



DEVON &
SOMERSET
FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

Right ((•))
Response

Right Response:

our proposal for changes
to how we respond to
automatic fire alarms

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Introduction

Last year, our crews responded to an average of 16 false alarms every day due to automatic fire alarms, placing an unnecessary burden on the Service's resources and our ability to be ready and available for genuine emergencies.

An automatic fire alarm (AFA) automatically alerts people that smoke or fire is present in a building. Some alarms, commonly in domestic properties, sound to alert people in the vicinity, while others - more likely properties managed by businesses or occupied by people who are vulnerable - trigger a response from the fire service.

Similar to smoke alarms in homes, AFAs in businesses can raise an alarm when there isn't an emergency, equivalent to when we burn the toast or when dust sets off the alarm.

In the last five years, we have been notified of more than 55,000 automatic fire alarms, out of which just 42 needed the hose reel jet from one of our fire engines, which is less than 0.08%. We're looking to see how we can reduce the number of automatic fire alarms we attend to make our Service more efficient, and make sure our firefighters are available to respond to genuine emergencies.

This is an issue across fire and rescue services nationally and we have previously made changes in this area and currently do not respond to automatic fire alarms in some types of building unless there is a confirmed emergency between 8am and 6pm, Monday to Friday. This is because during these times, we expect someone at the premises or in the vicinity to call 999 should this be a real emergency.

This document sets out the reasons why we feel further change is needed and the options we are proposing to tackle the problem.

I'm aware that any change to fire response can make people feel unsettled. I want to be absolutely clear: any change is only to what we will do in response to an automatic alert and we will always attend if someone has reported a sign of fire.

We will also always attend domestic properties, such as houses, or where there is a known night-time sleeping risk.

The options we are presenting cover a number of areas of change that we are exploring. We have not made a decision or preference against any of these. We want to hear a broad range of views about these areas of change to inform our decision making. Please take time to look over the proposals and provide clear responses to the questions about how they might either positively or adversely affect you or someone you're representing.



Gavin Ellis
Chief Fire Officer

What we do now

Fire alarms are vital tools in alerting people that smoke or fire is present within a building. Some alarms, commonly in domestic properties, sound to alert people in the vicinity, while others - more likely properties managed by businesses or occupied by people who are vulnerable - trigger a response from the Service.

We have four main categories for mobilisation:



A1 - Commercial / industrial

Low and medium rise commercial buildings, portable office accommodation, offices, abattoir, commercial garage, factory, filling station, police station, pumping station, agricultural storage buildings that may contain livestock, straw, hay, agrochemicals and farm machinery, etc.



A2 - Retail / public assembly

Theatres, cinemas, shopping complexes, shops, schools, colleges, sports stadia, night clubs, churches or other places of worship, community centres, libraries, marquees, museums, public houses etc.



A3 - Residential

Prisons, residential care homes, hotels, boarding houses, residential schools, hospitals, portable accommodation with sleeping risk, heritage buildings, low and medium residential, etc., where under The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 an employee refers to this property as their place of work e.g. warden, member of staff.



A4 - Domestic

Domestic properties where according to The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 this premises is occupied as a private dwelling.

Under the fire safety order, businesses and other non-domestic premises should have a designated 'responsible person'. Their role is to:

- carry out a fire risk assessment of the premises and review it regularly
- tell staff or their representatives about the risks they've identified
- put in place, and maintain, appropriate fire safety measures
- plan for an emergency
- provide staff information, fire safety instruction and training.

Any automatic fire alarm that we are alerted to that is not a genuine emergency is considered in terms such as an 'unwanted fire alarms signal' or 'false alarm'.

The Service currently has measures in place to reduce the impact of unwanted fire alarm signals. These include:

- only attending automatic fire alarms at commercial and industrial and retail and public assembly premises during night-times (6pm-8am) and weekends. During weekday daytimes, we will only attend if there is a confirmed sign of fire
- Fire Control 'call challenging' to confirm sight of fire before mobilising

Call challenging

When a call is challenged it means that fire control will ask questions to confirm whether there is an actual fire before sending resources. If control are unable to get confirmation either way then we will send a response depending on the time and type of premises. For instance, if it's a commercial premises overnight we would send a response, or if it's during weekday daytime hours we would not as we'd expect someone to be there to confirm. We would always attend a domestic premises. We would only not respond if control is fully satisfied that there is no genuine emergency.

- business safety teams working with businesses
- charging for repeat offenders
- communications messaging on the best ways to maintain alarms.



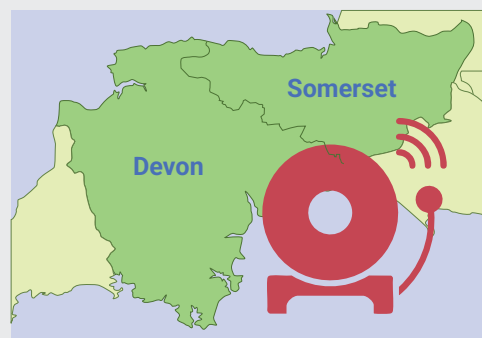
Why we are looking to change

We want to make sure we are supporting our communities in the most efficient and effective way.

About a third of the fire-related incidents our crews are mobilised to are from automatic fire alarms, yet the number of these that are genuine emergencies is very small.

In the five years to 31 August 2024:

Overall, the Service received **145,443** fire-related notifications, including automatic fire alarms and 999 calls, and attended **84,283** incidents.



55,438, or **38%**, of these notifications were automatic fire alarms.



of these, we attended **26,953** following call challenging. That's **32%** of the overall number of fire-related incidents we attended.



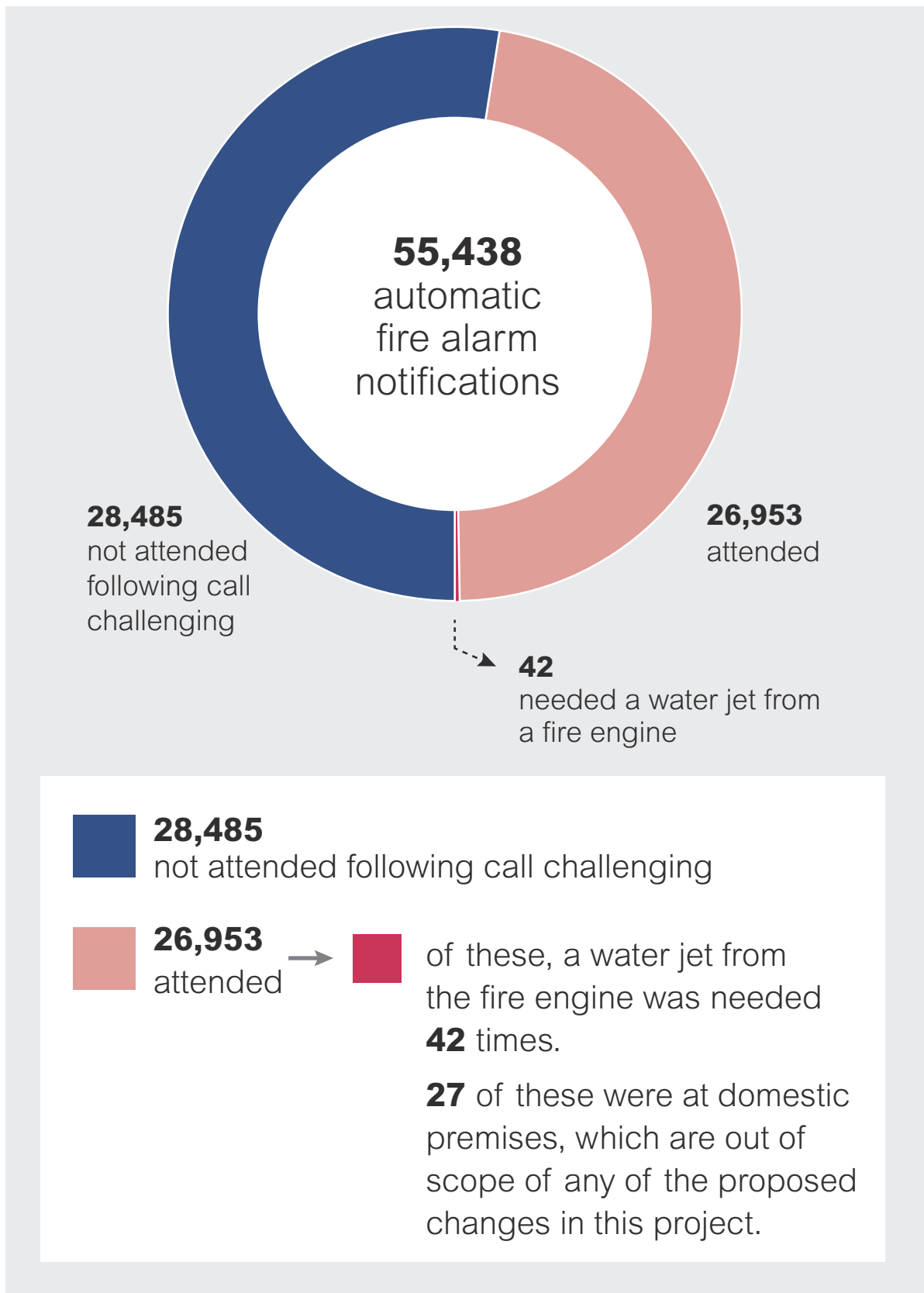
where we attended:

722 (2.7% out of 26,953) were fires and

747 (2.8% out of 26,953) special service calls,

which is primarily carbon monoxide detection in domestic properties. Domestic properties are out of scope in these proposed changes.

42 needed the hose reel or main jet from a fire engine.



Within five years there have been four fatalities and three serious injuries. All four fatalities were classified in the domestic category and therefore would not be impacted by any changes proposed in this project.

Of the serious injuries, one was domestic and two were in the residential category. One of these residential incidents was notified by automatic fire alarm at 5.46am, the other with a 999 call so would not be impacted by any changes proposed in this project.

There is a financial impact to the Service from attending false alarms, but there are many other impacts too.

Every time we have an appliance occupied dealing with a false alarm, those crews are not able to support other emergencies in that area meaning we need to send (or mobilise) fire engines from further away.

Unnecessary mobilisations also have an impact on our on-call firefighters, disturbing their primary work or home life. Our firefighters are committed to supporting their communities for genuine emergencies, but this can be an unnecessary disturbance when the mobilisation is needless.

For our wholetime firefighters, for whom the Service is their main employment, false alarms can impact upon their productivity, affecting training, prevention work and community engagement.

Every mobilisation has potential impact on people on the roads who have to adapt their driving to make way for emergency vehicles. And every journey by our one of appliances adds carbon to the atmosphere, increasing our environmental impact. The Service is committed to reducing our impact on the environment.

We want to make sure that any impact we have upon the the roads and the environment is done genuinely to save lives and property.

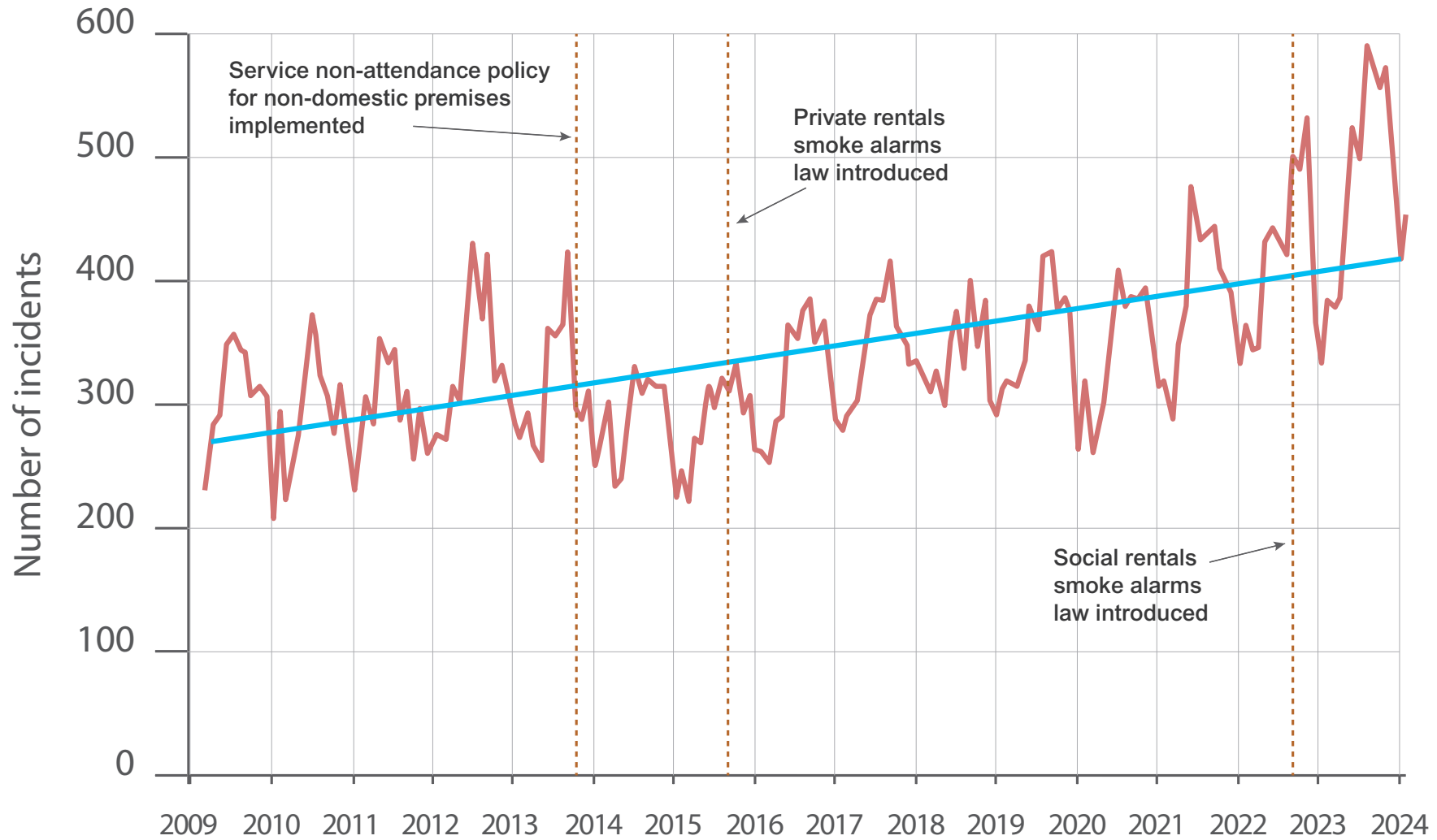
Our operating costs have been rising with inflation and the income we receive from taxation and government grants is not able to effectively match what we need to spend to provide an effective Service to our communities.

We have delivered a number of initiatives to remove inefficiencies in the Service, but we need to continue to make changes to reduce the gap where possible, as this gap is expected to increase over the next few years.

(see appendix for breakdown of figures)

The trend for false alarm incidents has been increasing over time:

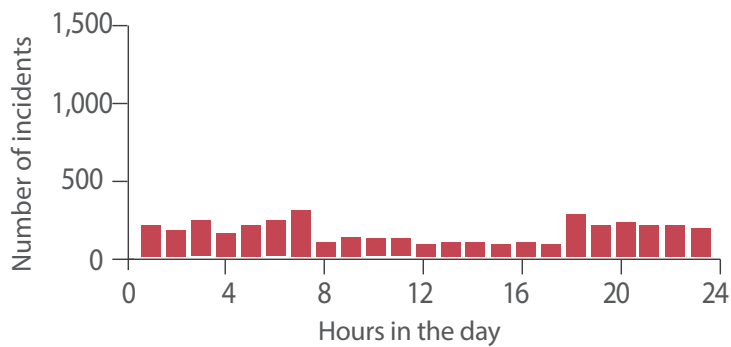
False alarms we have attended due to an automatic fire alarm



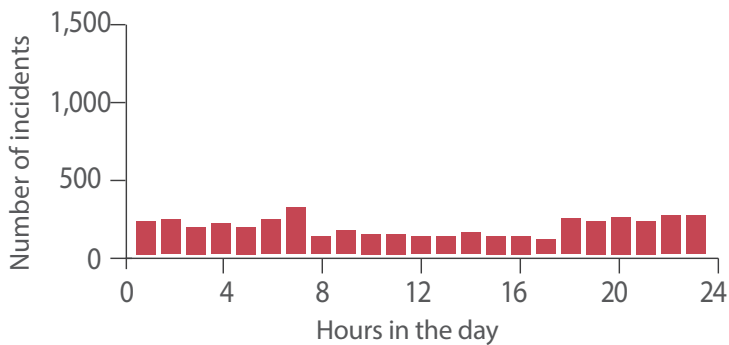
Previous changes to both the commercial and industrial and retail and public assembly categories to not attend during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sight of fire or smell of smoke have had an impact. The charts below show reduction in incidents attended in these categories during the daytime where there is a non-attendance policy already in place, compared with residential premises where there is 24-hour attendance.

Called to alarm incidents attended

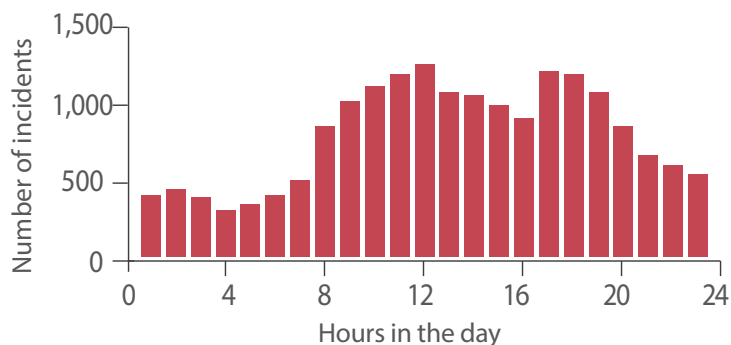
A1 alarm - commercial / industrial



A2 alarm - retail / public assembly



A3 alarm - residential



What we're looking to change

Right Response is looking at how we respond when we receive alerts from automatic fire alarms in non-domestic buildings so that we can reduce the number of false alarms.

Some of the options propose not responding to automatic fire alarms without confirmation of a sign of fire in the industrial and commercial and retail and public assembly categories. At the moment we respond to automatic fire alarms in retail and public assembly during weekend daytimes, when in reality there are people there to call 999 if there is a genuine emergency. The risk to life and property is also low in these categories during the night-time. There are actions businesses can do to both their risk further, put adequate fire safety measures in place, and make arrangements to confirm when a fire is present.

For residential properties, such as hotels and hospitals, we are looking at options to change how we respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes, only responding when we have received confirmation of a sign of fire. This is because there are generally staff on site during weekday daytimes, with people to call 999. There are also actions that can be put in place to reduce the risk further, put adequate fire safety measures in place, and make arrangements to confirm when a fire is present.

Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 it is the responsibility of businesses to make sure they have a nominated person who is responsible for managing fire safety, including procedures for alerting emergency services and evacuating premises.

We will continue to work with businesses to provide advice and support them in this role.

The consultation will also ask whether any specific types of building should be exempted from any changes.



What won't change

We will always attend fire alarms where we have been notified of confirmed signs of fire or a risk to life. We will continue to respond to alarms at domestic premises and where we know people regularly sleep overnight.

We will not change how we respond to Houses in Multiple Occupation, known as HMOs, as we consider these to be the same as domestic premises.

Care homes are exempt from any proposed change to the residential category, due to the 2013 British Standard on fire alarms.

Site specific risk information

We maintain site-specific risk information for a wide range of premises, which has informed other exemptions from the proposed changes.

Site-specific risk information helps to keep our firefighters safe at an incident by highlighting potential hazards as well helping them respond effectively. Each site, or premises, is assessed and given a risk level from 1-5, which determines how much information we collect and share with operational staff.

A level 1 may simply include information that responding crews may find useful, such as 'butane cylinders in storage area at the rear' or a simple gate or door entry code. A level 5 would be where an incident at that location would be at high risk of becoming a major incident requiring a multi-agency response, such as Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station and Devonport Dockyards.

If a premises is determined to be at risk level 3-5, it will have a Site-Specific Risk Information report created, known as an SSRI, which may lead to changes to the number and type of resources sent to an incident from the standard response. This approach has meant that we can exempt individual buildings rather than premises type. For instance, rather than exempt all hospitals, we know the specific risks surrounding each of the buildings, such as the building height and the complex layout at Derriford Hospital in Plymouth.

While most automatic fire alarm calls receive a standard response, sites with higher risks may warrant an enhanced immediate attendance. For these locations, we will not be changing our response.

There are 36 premises across Devon and Somerset which are exempt from any of the proposed changes to ensure the safety of our firefighters and communities. You can see the list of premises that have been exempted as an appendix. Note that some have not been included due to sensitivity of the site.

What the change will mean

Most people will not notice any difference in the way we respond to automatic fire alarms.

Public safety is our priority, and we are confident that our proposals balance a response that will keep people safe while using our resources in the most efficient way.

We are not proposing to change our response to people's homes. Whether you have an automatic fire alarm or a smoke alarm, we will attend as soon as we're alerted.

For non-domestic buildings, we will always respond to confirmed signs of fire. Where people are not at a heightened risk, for example while they are not sleeping, we are proposing to not automatically attend at certain times, unless a sign of fire is confirmed.

This would mean that we can keep our resources available for when they are most needed.

If you are a responsible person of a building that is not in the exemption list, there are some things that you may need to do depending on each option, which you can see below.

If your automatic alarm sounds, you may need to confirm that there is a fire by calling 999 before we attend. You may wish to consider how you do this outside of usual working hours or when there are fewer people in the building.

You should review your fire risk assessment and make sure it is up to date. There is information on how to do this on the business safety pages of our website.

www.dsfire.gov.uk/businesses/risk-assessments

How we will consider feedback and next steps

We want to hear what people think about the options so that we can consider the views of communities across Devon and Somerset before making a decision.

The Service hasn't decided on any of the options, nor will we favour a particular option in the consultation.

We encourage you to fully read the proposals and provide clear comments about how each of the options would affect you or people you know or represent, whether you perceive that to be a positive or adverse impact.

The consultation will be open for a total of 12 weeks, until midday on Wednesday 9 April, with focus groups and public events scheduled throughout this period. You can find out how to join one of the events on our website www.dsfire.co.uk

You can tell us what you think about the following options using the online survey <https://online1.snapsurveys.com/RightResponseConsultation>. If you, or someone you know, are not able to access the information or consultation survey, you can request this in an alternative format by either:

- emailing rightresponse@dsfire.gov.uk
- calling **01392 261287**
- sending a letter to **Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, The Knowle, Clyst St George, Exeter EX3 0NW.**

All consultation responses will be shared with independent specialist research organisation, SMSR Research, to write the findings report.

This, along with all written comments, will be shared with the project team to consider any adjustments to the options.

The findings report and adjustments will be shared with the Service's Executive Board and Change Portfolio team to make a decision in May. Depending on the outcome of the consultation, we anticipate any changes that are decided upon to be implemented from June 2025.

What are the options?

For all options, we propose to reinvest 10% of all savings made to support on-call firefighters with additional training in areas such as driving experience and risk familiarisation that could be lost should the number of mobilisations be reduced. There is also a reinvestment of £3,000 for communications campaigns to further reduce domestic false alarms, providing targeted advice about looking after and maintaining alarms.

The projected savings are based on expected reduction on-call payments only. There are other financial and non-financial benefits to the organisation and our communities that are not included in the below figures such as:

- decrease in disruption to on-call firefighters, potentially leading to better retention
- increase in wholetime capacity for training, prevention work, and availability for mobilisation to genuine incidents
- decrease in carbon footprint due to fewer mobilisations
- decrease in fuel consumption leading to potential fuel savings
- decrease in road risk due to fewer emergency mobilisations
- reduced wear and tear on Service vehicles and equipment.

When we refer to daytime hours, we consider this to be 8am to 6pm

When we refer to night-time hours, we consider this to be 6pm to 8am

Option one



Industrial and commercial (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will continue to not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Retail and public assembly (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will continue to not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Residential (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night.



Domestic (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night.

No saving

Option two



Industrial and commercial (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will continue to not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Retail and public assembly (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will continue to not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Residential (change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.

Houses in Multiple Occupation and care homes will be exempt from any change. The full exemption list can be seen in the appendix.



Domestic (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, with call enhanced communications campaigning.

Projected annual savings:

- **1,224** fewer alerts to incidents, which is almost **24 every week**
- **199 hours** saved for wholetime firefighters, to carry out prevention activity and other duties to keep our communities safe
- **£59,323** saving after investment into on-call firefighters and communications campaigns to reduce false alarms.

Option three



Industrial and commercial (change) – we will not respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Retail and public assembly (change) – we will not respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Residential (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night.



Domestic (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, with enhanced communications campaigning.

Projected annual savings:

- **1,470** fewer alerts to incidents, which is **28 every week**
- **257** hours saved for wholetime firefighters, to carry out prevention activity and other duties to keep our communities safe
- **£66,535** saving after investment into on-call firefighters and communications campaigns to reduce false alarms

Option four



Industrial and commercial (change) – we will not respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Retail and public assembly (change) – we will continue to respond to night-time automatic fire alarms. We will not respond to automatic fire alarms during the daytime unless there is a sign of fire. This option changes to include daytime weekend non-attendance.



Residential (change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes, unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.

Houses in Multiple Occupation and care homes will be exempt from any change. The full exemption list can be seen in the appendix.



Domestic (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, with enhanced communications campaigning.

Projected annual savings:

- **2,110** fewer alerts to incidents, which is **41 every week**
- **344** hours saved for wholetime firefighters, to carry out prevention activity and other duties to keep our communities safe
- **£104,477** saving after investment into on-call firefighters and communications campaigns to reduce false alarms.

Option five



Industrial and commercial (change) – we will not respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Retail and public assembly (change) – we will not respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.



Residential (change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms during night-time and weekends. We will not respond to automatic fire alarms during weekday daytimes unless there is a confirmed sign of fire.

Houses in Multiple Occupation and care homes will be exempt from any change. The full exemption list can be seen in the appendix.







Domestic (no change) – we will continue to respond to automatic fire alarms at any time of day or night, with enhanced communications campaigning.

Projected annual savings:

- **2,695** fewer alerts to incidents, which is **52 every week**
- **457** hours saved for wholetime firefighters, to carry out prevention activity and other duties to keep our communities safe
- **£128,858** saving after investment into on-call firefighters and communications campaigns to reduce false alarms.

We will always attend when there is a confirmed sign of fire.
 The blue dots show when we will also respond to automatic fire alarms.

	 Industrial and commercial			 Retail and public assembly			 Residential			 Domestic		
	Night-time	Week day daytime	Weekend daytime	Night-time	Week day daytime	Weekend daytime	Night-time	Week day daytime	Weekend daytime	Night-time	Week day daytime	Weekend daytime
Option one	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Option two	●		●	●		●	●		●	●		●
Option three							●	●	●	●	●	●
Option four				●			●		●	●	●	●
Option five							●		●	●	●	●

People Impact Assessment

Our purpose is to protect and save, keeping the **1.8 million people** who live here safe. We also protect **820,000 households, 74,000 businesses** and a further **1.1 million** visitors to our counties each year.

To assess the impact of the proposed options, we have carried out a People Impact Assessment and Equalities Risk and Benefit Assessment, both of which are available as an appendix to this consultation document.

As a result of these assessments, we have made some changes to the proposed options, for instance adding an option to include 7-day a week night-time attendance at retail and public assembly premises, and introducing a 10% reinvestment to on-call firefighter training.

As part of the consultation, we ask about whether people feel they, or any community group, are impacted by the proposed options. We will review the assessments alongside what people have told us in the consultation.

Glossary

Call challenging

When a call is challenged it means that fire control will ask questions to confirm whether there is an actual fire before sending resources. If control are unable to get confirmation either way then we will send a response depending on the time and type of premises. For instance, if it's a commercial premises overnight we would send a response, or if it's during weekday daytime hours we would not as we'd expect someone to be there to confirm. We would always attend a domestic premises. We would only not respond if control is fully satisfied that there is no genuine emergency.

Commercial and industrial

Commercial industrial premises is a category we use to identify low or medium rise buildings which are used for, for example, offices, commercial garages, police stations.

Retail and public assembly

Retail and public assembly includes theatres, cinemas, shopping centres, schools (non-boarding), community centres, libraries, museums, public houses, churches and other places of worship.

Residential

Residential premises include prisons, residential care homes, hotels, boarding houses, residential schools, hospitals, portable accommodation with sleeping risk, heritage buildings, residential buildings under 18 metres tall, where under The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 an employee refers to this property as their place of work e.g. warden, member of staff.

Night-time sleeping risk

If someone sleeps at the premises, this is classed as a sleeping risk. This could include hospitals, hotels, prisons and care homes, as well as homes.

Night-time sleeping risk relates to premises where people sleep overnight, between 6pm and 8am.

Daytime sleeping risk relates to premises where people sleep during the day, between 8am and 6pm.

False alarm

A false alarm is when we receive an alert that there is an emergency, but there is no emergency.

Appendix

Data

<https://www.dsfire.gov.uk/about-us/AFA-consultation/data>

People Impact Assessment

<https://www.dsfire.gov.uk/about-us/AFA-consultation/PIA>

Equalities Risk and Benefits Assessment

https://www.dsfire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/automatic_fire_alarms_project_-_erba_pre-consultation.docx

List of exemptions due to site specific risk information

List of exemptions due to site specific risk information

Residential

- Asheldon House
- Bradley Manor
- Commando Training Centre Lympstone
- Derriford Hospital
- East Park Block L
- Francis Court Exeter
- Francis Drake
- Grand Hotel Torquay
- His Majesty's Prison- Channings Wood
- His Majesty's Prison- Dartmoor
- Latitude 52
- Musgrove Park Hospital Taunton
- Montacute House
- Northhill
- Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital
- Torbay Hospital

Commercial/Industrial

- Calor gas Lee Mill
- CRC Industries Bridgwater
- Greenergy

- Origin Fertilisers
- Somerset County Hall
- Stonehouse barracks
- South West Metal Finishing
- Swallow Field
- Tamar Tandy
- UK Hydrographic
- Valero
- Vital Exeter
- Quadrangle

Retail/Public Assembly

- Clarks Village
- Coleton Fishacre (also residential)
- Exeter Cathedral
- Powderham Castle
- Saltram House
- Wells Cathedral