

Agenda Item	8.
Report No	RES/16/23

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Corporate Resources

Date: 8 June 2023

Report Title: Changes to SFRS response to Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals (UFAS)

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This paper advises Members of the changes planned by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to stop attending to automatic fire alarm (AFA) call outs to commercial business and workplace premises, such as factories, offices, shops, schools, and leisure facilities unless an actual fire has been confirmed.
- 1.2 This paper also outlines the Council's proposals which are being developed to respond to these operational SFRS changes.
- 1.3 Resource implications are currently being worked on regarding options for provision of out of hours cover and will be reported by to a future committee.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to:
- i. **NOTE** the change to SFRS responses to workplace automatic fire detection signals;
 - ii. **NOTE** the changes to be made to the programming of automatic fire detection systems, i.e., Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) to be notified when single heat detector, two smoke detectors or sprinkler system activated;
 - iii. **NOTE** the various implications set out in this report in section 3, in particular the Resource implications regarding options for a suitable Highland-wide out of hours callout process, including potential to contract a security company to provide a 24hr keyholder response service;
 - iv. **APPROVE** the recommendation to take Fire Alarm auto diallers 'offline' during normal working hours; and

- v. Consider and agree actions coming out of the Next Steps section at section 6.

3 Implications

3.1 Resource

- 3.1.1 Engagement is taking place with Staff and Trade Unions on these changes and the Council's response, although industry guidance is not yet available.
- 3.1.2 Increased support and training will be required for Council Responsible Premises Officers (RPOs), Facilities Assistants, Fire Wardens, lone workers and third party staff to ensure that there is an understanding on actions to be taken to ensure that where fire alarms are activated (via a single detector), appropriate evacuation takes place, and a site investigation is actioned to confirm if a fire has actually broken out.
- 3.1.3 Local fire safety management procedures will need to be refreshed by RPOs with the assistance of Fire Safety Advisers. Services will need to ensure that a maintained list of available keyholders is available to allow facilities to be accessed during out of hours periods.
- 3.1.4 A suitable Highland-wide callout process needs to be established to provide an out of hours support service. One option is to contract a security company to provide a 24hr keyholder response service. This option, which still needs to be costed, would be a practical solution not just for fire related issues but for intruder alarm callouts as well.

3.2 Legal

- 3.2.1 Workplace fire safety responsibilities are detailed in the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006. The Council has a duty to comply with this legislation.
- 3.2.2 The SFRS has no legal responsibility to respond to automatic fire alarms (AFAs) activating in the workplace. The responsibility to investigate AFAs rests with those with fire safety responsibilities for the premises, the duty holder, as detailed in Part 3 of both the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and the Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006. Within Highland Council workplaces the day-to-day fire safety management responsibilities are delegated to the Responsible Premises Officer.

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)

- 3.3.1 Given the geography of the Highlands there will be specific challenges with regard to a Council employee or an appointed dutyholder attending a Council site once an out of hours Automatic Alert has been triggered by a fire alarm system. The time taken to visit a remote site to confirm that the building is on fire will in reality mean a delay, in some cases significant, in the SFRS responding to a building that is subsequently found to be on fire.
- 3.3.2 Facilities that do not have an automatic dialler during working hours will rely on their installed fire alarm being activated during a fire or staff identifying a fire and, during out of hours, a member of the public/adjoining neighbour noticing that the building is on fire and raising the alarm, this is business as usual.

3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever**

Additional travel to Council sites to confirm if they are on fire will result in an increase in staff travel along with increased CO2 emissions.

3.5 **Risk**

Failure to adequately manage fire safety arrangements could lead to loss of premises and/or loss of life. There will be additional responsibilities for lone workers within premises, those working out with normal office hours and for members of the public/other organisations who have lets in premises where there is no facilities management (FM) presence. Should fire alarm systems be activated after hours then action will be required to identify if a facility is actually on fire or is the fire alarm sounding due to a faulty heat or smoke detector or a faulty fire panel.

3.6 **Gaelic**

No implications.

4 **Background**

4.1 The SFRS have advised that, as of 1 July 2023, they will stop attending call outs to workplace premises unless a fire has been confirmed via a 999 call. This change does not apply to sleeping premises, such as care homes or domestic dwellings.

4.2 In accordance with these changes, SFRS control room operators will be asking anyone who reports a fire alarm to check whether there is an actual fire or signs of fire, before sending the nearest firefighting resource. The call challenge will take place for those facilities without sleeping risks – Council staff/duty holders will be asked if there are any signs of smoke or fire and may be asked about the type of fire related detector that has been activated on the premises.

4.3 Council staff will no longer be able to rely on the SFRS attending site to advise on a false alarm incident. Should a Council employee/dutyholder identify the fire alarm activation as a false alarm then they will be required to complete a full building check and then reset the system and return the facility to normal operation.

4.4 If, however, an employee/dutyholder identifies that a fire may be on site (smoke apparent, heat detector activation, etc.) then they will be required to evacuate the site and call 999 asking for SFRS to attend site.

4.5 SFRS will only attend if there are confirmed signs of a fire, specifically:

- Smoke detected in/around a facility
- Fire/flame detected
- CO Monitor detection/activation
- Heat detector activation
- Manual call point activation
- Sprinkler head activation
- Multi-criteria detector activation
- Fire Alarm Panel indicates multiple detectors/zones activations

5. Current position

- 5.1 The Council's fire safety policy places the responsibility for the management of workplace fire safety on the Responsible Premises Officer, reflecting the requirements of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005. In addition, all employees have the responsibility of familiarising themselves and co-operating with fire safety arrangements.
- 5.2 Currently, (where installed – 61 premises), automatic fire detection systems in our workplace premises send a signal to an external contracted Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) when one fire alarm detector head is activated. The ARC alerts the SFRS on the alarm activation who would then respond accordingly. Relying on only one detector activation can mean that false alarms result in attendance by SFRS. In 2021 there were 199 unwanted fire alarm signals (UFAS) in Council premises (non-residential) – this number fell to 58 in 2022.
- 5.3 The Council's insurance provider has confirmed that insurance cover will be unaffected by SFRS's approach, and that cover will continue subject to the usual policy terms, exceptions, and conditions. They further advise that this highlights the need for all property owners to ensure that alarms and other fire precautions are well maintained and tested regularly to ensure that they fulfil the function intended and protect valuable assets. Additionally, fire risk actions should also be completed in line with timescales set out in the respective property Fire Risk Assessments.
- 5.4 The Fire Industrial Association (FIA) is a national fire protection trade association and has a group including a representative from a Scottish local authority working on preparing national guidance for duty holders. This guidance is not expected until after the go live date of 1 July. The Occupational Health Safety and Wellbeing Manager and Fire Safety Advisers in Highland are being updated and our recommendations are in line with the proposed guidance, except that this advises a minimum of three people are deployed to check for signs of fire: one to search the premises and two to remain at the panel. This will not be feasible in some of our smaller premises or if staff are working out of normal working hours.

6 Next Steps

- 6.1 Services must ensure that RPOs are appointed in all workplace premises in line with the current Corporate Health Safety and Wellbeing Policy. These appointments will be crucial to successfully implementing the Council's response to these changes.
- 6.2 The Council's Property team has advised that modifications can be made to the programming of existing automatic fire detection systems, i.e., Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) to be notified when single heat detector, two smoke detectors, call point or sprinkler system activated. This should reduce the number unwanted of false alarms callouts. This work will be carried out when the systems are being inspected/ maintained and should be complete by the end of June 2023.
- 6.3 A change in policy, taking auto diallers 'offline' during normal working hours and asking staff to safely check premises for signs of fire before calling 999 will also improve the management of alarm activations, in particular false alarms in Council facilities.
- 6.4 **Staff Training**
- 6.4.1 Guidance has recently been made available by the SFRS and we are awaiting fire industry guidance both of which will be incorporated into training for staff which is being

prepared. Training (supported by OHSW and People Development Teams) before July for Council staff in regard to checking for fires and how to read/interpret fire alarm panels, will need to be refreshed for RPOs, FM staff, Fire Wardens, and potential lone workers.

- 6.4.2 Priority training will be given to staff in schools as the procedures will be changed during the school summer holidays. Additional training for new management in schools will need to be scheduled at the start of the August term. Ideally, training will be delivered on site as interpretation of the fire panel is an integral part of the training.
- 6.4.3 The practice of checking for signs of fire will also need to be introduced to workplace premises which have auto diallers as an activated alarm system still needs to be confirmed as an actual fire and not a faulty detector.
- 6.5 Consideration is being given as to how existing unoccupied premises will be managed in line with these changes.
- 6.6 The Corporate Fire Safety Policy and Guidance will be updated to ensure that operational procedures and Fire Risk Assessments are aligned with these changes. A safety alert outlining the new procedures will be issued by the OHSW Team in advance of 1 July 2023.
- 6.7 All premises have a current fire risk assessment (FRS). Services should ensure the actions arising from these FRA are being progressed.
- 6.8 The management of lets in Council premises will need to be reviewed to ensure that fire alarm activations can be investigated and managed in line with this revised legislation. This will include liaison with third parties who have control of Council premises for any part of the day.
- 6.9 Some councils have engaged a third party to undertake the out of hours checks which will be required should fire alarms be activated. A feasibility study on this option is being undertaken by the Property and Facilities Management Service. The study includes a review of all existing Council standby arrangements with a view to creating a single out of hours call out service. The practicality and resource implications of this option have not been fully investigated at this stage, but a proposal will be brought back to Committee if it is considered to be a feasible way forward.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

Date: 25 May 2023

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