

LEICESTERSHIRE

FIRE and RESCUE SERVICE

Status of Report: Public Agenda Item: 10

Meeting: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 3rd September 2014
Subject: Managing Unwanted Fire Signals
Report by: The Chief Fire and Rescue Officer
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For: Discussion

1. Purpose

This report presents the findings of the study into charging for repeated attendance at Unwanted Fire Signals (UFS) with associated recommendation.

2. Executive Summary

There are several limitations identified as part of the study into charging for UFS that bring into question the viability of pursuing such a strategy. The impact of charging must be measured against the likely reductions in UFS attendance. It is unlikely that implementing cost recovery measures will make any significant financial savings, but the potential threat of recovering costs may realise further reductions in UFS.

3. Report Detail

- 3.1 On 29th January 2014 a report and presentation was delivered to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding an increase in attendance at unwanted fire signals (UFS). Following the presentation and subsequent discussions it was agreed to conduct a study into the feasibility of charging, for repeated attendance at unwanted fire alarm signals. The study has been completed and can be found at the Appendix.
- 3.2 The study provides an indication of the potential income that could be realised through cost recovery. It also provides an overview of London Fire Brigade's experience to date, together with the limitations and constraints of introducing a charging policy. These limitations include a 14.5% success rate in recouping costs, based on a total of 224 invoices issued to date. By transposing this rate to potential income generation for the Combined Fire Authority (CFA), it can be seen that the figure, taken from table 2 of the Appendix, is relatively small - total potential income over 12 month period £24,360/ 14.5% = £3,532. In

addition, an allowance needs to be factored in for the time spent by both the Risk Information Support Team and the Finance Department, in administering any cost recovery scheme.

- 3.3 Exemptions would require careful consideration. Hospitals generate a high proportion of UFS, but the number of actuations continues to reduce through the joint approach that is being taken with hospital fire officers. The real cost benefit of including hospitals requires careful consideration along with whether such a policy simply places additional financial burdens on an already strained health budget.
- 3.4 Similarly, council owned residential flats could be affected. Again, the impact of inclusion needs serious consideration. Local Authorities are facing similar financial constraints to the CFA and charging for attendance at repeat UFS calls would not only place additional pressure on already depleted budgets, but may have the detrimental effect of slowing planned work to address the issues. Any decision not to include Local Authorities, would have to be replicated in the private sector, which, based on the number of UFS generated from this type of premises, would bring into question the whole concept of cost recovery.
- 3.5 The study also highlights the issue of public perception, which could impact on decisions to place a genuine call for fear that there will be a charge incurred as a result. While the benefit from financial cost recovery may not be significant, the threat of charging repeat UFS offenders may be an effective deterrent.
- 3.6 Based on the study undertaken and the cost benefit analysis of the data gathered to date, a policy of cost recovery is unlikely to realise any significant savings either financially or in reducing the number of UFS. However, the threat of cost recovery may be an effective incentive to address on-going UFS issues and for this reason, adoption of a policy to cost recover may prove useful. In addition, the recommendation contained in the study for a review of Pre-Determined Attendances, may help with reducing appliance mobilisations, but sits outside the scope of this report, aligning to Community Response rather than Community Safety. Any review would need to be led by Community Response with Fire Protection Group assisting with premises specific data.

4. Report Implications / Impact

4.1 *Legal (including crime and disorder)*

Section 18C of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 makes provision for services to recover costs under certain criteria for attendance at UFS. If cost recovery was actually invoked, the criteria set as part of a charging procedure would have to align to this in order to meet statutory obligations.

4.2 *Financial (including value for money, benefits and efficiencies)*

The primary reason for adopting a policy of cost recovery is to drive down the number of UFS attended. Secondary to this is the potential income that could be generated, although the reality is that this is only likely to be a nominal

amount and is likely to be offset by invoicing and follow up costs

4.3 ***Risk (including corporate and operational, health and safety and any impact on the continuity of service delivery)***

- a) There is a risk that there may be a reluctance to place a genuine emergency call for fear of being charged, placing a premises or individuals at risk from fire. A clear statement outlining cost recovery criteria would need to be available in order to mitigate this risk.
- b) The work involved in producing, publicising and implementing a charging policy may result in a disproportionately low financial return and reduction in unwanted fire signals. A simple policy position making cost recovery an option will not.

4.4 ***Staff, Service Users and Stakeholders (including the Equality Impact Assessment)***

Cost recovery criteria for repeated UFS would be based solely on the number of fire alarm actuations at a given premises exceeding a set figure. It is the effectiveness of the fire alarm system that is under scrutiny and not human factors.

4.5 ***Environmental***

The ultimate aim of a charging policy is to reduce the number of UFS attended, resulting in less vehicle movements and consequently less harm to the environment.

4.6 ***Impact upon Our Plan Objectives***

The reduction of UFS will have a positive impact Objective 1 – Reduce the impact of fire and other emergencies on our communities; Objective 2– Contribute to improvements to the environment; and Objective 3 – Efficiency and provision of a value for money service.

5. Recommendations

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to recommend to the CFA that it adopts a policy, in principle, of recovering costs for UFS.

6. Background Papers

None

7. Appendix

Unwanted Fire Signals – The Way Forward

Unwanted Fire Signals – The way forward

July 2014

SM Andrew Quine

1. Introduction
2. Impact of charging for UFS in London Fire Brigade
3. Impact of charging on Leicestershire FRS
4. Cost/Benefit analysis of charging for UFS in Leicestershire FRS
5. Achieving further reductions in UFS – Recommendations

Appendix 1: Charging approach to UFS adopted by London Fire Brigade

Appendix 2: Premises with more than 10 activations (July 2013 – June 2014)

Appendix 3: Numbers of false alarms over last 5 years

1 Introduction

- 1.1 A new Unwanted Fire Signals (UFS) reduction strategy went live on the 1st July 2013. This strategy aims to reduce the burden on stations and ensures consistency when dealing with UFS. The Risk Information Support Team (RIST) currently take on responsibility for management of UFS for Leicestershire FRS and respond based on the number of activations from a premise. Reduction strategies implemented now mean fire crews now attend less than quarter of fire alarm activations in 2012/13 than it did in 2004/05 – see Appendix 3.
- 1.2 The Service's objective is to encourage proper use and management of fire alarm systems. Where persistent false alarms occur, call challenging by fire control aims to reduce unnecessary calls being made to Leicestershire FRS. Automatic Fire Alarms (AFA) which actuate when there is no fire can be an indication of poor fire safety management on the premises and, where appropriate, the Fire Protection department will intervene. In addition, those false alarms that result in an attendance by the Service have a significant impact on the use of operational resources and the aim is therefore to reduce UFS to as low as reasonably practicable.
- 1.3 To encourage an improvement in alarm management practices, the Communities and Local Government introduced the general power of competence under the Localism Act 2011. These powers came into effect on 18 February 2012 for all principal local authorities and fire and rescue authorities in England. As a result, fire and rescue services may now, under Section 18C of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, charge fees for reports of fire where:
- (a) The report is of fire at premises that are not domestic premises;
 - (b) The report is false;
 - (c) The report is made as a direct or indirect result of warning equipment having malfunctioned or been miss-installed, and
 - (d) There is a persistent problem with false reports of fire at the premises that are made as a direct or indirect result of warning equipment under common control having malfunctioned or been miss-installed

2 Impact of charging for UFS in London Fire Brigade

- 2.1 London Fire Brigade (LFB) have been at the forefront of charging for UFS and introduced a charging policy in January 2014. Appendix 1 provides a brief explanation on how charging has been introduced in LFB. Table 1 provides an overview of invoices issued and paid since 1st January 2014;

Table 1: Invoices raised by LFB from 1/1/14 to 8/5/14

Invoices	Amount
224 invoices issued	£64,960
33 invoices paid	£9,570
89 invoices outstanding up to 28 days	£25,810
102 invoices outstanding over 28 days	£29,580

- 2.2 Based on the same period last year, LFB might have expected 285 chargeable UFS incidents. However, there were actually an equivalent 117 incidents (although they found 103 were chargeable). This shows a possible effect that people took more action to reduce UFS when they found they would be charged. However, the overall UFS in LFB for the period Jan to Apr 2014 actually increased compared to last year.
- 2.3 Some of the highest offenders, despite being invoiced, have had significantly more UFS. Working with some of these organisations has shown they are willing to pay the invoices, and whilst they do want to reduce UFS, their ability to implement the necessary processes requires some work.
- 2.4 Some sites have more than one totally independent operator sharing the site and incidents must be separated out. These have generally been hospitals with multiple but separate trusts/buildings/systems/management on a site.
- 2.5 Some sites appear more focussed on trying to avoid having to pay rather than address UFS. These are generally where the person assigned the role to manage fire safety appears to be of lesser ability in understanding how to address UFS/false alarm issues.

3 Impact of charging on Leicestershire FRS

3.1 The purpose of applying a charge is to stimulate an improvement in the local management of fire alarm systems. This is expected to have the following positive impact on business and Leicestershire FRS:

- i) An improvement in local alarm management practices;
- ii) An increase in the general standard of fire safety at the premises;
- iii) A reduction in the unnecessary burden on Leicestershire FRS resources;
- iv) An increase in the availability of appliances & staff for real emergencies and training;
- v) An improvement in efficiency resulting in better value FRS provision in Leicestershire;
- vi) Recovery of costs (charging) associated with attending UFS.

3.2 The possible negative impact on introducing a charge for UFS includes the following:

- i) Potential for negative media attention when charging for a FRS resource. At present, LFRS have, subject to call challenging, attend AFAs without charging. A change in policy may be perceived negatively by business owners and members of the public.
- ii) Any negative media may lead to confusion in the wider community when dialling 999. The perception may be that all calls to the Service may be chargeable.

3.3 Further work required in relation to introducing a UFS charging policy will be required. This includes;

- I. Alterations to existing reporting mechanisms will be required. This may incur costs in relation to support by CIVICA.
- II. Establishing an appeals process and agreeing any exempt premises list.
- III. A new UFS charging policy and appeals process should be published on the website.
- IV. The capacity of the Leicestershire FRS Finance department to administer charging will also need to be fully explored.

4 Cost/Benefit analysis of charging for UFS in Leicestershire FRS

4.1 Appendix 2 outlines the numbers of premises with 10 or more activations in the period July 2013 – June 2014. The main offenders are flats, 3 premises which are council owned and 4 premises in private ownership. In simple terms, assuming that no improvement was made in reducing UFS after the first charge, table 2 outlines the potential income that **may** have been generated in 12 months:

Table 2: Potential income raised from charging for UFS from July 2013 – June 2014

Premises*	Total Number of UFS	Potential Revenue**
De Montfort House	54	£12,760
Goscote House	26	£4,640
Minster House	20	£2,900
Maxfield House	17	£2,030
Fielding Court	14	£1,160
52 Melton Rd	12	£580
Sir Robert Martin Court	11	£290
Total		£24,360

* Hospitals have been excluded as part of an exempt premises list.

** Based on LFB fee of £290 per attendance and charging commencing on the 10th activation.

4.2 LFB's risk profile compared to Leicestershire FRS is different, with higher concentrations of flats and commercial premises. LFB have invoiced for £64,960 in a 5 month period, whereas figures for Leicestershire FRS estimate that only £24,360 would be invoiced in a 12 month period. This figure also assumes that no improvements have been made, whereas it is likely that owners would seek to reduce UFS once they start being charged.

4.3 Significant reductions in UFS have occurred over the last 5 years in Leicestershire FRS - see appendix 3. The downward trend is anticipated to continue, however the

expectation would be that numbers of UFS to non-domestic properties would eventually level out.

5 Achieving further reductions in UFS – Recommendations

- 5.1 The relatively low numbers of UFS involved and small numbers of premises affected, mean that the income generated would likely be low. The current drive to reduce the administration burden across the service, balanced against the time and costs of administering UFS charging, mean that it is unlikely that adopting such a strategy would be worthwhile at this time.

The situation should be reviewed again in 18 months' time and another analysis completed to understand if the net effect of charging is worthwhile to the Fire Authority.

- 5.2 In the meantime, further reductions in Pre-Determined Attendances (PDA) to automatic fire alarms in non-domestic premises could be achieved by:

- Reviewing call challenging protocols at Hospital sites during normal working hours. Currently one appliance is mobilised to all AFAs and only turned back if confirmed a false alarm;
- Reducing PDA to all Cat 3 and 4 premises to 2 pumps;
- Reducing PDA to High Rises premises to 2 pumps.

6 Appendix 1: Charging approach to UFS adopted by London Fire Brigade

- 6.1 LFB have introduced a policy in January 2014 for charging for UFS. The following extract from 'Charging for AFA – London Fire Brigade' provides an overview of how this policy has been introduced:
- 6.2 *Any site producing 5 UFS in any 12 month rolling period will be issued a letter that warns of a charge applicable for UFS in excess of 9 in any 12 month period.*
- 6.3 *Premises producing persistent numbers of chargeable false alarm calls will receive an invoice for the 10th call and subsequent calls in a rolling 12 month period. Should the level of chargeable calls drop below 10 in a rolling 12 month period, a charge will not be issued.*
- 6.4 *In recognition of particular risk, there will be no charge levied against care homes. Sheltered housing would not be charged as they are categorised as domestic premises. Those property types excluded from the charging process, including domestic premises, should be agreed.*
- 6.5 *The following causes would not be considered as mis-installed -*
- i. *False alarm incidents resulting from testing of the system*
 - ii. *False alarm incidents resulting from smoking.*
- 6.6 *In addition to the above exclusions, false alarm incidents resulting from smoke from outside (bonfire or other – not under the control of the Responsible Person), may not be chargeable. These incidents will not be automatically discounted, but may be reviewed on appeal. Such incidents are chargeable where the cause of the smoke was under the control of persons on the site. They are not chargeable where it can be identified that the smoke was caused by persons independent of the site.*
- 6.7 *To establish an appropriate and consistent approach in this regard, the invoice will, whenever practicable, be issued to the Responsible Person as defined under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. In the event this cannot be achieved for whatever reason, the charge shall be issued on the owner/operator of the fire alarm system.*
- 6.8 *Chargeable incidents will not be based on the numbers of appliances attending a single incident. A single charge will apply for each chargeable incident. Currently LFB have introduced a charge of £290 plus VAT for each single attendance.*

7 Appendix 2: Premises with more than 10 activations (July 2013 – June 2014)

FP011948	De Montfort Housing Society	De Montfort House
☒ FP012014	Leicester City Council	Goscote House
☒ FP012062	Leicester Students Lettings	Minster House
☒ FP029797	Leicester City Council	Maxfield House
☒ FP004527	Charnwood Borough Council	Fielding Court
☒ FP006708	Asra Housing Group	52 Melton Rd
☒ FP033995	Housing 21	Sir Robert Martin Court

Hospitals with more than 10 activations (July 2013 – June 2014)

FP009583	Leicester Royal Infirmary	Balmoral Building
☒ FP012911	Arnold Lodge	
☒ FP009118	Glenfield Hospital	Main Building
☒ FP010787	Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust	Bennion and Bradgate Centre
☒ FP009679	Leicester Royal Infirmary	Kensington Building
☒ FP007171	Mill Lodge	
☒ FP008914	Loughborough Hospital	

8 Appendix 3: Numbers of false alarms over last 5 years

Property Type	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	Total	% +/-
Hospitals and medical care	427	349	268	245	228	1517	-46.6
Education	266	256	262	232	288	1304	8.3
Industrial Manufacturing	244	221	205	197	196	1063	-19.7
Retail	229	226	214	189	159	1017	-30.6
Offices and call centres	195	168	153	164	164	844	-15.9
Warehouses and bulk storage	153	152	135	123	106	669	-30.7
Entertainment and culture	84	100	95	95	84	458	0.0
Public admin, security and safety	59	49	35	38	34	215	-42.4
Industrial Processing	54	44	42	36	27	203	-50.0
Sporting venues	35	27	41	42	23	168	-34.3
Food and Drink	29	38	30	37	27	161	-6.9
Other	61	36	32	39	50	218	-18.0
Total	1836	1666	1512	1437	1386	7837	-24.5

Row Labels	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	Total	% +/-
Residential Home	253	230	258	217	170	1128	-32.8
Hotel/motel	74	47	45	33	22	221	-70.3
Sheltered Housing - not self contained	10	6	56	53	58	183	480.0
Other Residential Home	99	6	5	1	3	114	-97.0
Hostel (e.g. for homeless people)	18	27	18	14	18	95	0.0
Other	62	28	36	33	27	186	-56.5
Total	516	344	418	351	298	1927	-42.2