

SHROPSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

FIRE SAFETY ADVICE SHEET

PREVENTING UNWANTED FIRE ALARM SIGNALS

Each year, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service attend over 2000 unwanted fire alarms (false alarms), over 50% of which are generated by automatic fire detection systems.

This high rate of false alarms can have a serious impact not only on Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service, but for businesses and the community, and to understand the problem; you need to consider the following points.

- False alarms cause disruption to your business, resulting in substantial costs, loss of productivity and inconvenience.
- They erode the confidence in the value and reliability of the fire detection system, and consequently there is a real danger that in the event of a real fire, the evacuation of your premises could be delayed because of previous false alarm experiences.
- False alarms expose our communities to unnecessary risk as attendances for a real fire may become delayed.
- They put other road users, the public and our firefighters at unnecessary risk when responding to your premises under emergency conditions.
- Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service relies heavily upon firefighters on the retained (part-time) duty system, and false alarms create an unfair burden upon both these officers as well as damaging the goodwill of their employers who release them from their normal places of work to respond to emergencies.
- False alarms are wasteful of fire service resources, jeopardising other essential work such as community safety activities and training. They also impose a large financial burden in respect of mobilising costs such as salaries, fuel overheads, wear and tear on vehicles etc. We estimate that each call costs us around £240 per call, a total of over £480,000 paid for by the people of Shropshire.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Most fire alarm and fire detection systems in non-domestic premises are now being designed, installed and maintained to the British Standard BS 5839:Part 1:2002. Section 3 of this standard contains in depth advice on the limitation and prevention of false alarms, and irrespective of the standard to which your fire alarm system complies, it is considered that this guidance should be used to ensure that your fire warning and detection system is suitable for both the environmental conditions and use of your building.

It is inevitable that some unwanted fire alarm signals (UwFS) will always occur, but there is a great deal that you can do to both reduce and then eliminate the chances of them occurring. We have detailed below some of the most common causes and the preventative actions that you can take.

FIRE ALARM MAINTENANCE

It is essential that your fire alarm and fire detection systems are subject to periodic inspection and servicing by a competent person for the following reasons:

1. Preventative measures can be taken to ensure the continued reliability of the system.
2. False alarm problems are identified and suitably addressed.
3. Unrevealed faults are identified.
4. You can be made aware of any changes within your building that affect the protection afforded by the system.
5. Failure to maintain your system may invalidate your insurance cover.
6. Article 17 of the Regulatory Reform (Fire safety) Order 2005 requires the Responsible Person to ensure that any equipment provided under the fire risk assessment must be "*maintained in an efficient state, in efficient working order and in good repair*".

CONTROL OF CONTRACTORS

After system faults, the activation of fire detection systems by the activities of contractors is our biggest problem. Contractors should be properly authorised to carry out any work on your premises, be fully aware of the safety systems in your premises and be required to identify any activity that may cause an UwFS to be generated.

The failure of contractors is viewed as a failure in management and the Responsible Person, it is a management duty to ensure that contractors are fully briefed and do not place your staff, customers or others at unnecessary risk by causing false alarm activations.

COOKING

The use of cooking facilities causes the third highest number of UwFS we attend. Generally they fall into one of two categories, these being:

- Unauthorised use of cooking facilities (toasters, kettles, microwaves etc) in areas covered by highly sensitive smoke detection.
- Inappropriate detection in the vicinity of cooking facilities.

In both cases, a little forethought and planning can easily prevent these calls.

LIAISON WITH ALARM RECEIVING CENTRES

Many fire alarm systems are now remotely monitored by alarm receiving centres (ARCs). This means that upon activation, a signal is sent to a remote centre who immediately telephone the Fire and Rescue Service. Any weaknesses in your fire alarm system, including maintenance work being undertaken on a system connected to an ARC, has the very real potential to generate an UwFS. You need to ensure that either your connection is disabled for the period of the work/test, or you must contact the ARC, inform them of situation, and make arrangements for them to contact your premises first upon receipt of an alarm signal, to ensure that an UwFS has not been generated. When any work or testing has concluded, you must ensure that your connection to the ARC is properly re-established.

Further information on these procedures can be obtained using the contact details below.

There are, of course, many more causes of UwFS, such as inappropriate use of candles, accidental breakage of break glass call points, smoke or dust entering from outside (bonfires etc), insect infestations and so on.

In all cases, there are solutions to prevent your system from generating UwFS, all it needs is a little time and effort to consider the problem, identify the phenomena that may cause UwFS and put in place procedures to remove the risk.

For further information and advice on reducing UwFS, please contact the False Alarm Reduction Team on **01743 260260 or 01952 201146** or for general fire safety matters, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service can be reached on **01743 260260** or via our web site at **www.shropshirefire.gov.uk**