

11. Unwanted Fire Signals (False Alarms)

Unwanted Fire Signals can cost lives!

Free advice from the Fire & Rescue Service, along with good fire alarm management, can help to ensure effective and trouble-free automatic fire detection and alarm system.

The Problem

Although statistical information shows that 90% of installed AFD systems operate in an entirely satisfactory manner and protect life and property there are still 10% that cause problems. These problems question the credibility of AFD systems and are a disruption and financial burden commerce and industry. They are also a burden to Fire Services as they reduce our availability for actual fires and are a financial liability.

For advice on how to reduce unwanted and unnecessary fire calls, please contact Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service Locality Office.

Why is it important to reduce calls to false alarms?

A false alarm or unwanted fire signal (UWFS) is defined as an alarm activation resulting from a cause other than a fire.

If an Automatic Detection & Fire Alarm System is correctly maintained, it can significantly improve safety by detecting a fire and sounding the alarm at the early stages of a fire's development.

Unfortunately, this equipment can also produce unwanted or false alarms.

Impact of Unwanted Fire Signals (UWFS)

UWFS have a major impact on the Fire & Rescue Service due to:-

- diverting essential services from real fires and rescues (putting lives at risk);
- unnecessary risk to crews and the public while responding (accidents);
- disruption to training, arson reduction and community safety activities (education saves lives); and
- cost of attendance to the taxpayers.

The impact of UWFS on the community includes:-

- disruption of business (time wasted, loss of business);
- disrupts customer activities, causes inconvenience to residents;
- causes complacency by being treated as 'just another false alarm';

- cost to business when On Call Firefighters are released from work to attend an UWFS;
- disruption to arson reduction, community safety and fire safety activities;
- impact on the environment due to unnecessary appliance movements;
- a drain on public finances.

The causes of false alarms

False alarms occur for a number of reasons, many of which can be easily resolved. A fault with the alarm system is often not the main reason for activation.

False alarms may be caused as a result of: -

- the system being tested without informing the call centre;
- steam, aerosols and other fumes activating the detectors;
- humidity and temperature changes;
- changing the use of a room or area in the premises;
- a contractor working near a detector;
- incense and candles;
- accidental damage to a 'break glass' point;
- the build-up of dust on a detector;
- cooking fumes, such as burnt toast.

How to investigate fire alarm activation safely

Having an effective investigation procedure can limit the disruption caused to your business by a false alarm.

Modern fire alarm systems are excellent at detecting a fire in the early stages. By having a strategy to investigate the cause of activation the moment it happens, your staff can quickly identify false alarms, reset the system and return to work.

If you discover a fire or smoke as part of your investigation, do not put yourself at risk. Leave the premises quickly and safely, dial 999 and ask for the Fire & Rescue Service.