



# How to Investigate & Reset your Fire Alarm

*Guidance for Premises Managers*

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, October 2012

## Fire or False Alarm?

There's a price to pay for false alarms. In some businesses the disruption they cause has cost as much as £120,000 a year. Worse, they can cost lives, because fire-fighters can't be in two places at once.

We will no longer send fire appliances to calls from buildings where the only information available is that a 'fire alarm is sounding'. Correct application of the advice below will ensure that, in the event of a real fire, the full attendance is sent immediately.

To prevent the disruption and the risk posed by false alarms, and ensure the appropriate attendance is sent, we're asking building managers to investigate the source of fire alarm actuations before fire crews turn out, provided this process can be undertaken safely.

Whether it's a fire or false alarm, **always ensure the building is evacuated in accordance with your emergency procedure whenever the alarm activates.**

When staff investigate, they should leave the building by the nearest fire exit and summon the fire service using the 999 system if at any time they so much as **think** they've seen signs of a fire. We're not asking them to be absolutely certain; it'll be our job to check reports of fire or physical signs of fire.

## How to investigate

Remember you're looking for **signs of a fire** and not a fire itself. If there's an obvious fire there's no need to investigate simply phone 999 telling us what has happened and we'll be on our way.

- Where possible, don't search for signs alone. Consider searching in pairs.
- Check the fire alarm panel to find where the alarm has activated – it's vital that you have a full zone or detector plan displayed immediately adjacent to the panel.
- Have another member of staff at the alarm panel and remain in contact (mobile phone or short range radios are ideal for this purpose).
- When investigating **look**, **listen** and **smell** for signs of fire. It might be smoke, unusual noises or heat and could be any one, some, or all of those signs.
- Before opening a door feel it with the back of your hand, as high up the door as you can reach, for signs of heat. If it is hot **do not** open the door
- If at any time you discover signs of fire, raise the alarm, get out using the nearest fire exit and call the fire service on 999.
- When the call to the fire service is made, clearly state that an investigation has taken place and this is a call to a **FIRE** and not just an alarm sounding.

## No signs of fire?



## Reset procedures following a False Alarm

The following advice will help you to comply with fire safety legislation, keep your staff and premises safe and avoid future fire alarms:

- It is good practice to allow the evacuation to complete (interrupting an evacuation is confusing and leads to a false sense of security that every alarm is false)
- Ensure that whoever has been given the responsibility to reset the fire alarm are trained and competent to do so. If arrangements have been made with a third party to ensure the alarm is reset, (such as an on call fire alarm company) details of how to contact the company should be displayed immediately adjacent to the panel
- Any third party company contracted to reset your alarm should be able to attend within a reasonable time period as most fire alarms will not detect another fire if they are in 'silenced' mode or have not been fully reset
- Fire-fighters will not reset your fire alarm system for you. It is your responsibility to reset, or employ an on-call alarm company to reset for you
- Ensure the details of any false alarm are recorded in the fire alarm logbook. Record why it happened (if known) and its specific location. This is essential to demonstrate your compliance with fire safety law and to ensure the correct information is available to ensure it doesn't happen again
- All false alarms should be reported to the premises manager so that appropriate action can be taken to avoid further false alarms

## Causes and potential solutions to avoid false alarm

Many false alarms result from activities carried out near to fire detectors, particularly smoke detectors. To prevent unwanted false alarms, you should consider the following common causes and solutions and do something to stop them from happening in your workplace.

<b>Cause</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>Cooking fumes</b>	Ensure cooking is only allowed in designated locations which have appropriate detection (usually heat). Correct use of extractor fans and the closing of doors between designated cooking areas and detector heads can further prevent false alarms.
<b>Steam</b> (i.e. from shower rooms)	Ensure there is adequate ventilation in the shower room and keeping doors to outer rooms closed. Sometimes signage can help guests / staff; understand the need to close doors and take action to avoid build-up of excessive steam.
<b>Steam</b> (from industrial processes)	Ensure an appropriate detector type is fitted; seek advice from a qualified alarm engineer.
<b>Smoking</b> (cigarettes)	Should only be allowed in designated locations protected by appropriate detectors i.e. designed to be suitable for the risk whilst not being susceptible to actuation from cigarette smoke.
<b>Aerosol sprays</b>	Where possible, you should prevent the use of aerosols in the vicinity of fire alarm detector heads, where such cannot be avoided use of alternative products should be considered.
<b>Hot work/dusty work</b>	Consider fitting temporary covers on detectors while the activity is being carried out. Temporary covers should only be fitted by approved staff and removed <b>immediately</b> after the activity has ended. Whilst detectors are covered in this way, staff working in the area (including contractors) should be briefed to activate a 'break glass' call point if they see a fire.
<b>Accidental damage to a 'Break Glass' call point</b>	Consider protecting susceptible break glass call points with approved covers or guards.
<b>Testing or maintenance</b>	Prior to commencing any testing or maintenance you must inform your alarm centre to take your system 'off watch' for the duration of the activity.
<b>Changes to the use, or practices within the building</b>	Ensure the fire-detection system is appropriate for how the building is used.

Some of the solutions above are management related and can be resolved by management actions alone. Others rely on changes to the fire alarm system. Changes to fire alarm systems should only be undertaken by a competent person or contractor. Any such changes should only be undertaken after a fire risk assessment has been carried out and should be documented on appropriate certification kept in your fire safety logbook.