

**PROPOSED CHANGES TO HERTFORDSHIRE FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE
(HFRS) POLICY IN RELATION TO FIRE SIGNALS GENERATED FROM
AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARM SYSTEMS**

Report of the Director of Community Protection

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Executive Member: Terry Hone, Community Safety & Waste Management

1. Purpose of report

1.1 To propose changes to the way Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (HFRS) respond to fire signals generated by automatic fire alarms (AFA).

2. Summary

2.1 Over the past 5 years there has been a gradual increase in the number of attendances by HFRS as a result of false alarms generated by AFAs (2,760 in 2019/20, up from 2,324 in 2014/15).

2.2 The majority of this increase comes from AFAs at domestic properties, however despite a concerted combined effort by both local Fire Station Managers and the Fire Protection team the numbers of AFAs attended at non-domestic properties has also not reduced in any significant way (reduction of less than 5% over last 3 years - see Appendix 1 for data). It is therefore suggested that any further reductions will be dependent on changes to HFRS current policy in this area.

2.3 It is proposed that, for a trial period, the service no longer attends calls generated by AFAs at office or retail premises at any time of day or night unless there is an independently confirmed fire. These premises, which are considered to be very low in terms of life risk, make up a significant proportion of incidents attended.

2.4 Over the past three years these types of premises have made up 26% of all AFAs HFRS have attended at non-domestic properties, however less than 1% of those attended at these premises were actually fires.

3. Recommendations

3.1 The Panel is asked:

- I. to note and comment upon the content of this Report and recommend to Cabinet that Cabinet:
- II. agrees the proposed changes to the way Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service respond to fire signals generated by automatic fire alarms.
- III. And that any further decisions in this area, after the conclusion of the trial period, are delegated to the Chief Fire Officer, in consultation with the Executive Member for Community Safety & Waste Management.

4. Background

4.1 The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 clarifies the duties and powers of fire authorities to: -

- promote fire safety
- fight fires
- protect people and property from fires
- rescue people from road traffic incidents
- deal with other specific emergencies, such as flooding or terrorist attack and
- do other things to respond to the particular needs of their communities and the risks they face.

4.2 In addition each fire and rescue authority must produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), which is available to the public. HFRS' Integrated Management Plan can be found [here](#).

4.3 Fire calls that turn out to be false alarms have a major impact on the service diverting resources rendering them unavailable, with the possibility of delayed attendance to genuine calls.

4.4 They also create unnecessary risk to fire crews and members of the public when appliances are responding under emergency conditions and are disruptive to community fire safety activity and training.

4.5 The most recent inspection by [Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services](#) (HMICFRS) in 2018 concluded that HFRS is responding to too many false alarms and could do more to reduce the impact.

Performance Data

- 4.6 In terms of AFAs attended at non-domestic premises HFRS performs 10th highest out of a total of 16 services within the same family group (based on Q2 data for 2019/20). This relates to 17.88 attendances per 1,000 non-domestic premises with the average within the family group at 16.07. Kent Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) are the highest performing service at just 3.35 attendances per 1,000 premises (see below for details of Kent FRS attendance policy).
- 4.7 It should also be noted however that when compared to all FRS within England, HFRS performs more strongly with the number of AFAs attended (includes domestic and non-domestic) well below the national average (see Appendix 2).

Current Policy

- 4.8 Until November 2019 HFRS policy was that there should be no attendance in respect of fire signals generated by AFAs, between the hours of 0900hrs – 1700hrs from Monday to Friday, unless a call is received from the premises or a passer-by confirming that there is a fire, or signs of a fire.
- 4.9 There were, and still are, a number of exceptions to this policy. These include all residential properties as well as the higher risk premises, listed below;
- Hospitals;
 - Care Homes;
 - Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO);
 - High Rise Residential Properties;
 - Hostels;
 - Schools;
 - Where a risk assessment by the relevant Group Commander indicates an attendance should be made; or
 - Where other circumstances determine that an attendance should be made.
- 4.10 From November 2019 this was changed with no attendance between the hours of 0700hrs – 1900hrs from Monday to Friday (same exceptions highlighted above apply).
- 4.11 Fire Control Operators now also have more discretion to not mobilise an attendance outside of these times/days if business hours are known i.e. retail premises with longer or 24-hour trading hours.
- 4.12 Since this change was implemented in November 2019 there has been limited impact on the number of AFAs attended (see Appendix 3 for data comparing December 2019 – July 2020 with the same period the previous year).

Proposed changes to Policy

- 4.13 Analysis of AFAs attended at non-domestic properties over the past three years suggests that a significant proportion of these are at offices and retail premises.
- 4.14 During that 3-year time period HFRS have attended 3,319 incidents generated by AFAs at non-domestic premises. Of these 513 (15.5%) were at retail premises and 348 were at office premises (10.5%). Combined, these two category types made up 26% of all AFAs attended at non-domestic properties over this period (see appendix 4 for a breakdown by station of these 861 incidents).
- 4.15 Further analysis of data for the same three-year period shows that of these 861 incidents attended only 7 were actually fires (4 at retail and 3 at office premises). This makes up just 0.81% of these incidents attended.
- 4.16 None of these 7 incidents required a hose reel or breathing apparatus to be used suggesting that these were relatively minor incidents. None of these 7 fires resulted in any injuries (or fatalities). It should be noted however that these fires may have developed further and become more serious incidents had HFRS not attended.
- 4.17 A review of incident records confirms that no follow up 999 call was made in relation to these 7 incidents, however as highlighted above, all were relatively small fires and so may not have been visible from outside of the building.
- 4.18 Given the low level of risk highlighted it is proposed to trial a policy of non-attendance at either office or retail premises at any time of day or night unless there is a confirmed fire. It is suggested that there will be some limited exceptions to this policy where the risk suggests that a response is required e.g. where sleeping accommodation, residential or high-risk premises are connected or adjacent to the office or retail premises. This would include premises that have been identified in advance by local Station Managers or where information received by Fire Control suggests that an immediate response is required.
- 4.19 As highlighted above Cabinet will also be asked to delegate any further decisions in this area, after the conclusion of the trial period, to the Chief Fire Officer in consultation with the Executive Member for Community Safety & Waste Management. Subject to successful evaluation of the proposed policy changes this would allow further lower risk premises types to be added over time.
- 4.20 A report published by the Chief Fire Officers Association (now the National Fire Chiefs Council) in 2005, suggested that 60% of privately-owned businesses that suffer a fire never recover and eventually go out of business. Communication to the business community will need to

be carefully managed to ensure that the rationale and support available to businesses is highlighted.

- 4.21 A number of other Fire & Rescue Services (FRS) have already made similar amendments to their attendance policy with some going much further. Essex FRS, for example, have recently agreed to no longer attend lower risk premises at any time of day unless a confirmed fire. This includes factories, warehouses, small & medium places of assembly, offices, shops, theatres, cinemas and transport premises. Surrey FRS already have a similar approach and are no longer attending offices, shops, industrial, commercial, public buildings such as libraries, museums, places of worship, colleges and universities without sleeping accommodation unless a confirmed fire.
- 4.22 Research recently carried out by Surrey FRS suggests that at present 17 FRSs have adopted similar procedures across the country and many more are currently in the process of reviewing. Contact has been made with other FRS implementing similar policies and none are aware of any legal claims being made against a service as a result of non-attendance at an AFA.
- 4.23 Kent, who have the best performance figures in HFRS family group (as highlighted above) have gone even further. From April 2013, Kent FRS no longer attend any premises reporting an AFA sounding unless it is confirmed to control that there is a fire.

Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004

- 4.24 As noted above The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires that a fire and rescue authority 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. In making this provision a fire and rescue authority must in particular make arrangements for 'dealing with calls for help' and for ensuring that 'reasonable steps are taken to prevent or limit damage to property'. There is however little case law relating to the activities of FRSs or these provisions.
- 4.25 It is clear that there is no statutory requirement for a fire and rescue service to respond to an AFA which is not strictly a call for help, nor is there necessarily a fire. However, notwithstanding this, it is important that HFRS approach is reasonable in all of the circumstances. If these proposals are approved, HFRS would be operating in a similar way to a number of other fire and rescue authorities. As highlighted above the approach is not novel and has essentially been 'tried and tested' in other areas.
- 4.26 Information about the proposed changes have been shared with business organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, Chambers of Commerce as well as Business Improvement Districts.

To date no adverse feedback has been received with a further update to be provided verbally at the Cabinet Panel.

5. Financial Considerations

- 5.1 It is important to note that these proposals are not financially driven but are about making more efficient use of resources available. By reducing the number of false alarms attended by whole time firefighters, these resources can be redeployed to support community safety activity, training and be available to attend incidents that do require an attendance. There may however be some limited savings in relation to overtime, fuel and vehicle maintenance costs.
- 5.2 In relation to on-call firefighters it is likely that there will be some financial savings with reductions in callouts leading to a reduced number of disturbance payments and hours worked.
- 5.3 Both will be monitored and considered as part of the evaluation of the 12-month trial period.

6. Equality Implications

- 6.1 When considering proposals placed before Members it is important that they are fully aware of and have themselves rigorously considered the equalities implications of the decision that they are taking.
- 6.2 Rigorous consideration will ensure that proper appreciation of any potential impact of that decision on the County Council's statutory obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty. As a minimum this requires decision makers to read and carefully consider the content of any Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) produced by officers.
- 6.3 The Equality Act 2010 requires the Council when exercising its functions to have due regard to the need to (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act; (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it and (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. The protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 6.4 Having considered the changes proposed it suggested that there are unlikely to be any implications for any persons with protected characteristics or any adverse impact on any particular group. This will be reviewed at the conclusion of the pilot or if any equalities implications arise.

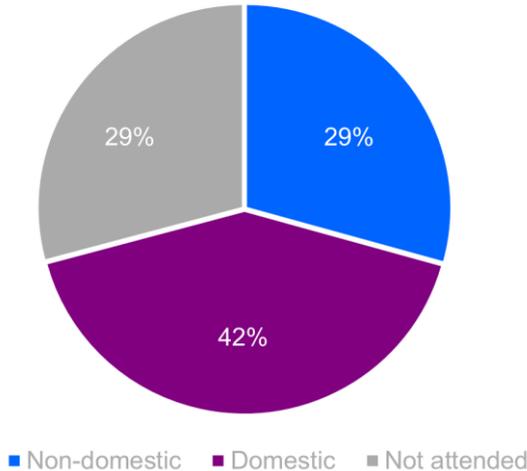
6.5 There is no EqIA relating to this report.

Background information

[HFRS IRMP](#)

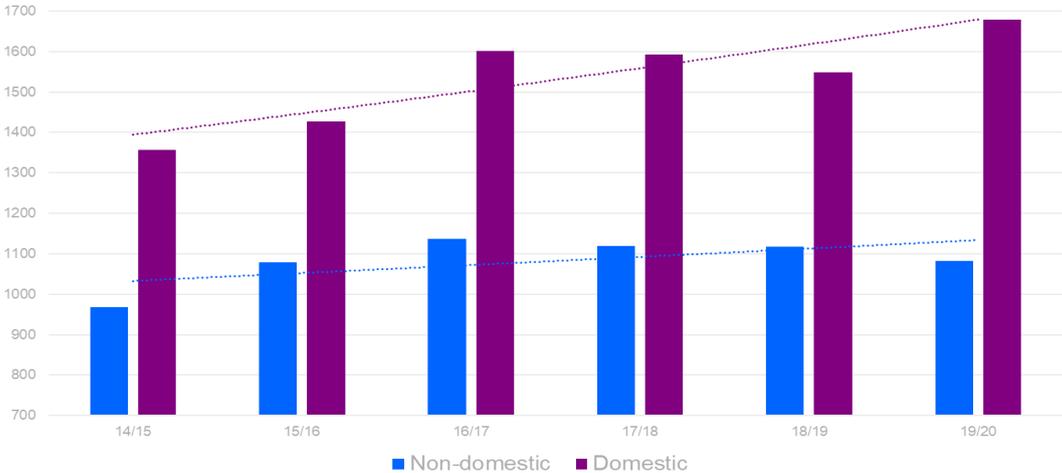
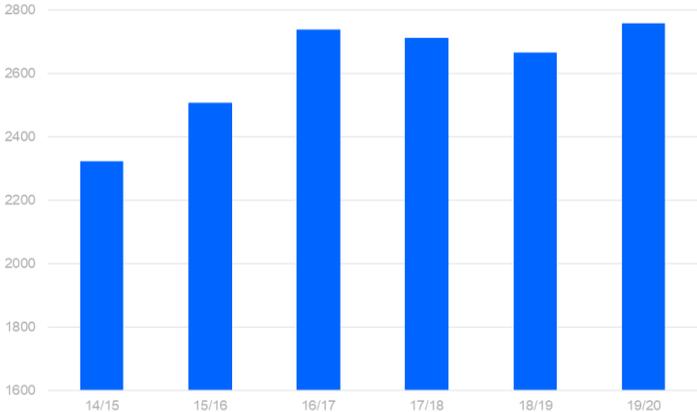
[Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services](#)

All false alarms caused by AFAs (2014 – 2020)



Attendances at false alarms caused by AFAs (domestic & non-domestic)

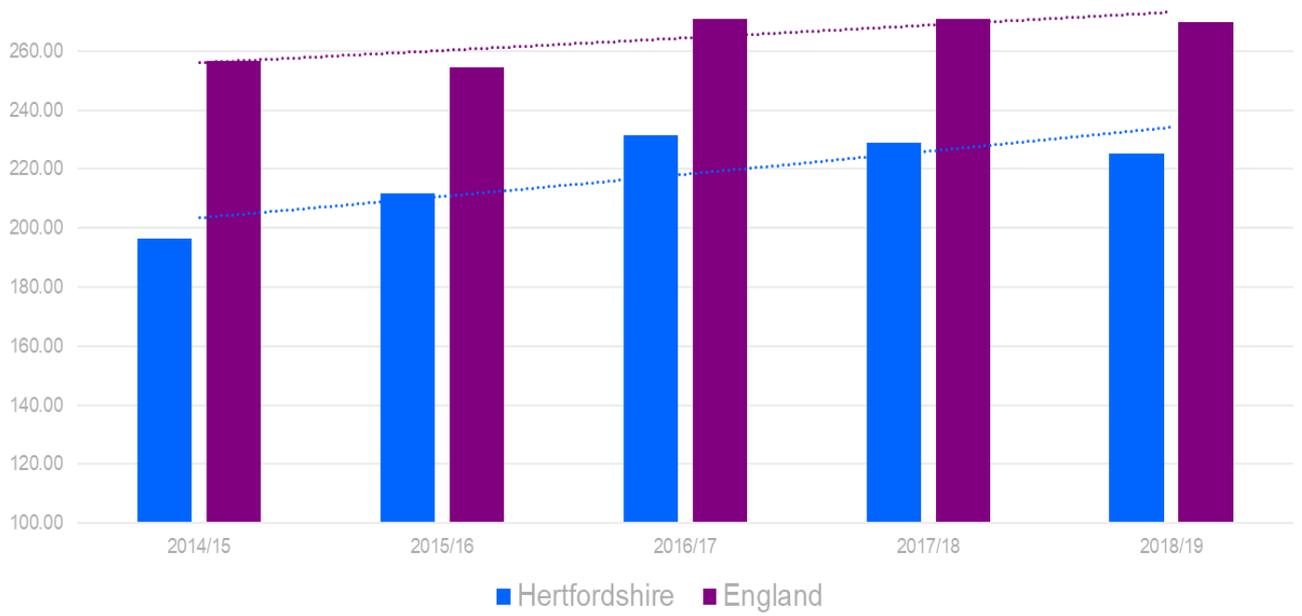
14/15 - 2324
 15/16 - 2507
 16/17 - 2739
 17/18 - 2712
 18/19 - 2666
 19/20 - 2760



Source – HFRS Incident Reporting System

APPENDIX TWO

AFAs attended per 100,000 population (domestic & non-domestic)



Source - Home Office Fire Statistics (AFAs attended) / Office for National Statistics (population)

APPENDIX THREE

Evaluation of change of policy in November 2019

	18/19*	19/20*
Total AFAs	2386	2295
AFAs (not attended)	728	660
Percentage of all AFAs attended	69.5%	71.2%
AFAs in non-domestic premises (attended)	692	625
AFAs in domestic premises (attended)	966	1010
Total attendances to false alarms caused by AFAs	1658	1635



**18/19 figures are from December 2018 to July 2019*

**19/20 figures are from December 2019 to July 2020*

Source – HFRS Incident Reporting System

APPENDIX FOUR

Incidents generated by AFAs at office / retail premises (1 April 2017 – 31 March 2020)

Station	Office Premises	Retail Premises	Total
Baldock & Letchworth	16	28	44
Berkhamsted	2	6	8
Bishops Stortford	12	47	59
Borehamwood	34	33	67
Buntingford	3	2	5
Cheshunt	10	23	33
Garston	23	27	50
Harpenden	6	4	10
Hatfield	16	24	40
Hemel Hempstead	19	51	70
Hertford	13	10	23
Hitchin	8	13	21
Hoddesdon	7	18	25
Markyate	0	2	2
Potters Bar	11	6	17
Redbourn	1	3	4
Rickmansworth	12	9	21
Royston	0	8	8
Sawbridgeworth	0	5	5
St Albans	39	37	76
Stevenage	36	56	92
Tring	3	3	6
Ware	2	4	6
Watford	62	64	126
Welwyn	2	2	4
Welwyn Garden City	11	25	36
Wheathampstead	0	3	3
Total	348	513	861

Source – HFRS Incident Reporting System