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| REPORT REFERENCE NO. | CSC/24/13 |
| MEETING | COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE |
| DATE OF MEETING | 4 SEPTEMBER 2024 |
| SUBJECT OF REPORT | AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS PROJECT UPDATE |
| LEAD OFFICER | ACFO GERALD TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF SERVICE DELIVERY |
| RECOMMENDATIONS | <i>That the report be noted.</i> |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | This report gives an update on the project to review our response to automatic fire alarms to minimise the impact on the Service on attending false alarms. |
| RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS | As indicated in the paper |
| EQUALITY RISKS AND BENEFITS ANALYSIS | An equalities impact assessment will be produced for any proposed changes |
| APPENDICES | None |
| BACKGROUND PAPERS | Report DSFRA/23/27 – Strategic Business Change Plan Tranche 1 |

1. **INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1. This paper is to give a brief update on the Automatic Fire Alarms project.
- 1.2. This is one of the four main projects the Service is exploring to improve efficiency and reduce costs as reported to the Authority at its meeting on 11 December 2023 (Minute DSFRA/23/29 refers).

2. **BACKGROUND**

- 2.1. Fire alarms are vital tool 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 in non-domestic buildings or properties occupied by people who are vulnerable - provide an automatic fire detection which triggers a response from the Service.
- 2.2. The Service has four main categories for mobilisation:
 - Commercial/industrial (such as factories, warehouses etc.);
 - Retail/public assembly (such as shops, entertainment venues, places of worship etc.);
 - Residential (such as hotels, hospitals, care homes); and
 - Domestic.
- 2.3. Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, 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; and
 - provide staff information, fire safety instruction and training.
- 2.4. Any automatic fire alarm that the Service responds to that is not actually a fire is considered to be an 'unwanted fire alarms signal'.
- 2.5. In the last five years, automatic fire alarms have alerted the Service almost 48,000 times. On average, only 1.7% of the automatic fire alarms, the Service attended across all categories were classed as emergencies. In many cases, the fire was out on arrival and only 41 incidents required the use of a hose reel jet to fight the fire.
- 2.6. Unnecessary mobilisations provide a considerable cost to the Service, but it also has other impacts, including but not limited to:
 - Increases carbon footprint and contributes to poor air quality in the environment;

- Increases road risk to the workforce and the public;
- Causes disruption to on-call firefighters, which impacts local businesses and the local economy when staff are disturbed from primary employment. As a result, it could also impact upon our retention of on-call firefighters; and
- Disruption to wholetime work routines, interrupting crucial operational risk, prevention, protection, and training activities all of which are designed to keep our workforce and the public safe.

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

- only attending commercial/industrial premises automatically during non-working hours
- Fire Control 'call challenging' to confirm sight of fire before mobilising
- business safety teams working with businesses
- charging for repeat offenders
- communications messaging on best ways to maintain alarms.

2.8. Reducing wasted mobilisations would create a more efficient and effective Service for the communities of Devon and Somerset.

2.9. This is an issue that is prevalent across the fire and rescue sector. Several Services have either changed their approach to unwanted fire alarm signals or are in the process of doing so. It is also an area of focus for the National Fire Chiefs Council, who have produced guidance documents.

3. AIM, BENEFITS AND CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. The overall aim with the project is to reduce unnecessary mobilisations while making sure we maintain our response standard and do not put anyone at increased risk.

3.2. The Service will carry out a thorough risk assessment of all potential options to make sure people are safe. For example, we are not considering any changes to mobilisation to domestic properties or where there is a nighttime sleeping risk.

3.3. Anticipated benefits of the project include:

- Financial saving, which is to be determined based on analysis of all categories. It is estimated that this saving could be between £50,000 and £125,000 a year. A cost analysis will be provided in the full business case;
- Reduced disturbance for on-call firefighters and primary employers potentially leading to better retention;
- More productive time for wholetime firefighters to train and deliver risk, prevention, protection and community engagement work; and

- Reduction in road risk.

3.4. Potential solutions open to the Service are:

- Non-attendance to automatic fire alarms for some categories (we would then only attend if we received a call confirming sight of fire);
- Further non-attendance at specific times of day when the risk is lowest;
- Reduction in pre-determined attendance for initial response to automatic fire alarms, with potential to increase resources on confirmation of fire;
- Further call challenge for some categories;
- Further charging for attendance at an unwanted fire alarm signal; and
- Further targeted communications campaigns.

3.5. There are areas for consideration to make sure when the Service is reviewing changes to its response that it is not putting people or the organisation at unnecessary risk. They are:

| Consideration | Action |
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| The potential for a small delay in response to lead to a bigger, more resource-intensive incident. | The Service is analysing the data to look at the likelihood of this occurring and the potential impact. Any impact will be considered as part of the full business case and mitigations put in place where needed. |
| Impact on life risk | The Service will carefully consider each option and will not propose changes that will put people in danger, such as is the case for properties in the 'domestic' category. |
| Impact on community through non-attendance for the small percentage of fire alarm signals that result in fires due to delayed attendance. | Community impact assessment will form part of the business case and will be driven by data and insight gained from engagement work. |
| Delivering on His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) requirements for effectiveness and efficiency, if unwanted fire signals are not reduced. | Clear rationale for any changes that are or are not made based on risk communicated to the HMICFRS and additional work to reduce unwanted fire signals also cited. |

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| Gaining community and representative body buy-in to implement proposed changes. | Clear consultation and engagement plan to be in place for all key stakeholders. |
| Reduced payments to on-call firefighters by non-attendance may affect morale. | Clear rationale of drivers for change and benefits to the community they serve to be communicated to staff. The converse – that unnecessary mobilisations can also affect morale and retention – is also to be explored. |

4. CURRENT WORK AND NEXT STEPS

- 4.1. Following the development of the outline business case, which looked at the overall potential for benefits across category area, the project has undergone a further review. Data analysts are looking deeply into each sub-category so to see where a more targeted approach our adaptations can provide benefits.
- 4.2. The data analysts are exploring what is gained from responding to automatic fire alarms, and what the impact would be of not responding. We will then assess the opportunities and risks for each sub-category area in changing how we mobilise to automatic fire alarms.
- 4.3. The second area of review to inform the full business case is engagement with multiple stakeholders. This will include our own staff, selected responsible people for premises, a representation of parish and town councils, businesses who employ on-call firefighters, representative bodies, and disability groups, among others
- 4.4. This engagement will include both quantitative and qualitative methods and explore the opportunities, barriers and concerns people may have with any potential changes.
- 4.5. Once the data analysis and engagement research are complete, they will be used to form a full business case with options for change, which will be presented to the Executive Board and Portfolio Board.
- 4.6. Any proposed changes to our response to automatic fire alarms will then be subject to a consultation, the results of which will further inform the decision-making process.
- 4.7. Subject to the findings of the consultation, it is expected that any changes to our response to automatic fire alarms will be implemented from April 2025.

ACFO GERALD TAYLOR
Director of Service Delivery