



**Northern Ireland  
Fire & Rescue Service**

# **FIRE ALARM MONITORING**

## **CODE OF PRACTICE**

**Arrangements for effective liaison,  
collaboration, communication and mutual  
co-operation between the parties**

**Effective from 1 February 2024**

*Safer  
Together*

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this Code of Practice is to detail Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) expectations for management of fire signals arising from fire alarm and fire detection systems.

## 1.2 Aims

The aims of this Code of Practice are to:

- > provide a working framework for co-operation and coordination;
- > provide clarity on expectations and protocols;
- > reduce the number of false alarms generated by fire alarm systems;
- > reduce the number of false alarms forwarded to NIFRS; and
- > reduce the impact on NIFRS resources, activities and personnel.

## 1.3 Fire Alarm Monitoring

Premises are generally either:

1. remotely monitored by Fire Alarm Monitoring Organisations (FAMOs), or
2. remotely monitored by Alarm Receiving Centres (ARCs), or
3. remotely monitored by Telecare (social alarm) monitoring organisations, or
4. self-monitored by premises managers or occupiers.

Types 1, 2, and 3 are collectively referred to as FAMOs.

FAMOs provide the valuable function of protecting property in the event of fire in buildings outside normal working hours, when unoccupied and as back-up to on-site filtering arrangements. FAMOs also provide valuable monitoring services for vulnerable groups through monitoring fire alarms which are part of social alarm system provision.

ARCs are a specific type of FAMO inspected to BS5979 “Remote centres receiving signals from fire and security systems – Code of Practice”. The standard states specific requirements for the ARC on site selection, construction, facilities, operating

procedures and alarm handling techniques (including filtering) and is used by the ARC to ensure that a suitable and sufficient standard of operational effectiveness is achieved.

Telecare (social alarm) monitoring organisations have a specific role in the monitoring of an individual. It is accepted that there will be occasions when call filtering should not be applied due to the specific risk relating to the individual such as decision making capability. The Telecare Services Association provides advice, standards and guidance on accreditation for monitoring vulnerable individuals.

Premises managers or occupiers provide the valuable function of having detailed knowledge of their premises and are able to set in place effective investigation and on-site filtering arrangements.

## **1.4 Limitations**

This guidance is limited to arrangements for effective emergency call handling. Although some fire safety legislative requirements are detailed, NIFRS website at [www.nifrs.org](http://www.nifrs.org) should be consulted to gain comprehensive detail on all of the other fire safety arrangements that premises managers are required to implement.

## **1.5 FAMO Standards**

It is important that each type of FAMO adopt all the recommendations considered necessary for their specific monitoring functions. This is likely to incorporate best practice from BS5839, BS5979 and the Telecare Services Association Code of Practice.

## **1.6 Legal Responsibilities**

Persons who own, manage or operate a business, need to comply with fire safety law. The main laws that apply in Northern Ireland are:

- > The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006; and
- > The Fire Safety Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010.

The Order applies to almost all buildings, places and structures that aren't domestic premises. Other places covered by the Order include houses in multiple occupation

(HMOs), and facilities for the protection of Firefighters in blocks of flats and maisonettes.

NIFRS will always respond to calls reporting a fire but is not legally required to respond to calls originating from a fire alarm system if a fire, or signs of a fire, have not been confirmed.

The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 (the Order) states that the employer and persons in control to any extent of relevant premises are legally responsible and must have in place a Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) that details, amongst other measures, what actions are to be taken upon actuation of a fire alarm system. The FRA should include action to notify NIFRS via the 999 system as soon as a fire, or physical signs of fire, are confirmed.

In many types of premises it will be appropriate to investigate the cause of an alarm before notifying NIFRS. Where an investigation period is employed, the fire and rescue service ought not to be called until the outcome of the investigation is known (except in residential care premises where it is necessary to summon the fire and rescue service as soon as the fire detection and fire alarm system operates). This can minimise disruption to the occupiers, and prevent false alarms being transmitted to NIFRS. It is not sufficient to rely upon NIFRS to investigate the reason for the actuation of the system.

In addition, the Order states that a person shall be guilty of an offence if they knowingly report a false alarm (a fire or other emergency) to NIFRS and on summary conviction shall be liable to a fine and details held on a criminal record.

The installation, management and maintenance of fire alarm systems and emergency procedures are a key responsibility that falls within the Order. Staff must be well trained in what to do in the event of a fire or a fire alarm sounding, know how to evacuate and managers must have arrangements in place to meet the fire service on arrival. NIFRS, as the enforcing authority, will inspect premises to confirm compliance.

## 2. Management of Fire Alarm Systems

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This section details the impact and management expectations for the installation and maintenance of fire alarm systems.

### 2.1 Impact of False Alarms

The impact of false alarms include:

- > diverting emergency services away from people who may be in life-threatening situations and who need urgent help;
- > disruption of business due to downtime, time wasted, and loss of business;
- > erosion of users confidence in the value and reliability of fire alarm systems;
- > discouragement of people taking alarm signals seriously;
- > negative impact on managers and monitoring organisations dealing with false alarms;
- > unnecessary risk of accidents to firefighters and public whilst responding;
- > disruption to training of NIFRS personnel and the delivery of community safety initiatives;
- > cost to businesses of on call firefighters being released; and
- > drain on public finances.

### 2.2 Installation and Maintenance of Fire Alarm Systems

Fire alarm systems should be designed, installed, commissioned, managed and maintained in accordance with British Standard 5839: Fire Detection and Fire Alarm Systems for Buildings.

BS5839 Part 1 should not be applied prescriptively, e.g. without consideration of design and use of the building. This can result in conflict with other areas of BS5839; such as Section 3 - Limitation of false alarms, which contains guidance on filtering measures including design, detector selection, time related systems, etc.

BS5839 Part 6 recommends that prior to establishing a monitored connection in domestic premises, guidance on the avoidance of false alarms (as contained in BS5839 Part 6 Annex D) should be sent to the occupier or landlord.

This Code of Practice expects designers, installers, commissioners, acceptors, maintainers and managers of fire alarm and fire detection systems to fully utilise the innovative applications in design and make use of permitted variations as necessary in their application of these filtering measures. Application of a fire alarm and fire detection system should complement the overall fire risk assessment, including consideration of the effects on business continuity for the occupier/s process and for minimising unnecessary fire and rescue services emergency response. For example, it may be appropriate to introduce measures only during certain times, e.g. application of an investigation period only during occupied times.

## 2.3 Reducing False Alarms

There is no doubt that the disturbance caused to businesses and the occupiers of premises by false alarms is a problem that managers will wish to keep to an absolute minimum. However, if should a fire occur, it is vital that the system operates correctly and people are alerted and evacuate immediately.

Listed below are a series of solutions that can be implemented to address the common faults encountered.

## 2.4 Common Faults and Solutions

- > **Call Filtering** - if your fire alarm sounds, check first to confirm if there is a fire or fire symptoms before calling NIFRS. Do not call NIFRS if it is a false alarm. The only exception is in residential care premises when NIFRS should always be called immediately.
- > **Zone Plan** - a zone plan, or a written description of the zone locations relating to your fire alarm system, should always be on display beside your fire alarm panel.
- > **Log Book** - the user should maintain a log book to record all false alarms, the action taken, and the maintenance and testing of the system.
- > **Staff Training** - should include input on the type of fire alarm system in your premises and the correct procedures for both raising the alarm and investigating a fire alarm actuation. Details of training must be recorded.



- > **Keyholder** - a keyholder trained to reset the alarm system should be contacted by the Fire Alarm Monitoring Organisation (FAMO) or Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) in the event of an alarm outside of normal business hours. They should be able to attend the premises within 20 minutes of being notified. NIFRS will not reset alarm panels.
- > **System Faults** - a maintenance contract must be in place to rectify faults and service the system on a regular basis.
- > **Cooking Fumes** - ensure heat detectors are fitted in kitchen areas and ensure that adequate ventilation is provided. Many false alarms are caused by the inappropriate siting of detectors or the wrong type of detector for the identified risk.
- > **Steam** - ensure that adequate ventilation is provided in showers or bathrooms and consider re-siting or fitting an alternative type of detector if steam is causing repeated false alarms.
- > **Call Points** - prevent accidental operation and deter malicious operation by moving manual call points to a more suitable location or fitting a protective flap or cover over call points. If a cover or flap is fitted, clear instruction on use must be provided to staff and visitors.
- > **Smoking** - smoking regulations prevent most premises from having indoor smoking areas. They are permitted in care homes, hospices and prisons but must be a specific room with adequate ventilation and a heat detector.
- > **Dust from Workers/Engineers** - people must be briefed in advance. If dust will be generated, place a cover over the detector head and remove when the work is complete. No-one should be permitted to work in the area, or on the system without being briefed by management in advance.
- > **Fire Alarm Companies** - if your premises is/are connected to a Fire Alarm Monitoring Organisation (FAMO) or ARC, make sure they are informed before any work is carried out on the system. If your alarm actuates, ensure they can contact your premises to confirm that a fire, or signs of fire, have been detected. Advise them of your normal hours of business because this information may affect any emergency response from NIFRS.

- > **Weekly Tests** - complete the required weekly test of your alarm system at the same time and on the same day of each week for all routine fire alarm system checks and inform your FAMO/ARC of this day and time.

## 3. Expectations for Fire Alarm Monitoring

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To ensure effective co-operation and coordination between NIFRS and monitoring organisations, the following principles provide a common understanding of NIFRS expectations for fire alarm monitoring.

### 3.1 NIFRS Expectations

NIFRS expectations are that organisations will:

1. Provide a single point of contact to NIFRS Regional Control Centre to consult on Code of Practice matters.
2. Not filter calls to vulnerable persons or residential care homes.
3. Filter calls to all other premises in accordance with the principles detailed in Section 4.
4. Ensure that information confirming the presence of fire is passed to NIFRS immediately.
5. Ensure that instructions for premises access for the emergency service are provided as appropriate.
6. Ensure that arrangements are in place to mobilise a key holder to premises within 20 minutes of the time of call.
7. Ensure that premises managers are aware that NIFRS will not await the arrival of a key holder or reset fire alarms.
8. Be aware that NIFRS will not apply additional call filtering. NIFRS will assume that filtering will already have taken place by the fire alarm monitoring organisation.
9. Not call NIFRS post incident to identify the cause of an alarm. This is to ensure operators are kept available for emergency call handling. Queries can be made during normal working hours via the Area Headquarters Protection Department.

## 3.2 Emergency Call Handling

The information that must be provided to NIFRS to ensure effective emergency call handling includes:

- > an accurate address of the premises;
- > the use of the premises;
- > if the premises is occupied or unoccupied;
- > if the premises contains sleeping accommodation;
- > the cause of the alarm if known or unknown;
- > if there are signs of fire (flames, smoke, smell, or strong indicator) and their location;
- > if there are persons trapped or missing;
- > specific access arrangements such as a key code, or premises information box; and
- > if a key holder has been mobilised and their estimated time of arrival.

For Telecare (social alarm) monitoring organisations who monitor an individual alarm in a self-contained flat, which can be within a larger premises, and with a voice box to be able to speak to the occupier, it is very important that accurate information is provided, in addition to providing advice provided to the occupier.

If a fire has been confirmed, or it is confirmed that persons are trapped, NIFRS will mobilised significant additional resources.

If it has not been possible to speak to the occupier, or they deliberately cut off the call, or a fire has not been confirmed, it is important that that information is provided to ensure that NIFRS do not mobilise additional unnecessary resources.

## 3.3 Signs of Fire

Signs of fire include visual flame, smoke, a smell of burning, or a strong indicator from a fire alarm system.

A strong indicator from a fire alarm system is when:

- > a multi-sensing detector\* has activated;
- > multiple detectors have been activated;

- > sprinklers have activated; or
- > fire suppression systems have been activated.

Where one of these scenarios arises, the caller should state that signs of a fire are confirmed. This is to ensure there is a simple and consistent approach for all types of premises.

\*A multi-sensing detector activates if there is more than one fire indicator, such as heat and smoke. They are not to be confused with a combination alarm that will activate if there is one indicator, such as heat or smoke.

Where a manual call point, or a single heat detector has been activated, the duty holder should set in place arrangements suitable for the premises to confirm if there is a fire.

## 4. Call Filtering

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### 4.1 Domestic Premises

All fire alarm signals received from domestic premises (all Single Private Dwellings) should be subject to a call back for confirmation of fire. Unless there are known circumstances which would make it appropriate to increase the time limit, the call back should be limited to 30 seconds if not answered, before passing to NIFRS. When answered, the call filtering process should be applied as per Section 4.3 below.

A vulnerable person can be identified as a person aged 18 years or over who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness and who is or maybe unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.

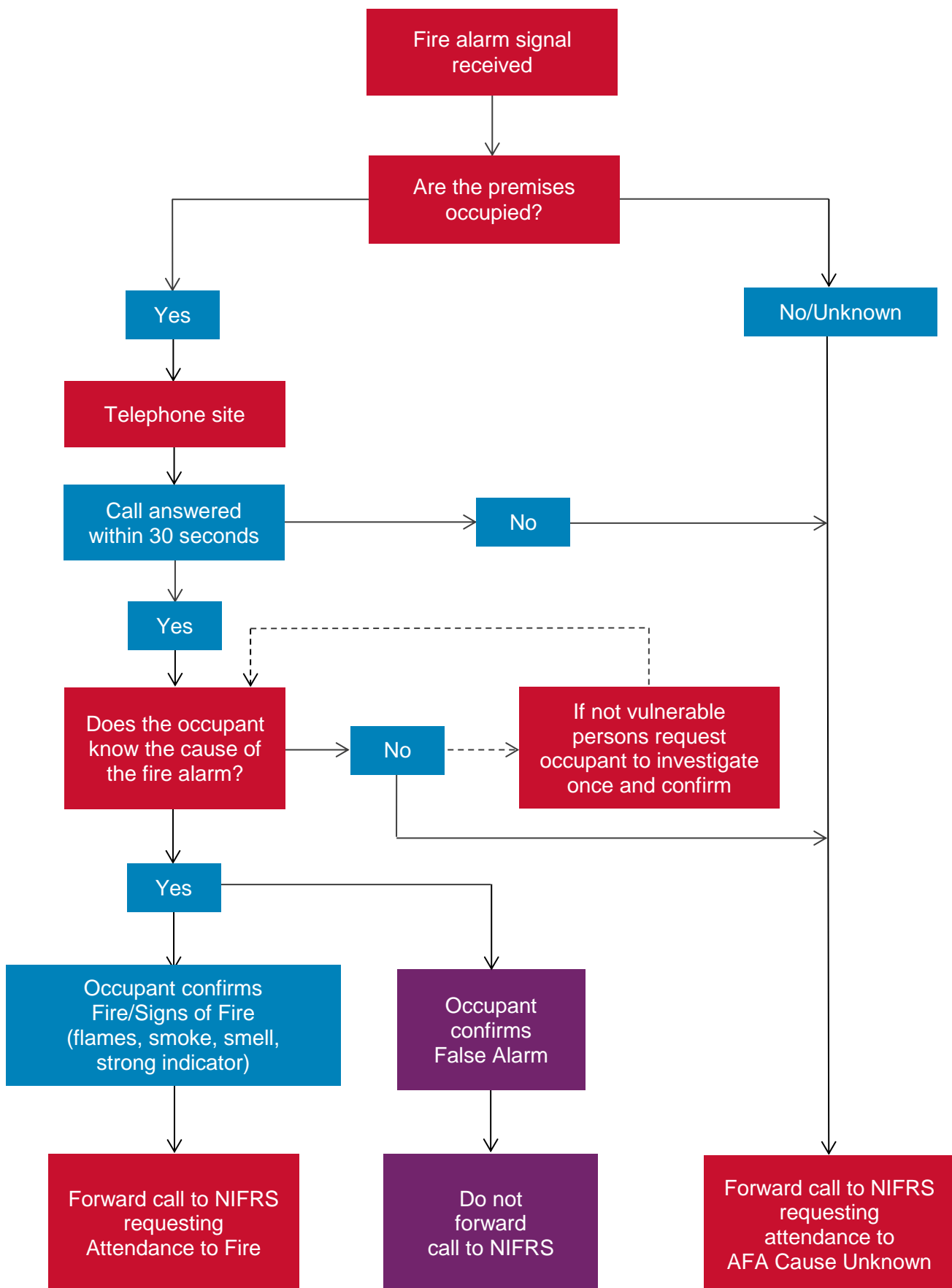
Call filtering of a fire alarm system monitoring a vulnerable person should not be automatically applied, but considered through an appropriate risk assessment. Where the risk assessment determines that filtering should not be applied, a system should be put in place to 'flag' to the operator that the call should not be filtered before sending through to NIFRS.

### 4.2 Commercial Premises

This includes any premises that are not a Single Private Dwelling.

Filtering arrangements should be supplied to the FAMO by the responsible manager. This must include either on-site filtering arrangements or a request for a call back facility. Unless justified otherwise under a risk assessment, the call back should be limited to 30 seconds.

### 4.3 FAMO Call Filtering Process



## 5. Co-operation and Coordination

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Effective co-operation and coordination is essential to ensure the needs of both NIFRS and monitoring organisations can be met through mutual understanding.

Open and transparent lines of communication will be achieved through:

- > direct two way communication between NIFRS Regional Control Centre and monitoring organisations in relation to emergency call handling;
- > engagement and liaison between NIFRS fire safety inspectors and premises managers in relation to legislative requirements and measures to reduce false alarms;
- > engagement at operational incidents between the manager on site and NIFRS officer in charge;
- > periodic circulation of this Code of Practice to FAMOs; and
- > the promotion of false alarm advice and this Code of Practice through NIFRS website at [www.nifrs.org](http://www.nifrs.org).



## 6. Further Information & Guidance

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Queries in relation to Emergency Call Handling from monitoring organisations may be made via:

### **Regional Control Centre Duty Officer**

#### **NIFRS Headquarters**

1 Seymour Street | Lisburn | BT27 4SX

**T** 028 9266 4221

**E** [rccdutyofficer@nifrs.org](mailto:rccdutyofficer@nifrs.org)

Further information and guidance about this Code of Practice can be obtained from:

### **Protection Department**

#### **NIFRS Headquarters**

1 Seymour Street | Lisburn | BT27 4SX

**T** 028 9266 4221

**E** [protection@nifrs.org](mailto:protection@nifrs.org)

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