

FIRE SERVICES EXAMINATION BOARD

STUDY NOTE

EXAMINATION	LEADING FIREFIGHTERS EXAMINATION
PAPER	FIRE SAFETY, EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT
SUBJECT	COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY
ITEM	UNNECESSARY FIRE CALLS
STUDY NOTE No.	1204

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY NOTE

This study note has been prepared as the basis of study in connection with the qualifying examinations for promotion.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the information contained in the study note and understand how it should be applied:

The 'References' made at the end of the Study Note are included for information only and candidates will not be expected to study these as part of the bibliography.

UNNECESSARY FIRE CALLS

1. Introduction

False alarm calls are a drain on the resources of all Fire Services, but more importantly they could affect mobilisation to other incidents which may involve threat to life.

Additionally, there is an unnecessary risk to members of the public, other road users and Fire Service personnel when appliances are being driven to incidents which turn out to be an unwarranted call.

Furthermore, it should be realised that they also disrupt other Fire Service activities and Community Fire Safety work organised to improve both the overall safety of members of the public and the effective provision of an efficient Fire Service.

However, the problem is not exclusively a fire brigade problem since false alarms also erode the confidence of end-users in the value and reliability of AFD systems and can cause costly interruptions to manufacturing work procedures. False alarms also have a detrimental effect on the support of full-time employers for those firefighters on the retained duty system since they will also suffer lost production from unwanted fire signals.

This study note briefly outlines the processes which may help to reduce unnecessary calls and which should be familiar to a Leading Firefighter.

2. Types of Unnecessary Calls

Unnecessary calls can be divided into two basic types:

- (a) those that are made maliciously (FAM); and
- (b) those that are received from an automatic fire alarm system (AFA).

False alarms received from automatic fire alarm systems (including domestic systems) can be further split into two sub-groups:

- (a) those which are False Alarms with Good Intent (FAGI); and
- (b) those caused by faults with the systems which are False Alarms Electrical (FAE).

3. False Alarm Malicious (FAM)

False alarm malicious calls are those calls which have been received either by direct use of the '999' system, and on arrival at the incident it is apparent that there is not a fire and a good reason why someone should have called the Fire Service, or is a call received by an alarm system where the break glass call point has been broken deliberately.

Put simply, FAM calls are nuisance calls and there are actions which must be taken to minimise the affect of these calls on the Fire Service.

4. Offences

The Fire Services Act 1947 covers the offence of making a false alarm of fire to any fire brigade.

Section 31 of the 1947 Act states:

“Any person who knowingly gives or causes to be given a false alarm of fire to any fire brigade maintained in pursuance of this Act or to any member of such a brigade shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine or to imprisonment or both such fine and such imprisonment”.

Additionally, making a malicious call is a criminal offence and callers can be prosecuted under both the Telecommunications Act 1984 and the Harassment Act 1997.

Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984 states that:

“A person who :

- (a) sends, by means of a public telecommunication system, a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character; or
- (b) sends by those means, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, a message that he knows to be false or persistently makes use for that purpose of a public telecommunication system,

shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale or both.”

5. Typical Fire Control Procedures

Fire Brigades have procedures for dealing with calls that are suspected to be malicious. The procedures will vary from brigade to brigade but may typically be as follows:

- (a) If a call is received, which is not from a telephone kiosk, and the Fire Control Operator believes the call to be a hoax, it will be declared a “Suspected False Alarm Malicious” call.

Fire Control will mobilise a reduced pre-determined attendance of one firefighting appliance.

If the incident is confirmed as a hoax, the Police will be informed of the unnecessary call, which will be recorded as - False Alarm Malicious.

- (b) If a call is received from a person in a telephone kiosk, and the call is believed to be of a malicious nature, then the caller is challenged as to the authenticity of the call.

ie "Your voice is being taped, if this is a hoax call, the tape will be passed to the Police. Do you wish to continue?"

Should the caller clear down or become abusive, then the call is deemed to be abandoned by the caller and the Fire Service makes no attendance. The call details however are passed to the Police.

6. Statistical Recording

All unnecessary calls received should be recorded for statistical purposes onto a dedicated computer database which should be made available regularly to personnel who can collate and use the information to initiate Community Fire Safety programmes to combat any growing trends.

Some Fire Brigades may have dedicated Community Fire Safety personnel who would be available to interrogate the database, to determine patterns of commonality throughout the Brigade's area.

Other Fire Brigades may rely on Local Stations to carry out this task for their own Station areas:

- (a) In all cases, when a trend is detected liaison is essential between the Fire Service, Police and other interested parties, to enable a structured common approach to be adopted to the problem.
- (b) Information should be released throughout the local community to inform them of the problem in the area.
- (c) Schools in particular should be targeted in an aim to educate the young as to the consequences of unnecessary calls.

7. Detection Using CCTV

Where a call is received from a public telephone kiosk in an area that is covered by close circuit television, the Police should be informed to enable them to check the video tapes to assist in the identification of the hoax caller(s).

Where persistent hoax calls can be identified as originating from the same kiosk, the telephone company has the ability of providing individual miniature CCTV surveillance within the kiosk. Arranging CCTV in such kiosks is a matter for brigade management due the costs involved.

In some areas the use of notices within a telephone kiosk warning that it is monitored has been shown to be sufficient to reduce the number of malicious calls.

8. Officers-in-Charge of Fire Appliances

If information is passed to the officer-in-charge that the call being attended is suspicious, the officer should note this, but until the call has been investigated the incident should be dealt with as an emergency call. It is emphasised that appliances should always attend the address that they are mobilised to in the first instance.

Investigations should be undertaken at all incidents of this nature to try and identify the caller, or the person responsible for the malicious breakage of a fire alarm call point. It may be that members of the crew identify the same person at the scene of a malicious false alarm call as at a previous malicious false call. If this is the case, the Police should be asked to attend and deal with the matter.

Where malicious calls are made from telephones other than those in public places, the telephone may have computerised facilities that can check for last number called, last number calling, caller location and other such facilities. These should be checked to try and identify hoax callers.

If the person who has made a false alarm call is a young child, making the call from their home, it is possible that there was no malicious intent and that it was a mistake or a desire to see what happens when you call the fire service, in which case the officer-in-charge of the appliance will be expected to advise the child and parents of the consequences of their actions.

Where a person suspected of making a false alarm call is under 10 years of age, they are considered, in the eyes of the law, to be minors. Questioning under 10's should only be carried out with their parents or a Police Officer present. Consideration should also be given to speaking to children between the ages of 10 and 16 with an adult present.

Some Brigades have "young fire setter" schemes which deal with youngsters who for whatever reason start fires. These schemes operate safety awareness and fire education programmes and are run by dedicated trained personnel. Where appropriate, the officer-in-charge of the appliance should refer "young fire setters" or "potential young fire setters" to such a scheme.

Where the identified person making the malicious call is an adult, then the attendance of the Police should be requested and the matter handed over to them to deal with.

9. Awareness of Malicious Calls

Personnel should be aware of the regularity of unnecessary fire calls on their Station ground.

Information about FAM may be gleaned from 4 main sources:

- (a) Personnel who attend the incidents.
- (b) Station incident records.
- (c) Fire Control.
- (d) Community Fire Safety.

The Station Commander should be advised by personnel of any relevant information to enable the Officers to monitor all unnecessary calls and take further action to reduce the impact on the Service as necessary.

10. Calls by Automatic Fire Alarm and Detection Systems (AFAs and AFDs)

A false alarm is defined as 'any fire alarm or fire signal other than a genuine fire or test signal'.

Nationally, the percentage of unnecessary Automatic Fire Alarm calls in comparison to the overall total of emergency calls received from such systems is very high and various studies have been undertaken with the aim of providing solutions to reduce such calls.

By addressing rogue systems, a demonstrable reduction in the problem may be achieved. It has been proposed that each brigade should compile a list of its 20 worst "offenders" in terms of unwanted fire signals generation. After discussing the problem provided with the management of each "offender" and, where relevant, the local representative of the British Fire Protection Systems Association (BFPSA), a targeted reduction in the number of false alarms should be agreed.

The identification of the worst "offenders" will enable the brigade to undertake appropriate research into the history and causes of unwanted fire signals. Resources could then be targeted to seek solutions to the problem.

Positive action to reduce these numbers should include:

- (a) The establishment of a robust database of statistical information recording the causes of unnecessary calls from AFA and AFD systems within the Brigade area.

Initially this information could be collected by the officer-in-charge of the appliance attending the call, who should give advice to the occupier of the premises on how to prevent a re-occurrence of the alarm.

- (b) The officer-in-charge investigating the AFA call should to identify the system, zone, detector head and cause of the false signal if it is known. These details should be recorded and made known to the responsible person on site to enable the details to be entered onto the premises Fire Alarm System Log Book, where one is provided.

A list of recommendations should be left with the responsible person which gives advice to the owner/occupiers of premises fitted with automatic fire detection on how to avoid false alarms. (see Appendix A)

- (c) The officer-in-charge investigating the AFA call should ask to see the premises fire alarm log book to see whether the system is being maintained and tested, that details are being recorded in the log book and if a reputable engineer had been called to inspect the system to rectify any previous fault(s).

- (d) If it is thought that the alarm system is not being maintained or tested in accordance with the appropriate standard then a leaflet explaining to the user, their responsibilities, should be left with the occupier/owner or the matter reported to the Fire Safety department or Station Commander for action.
- (e) Before leaving the incident, the officer-in-charge should stress the importance of always calling the Fire Brigade whenever the alarm sounds.
- (f) It should be remembered that at no time should Service personnel ever reset the alarm system. Doing this could hamper the investigation by a competent engineer into the cause of the alarm. It also reduces the onus on the owner/occupier to have the system checked.
- (g) On return to station, the officer should complete a false alarm statistical report and forward it to the relevant centre for processing and placing on the appropriate premise file for the necessary follow up action.

11. Common Causes of Persistent False Alarms

Common causes of false alarm calls can be identified as indicated below:

- (a) smoke detectors within close proximity to kitchens and other cooking facilities;
- (b) the incorrect type of detector for the area being protected, i.e. Ionisation detectors where optical detectors would be better suited, and visa-versa;
- (c) Insects; and
- (d) poor maintenance.

In each of these instances, the amount of calls can be radically reduced or stopped altogether by:

- (a) advising occupiers/owners to change smoke detectors for heat detectors in areas where this would not compromise the safety of the occupants;
- (b) advising occupiers/owners to change the type of smoke detectors in certain areas;
- (c) advising occupiers/owners to ensure kitchen doors are closed before cooking takes place; and
- (d) ensuring that correct maintenance of the whole system is carried out on a regular basis as recommended by the manufacturer of the system.

Where advice is given to occupiers a "note for case" for fire safety file should be prepared so that any officer inspecting the premises in the future will be aware of the background.

References

Fire Services Examinations Board

AUTOMATIC FIRE DETECTION - AVOIDING FALSE ALARMS

Guidance For Owners/Occupiers Of Buildings Fitted With Automatic Fire Detection Systems

1. Introduction

Properly used and maintained, your automatic fire detection and alarm system, with its fast response to fire, can be a significant factor in reducing the risk to life and the limiting of damage to your property in the event of fire.

The very features that provide this fast response can also produce unwanted fire signals arising from activities other than real fire. These can prove both costly to the Fire Service, by initiating unnecessary attendance of fire appliances, and to you the occupier by requiring evacuation of a building, which can result in loss of production and disruption of normal business activities, as well as a loss of confidence in the system.

Recent surveys show that up to 43% of unwanted alarms are attributable to human error or equipment malfunction. The key to effectively avoiding many of these factors is by adopting suitable procedures, correct supervision and the appointment of a person to be responsible for the system.

2. Appointment of a Responsible Person

- (a) This person should have a good understanding of the operation of the fire alarm system as well as the consequences of poor maintenance and inadequate routine testing.
- (b) The person appointed should have sufficient authority to maintain the system in correct operation.

3. Duties of the Responsible Person

- (a) The responsible person should ensure that any users of the system are instructed in its proper use.
- (b) Ensure a clear space is maintained around all fire alarm and automatic detection equipment at all times.
- (c) Ensure that if a fault is indicated by the fire alarm panel, the reason is determined and recorded in the log book and arrangements made for repair.
- (d) Have available, installation drawings and operating instructions which should be kept up to date and available for convenient reference.
- (e) Ensure that a log book is properly maintained and available for inspection. The log book should record all changes affecting the status of the systems.

- (f) Establish liaison with those responsible for building and plant maintenance or redecoration, to ensure their work does not cause faults, interfere with system operation or false alarms.
- (g) The responsible person should ensure that visiting contractors are made aware that the building is equipped with an automatic fire detection system, to prevent unwanted alarms being caused by work in the vicinity of detectors where temporary work involves the generation of smoke, dust or paint spray.
- (h) Ensure that during building work, or other dirty activities, arrangements are made for smoke detectors to be protected by temporary covers, which are removed at the end of each working day. Upon completion of the work, any temporary covers should be removed, an entry made in the log book and the system properly reinstated.

4. Servicing

- (a) Correct regular servicing is essential and normally an agreement should be made with a competent contractor, immediately upon completion of the installation. The responsible person should ensure that the terms of the contract are met.
- (b) The responsible person should ensure that the routine system checks are properly conducted and that others are familiar with the system to cover their absence.

5. Unwanted Calls

- (a) Where an unwanted alarm has occurred, the detector or manual call point should be identified and examined, the cause of the alarm established wherever possible, and the incident recorded in the log book.
- (b) Installations, detectors, or locations with noticeably high unwanted alarm rates should be subjected to detailed investigation. It may be necessary to modify the system to alleviate the problem. (Before modification, consultation should be sought with the Fire Authority and any other relevant organisations).