By: Assistant Director, Community Safety

To: Planning and Performance Committee – 27 April 2015

Subject: AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARM DEVELOPMENTS

Classification: Unrestricted

FOR INFORMATION

SUMMARY

This report updates Members on the issues relating to calls received from automatic fire alarm (AFA) systems; the changes the Authority has made to the way it handles and responds to AFA calls; and the positive impact this has had on the availability of front line resources. The report also provides a summary of how other fire and rescue authorities have addressed this issue.

CONCLUSION

Members are requested to:

1. Consider and note the contents of the report.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

COMMENTS

Background

1.   Members will be aware from previous reports of the significant operational demand placed on the Authority in receiving and responding to calls from automatic fire alarm (AFA) systems, over 98% of which were known to be false alarms.

2.   Buildings are provided with AFA systems to alert anyone using the building to the possibility of a fire and the need to evacuate or follow the fire emergency instructions. Some AFA calls are reported directly by a 999 call from the building. Many others are routed to an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) which then passes the call on to the Authority.

3.   Whilst AFA systems are an important part of fire safety arrangements, significant increases in the number of systems installed, combined with poor management and maintenance arrangements, have seen the number of AFA false alarms increase considerably over the past 20 years.

4.   False alarms from AFA systems have a significant impact on building users and the fire service. Those living in or using a building will see their business, care or living arrangements disrupted, with repeated false alarms creating a 'cry wolf' culture and the subsequent risk that people will not evacuate if there is a real fire. False alarms tie up firefighters and fire appliances which are not then available for real emergencies, training or community safety work.

Changes to Handling and Responding to AFA Calls

5.   **Early efforts** - from the late 1990s to 2010 there were concerted efforts by the Authority and other fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) nationally to highlight the problem of false alarms and to work with building owners and managers to reduce the number of unwanted AFA calls. By 2010 this Authority attended in excess of 5500 false alarm AFA calls a year. Between 10 and 20 AFA calls were fires which needed some form of firefighting action. By comparison, each year there were approximately 50 calls to real fires and emergencies such as car crashes where the nearest fire appliance was not available because it was attending a false alarm.

6.   **Call Management Policy** - In 2010, given the impact of false alarms and the limited success from working with building owners and managers, the Authority decided to consult on a change of response to AFA calls. The 2010 Integrated Risk Management Plan (now the Safety Plan) included a proposal that firefighters would only respond to an AFA call where there was confirmation that there was a fire, or signs of fire, in the building.

7. Following extensive consultation with businesses, communities and other key stakeholders, the new policy was introduced in two phases from April 2012. The first phase saw the call-management arrangements applied from 06:00 to 18:00. 24-hour call-management commenced in April 2013 and has been in place for a little over two years. Callers reporting an AFA sounding in sheltered accommodation are asked to confirm if the call is a known false alarm. If a false alarm cannot be confirmed then an emergency response is sent.

8. **Support for businesses** - The Authority worked extensively with businesses and building owners to advise and support them in preparation for the new policy and in reducing false alarms. An explanation of the reasons for the change combined with practical advice about checking a building for signs of a fire were well-received and have contributed to the overall success of the policy.

9. Since implementation of the new policy, the number of AFA calls received from sheltered accommodation has increased and sheltered accommodation now represents the largest source of AFA calls currently attended. In response to this, an engagement initiative will be developed to focus on this issue.

Impact on Availability of Front Line Resources

10. During the first year of the new AFA policy (2012/13), when calls were challenged from 06:00 to 18:00 hrs, the number of calls attended reduced from 4885 to 3019, an overall reduction of 38% (1866). In the second year (2013/14), when all calls were challenged, the attendance reduced further to 1657, an overall reduction of 66% (3228). The year-end figures for 2014/2015 show a further reduction to 1441, giving an overall reduction since the policy was introduced of 70% (3445).

11. A review of calls has been undertaken to see if there have been any cases where the Authority did not attend an initial AFA call, which subsequently turned out to be a real fire. In the past two years (2013-15), since the policy has been applied for 24 hours a day, there have been 12 such calls. All incidents were found to be minor and either out on arrival or requiring minimal firefighting action.

How Other FRAs have Addressed the Issue

12. **Call challenge and response** - All UK FRAs face a similar problem with AFA false alarms. Whilst many FRAs have adopted an approach similar to Kent's, requiring some form of confirmation of a fire before an operational response is mobilised, some levy a charge for false alarms, while others have made no change to their response arrangements.

13. Call challenge and incident confirmation is the most effective method of reducing the number of AFA calls an FRA attends and this Authority was one of the first to adopt

this approach. Following its success with the policy, many other FRAs adopted a similar approach, often with local variations.

14. FRAs from within the same family group as Kent and which have introduced call challenge and incident confirmation have seen reductions in the number of AFA calls attended in the period 2011/12 to 2013/14 of between 20 to 25%. By comparison, Kent and Merseyside, who apply the policy most comprehensively, have seen reductions in the same period of 57% and 51% respectively.

15. **FPA research – Unwanted Fire Alarms** - The Fire Protection Association (FPA) has recognised that the current climate has created a 'crisis of confidence' in AFA systems. With a continuing high level of false alarms and unwanted calls being passed to FRAs, many of which no longer respond to AFA signals without other actions being taken, insurers and businesses are questioning the benefits of having a fire alarm system.

16. To address this, the FPA has commissioned a research project which is testing the concept that a modern AFA system using emerging technology offers an opportunity to turn the current 95% belief that an AFA has sounded because of a false alarm into a more than 80% belief that it is because of a fire. If the 'Proof of Concept' project results are favourable, the FPA will present findings to the Government and the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC) for consideration. This research will be kept under review and Members will be updated accordingly.

17. **CFOA Guidance for the Reduction of False Alarms and Unwanted Fire Signals** - The Chief Fire Officer's Association (CFOA) produced a 'Protocol for the Reduction of False Alarms and Unwanted Fire Signals' in 2005, revising this in 2010. The protocol advocated a partnership approach to improve the management and maintenance of fire alarm systems. Despite the 2010 rewrite, the protocol was adopted by a limited number of FRAs nationally, as it was seen as heavily bureaucratic at a time when the focus on reducing 'red tape' was uppermost in the minds of most public bodies and businesses.

18. In 2014, CFOA further revised the document and published it as 'guidance' which offered a range of 'toolkits' used by FRAs in addressing the problem of false alarms and unwanted fire signals. The 'toolkit' for managing poorly performing fire alarm systems was largely drafted by this Authority, based on the experience gained when working with businesses and introducing the AFA call management policy.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

19. The Authority's revised AFA policy was subject to a detailed people impact assessment (PIA) when the policy was developed. The PIA was subject to consultation through the IRMP process in 2011–13. As a direct result of the PIA process and feedback during consultation the draft policy was amended to take account of people living in sheltered accommodation and calls which were received from care line operators.

20. Application of the policy is kept under regular review to ensure that there are no adverse impacts on any individual or group of people. No negative impacts have been identified to date.

CONCLUSION

21. Members are requested to:

21.1 Consider and note the contents of the report.