

False fire alarms reduction – North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 We reviewed the Authority's approach to the reduction of false fire alarms, focusing primarily on its approach to attendance at non-domestic premises. Our audit included reviewing the Authority's policy, how it was developed and is being implemented, how false alarms are monitored, and how performance is managed and evaluated.
- 2 We examined false alarms due to the significant numbers responded to by Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs). This means that they have a significant operational, financial, and environmental impact. They are also a key area for improvement within the Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016¹, set by the Welsh Government.
- 3 We undertook the review during the period November 2022 to March 2023.

What we found

- 4 Our review sought to answer the question: **Is the Authority doing all it can to reduce the prevalence and responses to non-domestic fire false alarms?**
- 5 Overall, we found that: **The Authority has significantly reduced the number of non-domestic false fire alarms it attends but needs to address financial risks and capacity issues to ensure its risk-based approach is sustainable.** We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Authority demonstrates a good understanding of the locations, causes and impacts of false fire alarms in non-domestic premises.
 - the Authority has a well-embedded policy to address false fire alarms in non-domestic premises and has revised its approach to reflect evolving risks.
 - the Authority closely monitors responses to automatic fire alarms and works with partners to address problem premises.
 - the Authority's policy has resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of false fire alarms it responds to. However, numbers have steadily increased since 2015-16 and Members need to scrutinise future performance in the face of challenging financial pressures.

¹ [Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016, Welsh Government](#)

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
Demonstrating the impact of false fire alarms	
R1	<p>This report highlights opportunities to build on the Authority’s understanding of the impact of false fire alarms on its use of resources. To address this, we recommend that the Authority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• updates its financial analysis to capture the impact of responding to false alarms across its services.• in quantifying the impact of responding to false alarms, analyse and report of the impact of attending false alarms looking at hours lost by wholetime and on-call crews in attendance. This will help to support strategic decisions on the growing role of firefighters and help to inform the Authority’s future approach to maintaining firefighters’ competency.• as part of its performance reporting framework, report on the number of automatic fire alarm (AFA) actuations that do not elicit an emergency response under its current policy, including as a proportion of all AFA actuations. This will help the Authority to demonstrate the impact of its current policy.• reviews the avenues by which false alarm data is captured (e.g. post-incident forms, control information) to ensure information is captured accurately and consistently.
Improving integration	
R2	<p>We found limited clarity on how data on AFA actuations (both the ones that elicit an emergency response, and those that do not) is used by business fire safety teams. We recommend that the Authority includes data on all non-domestic AFA actuations as part of its development of new data dashboards, and provides appropriate access to business fire safety teams. This will help to improve the use of intelligence to proactively inform the workload of business fire safety teams.</p>

Recommendations

Building resilience

- R3 The final part of this report highlights capacity challenges which threaten to undermine the effectiveness of the Authority's risk-based approach to managing false alarms. We recommend that the Authority reviews Members' development needs and tailors training opportunities accordingly to support their role in scrutinising performance and supporting improvement.

Detailed report

Fire and rescue services face the most challenging financial and operational environment in a generation

National framework expectations

- 6 The Welsh Government's National Framework for Fire identifies the reduction of false alarms as a key efficiency saving available to FRAs². It notes that responding to false alarms incurs significant financial and opportunity costs, both for FRAs and building occupiers, whilst yielding no benefit whatsoever. This is especially impactful as there are more false alarms than actual fires. In 2021-22, 47% of total incidents attended by the Authority were false alarms, illustrating the significant burden they place on the limited resources available. Consequently, the Welsh Government requires FRAs to 'Identify the main sources of false alarms and take all reasonable and practical steps to reduce their incidence'.
- 7 In shaping their approach, FRAs must also demonstrate the Sustainable Development Principle under the Well-being of Future Generations 2016. FRAs are required to show how they are taking a long-term view to improvement that focuses on prevention, involving people, and integrating and working collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.
- 8 Therefore, the expectation of the Welsh Government is to see a reduction in responses to false alarms in order to free both resources and capacity. This would also put FRAs in a stronger position to realise Welsh Government's wider ambitions for fire and rescue services in Wales.

Growing the role of the firefighter

- 9 Reducing false alarms is required to provide the additional capacity needed to meet the Welsh Government's policy expectations. Since the National Framework was published in 2015, the Welsh Government have set out a broader policy direction for FRAs. This involves expanding the role of firefighters to support the health and social care system, such as responding to non-injured falls. This was approved by the Cabinet in 2020.
- 10 In 2021, the Welsh Government published its assessment of whether the role of firefighters could be expanded without causing detriment to the core fire and rescue service. Even without delivering a broader role, the review concluded that a 'fundamental review of station work routines is required to ensure that activity is appropriately scheduled to maximise output'. Analysis found that there was no unallocated capacity during the day shift of wholetime crews, which would coincide

² [Welsh Government, Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016, November 2015](#)

with peak hours of demand for the Welsh Ambulance Service Trust (WAST) between 7am and midday.³

- 11 A lack of adequate training time was also identified by the Welsh Government and led to a second thematic review focused on operational training⁴. It concluded that there was insufficient training time available, particularly to firefighters under the Retained Duty System (RDS). The report recommended that FRAs 'undertake an unconstrained analysis of the amount of time required for firefighters to train'.
- 12 Given the broad impact across the service, a reduction in false alarms responses can help increase capacity, which is needed to help grow role of the fire fighter. This is alongside other requirements, such as leadership from senior officers and members, effective collaboration, robust data analysis, and effective scrutiny.

Reductions in resources

- 13 FRAs have had to deliver within significantly reduced budgets during years of austerity and, as all public bodies, must continue to adapt to respond to the current financial pressures. Consequently, Authorities have had to maintain their services with fewer resources and have long focused on rebalancing their emphasis from responding to incidents, to preventing fires and improving safety.
- 14 In real terms, the Authority experienced a 10.9% decrease (£4.5 million) in revenue expenditure between 2009-10 and 2021-22⁵. Over the same period, the calls received by the Authority decreased by 27.6%⁶ and the number of incidents attended reduced by 38.2%⁷. The number of staff employed by the Authority also fell by 15.6% between 2009-10 and 2021-22 (**Exhibit 2**):

³ Welsh Government, [Broadening of the role of firefighters in Wales](#), November 2021

⁴ Welsh Government, [Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services](#), October 2022

⁵ StatsWales, [Revenue outturn by authority](#)

⁶ StatsWales, [Calls handled by fire control watch FTE by call type and financial year](#)

⁷ StatsWales, [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales](#)

Exhibit 2: North Wales FRA personnel headcount by employment type, 2009-10 to 2021-22

Role	2009-10	2020-21	Change
Wholetime uniformed staff	294	278	-5.4%
Retained staff	556	429	-22.8%
Fire control staff	33	30	-9%
Non-operational staff	151	136	-9.9
All staff	1,034	873	-15.6%

Source: [StatsWales](#)

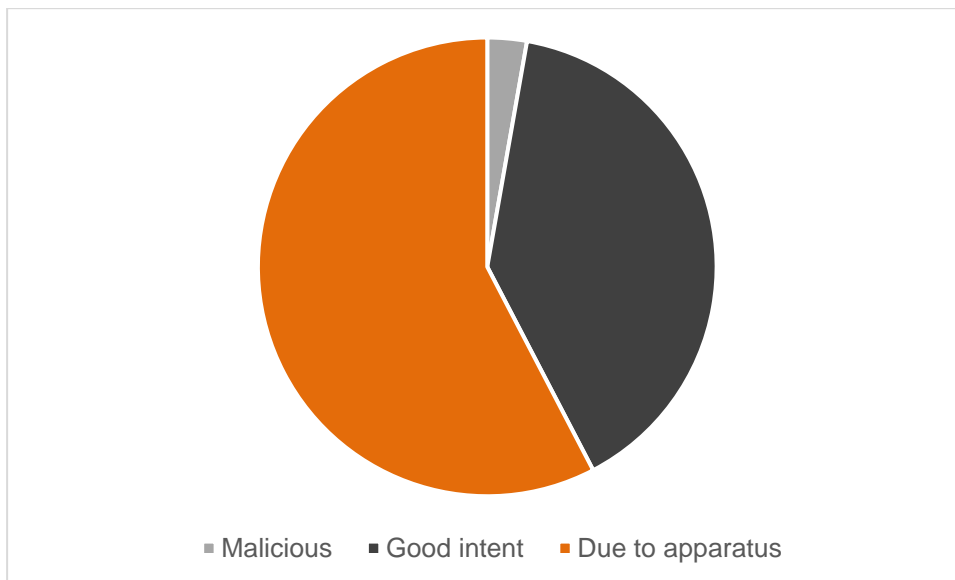
What are false fire alarms and why are they important?

Definition and types

- 15 Within the Home Office Incident Reporting System (IRS), false alarms are categorised into three types:
- **Malicious** – a call made with the intention of getting a response to a non-existent fire-related event.
 - **Good intent** – a call made in good faith that a response would be needed.
 - **Due to apparatus** – a call initiated by a fire alarm or firefighting equipment (including accidental initiation).
- 16 **Exhibit 3** shows that, nationally, false alarms 'due to apparatus' account for just under 60% of total false alarms.⁸

⁸ Note – this includes both domestic and non-domestic false alarms responded to due to how data is reported.

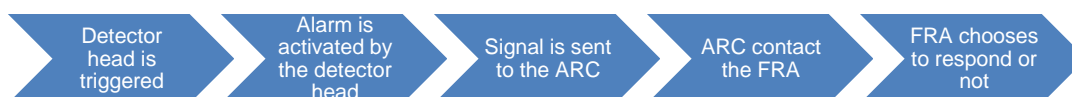
Exhibit 3: share of total false alarms in Wales by type, 2021-22



Source: [StatsWales](#)

- 17 These are typically caused by Automatic Fire Alarm systems (AFAs), which are networks of detector heads in buildings that are linked to an alarm system. The alarms are linked to Alarm Receiving Centres (ARCs). Due to technology not requiring on-site management, ARCs can be located anywhere in the world. However, ARCs are required to register with each FRA in the areas they operate within. **Exhibit 4** sets out the AFA process when activated.

Exhibit 4: automatic Fire Alarm Process



Source: Audit Wales

- 18 When a false alarm is received via an AFA, it is typically referred to as an Unwanted Fire Signal (UwFS). As UwFS form the largest share of false alarms, they are the key focus of reduction activity across the UK⁹. Consequently, the focus

⁹ For example, see the [National Fire Chiefs Council guidance](#)

of the Authority's approach and this audit has been on UwFS reduction, whilst also covering other types of false alarms.

False alarms impact the resilience of Fire and Rescue services

- 19 As with any response made by the Authority to any incident, there are financial, operational, environmental, and safety impacts when responding to false alarms.
- 20 Taken together, the impacts of responding to false alarms are significant and highlight the importance of having an effective approach to reduce their prevalence. As a result, any improvement in performance in this context can help the Authority to better manage its resource pressures and increase capacity to undertake additional training and other priority tasks.

Financial

- 21 The total financial impacts of a false alarm response are difficult to quantify precisely. In most cases, the cost of deploying an appliance to attend a false alarm would be similar if not identical to that of a genuine incident, as crews are deployed in the expectation of a genuine fire. This varies by Authority based on various factors, such as geography, but other UK FRAs estimate the cost of attendance to be around £350-400 per hour¹⁰. Using their estimates, the total financial cost for North Wales FRA responding to the total number of false fire alarms received in 2021-22 would be between £900,000 and £1 million.¹¹
- 22 In North Wales, the Authority has not quantified the cost of responding to false fire alarms in recent years. When changing its AFA response policy¹² in 2014, the Authority applied a notional cost of £81.50 per AFA false alarm attended, to help calculate the potential financial impact. This was based on the salary cost of a crew of four firefighters with a watch manager to respond and attend an incident for one hour. Using this cost calculator, the financial impact of responding to AFAs in the years preceding the policy change were noted as: £158,273 (2011-12), £150,367 (2012-13) and £142,951 (2013-14).
- 23 The cost impact in rural areas is easier to quantify accurately, using call-out fees for retained duty system (RDS) crews as the basis. In reality, however, the majority of false fire alarms occur in urban areas where stations are either wholetime or day crewed. Indeed, the Authority estimated in 2014 that just 15% of the AFAs it responded to were from its RDS stations.

¹⁰ For example, Devon and Somerset FRS' standard charge of £364.27 or Buckinghamshire FRS estimate of £305 plus VAT.

¹¹ This notional calculation is based on published data which includes domestic and non-domestic false alarms.

¹² Paragraph 37 describes the Authority's policy.

- 24 The Authority estimated that its change in policy in 2014 would result in a cost saving of £25,000. This is based on the demand on RDS stations alone (i.e. around 15% of the overall number of false alarms). This reflects a limited consideration of the impact on its resources. Despite the policy paper highlighting the financial impact beyond that on its RDS stations, it stopped short of setting how the difference between its estimated cost saving of £25,000 and the wider financial cost of responding to AFAs (circa £150,000 per annum) would be accounted for. For example, by setting out how the savings resulting from its policy change could be used – e.g. investment in equipment, training or a further contribution to addressing budget shortfalls.
- 25 To counter the financial impact of responding to false alarms, some FRAs in England have prescribed charges for premises that produce multiple false alarms. For example, Cleveland FRS charge premises £345 (excluding VAT) from their fifth call.¹³ Similarly, Humberside FRS charge a minimum of £365.75 from the fourth false alarm.¹⁴

Operational

- 26 Responding to false alarms causes unnecessary disruption. This highlights the importance of reducing attendance. It can divert people from training, prevention work, or premises familiarisation, which are all critical tasks for a crew to maintain operational capability. Disruptions to training are particularly costly, as highlighted by the Welsh Government's most recent report¹⁵, which notes a risk of staff competencies not being maintained where crews are regularly responding to false alarms.
- 27 The operational impact is potentially significant for retained firefighters, whose capacity to attend training is less compared to wholetime crews. Typically, retained firefighters receive two to three hours of training per week, which may be removed entirely if required to respond to false alarms during training hours.
- 28 In addition, as the RDS model relies on the goodwill of employers to release staff to attend a call during their work hours, increasing responses to false alarms risks deterring businesses from supporting their staff to take on a RDS role. This may negatively affect staff retention.

Environmental

- 29 As set out in our report into Carbon Emissions Reduction report¹⁶ in 2021-22, there are significant environmental impacts incurred in delivering fire and rescue services. This includes the use of fuel for a response, as well as the environmental

¹³ Cleveland FRS, [Fire Alarms](#)

¹⁴ Humberside FRS, [Call out charges 2022-23](#)

¹⁵ Welsh Government, [Thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services](#), October 2022

¹⁶ [Carbon emissions reduction in North Wales FRA](#), Audit Wales, March 2022

impact of firefighters travelling to their station. Given that 47% of all the incidents attended by the Authority in 2021-22 were false fire alarms¹⁷, it is an area where a significant reduction in carbon emissions could be made.

Safety

- 30 False alarm reduction is crucial to reducing safety risks. The prevalence of false alarms also has potentially significant impacts on the safety risks of communities, such as road risk and complacency.
- 31 Road safety risks are present whenever the emergency services respond to an incident. Driving at speed or under blue light conditions can generate significant risks to both crews and other road users. This risk is also present at road speed, due to the significant size and weight of fire appliances.
- 32 High volumes of false alarms can also lead to complacency among building occupants and citizens. For example, it may lead to a lack of response during a real incident, placing both the occupants and the responding crew at increased risk. False alarm reduction, therefore, helps to reduce the safety risks to both the Authority's crews and communities.

What others are doing

- 33 FRAs across the UK have devised different solutions to address the volume of false alarms. They are a significant burden on the local stations and limit the time that can be spent on other issues. Home Office research¹⁸ found that 63,000 hours were wasted in England during 2017-18 due to responding to false alarms.
- 34 As a result, English fire and rescue services have developed a range of approaches to help reduce the number of false alarms attended, which vary in their usage (**Exhibit 5**).

Exhibit 5: example approaches taken by English FRAs in 2018

Approach	Description	Proportion of English FRAs adopting the approach in 2018
Call challenging	Where fire control staff ask questions to those making a call to confirm if a fire is real to prevent a first response.	93%
Education and information initiatives	Information or materials are given to building occupants on the need to reduce false alarms.	93%

¹⁷ [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

¹⁸ Home Office, [Trends in fire false alarms and fire false alarm policies](#), November 2022

Approach	Description	Proportion of English FRAs adopting the approach in 2018
No confirmation needed	A normal response is sent without confirmation.	76%
Adapted responses	An immediate response is made but reduced from the Pre-Determined Attendance (PDA), e.g., one appliance is sent to investigate rather than three.	74%
Requiring confirmation (or 'double knock')	A response is only sent if a call to confirm a fire is received, or if multiple alarms are triggered.	60%
Enforcement action	A legal enforcement action is taken against premises that often trigger false alarms, such as a fire safety audit or fine.	33%
Fines	A monetary charge is made for premises with repeat false alarms.	24%
Non-attendance	After a warning, no response is made to premises that repeatedly trigger false alarms.	13%

Source: [Home Office research](#)

- 35 The National Fire Chiefs Council has published a toolbox¹⁹ to support FRAs with their management of false alarms and the potential options to be considered. These include:
- no response being made to AFAs during daytime hours unless there is a higher level of risk (e.g. sleeping risk or high-risk premises like a hospital).
 - charging the occupants of a building that repeatedly cause UwFS.
 - requiring premises to register their AFAs to enable enhanced monitoring to help call handlers make better informed decisions.
 - establishing thresholds for an adapted response based on the number of detector heads in a building (e.g. a building with 500 heads would get a full response with ten UwFS whilst a building with 100 heads would not).
 - prioritising work on educating and informing people of their responsibilities and having dedicated officers to help facilitate change in buildings/organisations with high numbers of false alarms.
 - engagement with ARCs to improve call handling and encouraging bodies to undertake visual checks to confirm there is a fire.
- 36 Both the toolbox and research demonstrate the breadth of approaches available to FRAs, reflecting their local circumstances and risk appetite.

¹⁹ National Fire Chiefs Council, [Unwanted fires signals toolbox](#)

Managing false alarms in North Wales FRA

Current policy

- 37 The Authority has a clear and well-embedded policy to determine its attendance at automatic fire alarms. It will not send an emergency response to automatic fire alarm actuations unless a back-up 999 call is received confirming that there is a fire. There are exemptions which will elicit a response. These are:
- all residential property – where the responsibility for the safety of the occupiers rests with the individuals who reside there – HMP Berwyn, hospitals, sheltered housing and houses in multiple occupation will continue to receive a response.
 - other sleeping accommodation and schools – such as care homes, hostels, all schools and colleges, hotels and halls of residence will be exempt between the hours of 8pm and 8am. During these hours, they will respond to automatic fire alarm calls.
 - all Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) sites²⁰ in North Wales which will continue to receive a response as usual.
 - the Authority's Control department also holds a list of other commercial/industrial premises where an attendance will be made. The application of exemptions is overseen by the Head of Fire Safety.
- 38 The current iteration of the Authority's policy was adopted in September 2022, following a review. The review centred on an evolving risk profile due to changes in building occupancy as a result of the pandemic. For example, a reduced likelihood of someone being present in a public building who would normally be expected to make a back-up 999 call to confirm a fire. Apart from reviewing some exemptions, the current policy broadly reinforces the approach adopted in 2014. Prior to 2014, the Authority responded to all automatic fire alarms with little or no challenge.

Current performance

- 39 The Authority's 2014 policy resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of false fire alarms it attends. Although responses to false alarms still represents a significant proportion of all incidents attended by the Authority, **Exhibit 6** shows that the total number of incidents has fallen over time. The Authority responds to around 700 fewer false alarms compared to 10 years ago; a 22% reduction.

²⁰ COMAH sites are sites covered by the Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) Regulations 2015. The regulations cover any establishment storing or otherwise handling large quantities of hazardous industrial chemicals.

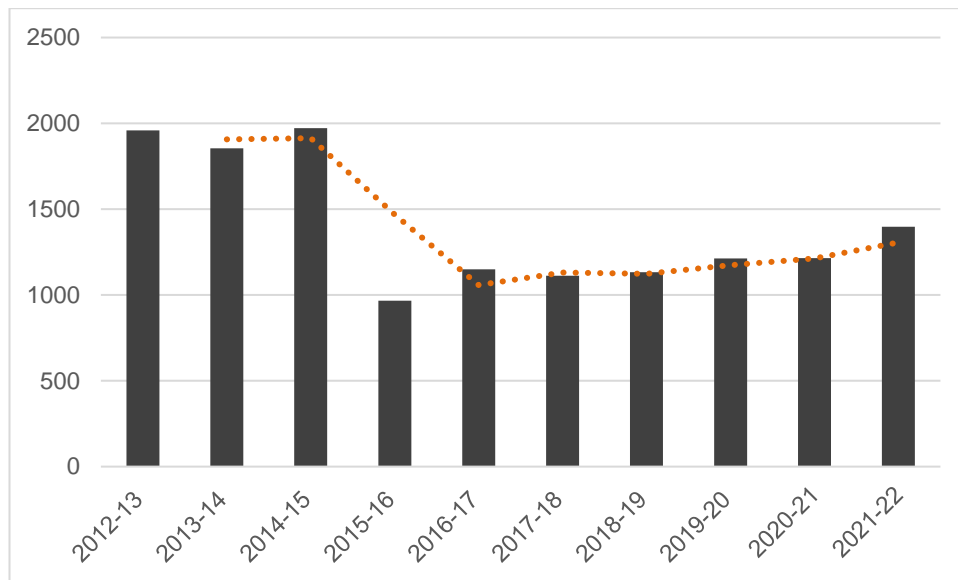
Exhibit 6: all false alarms attended by the Authority over the last 10 years

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
All incidents attended (includes FFAs)	6,803	6,356	6,099	4,879	5,348	5,733	5,300	4,872	4,699	5,354
FFAs attended	3,229	3,088	3,203	1,975	2,124	2,102	2,256	2,263	2,302	2,506
FFAs as a proportion of all incidents	47%	49%	53%	40%	40%	37%	43%	46%	49%	47%

Source: [Fires, Special Service Incidents and False alarms attended by Fire and Rescue Services in Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

40 The impact of the 2014 policy change is clearly demonstrated by data on the Authority’s attendance at fire alarms caused by apparatus activation. **Exhibit 7** shows that the Authority responded to 1,972 false alarms of this type in 2013-14, the year preceding its policy change. In the following year operating to the new policy (2014-15), this reduced to 966. Although the data includes both domestic and non-domestic AFAs, it shows a significant reduction in false alarms demonstrating the positive impact of its policy. In addition, performance has been sustained since 2014 with the number of false fire alarms responded to during 2021-22 some 29% lower compared to 10 years ago. However, numbers have steadily increased since 2015-16, highlighting the need to regularly review and monitor attendance.

Exhibit 7: false alarms due to apparatus (domestic and non-domestic), over a 10 year period



Source: [False alarms by reason and financial year \(gov.wales\)](#)

Understanding the challenge

- 41 The Authority has a good understanding of the location, cause and impact of false fire alarms in non-domestic premises. Officers clearly and consistently articulate the impacts of false alarms. These include:
- the impact on training and development opportunities and the risks around maintaining competency, especially for a largely retained operational workforce;
 - the issues around availability and capacity, and how responding to false alarms risks crews' capacity to attend a genuine emergency;
 - enhanced road risks in relation to emergency response; and
 - risks around public complacency, affecting how people may respond to a genuine emergency.
- 42 However, the Authority's understanding of the environmental and financial impact of responding to false alarms is less developed. As described above (paragraphs 21-23), it has been some time since the Authority quantified and updated its assessment of the financial impact of responding to false alarms. If the Authority is to effectively meet the Welsh Government's ambitions around broadening the role of the firefighter in future, it will need to demonstrate a firmer grasp on the impact of false alarms on its resources, including both wholetime and retained staff.
- 43 Positively, the Authority is learning from its previous approach to reducing attendance at false alarms. **Exhibit 7** shows that, since the initial dip following the introduction of its 2014 policy, attendance at false alarms due to apparatus have increased by 45% between 2015-16 and 2021-22. In reviewing its approach, the

Authority found that its policy may have been applied too stringently initially, and the list of exempted properties has increased over time as its understanding of risk has developed. In addition, officers described the impact of an increasing number of new housing developments now being built with AFA systems as standard – for example, new homes built with hard wired smoke alarms and multi-occupied buildings with systems that cover communal areas.

- 44 The Authority regularly reviews false alarm attendance and has a good understanding of the type of organisations generating the biggest demand in this respect. For example, a report to the Authority’s Service Leadership Team in November 2022 highlighted the number of false alarms and reasons for actuation. This included an analysis of the 152 AFA actuations in non-domestic properties in second quarter of 2022-23. Of these, 134 were in hospitals. This is reflective of the key challenge facing the Authority in reducing false alarms – the biggest generator by far is the health board.
- 45 The Authority has good systems to record and measure the volume and nature of false fire alarms. For example, its internal platforms facilitate reporting on false alarms to enable detailed information to be captured and shared with colleagues in the health board to help identify trends. Building on this, officers we interviewed highlighted ongoing projects to develop real time data dashboards to help to equip and empower local teams to manage responses informed by more granular data.
- 46 Despite this positive development, data dashboards are only as good as the information being inputted. In this respect, we found opportunities to improve how the Authority records data. For example, there are inconsistencies in how the Authority is capturing data when appliances are recalled to station while enroute. Other examples include inconsistencies in how post-incident forms are completed by response crews following false alarm attendances.
- 47 There are also some varying interpretations of what constitutes a ‘false alarm’ – for example, depending on your perspective, a recent pattern of incidents leading to AFA actuations at HMP Berwyn in Wrexham could be described as fires, arson incidents, or false alarms. Agreeing the definitions and ensuring consistency in how data is captured will give the Authority greater confidence in using data to inform future approaches to reduce false alarms.
- 48 At the time of our audit, we found scope to improve how the Authority captures and uses data on AFA actuations that fall outside of its response policy (e.g. low risk commercial properties). Reporting on the number of calls the Authority has not responded to, coupled with more robust financial data, would help it to better demonstrate the impact of its policy over time. Furthermore, patterns in AFA actuations are important to monitor even if the Authority does not respond. Such patterns can indicate a poorly managed property in the context of fire safety. And the risk of false alarms causing public complacency still applies, regardless of whether the Authority responds.

Tackling problem premises

- 49 Although the extent to which the Authority engaged and involved wider stakeholders in shaping its 2014 policy is unclear, the change in approach was well communicated at the time, helping to ensure a smooth transition. Promotional literature targeted those who would be affected by the change and the communications planning helped the Authority to prepare for any negative backlash.
- 50 As the main source of AFA false alarms across the region, the Authority has a good approach to working with the health board to reduce the number of actuations. Officers demonstrate an excellent understanding of the main causes of AFA actuations in these problem premises, using granular data to support detailed analysis of the main causes of in hospital sites. The sharing of information is symptomatic of the good working relationships between the Authority and the estates teams in Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board. This is important because, having decided against the principle of pursuing enforcement action in problem premises, the Authority relies on good working relationships to influence change.
- 51 Despite the positive relationships, however, the pace of change by partners is slow and the health board continues to generate a significant number of false alarms. Changes to the Authority's pre-determined response reflect the pressures this causes. For example, to reduce the impact on its resources, the Authority's daytime response consists of sending just one appliance to hospitals following an AFA actuation, in anticipation of it being a false alarm. This is a tricky balance and relies on the Authority's risk appetite – if there is a large fire in a hospital, it's unlikely that a single appliance would be able to tackle it, and the delay until a second appliance arrives could be significant. The Authority's risk appetite does not extend to exploring this further, for example by applying the same logic as the basis for not sending any appliances in response to AFA actuations in hospitals.

A sustainable approach?

- 52 Overall, our review has found that the Authority has a good, risk-based approach to managing false alarms. However, the key difficulties facing the Authority are centred around its capacity to maintain its current approach and continue to resource its services to reflect risks. In this respect, and given the significant demand they continue to place on the Authority, false alarms cannot be perceived as an isolated issue and must be considered alongside the wider challenges facing the Authority.
- 53 The Authority is on a journey of change and the new leadership has led to a number of thorny issues being tabled. This includes:
- a wholesale Emergency Cover Review across North Wales. As described above, capacity is impacted significantly by the high proportion of false alarms attended by the Authority. In the context of increasing expectations

and diminishing resources, it is important that the Authority accurately quantifies the impact of false alarms to support future options appraisals.

- the Authority's asset base, including the number and location of fire stations. This is inherently linked to the review of fire cover across the region, and reflects the Auditor General's recent review of the Authority's corporate resilience. Our report highlighted that its fire stations are not always located in the best location to maintain service resilience with the changing role and expectations being placed on fire and rescue services.²¹
- difficulties in recruitment and retention impacting on on-call availability, in the context of a delivery model heavily weighted towards retained firefighters. Recruitment was paused during the pandemic, and thereafter the Authority has struggled to meet its recruitment targets for on-call firefighters. Officers highlighted that reducing attendance at false alarms can be perceived as a barrier in this respect, because much of the potential financial savings are directly linked to call-out fees. Again, this highlights the importance of accurately quantifying staff capacity, to inform strategic decisions on the "redeployment of human and other resources... to more productive tasks".²²
- an investment in new training facilities. Significant investment is needed to develop a new training centre in North Wales to support firefighters' competency. Firefighters' capacity to attend training and development is affected by false alarms and this needs to be captured in the context of its investment in new facilities.
- new governance structure and the evolving culture of the organisation. The Authority has recently established a new governance structure within the officer cadre, with a view to improving performance focus and help devolve decision making and scrutiny of performance at all appropriate levels.

54 This is a challenging agenda, set against a backdrop of current and future budget shortfalls. However, despite being presented with performance information on false alarms, our review of the minutes of full Authority and Audit Committee meetings over the last two years found little evidence of Members actively seeking to challenge performance on false alarms to help support financial and operational improvement.

55 The Authority's limited resilience in the context of false alarms is exemplified by its approach to business fire safety. Whilst it has a good approach to reduce attendance at AFAs, its decision to not attend a large proportion of false alarms inevitably increases the emphasis on fire safety colleagues responding in a different way. For example, by identifying patterns of occurrence and proactively inspecting fire safety procedures, or following up through the work of business education colleagues. Paragraph 48 of this report highlights opportunities to strengthen the links between AFA actuations data and the workloads of business

²¹ [Corporate resilience in North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority, Audit Wales, May 2021](#)

²² This expectation is set out in the Welsh Government's [Fire and Rescue National Framework 2016](#)

fire safety colleagues. However, we found that there are barriers to do this, not least the limited scope to increase workloads within the current structure, with teams already at capacity.

Appendix 1

Audit approach and methodology

Audit approach

Our approach was to understand the Authority's approach to fire false alarm reduction, focusing in particular on non-domestic settings. The review sought to answer the question 'Is the Authority doing all it can to reduce the prevalence and responses to non-domestic fire false alarms?'. Our focus was on the actions of the Authority, not the actions available to building managers or responsible people.

We completed our fieldwork across all three Fire and Rescue Authorities separately, using the same team across all three. This enabled insights to be drawn into each Authority, as well as informing a forthcoming national output.

We sought to be flexible to fit around officers when organising and delivering our fieldwork, ensuring that our work did not detract from the operational work of the Authority.

Methodology

Our review was completed between November 2022 and March 2023. We used a range of methods to draw conclusions for our review:

- document review – we reviewed policies and documentation provided by the Authority, as well as reviewing their published information, such as their website. In addition, we also reviewed documentation from the Welsh Government, NHS Shared Services Partnership (NWSSP), and representative groups.
- data analysis – we analysed both data provided by the Authority and publicly available data. This included management data, Incident Recording System (IRS) data, and other available data from StatsWales.
- local interviews – we interviewed officers nominated by the Authority that covered a range of different areas, both corporately and locally. This included the lead officer for false alarms, Business Fire Safety (BFS) officers, and senior officers.
- national interviews – we interviewed representatives of local health boards, the NWSSP, and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).
- survey – we designed a survey for building managers and responsible people to gauge their views of false alarms and the Authority. We encouraged the Authority to send this to organisations in their area, as well as promoting it through professional networks, such as the NHS Estate Managers group. Unfortunately, too few responses were made to use this evidence to draw conclusions.



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Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.