

Project Brief – Reducing False Alarms – North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

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Project brief

Background

- 1 The performance review for 2022-23 of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) will focus on the progress made to reduce and prevent fire false alarms. A fire false alarm is defined as an event where a fire and rescue crew attend an incident believing there to be a fire but on arrival discover that no incident exists or has existed. This project brief provides background information for the review, the key audit methodology, outputs, and timescales.
- 2 Since 2009, all UK Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) are required to record incidents attended via the online Incident Recoding System (IRS). This includes fire false alarms, which are categorised into three sub-categories:
 - due to apparatus – where an alarm or fire-fighting equipment operate in error, including accidental initiation by people.
 - good intent calls – where a person believes in good faith that the service is required.
 - malicious false alarms – where a person intends for a response to a non-existent incident.
- 3 IRS data on these categories is regularly published by the Welsh Government. Whilst there has been a significant reduction in false alarms since the financial year 2007-08, Welsh FRAs are still sending full-crewed responses to thousands of unnecessary incidents. During financial year 2020-21, Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities attended 14,880 false alarms:

Exhibit 1: false alarms by reason and financial year, 2007-08 and 2018 to 2021

Category	FY 2007-08	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20	FY 2020-21
Malicious	1,532	372	375	321
Good intent	5,946	5,855	5,422	5,810
Due to apparatus	12,120	8,258	8,484	8,749
Proportion of total incidents	35.6%	39.5%	40.8%	48.9%

N.B. 2007-08 is the earliest data available and is provided for context

Source: [Stats Wales](#)

- 4 In addition to those attended, FRAs also receive false alarms that are not attended due to the way they are handled by Control Operators. This is mainly the result of confirmation by the source of the signal that there is no incident. These are still false signals, but as a crew does not attend or are turned around enroute, they are not recorded in IRS data
- 5 The costs of attending these incidents are both financial and human, with increased risk and opportunity costs. The Welsh Government estimated that the 9,805 false alarms due to apparatus in 2013-14 cost Welsh FRAs £2.94 million (2014 prices)¹. These costs can vary according to various circumstances, such as the type of firefighter attending, or distance travelled.
- 6 Furthermore, as fire and rescue crews believe they are attending genuine incidents, their response is identical to that of a real fire. This can often mean a 'blue light' response, which also increases the risk for the crew(s) responding and other road users. In addition, there is the risk that a crew responding to a fire false alarm is unable to respond to a genuine incident or is delayed.
- 7 There are also additional costs with the deployment of equipment, such as additional wear and increased carbon emissions. This makes achieving the Welsh Government's target of carbon neutrality for the public sector by 2030 even more challenging. It also means opportunity is lost to train crews or for firefighters to be deployed to other activities, such as prevention work. As a result, there are incidental costs in addition to the immediate response that need to be considered.
- 8 Repeated and frequent false alarms can also undermine confidence in fire safety systems, leading to people at such premises potentially taking alarms less seriously. This may prove costly in the event of a real fire in the same premises.
- 9 The fire and rescue sector as a whole has identified the issue of false alarms and sought ways to prevent and reduce them. Guidance was produced by the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) in 2014² that focused on reduction following consultation with FRAs and other stakeholders. Collectively, the Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities produced guidance³ on false signals caused by automatic fire alarms in 2018.
- 10 In 2015, the Welsh Government published the report *Time for Action*, which examined this issue and presented a range of options for FRAs, building owners/occupants, and for collaboration between both. In addition, the 2016 National Framework⁴ also endorsed and adopted recommendations to 'identify the main sources of false alarms and take all reasonable and practical steps to reduce

¹ Welsh Government, [Time for Action](#), October 2015

² CFOA, [Guidance for the Reduction of False Alarms & Unwanted Fire Signals](#), 2014

³ Welsh Fire and Rescue Services, [Reducing Automatic Fire Alarm Signals](#), 2018

⁴ Welsh Government, [Fire and Rescue National Framework](#) 2016, November 2015

their incidence'. Since then, the volume of false calls has remained stubbornly above 14,000 incidents per year.

- 11 This review will, therefore, seek to understand why false calls remain so prevalent, the cost of them, whether past recommendations have been actioned and the other steps taken by the Authority to address them. The review is also an opportunity to share and learn from work in other parts of the UK.
- 12 For the purpose of this review, Audit Wales will primarily focus on non-domestic fire false alarms. As many false alarms originate from other public sector locations, such as hospitals, the review will highlight national themes for Welsh Government to consider.

Legislative basis for the review

- 13 This project is being undertaken to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under sections 17 and 41 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. It will also inform an examination undertaken by the Auditor General under section 15 of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

Purpose of the review

- 14 The review will provide assurance to citizens, the Welsh Government, and the Authority that sufficient progress is being made in reducing the prevalence of fire false alarms and their associated costs from primarily non-domestic buildings. It will also support the Authority to identify good practice and to see wider benefits, such as carbon emissions reduction.

Method

- 15 The project will largely involve document reviews and interviews. Where there may be a need for interviews, where practical we will seek to integrate this with other planned work and/or our regular liaison meetings with Authority officers/members.
- 16 In undertaking this project, we will also draw on the findings of our other ongoing and recent work, the findings of other Inspectors and Regulators and the work of the Authority's own internal review mechanisms such as the Authority's internal audit and scrutiny functions. Our key methods include:
 - **M1:** A review of cumulative audit and inspection knowledge and experience (CAIKE)
 - **M2:** Document reviews (see **Exhibit 4**)
 - **M3:** Interviews with key officers and authority members
 - **M4:** Interviews with other public sector organisations that are significant causes of fire false alarms
 - **M5:** Interviews with other FRAs to identify good practice

- **M6:** Short survey of building managers of key sectors

Main review questions

Exhibit 2: main review questions

The table below sets out the main questions we will seek to answer in undertaking this review.

Level 1
Is the authority doing all it can to reduce the prevalence and responses to non-domestic fire false alarms?
Level 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the Authority have a good understanding of the locations, causes and impacts of fire false alarms in non-domestic premises? • Does the Authority have a clear and appropriate plan or strategy for addressing fire false alarms in non-domestic premises considering risk and suitable evidence? • Does the Authority regularly, evaluate and monitor performance to ensure fire false alarms in non-domestic premises are reducing? • Has the Authority reduced the volume of fire false alarms it responds to in non-domestic premises?

Output

- 17 Once we have completed our fieldwork, we will provide a report and present our findings to the Authority. The report will include a summary of our findings together with recommendations for improvement and compare wider performance with the other Welsh FRAs.
- 18 We will continue to utilise the ‘no surprises’ approach and share emerging findings and conclusions with senior managers prior to reporting.

Intended Benefits

- 19 The review will help to:

- Provide assurance that the Authority has an appropriate strategy in place to reduce fire false alarms from non-domestic premises.
- Provide assurance that plans are in place to secure value for money in the use of resources.
- Provide insight through highlighting opportunities for improvement.

Timetable

Exhibit 3: timetable

The table below sets out a proposed timetable for the review at the Authority

Proposed timetable	
Draft project brief discussed with the Authority and a final draft issued	July 2022
Document review and other desktop analysis	July to October 2022
Interviews	October 2022 to January 2023
Emerging findings meeting and draft conclusions feedback	December/January 2023
Report issued and finalised	March 2023

Fieldwork schedule

Interviews

20 We will liaise with the Authority to identify and agree who will need to be interviewed to inform our review. As a minimum, we will interview members of the senior leadership team; the relevant Head(s) of Service; front-line staff, and representatives of key partner bodies involved in fire false alarm reduction. We can offer interviews in either Welsh or English.

Audit approach

- 21 Audit Wales continues to closely monitor the situation regarding COVID-19. Whilst we are conscious that the delivery of our audit must not detract from the important work of public bodies at this critical time, we are also confident that it can add value and insight to support organisations in their recovery. As a principle, we will always ensure we balance the delivery of our statutory responsibilities with giving public bodies the time and space they need to recover from the pandemic.
- 22 The Auditor General's priority remains to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of Audit Wales staff, their families and those of our partners elsewhere in the public service. Practically, this means that we will engage with the Authority to agree how best to deliver our fieldwork and we will remain flexible throughout.

Document request

- 23 Prior to interviews we will undertake a review of the documents identified below. However, we would be grateful if you could supply us with any additional documents which you feel may be relevant to our work in this area. The list is not exhaustive and requests for additional documents may be made during the course of the review. Where documents in the list below are publicly available on the Authority's website, we would be grateful if you could please direct us to where we can find them.

Exhibit 4: the table below sets out the documents we would like to request initially as part of this review

Document title
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fire False alarms reduction plan.• Any data (internal and IRS) capturing information on fire false alarms, such as causes, frequency, duration of response, and cost, including those not attended• Evidence and analysis of any consultation or engagement exercises to inform a fire false alarms strategy or policy.• Evidence of training and guidance provided to officers on implementing the fire false alarm strategy.• Corporate Plan.• Job descriptions, business case and specification of any role(s) dedicated to (or primarily) leading on the Authority's response to fire false alarms.• Terms of Reference and recent meeting minutes of any working groups co-ordinating and/or scrutinising fire false alarms.• Publicity and campaigning work on reducing fire false alarms.

Document title

- Evidence of progress in addressing previous Welsh Government recommendations.
- Evidence of engagement with public sector partners to reduce fire false alarms.
- Reporting of performance against targets, actions and milestones – to senior officers and Authority members.
- Breakdown of the cost of deploying a fire appliance to respond to a call.
- Contact details of building managers held by the Authority.

Audit Wales contacts

Exhibit 5: Audit Wales contacts

The table below sets out the Audit Wales team that will be working on this review at the Authority.

Role	Name
Audit Director	Derwyn Owen
Audit Manager	Nick Selwyn
Senior Auditors	Matthew Brushett Philippa Dixon Euros Lake Charles Rigby



Audit Wales

24 Cathedral Road

Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English.
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