that policies are clearly understood and continual progress can be made. New front line crew recruits receive a presentation on the All Wales call challenge guidance and staff attend an all-Wales Building Fires Safety group and Protection forum, which includes training on UFS.

Measuring and improving performance

60   The Authority's policy ambition is to reduce false FFAs but it has not set targets for the future. Some officers found it difficult to articulate how much FFAs had reduced and were not aware where the Authority is trying to get to, nor what success would look like. The Authority reports the volume of false alarms regularly to Members; however, Members are also not aware of what current targets are in place to enable them to accurately measure performance.

61   Action plans identifying areas for improvement are formally presented to the Fire Authority and include three core areas:

- identifying suitable pathway(s) for information to be sent from incident to Business Fire Safety department;
- identifying ways to improve premises information; and
- using software to focus on premises that require attention.

Despite the potential for these actions to improve how UFS are reported, the current ongoing actions indicate progress has been slow.

62   When it comes to quality of information provided for scrutiny, Members receive a high-level overview of the number of false alarms year on year, but this is insufficient to scrutinise current performance effectively and identify opportunities for improvement. A brief high-level explanation of reasons for increases/reductions accompanies the data presented to Members, but no information is provided to support how these causes are arrived at, nor how other variables have been considered. Members receive no information on costs associated with responding to UFS.

63   When officers present UFS information to Members, we would expect that information is scrutinised proportionately, depending on the associated risks. Given the likely high cost of UFS to an organisation, we consider Member scrutiny to be insufficient in this area. There is little reporting or discussion of UFS seen in minutes presented to Members over last two years of meetings. Scrutiny is overly focussed on malicious calls despite evidence showing that the Authority has successfully reduced these. Unwanted fire signals receive much less attention, despite their likely impact. Member knowledge of FFAs varies, and with many new Members recently having joined the Authority they would welcome and benefit from more training on the issue.

Involvement and communication with stakeholders

64   The Authority works well with key public sector partners but this is not always resulting in changes in behaviour and practice to reduce unwanted fire signals. There are opportunities to build upon positive relationships with public sector partnerships to drive further improvement. The Authority has a dedicated officer and an internal working group to coordinate activity on reducing false alarms. Current work focuses on a narrow group of stakeholders who are responsible for the majority of UFS. This approach does mean however that the Authority is not prioritising reductions in false alarms across the whole service area.

65   We heard from officers and responsible persons that overall, engagement with stakeholders is good, but reactive. Officers felt more targeted information and media campaigns would help to keep the pressure on institutions to further drive down the number of FFAs. In times of increased budgetary pressures, the Fire Authority needs to continually work to influence its stakeholders and effect change.

66   Some key partnerships have suffered as a result of the pandemic. For instance, the Fire Authority and Health Boards used to meet regularly, but this has stalled since the pandemic. On the whole, engagement with health bodies is good, but can often be ad hoc at a local station level. These relationships could be strengthened more formally, as often, the level of engagement is down to the responsible person's previous experience rather than any formal engagement policy.

67   Senior officers made it clear that any further reduction must be in line with what the public expects, although we saw little evidence showing any exercises or analysis to obtain the views of the public, to gauge how they expect the FRA to respond to false alarms. Senior management have acknowledged that they need to establish what this public expectation is, including whether the FRA should respond to all FFAs in their communities.

68   We saw some evidence showing examples of improvements being put in place following crews attending incidents and offering advice. Follow-up letters confirmed these visits had taken place and showed the brief advice that had been offered, along with any further monitoring to take place.

69   However, high staff turnover at both the Fire Authority and other institutions poses a risk to these established relationships and limits the influence the Authority can have to effect change. Health Boards told us the Fire Authority could improve information sharing by having one key point of contact to avoid the need to deal with different watch managers.

Appendix 1

Approach

Our approach was to understand the Authority's approach to FFA 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 false fire alarms?'. Our focus was on the actions of the Authority, not the actions available to building managers or responsible people.

We completed our fieldwork across all three Fire and Rescue Authorities separately, using the same team across all three. This enabled insights to be drawn into each Authority, as well as informing a forthcoming 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 Authority.

Methods

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

- document review – we reviewed policies and documentation provided by the Authority, 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 Authority 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 Authority that covered a range of different areas, both corporately and locally. This included the lead officer for false alarms, Business Fire Safety (BFS) officers, and senior officers.
- national interviews – we interviewed representatives of local health boards, the NWSSP, and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).
- survey – we designed a survey for building managers and responsible people to gauge their views of false alarms and the Authority. We encouraged the Authority to send this to organisations in their area, as well as promoting it through professional networks, such as the NHS Estate Managers group. Unfortunately, too few responses were made to use this evidence to draw conclusions.

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We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.