



# Automatic Fire Alarms: The case for change

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Date: 11 December 2018

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### Notes:

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## Introduction

**1.1** Based on the six financial years between 2012 and 2017, **51%** of all calls that Avon Fire & Rescue Service (AF&RS) received were due to a false alarm. When taking into account the [current response](#) that the service provides to Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs), this has placed a requirement on our Service to attend approximately 4,131 calls each year, which equates for **37%** of all incidents that we have attended.

**1.2** This places a large burden upon the resources available to our Service causing disruption to other risk-critical activities that we carry out; raising the question whether these activities are an efficient use of time and resources? This is justifiable when taking into account that only 1.9% of these calls actually result in an emergency incident.

**1.3** Following the recommendations of the [Statutory Inspection](#) into Avon Fire and Rescue Authority published in July 2017, we have brought forward our IRMP planning cycle as part of our Improvement Programme and will publish a new three-year integrated Service Plan on 1 April 2019. Part of this plan includes our proposals to provide a more effective and efficient response to AFAs.

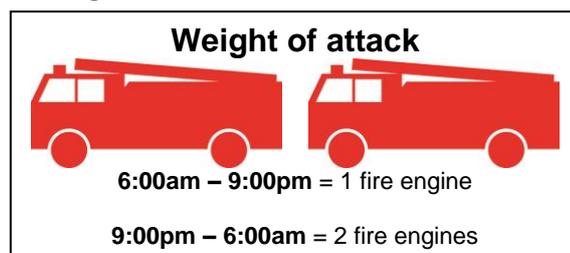
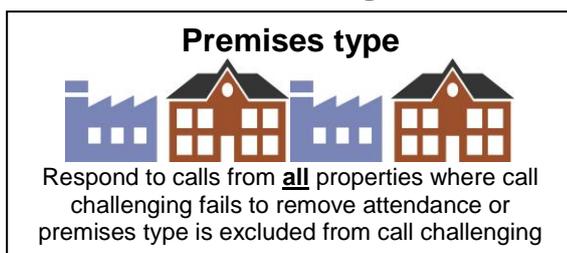
### [Proposals for change](#)

**1.4** We propose to:

- call challenge all properties where an AFA is received regardless of risk; except care homes which may expect to see an AF&RS response without the application of call filtering as per [BS5839-1 and CFA Guidance](#);
- where call challenging fails to remove need for attendance, mobilise to AFAs that are received from [sleeping risk](#) and [high risk](#) properties only (in line with our [risk rating process](#)); and
- reduce the weight of attack that is sent to an AFA to one fire engine.

**1.5** In summary, we propose to change:

- **From our existing method** of responding to AFAs:



- **To our new method** of responding to AFAs:

<p><b>Premises type</b></p>  <p>Respond to <a href="#">sleeping risk</a> and <a href="#">high risk</a> premises types where call challenging fails to remove attendance.</p>	<p><b>Weight of attack</b></p>  <p>1 fire engine sent at all times</p>
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**1.6** It is important to be clear that for the purposes of this paper [our proposals for change](#) **do not alter our response to alarm calls that are received from domestic dwellings.**

**1.7** The public consultation on our new Service Plan (including these proposed changes to our response to AFA's) runs for eight weeks from 7 January to 1 March 2019. We would welcome your views and our [consultation question](#) is included in [section five](#).

- 2.1** Since the beginning of austerity in 2010, AF&RS has had to make substantial savings year-on-year while continuing to provide the high level of service that the public expects.
- 2.2** During the period 2010/11 to 2018/19, real-term revenue savings of £14.5m (26%) have been achieved. Additionally, capital grant of £1.5m is no longer received which has resulted in increased borrowing cost pressures.
- 2.3** Further savings may need to be identified in 2019/20 as a result of the removal of the public sector pay cap during 2017/18, the current actuarial review of the Firefighters' Pension Schemes and inflation running well above Government targets.
- 2.4** Due to these financial pressures, the Service has been through unprecedented change over the last eight years and the savings we still have to make will place great strain on our ability to deliver our services to the public.
- 2.5** To continue to be able to deliver the high level of service the public expects, we need to look at being smarter, more efficient and more effective so that the resources at our disposal are used to maximum potential and effect.
- 2.6** Following the recommendations of the [Statutory Inspection](#) into Avon Fire and Rescue Authority published in July 2017, the Service established an Improvement Programme to make changes in preparation for the future. One element of work within this programme has been to look at our response to automatic fire alarms.
- 2.7** This work stream compliments the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) [guidance](#) for the Reduction of False Alarms and Unwanted Fire Signals (2010), aimed to ensure improvements across the sector. Individual Fire and Rescue Services (FRS's) have to now consider new response strategies to AFA's to reduce the overall cost and [impact](#) of such calls.
- 2.8** An AFA is simply a fire detection and alarm system which provides a reliable means of signaling an alarm to an occupant(s), so that action can be taken to deal with a fire before it takes hold.
- 2.9** Depending upon the type of AFA system in place, we are often notified of the alarm activation due to a 999 call from a person, or a call from an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) which has passed the information onto our Service.
- 2.10** Our Service receives and responds to approximately 4,131 AFA calls each year. These account for **37%** of all incidents that we have attended for the six financial years between 2012 and 2017, with only 1.9% of these calls actually resulting in an emergency incident.

**2.11** We respond to these AFA calls even though there is not a legal requirement for us to do so, while absorbing the demand that they place upon our resources and the disruption they cause to other critical work activities.

**2.12** This report explores our current response to AFAs, the options for change that have been explored and [our proposals for change](#) so that we can provide a more efficient and effective service in the future.

**2.13** It is important to be clear that for the purposes of this paper [our proposals for change](#) **do not alter our response to alarm calls that are received from domestic dwellings.**

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### Our current response to AFAs

**3.1** When a call to an AFA is received, our control room initially uses a call challenge or filtering process for premises types not excluded from this process (shown in Table 1). This process allows for additional information to be gathered about the cause of the alarm, following which a decision is made about what, if any, response is made.

**3.2** In most circumstances where a call is challenged, the caller will be asked to establish the cause of the alarm before the control room mobilises the relevant Pre-Determined Attendance (PDA) to the premises.

**3.3** At present, calls received from the following premises types will not be call challenged by our control room operators and a response will be automatically sent:

**Table 1: Premises types currently exempt from call challenge**

- domestic premises
- houses in multiple occupancy;
- residential flats;
- sheltered housing;
- residential care;
- nursing homes;
- unoccupied premises;
- hospitals;
- hotels;
- schools;
- sites subject to COMAH Regulations 2015;
- other high-risk sites or incident types with a bespoke pre-determined attendance detailed in the relevant standard operating procedure (for example, Bristol Airport); and
- sites of special interest

**3.4** When the control room operator deems that a response to an AFA is required, the amount of resource deployed is as follows:

**Table 2: Fire cover categories**

**For alarms operating in unoccupied premises, hospitals, hotels and other business and commercial premises:**

<b>Between 6:00am and 9:00pm:</b>	Nearest fire engine(s) with a combined crew of five.
<b>Between 9:00pm and 6:00am:</b>	The nearest fire engines with a minimum combined crew of nine (for multi-storey buildings additionally the nearest aerial appliance).

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**3.5** This level of response will be superseded (with the full PDA being sent according to the premises type) in the following situations:

- any call to premises where a special PDA is required;
- calls to multi-storey flats with residential accommodation;
- where information from the caller indicates that there is a confirmed fire in the premises;
- where the call is backed up from another source to confirm a fire; and/or
- at the discretion of the Mobiliser within the control room.

### **How do other FRS's respond to AFAs?**

**3.6** For statistical analysis and comparison, our service is grouped within what is called 'Family Group 4'. This is essentially 18 services which are similar in population size to our own service area.

**3.7** Against our Family Group we rank 3<sup>rd</sup> from bottom<sup>1</sup> for attending AFAs. The best performing are FRS's who have policies of not attending any reports of false alarm. Performance can also be improved by working with commercial premises to reduce AFA's from occurring when a fire is not present (false alarm).

**3.8** The same can also be said for our neighbouring FRS. For example, Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Service does not respond to AFAs unless it is backed up with a 999 call, and Devon and Somerset Fire & Rescue Service has a non-attendance protocol which applies between the hours of 8:00am to 6:00pm, Monday to Friday.<sup>2</sup>

### **How many AFAs do we receive?**

**3.9** For the six financial years between 2012 and 2017, **37%** of all incidents that we have attended have been in response to AFAs. On average, this equates to 4,131 AFA incidents per year.

### **How many AFAs do not receive AF&RS attendance following call challenging?**

**3.10** For the six financial years between 2012 and 2017 out of the 4536 calls to AFAs received by AF&RS, 1656 were in properties that initially get call challenged, making up 36.5% of all AFAs received; of these 24.5% did not receive an attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the reporting figures from the first quarter of the 2018/19 financial year

<sup>2</sup> Only relates to certain non-residential premises types unless a prior risk assessment indicated that other arrangements were necessary

## How many AFAs turn out to be real emergencies?

**3.11** Of the 4,131 AFAs received annually, on average only 67 of these turn into working incidents where an emergency situation has occurred. This equates to 1.9% of the total, and therefore 98.1% of AFAs received turn out to be a false alarm.

**3.12** Of these 67 incidents, 78.6% occurred in premises that are considered [high risk](#) and/or [sleeping risk](#).

**3.13** In comparison, when we are called to a fire there is a 67% chance that it will result in a working incident where an emergency situation has occurred, and this increases for a Special Service Call (SSC)<sup>3</sup> to 95%.

## Impacts of AFAs

**3.14** There is an impact upon our Service and the local communities from responding to AFAs. These impacts are shown in Table 3.

*Table 3: Impacts of automatic fire alarms*

### Impacts upon our Service:

- diverting essential services from real fires and rescues (putting life at risk);
- unnecessary risk to crews and the public whilst responding (accidents);
- disruption to training, arson reduction and community safety activities (education saves lives);
- adverse effect on the best value performance indicators; and
- demoralising to personnel.

### Impacts upon local communities:

- an increased level of risk to pedestrians and other road users from vehicles responding under 'blue light' emergency driving conditions;
- diverting essential services from real fires and rescues (putting life at risk);
- cost to business from on-call firefighters being released from the workplace;
- disruption to arson reduction, community safety and fire safety activities (education, home fire safety visits, etc.);
- environmental impact of vehicle movements; and
- a drain on public finances.

## How does our response to AFAs compare to other incident categories?

**3.15** All emergency incidents can be categorised as being a fire, an alarm or a SSC. Our average weight of attack<sup>4</sup> at the time of receiving a call to each of these categories is shown in Table 4.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of a SSC are road traffic collisions, rescue of persons or making a scene safe.

*Table 4: Weight of attack by category*

Category type	Weight of attack (at time of call)
Fire	1.85
Special service call	1.76
Alarm	2.19

**3.16** As can be seen from Table 4, on average, the weight of attack to an alarm is currently larger than that to a call of fire or SSC. This poses the question: why do we send more resource to a false alarm when, statistically, it is far less likely to result in an emergency incident when compared to calls of fire and/or SSC, as shown in [sections 3.11 and 3.13](#).

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<sup>4</sup> **Weight of attack:** refers to the number of service assets (vehicles) deployed to an incident. This may differ depending upon the premises type and/or risks present.

## Introduction

4.1 There are three key elements to consider in relation to making our response to AFAs more effective and efficient. These are:

- deciding which AFA **premises types** we will call challenge;
- deciding which AFA **premises types** we will respond to; and
- the **weight of attack** that will be sent in response to the AFA.

## Options

4.2 The options that have been considered in relation to these key elements are:

### Call challenge options

*Table 5: Which AFA premises types will we call challenge?*

#### Option i

We can continue with our current mobilisation policy ([see section 3.3](#)) and call challenge all non-[high risk](#) properties.

#### Option ii

We call challenge all properties regardless of risk; except care homes which may expect to see an AF&RS response without the application of call filtering as per [BS5839-1 and CFA Guidance](#).

### Response options

*Table 6: Which AFA premises types will we respond to?*

#### Option 1

We can continue with our current mobilisation policy ([see section 3.3](#)) as it is and mobilise to all AFAs received from all properties types (subject to the call challenging process).

#### Option 2

Mobilise to [sleeping risk](#) and [high risk](#) properties only (in line with our [risk rating process](#))

#### Option 3

Mobilise to sleeping risk properties only (in line with our [risk rating process](#)). This means we won't respond to AFAs in non-sleeping premises unless the alarm has been backed up by a call confirming that there is a fire.

#### Option 4

Non-mobilisation for all AFAs – that is we only respond to an automatic fire alarm if somebody calls us to

**Table 6: Which AFA premises types will we respond to?**

Confirm that the alarm is sounding because there is a fire; in other words, it is not a false alarm.

**Table 7: Weight of attack**

**Option (a)**

Maintain the current weight of attack that is sent to AFAs.

**Option (b)**

Reduce the current weight of attack to one fire engine only.

## Analysis of the options

**4.3** The key areas of analysis which have influenced our decision making in relation to the three key elements are:

### Call Challenge Options

**4.4** AF&RS record all AFAs regardless of the level of response provided and using this information we are able to determine the number of AFAs not attended.

**4.5** For the six financial years between 2012 and 2017 1656 AFAs received by AF&RS were in properties that initially get call challenged; of these 24.5% did not receive an attendance.

**4.6** Both call challenge options are set out in table 8, and show the number of AFAs that would fall within the call challenging strategy and using the non-attendance rate of 24.5% previously achieved for non-[high risk](#) properties show the projected number of AFAs the service would and wouldn't attend.

**Table 8: Options analysis – Call challenge AFA statistics** <sup>5</sup>

	Option (i) Call challenge non- <u>high risk</u>		Option (ii) Call challenge all except care homes	
	Total	%	Total	%
No. of AFA calls received	4,536			
Call Challengeable AFAs	1,251	27.6%	3,968	87.5%
Attendance	4,131	91.1%	3,565	78.6%
Non-attendance	405	8.9%	971	21.4%

In summary, Option (ii) when compared to Option (i) provides a significant increase in the number of AFAs that we would call challenge. If we achieve the same 24% non-attendance rate on these calls which are call challenged, it provides the potential for less AFA calls requiring attendance.

### Response Options

**4.7** To enable more detailed consideration of the options set out above, and the potential affect that these options will have upon our Service and the communities that we serve, Table 9 below compares performance data for each of the options.

**4.8** Set out against each option is the number of AFAs that the service will respond to, the weight of attack sent, and the total number of personnel hours that responding in such a way would have required, based on our AFA response statistics form the six financial years between 2012 and 2017.

**4.9** When considering the total number of hours taken, this is based upon the fire engine hours taken up which would carry a crew of either four or five firefighters. This highlights the impact upon our resources and the effect upon work productivity in other areas of the Service. For example, some of this time could be spent on fire prevention and protection activities making the public and local businesses safer, whilst improving the local management of AFAs which will reduce the number of calls we receive in the first instance.

<sup>5</sup> Option (ii) is predicted based upon current levels of response

**Table 9: Options analysis – annual AFA statistics<sup>6</sup>**

	Option 1 Current response		Option 2 Sleeping risk and high risk only		Option 3 Sleeping risk only		Option 4 Non- mobilisation for all AFAs	
	Total	Reduction	Total	Reduction	Total	Reduction	Total	Reduction
No. of AFAs	4131	-	2865	31%	2665	35%	67	98%
<b>Option (a) - Maintain the current weight of attack that is sent to AFAs</b>								
Deployments <sup>7</sup>	9070	-	6517	28%	6349	30%	196	98%
Hours	2766	-	1997	28%	1876	32%	104	96%
<b>Option (b) - Reduce the current weight of attack to 1 fire engine only</b>								
Deployments <sup>8</sup>	4247	53%	2981	67%	2764	70%	196	98%
Hours	1343	53.5%	933	66%	865	69%	104	96%

**4.10** In summary, the option which provides the greatest reduction in number of AFAs requiring attendance is Option 4 with a 98% reduction. However, when considering this approach, the additional risk that is posed to our service and our communities needs to be taken into account due to not attending [sleeping risk](#) and/or [high risk](#) premises.

**4.11** Whilst Options 2 and 3 do not reduce the number of AFAs requiring attendance as much as Option 4, with a reduction of approximately one third, they pose less risk as they provide a risk based approach depending upon premises type through our [risk rating process](#).

<sup>6</sup> Options 2, 3 and 4 are predicted based upon current levels of response

<sup>7</sup> **Deployments** – the weight of attack x the number of AFA’s attended

<sup>8</sup> **Deployments** – the weight of attack x the number of AFA’s attended

## Introduction

**5.1** Subject to the outcome of an eight-week public consultation period in January and February 2019, we plan to implement our proposed changes from April 2019. Until April 2019 we will continue to respond to AFAs in line with our current response which is detailed in [sections 3.1 to 3.5](#) of this report.

**5.2** Any changes that we make to our response will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment. This is a way for us to understand how our plans may affect the different communities we serve and our own staff – both positively and negatively. Using this information, we can then adapt our plans to make sure no-one is disadvantaged by how we deliver our work.

## Our proposal

**5.3** In relation to the three key elements explained in [section 4.1](#) of this report and the options given within [section 4.2](#), we propose the following:

- **Which premises types will we call challenge?**

We propose that we adopt Option ii: call challenge all properties regardless of risk; except care homes which may expect to see an AF&RS response without the application of call filtering as per [BS5839-1 and CFA Guidance](#).

- **Which premises types will we respond to when called to an AFA?**

We propose that we adopt Option 2: mobilise to [sleeping risk](#) and [high risk](#) properties only (in line with our [risk rating process](#))

- **Weight of attack**

We propose that we adopt Option (b): Reduce the current weight of attack to one fire engine only.

## Rationale for our proposal

**5.4** Increasing the premises types the Service call challenges allows it to ascertain a cause of alarm and deploy appropriately; potentially removing an estimated 566<sup>9</sup> AFA attendances a year with little risk of not attending emergency incidents while making our response to AFAs more effective and efficient.

**5.5** Based on past performance we estimate that we will respond to 1,354 less calls per year. This will free up approximately 1,833 fire engine hours, translated into personnel hours this would be a minimum of 7,332 hours<sup>10</sup>.

**5.6** Firefighters will be able to use this significant amount of freed up time to carry out other work such as risk-critical training, community safety interventions, familiarisation visits at [high risk](#) premises and fire safety inspections, which will make our Service stronger and our communities safer.

**5.7** We also believe that the balance given between Option 2 and Option (b) not only makes our response to AFAs more effective and efficient, but it also keeps the level of risk that the public and local businesses are exposed to down to a minimum. This is because we will still be responding to the premises types which potentially pose the most risk.

## Financial costs/savings

**5.8** Based upon the current rate of pay for a competent firefighter of £17.35 an hour<sup>11</sup>, and the estimated reduction of 7,332<sup>12</sup> personnel hours that will be released for other fire and rescue service related activities as a direct result of not responding to as many AFAs, the annual revenue cost in terms of wages that will be freed from responding to AFAs will be **£127,210**.<sup>13</sup>

**5.9** Although this £127,210 will not be a direct saving to the Service in 'real monetary terms' the savings will come through efficiency and providing better value on this spend of £127,210.

**5.10** Although the specific figures are not known, there will be significant financial savings from the reduction in vehicle movements and subsequent reduction in miles being travelled.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on figures from [Table 8](#) – attendance total for option (i) minus attendance total for option (ii).

<sup>10</sup> Fire engines respond with a minimum of four firefighters, therefore 1,833 fire engine hours would give 7,332 personnel hours. However, fire engines fluctuate between four and five firefighters so figure could be a higher.

<sup>11</sup> This is based upon the total hourly rate (with on-costs) for a wholetime competent Firefighter on the 2006 pension scheme

<sup>12</sup> 11064 (Option 1 with Option (a) hours = 2766 x 4 the number of crew members) minus 3732 (Option 2 with Option (b) hours = 933 x 4 the number of crew) = 7,322 hours

<sup>13</sup> 7,322 (hours saved) x £17.35 (competent firefighter hourly rate with on-costs) = £127,210

## Benefits

**5.12** The significant benefits for our Service that can be expected from adopting Option 2 and Option (b) are:

*Table 10: Expected benefits of proposed changes*

- Increase the availability of essential services for real fires and rescues.
- Reduce unnecessary risk to crews and the public whilst responding (accidents).
- Increase time available (approximately 7,332 hours) for other critical fire service functions; such as arson reduction and community safety activities.
- Reduce the environmental impact of vehicle movements and our carbon footprint.
- Limit the drain on public finances.
- Reduce the cost to business from on-call firefighters being released from work.
- Provide additional time for risk critical training, increasing firefighter safety and competence.
- More efficient use of our resources (financial, personnel and equipment)

## Risks

**5.13** Potentially significant risks that our service may face after adopting Option 2 and Option (b) are:

*Table 11: potential significant risks of proposed changes*

- the potential for an AFA in a premises type that we no longer respond to turning out to be a fire
- reputational damage if the above was to occur

## Consultation question

An Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) is a fire detection and alarm system which provides a reliable means of signalling an alarm to the occupants of a property providing an early warning, so in the event of a fire, people can escape to safety. Although we are not legally required to attend potential incidents just because a fire alarm system has sent an alert, we will currently respond to AFAs we are alerted to, unless you call us to confirm it's a false alarm.

Based on the six financial years between 2012 and 2017, **51%** of all calls that our Service received were due to a false alarm. When taking into account the current response that we send to AFAs, this has placed a requirement on our Service to attend approximately 4,131 calls each year, which equates for **37%** of all incidents that we have attended. In addition to the significant demand this places on the Service, taking into account that only 1.9% of these calls actually result in an emergency, this means that our firefighters are attending false alarms, instead of saving lives. Changing our response to AFAs would not only free staff up to save lives, we can also do further prevention and protection work (including inspections) to avoid fires.

We are therefore proposing to only respond to AFAs that are received from sleeping risk and high risk properties only (in line with our risk rating process). We also propose that we only send one fire engine in response to these AFAs. To be clear our proposals for change **do not alter our response to alarm calls that are received from domestic dwellings.**

Do you agree with our proposals for changing the way in which we respond to automatic fire alarms (AFAs)?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

You are invited to share your view and any additional thoughts, comments or suggestions via our consultation feedback form.

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Term or abbreviation	Meaning
ARC	Alarm Receiving Centre
AFA	Automatic fire alarm
AF&RS	Avon Fire & Rescue Service
COMAH	Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations 2015
PDA	Pre-determined attendance
BS5839-1	Residential and care homes will be sent a response due to the requirements of BS5839-1 where it is not practical to expect a filtering process to be carried out
Control room	<p>The control room is based at Lansdown and handles all of the 999 emergency calls for the area. Fire Control staff have a vital role and are trained to deal with any 999 call that they might receive, from a house fire to a serious road traffic collision or cliff rescue.</p> <p>From their knowledge of the Avon area, Control staff help callers identify their exact location, provide fire safety advice to people who might be trapped inside a burning building and continue to reassure callers until the moment firefighters arrive on the scene. They are also trained in dealing with other incidents, including chemical, radiological, biological and nuclear incidents.</p> <p>When Fire Control staff receive a call they assess the situation the caller is in and then mobilise a fire engine(s) to the incident. Fire Control staff are then responsible for the needs of the firefighters by dispatching further resources as required, arranging relief crews, liaising with other agencies and providing important operational information for the duration of each incident.</p>
Dwelling	A house, flat, or other place of residence.
High Risk (risk rating process)	<p>Our own risk based process will be applied to determine the level of risk posed by premises. The factors that will be taken into consideration when determining if a premises is allocated a high risk rating are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupancy</li> <li>• Time of day</li> <li>• Protection measures</li> <li>• Height</li> <li>• Size</li> </ul>

Term or abbreviation	Meaning
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use</li> <li>• FF Safety</li> </ul> <p>This is not an exhaustive list but will form part of the main areas to determine the risk rating.</p> <p>The reason for calculating high risk in such a way is because the risk will be affected by the factors above and as such cannot be simplistically grouped into sleeping risk or commercial risk as the risk will vary between those groups. Potential examples are the difference between a Five star luxury hotel and a cheap run down hotel, or commercial premises which are fully occupied during the day (Tynsfield House) but isolated and of great historical, political and financial importance during the night when a fire could break out and would not otherwise be investigated.</p>
Sleeping risk	<p>This applies to premises where the main use is for sleeping accommodation. Examples include care homes, domestic dwellings, hotels, hostels, holiday villages, student halls of residence, and homeless persons' accommodation (not an exhaustive list).</p> <p>With the exception of residential and care homes which will be sent a response due to the requirements of <a href="#">BS5839-1</a> and <a href="#">CFOA Guidance</a> where it is not practical to expect a filtering process to be carried out, the sleeping risk premises which we attend will be determined by our own risk based process as per the <a href="#">risk rating process</a> above.</p>

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