

Protocol for Security Staff Responding to a Building Fire Alarm

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Document owner		David Sharp (Fire Safety Advisor)	
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Introduction

This document details the protocols to be followed by University of Reading Security staff that may have to respond to a building following the activation of the fire alarm system. Safety is paramount and all personnel tasked with investigating a building fire alarm activation must have received training as agreed by Security Management and Health and Safety Services.

Proceeding to the building in alarm

If you are travelling in a vehicle, always 'drive to arrive safely' without putting yourself or other road users at risk. Ensure that you follow University and local Security instructions for travelling in university motor vehicles. On arrival at the building in alarm consider where you park ensuring any attending fire brigade vehicles are not impeded.

On arrival at the building

- Look for signs of fire or possible causes of the alarm.
- Ask the Building Evacuation Officer, Fire Wardens and building occupants if they know what has caused the fire alarm.
- If it is confirmed there is a fire, do not enter the building, instead radio Security Control with the information provided and request a further 999 call is made to summon the fire service. It is imperative a further 999 call is made because the fire service may not send a fire engine unless a fire is confirmed.
- If reliable information is gained that it is a false alarm, inform Security Control immediately.

Interrogation of the Fire Alarm System

Until the building fire alarm panel has been interrogated no one should progress into the building to investigate the cause of the fire alarm activation. Fire alarm panels are located at building entrances, so it is acceptable to interrogate the fire alarm panel with just one person.

Investigating the cause of the fire alarm

If after talking to the Evacuation Officer and building occupants it is not possible to ascertain the cause of the fire alarm activation, Security Staff should investigate further adhering to the following advice: -

- **Numbers of Staff:** - Investigate in pairs with a 3rd person remaining by the alarm panel.
- **Communications:** - Ensure radio contact is maintained between staff investigating the alarm and the staff member at the fire alarm panel.
- **Monitoring of the Fire Alarm Panel:** - The security officer remaining at the fire alarm panel must continually monitor the panel and update the investigation officers should there be any changes or further activations.
- **Silencing the fire alarm sounders:** - If it is confirmed by the Building Evacuation Officer or any other responsible person that everyone is accounted for, then consider silencing the fire alarm – but do not reset the system. Silencing the fire alarm system may make communications between the search team and the person at the fire alarm panel easier. If it cannot be confirmed that a full evacuation has taken place, leave the fire alarm sounding. It is important should the fire alarm be silenced the Evacuation Officer is notified to ensure the occupants do not re-enter the building believing the incident to be over.
- **Signs of a fire:** - Whilst searching for the cause of the fire alarm activation it is important to observe for any signs of fire. Should a fire be identified immediately inform Security Control and if safe to do so attempt to extinguish the fire with a suitable fire extinguisher or leave the building by the nearest available fire exit.
- **Opening doors within a building:** - Before opening any doors, feel the door with the back of your hand, as high up the door as you can reach for signs of heat. Feel the door handle with the back of your hand - it may feel hot if there is a fire behind the door. Look through any vision panels for signs of fire or smoke; also check for any visible smoke from around the door edges. If you can hear any unusual sounds such as crackling from behind the door this may indicate a fire.
- **Identifying the device activated:** - The fire detector / manual call point which has activated will show a continuously illuminated led light, normally the colour red. Once the device activated has been identified and it is confirmed there is no fire within the room or area, update Security Control and ask the officer by the panel to reset the fire alarm panel. If the glass has been broken in a manual break glass call point the glass must be replaced before resetting the fire alarm panel.
- **Laboratories:** - There are numerous hazards within laboratories with potential to cause harm and injury to security staff. For this reason, security staff should not wonder around laboratories to investigate a fire alarm signal unless they are accompanied by an appropriate staff member of the building who understands the risks. If there is no such person available, then security staff should check on the room from the door or look through windows.
- **Detectors located in voids, above ceilings or below floors:** - Fire detectors may be located in voids not readily accessible. These may include lift shafts, riser cupboards, ceiling and floor voids. Often void detectors will be fitted with remote indicators adjacent to the void which illuminate when the void detector has activated. Accessing voids to inspect a detector may require working at height, floor lifting tools and Estates keys. For this reason, if security staff are unable to access the void, Estates staff should be requested to assist. If signs of a fire are observed ensure that the fire service is called out immediately.
- **Acting on Information:** - If reliable information is received from a building occupant which corresponds with the fire alarm panel and it appears the cause of a building fire alarm is a false alarm, it is permissible for a single security officer accompanied by the occupant to confirm the source of the alarm (radio contact must be maintained with the Security Control Room).

Establishing the cause of a false alarm

In order to eliminate or reduce the risk of further false alarms, it is important the cause of the alarm is established. Typical causes of false fire alarms are:

- Burnt toast and cooking fumes
- Steam from showers and kettles.
- Water ingress from burst pipes etc.
- Smoking materials and Vapes
- Candles and incense sticks
- Insects
- Aerosols such as deodorant, hair spray and air fresheners
- Dust from contractors.
- Weather related – high temperatures in summer and rapid temperature increases in winter caused by heaters being switched on.
- Faulty fire detector devices – some devices will fail causing a fire alarm.
- If the cause can be established ensure that this information is relayed to Security Control, Evacuation Officers and Estates as required.

Resetting the fire alarm system

Once the cause of the fire alarm has been established consider the need for remedial action to eliminate a further activation. Typically, this could mean ventilating a room or instructing builders to cease work pending agreement on improved or revised working practices. If confident that all is in order, reset the fire alarm panel. Then wait for approximately 60 seconds at the fire alarm panel to ensure the fire alarm does not reactivate. If the system resets inform the Evacuation Officer and give the all clear to allow occupants to return to the building.

Failure of fire alarm to reset

If the fire alarm system will not reset and it is confirmed there is no fire, the Estates electrician should be asked to attend via the helpdesk or Duty Engineer. It is permissible to allow re-occupation with the fire alarm system in silenced mode (if another device activates the system will sound the alarms again).

Incident Closure

Take all appropriate actions following the fire alarm incident, typically this may include:

- Reporting actions to a Team Leader
- Briefing Evacuation Officers on what has happened offering advice where necessary to prevent reoccurrence.
- Contacting the Estates electrician to rectify a fault.
- Escorting the fire service to the scene of the activation if required.
- Securing the building out of hours.
- If there has been a fire, secure the area and if out of hours depending on the severity and amount of damage, contact the Estates Duty Engineer and a senior manager from the building e.g. Head of School or Department. If considered appropriate implement the Major Incident Plan (MIP).
- Ensuring a full report of the incident has been entered onto IRIS and sent to the relevant personnel.