



Learn by example

Richard Jenkins describes how concerning levels of false fire alarms can be tackled by adopting the security sector's approach

RECENTLY PUBLISHED reports about fire and rescue service (FRS) deficiencies have highlighted a number of deep seated problems in the fire safety sector. These have focused on issues including significant training lapses and an unduly high number of unnecessary FRS callouts to false alarms. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services evaluated 15 FRSs in 2019 and identified three (London, Essex and Gloucestershire) as requiring improvements. It also found that London Fire Brigade (LFB) had been 'wasteful' and 'slow to implement changes' over the past three years.

While average LFB response times in 2017-18 were graded as 'excellent', the report said that approximately 48% of these were to false alarms and that not enough was being done to reduce unnecessary callouts. Home Office figures show that more than 150,000 FRS callouts in England in the year ending March 2019 were 'due to apparatus' such as automatic fire alarms - about two thirds of all false alarms.

Of those, 40,813 were caused by 'faulty equipment' and 34,582 were listed as 'cooking/

burned toast'. These have been the top two causes of false alarms among English FRSs for the past eight years. *BBC News* reported in December 2019 that five out of six English FRSs say they do not send crews in response to every automatic fire alarm, because the 'vast majority' are false and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) has said that repeated false alarms put the public in danger.

The majority of these false alarm calls are caused by automatic systems being set off by, for example, burnt toast, steam, aerosols or cigarette smoke; or simply because the system is badly maintained.

Frustratingly, the fire sector is yet to benefit in a similar way to the security sector, where 25 years ago deep seated problems associated with high levels of false alarm rates were tackled by a combination of measures implemented through a cross party collaborative approach. This successfully tackled detrimental issues affecting intruder alarms through actions centring on third party certification (TPC), inspection and approval of installed monitored alarm systems.



by approved providers. Becoming approved necessitated signing up to TPC and an ongoing programme of independent third party inspection and approval, delivered in part by the National Security Inspectorate (NSI). A certificate of compliance to key alarm standards, along with monitoring of the alarm by an approved alarm receiving centre, was required to obtain a unique reference number (URN), without which a police response was unavailable.

The success of this approach is readily demonstrable in a number of ways. The false alarm rate has reduced over time by more than 90%, and the deterrent effect of now reliable approved alarms serves its purpose. The number of burglaries has fallen over the long term, fewer police officers are deployed on 'wasted' call outs and there have been sizeable resultant savings to the public purse.

Insurer gains

In addition, from the insurers' point of view, burglary is no longer the greatest overall risk covered. It has long been overtaken by fire and flood, and this has been reflected in insurance premiums over the long term – benefiting end users in turn. Commitment to TPC has delivered the desired outcome, and so the evidence base is clear: strong governance in the form of TPC of alarm installers and monitoring centres has raised standards in the market, with significant benefits for all industry parties and the wider public. It's a proven, widely respected model for delivering consistent high standards across the marketplace. Undeniably, the world is safer as a result of partnership between the police and the private sector, based on a standardised approach underpinned by TPC.

We are convinced that the approved intruder alarm partnership between industry and the police is transferrable to the FRS. It could reap similar or even greater benefit in saving lives and property, reducing false alarms and lowering attendant costs. The police alarms URN model, if adopted into fire safety and with particular regard to critical infrastructure, public buildings and commercial property, could have a significant beneficial effect across the board.

Starting steps

So how could lessons learned in the security arena be transferred into meaningful measures to similarly benefit the fire sector? As a starting point, the national guidance recognised by the NFCC and industry is BS 5839-1: 2017: *Fire detection and fire alarm systems for buildings. Code of practice*

for the design, installation, commissioning and maintenance of fire detection and fire alarm systems in domestic premises.

Through more rigorous implementation and enforcement, there is a clear opportunity to increase fire safety and reduce false alarms. But there are of course other areas of active and passive fire safety where TPC can reduce risk – this has long applied to manufactured fire safety products. The challenge is no longer in the components, but in the design and installation of systems on site. TPC can help embed standard practices through robust, ongoing sampling and inspection of service providers and installations. TPC infrastructure is ready to deploy for all fire safety disciplines.

One of NSI's particular specialisms here is BAFE's suite of fire safety schemes, including fire detection and alarms, fire risk assessment and commercial kitchen fire protection systems; all disciplines that add greatly to fire safety and are broadly supported by insurers. NSI is also currently actively engaged in rolling out BS 8629: 2019: *Code of practice for the design, installation, commissioning and maintenance of evacuation alert systems for use by fire and rescue services in buildings containing flats.*

Legislative opportunities

The fire safety bill being introduced to improve fire safety in buildings in England and Wales offers a number of opportunities to strengthen measures under the FSO. These include clarification of scope, such as the inclusion of a building's external walls and cladding, balconies and windows, as well as fire doors

for domestic premises of multiple occupancy where they open into common parts.

Alongside supplementary actions being taken to improve building and fire safety – as part of the government's commitment to implementing recommendations following phase one of the Grenfell Tower inquiry – these are welcome steps forward, but they still fall short of all attainable gains. As the security sector's experience in successfully tackling false alarms has proved beyond doubt, the implementation of TPC across the fire sector would deliver this. If overseen by the NFCC as part of a similar cross party collaborative approach, it could deliver results beyond products, extending TPC into the important design and installation process.

The time is ripe

As a certification body working in security and fire safety, we are proud of the way TPC has served the police and private sector alarms partnership and has stood the test of time. In fire, TPC remains an area with great potential to help prevent further tragedy. Fifteen years on from the FSO's introduction, now is the time to take heed of security's positive experience, and deploy a similar approach founded on the undeniable merits and latent opportunity offered by TPC. As we adjust to COVID-19 and the 'new normal', let us refocus on the unresolved needs of fire safety and press on with meeting them ■

Richard Jenkins is chief executive officer of NSI. For more information, view page 3



Robust approval

Let's look at this in context. Markets by and large deliver what is asked of them: they work to a price, given the rigour – some might say the lack of rigour – of legal requirements and market demands. Without statutory requirement and appropriate enforcement by way of a robust approval regime, cost and 'value engineering' will take precedence over safety and compliance.

Take the vehicle MOT test as a good example of this in practice. Introduced in 1960, its approved test centres and test technicians are underpinned by legislation, helping to keep all road users safe. However, without the legislation in place, how many vehicle users would voluntarily submit their vehicles for a road worthiness test? Under current legislation, approved MOT test centres keep people safe, with thousands of potentially dangerous vehicles being properly maintained every year.

In contrast to the MOT, the fire safety sector's experience is less positive. Despite the introduction 15 years ago of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety Order) 2005 [FSO] in England and Wales, and its equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland, enforcement remains weak. Many fire detection and alarm systems are not competently 'MOT'd', and unreliable fire alarms are sadly commonplace. Some organisations are committed to high standards of fire safety and competent fire risk

assessments, yet many more are not. Effective approval regimes work well in many markets, keeping people safe at work, at home and in all walks of life.

TPC bodies play a large part in making this happen. A compelling example of certification making a positive difference can be found in the security sector and its long standing alignment with the police in terms of monitored intruder alarms. Founded on agreed standards, TPC has been delivering substantial benefits here for more than 30 years, and continues to do so.

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), formerly known as the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), and the security industry forged this effective alliance in the 1990s to address the significant adverse impact of false alarms on victims of crime, insurers and the police. At the time, intruder alarms were notoriously unreliable, almost encouraging criminals to chance their luck.

Consequently, burglary rates were high, and responding to them was considered both costly and a huge waste of police resources – hence many were ignored. To address the problem of an untenable 92% national false alarm rate, the NPCC laid down requirements working in conjunction with industry for the installation, monitoring and confirmation of alarm systems covered by police automatic response.

Under the original 1995 unified ACPO intruder alarms policy, this was only to be undertaken



Contributors



Jérôme Andolfatto
Catalyst for change (p52)

Jérôme joined Fire Safe Europe (FSEU) in 2018, and co created the European Fire Safety Community. As main community manager, she leads on daily community management and developing editorial content, and is involved in member recruitment. Her role as FSEU's public affairs executive covers sustainable buildings, advocating for a sustainable, fire resilient EU building stock, and contributing to FSEU social media and newsletters.



Liz Barnwell
Member update (p4)

Liz is the FPA's membership and publications manager, and a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Before joining the FPA, she held production, client facing, account handling and account director roles at several advertising and design agencies; ran her own design and marketing business; and worked for VFB Holidays, Marketing Gloucester and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association.



Chris Cant
Keep talking (p32)

Chris is product manager (systems and solutions) at Hytera UK and has more than 30 years' experience in the radio communications industry in roles ranging from communications engineering, technical training and sales engineering, to product management. She has worked with many industry groups over the years, both in the UK and globally.



Iain Cox
Solid case (p44)

Iain chairs the Business Sprinkler Alliance, National Fire Sprinkler Network and Fire Risk Assessment Competency Council. Of his 34 years in the fire service, the last ten were as chief fire officer of Royal Berkshire. From 2009 to 2011, he was a board member of the Chief Fire Officers Association, focused on prevention and protection.



Silke Hendricks
Safe return (p28)

Silke is managing director of Ballyclare and has secured significant tender wins, as well as acquiring private customers in the UK and Europe. With her experience, knowledge and passion, she is leading Ballyclare into an exciting and ambitious new stage of development.



Richard Jenkins
Learn by example (p48)

Richard became chief executive officer of the National Security Inspectorate (NSI) in 2014. Stemming from the 1970s, NSI marked 20 years' independence from the Loss Prevention Council in 2018 and has offered BAFF's fire safety schemes for 15 years. His experience in the UK and EMEA private sector spans sales, retail and wholesale distribution, manufacturing, international logistics and quality systems at IKEA, Chubb, Steelcase and Caterpillar.



Simon Mabb
Advance guard (p24)

Simon is managing director of Romero Insurance Brokers. He has more than 25 years of experience in the commercial insurance business, and is well versed in managing risks and protecting businesses when they need it most.



Warren Spencer
**FSO in focus (p18),
Fair share (p36)**

A specialist in fire safety law, Warren is managing director and fire safety solicitor at Blackhurst Budd Solicitors. He currently prosecutes for a number of fire and rescue services nationwide, including Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Cumbria, Cheshire, Merseyside, and Hereford and Worcester. In addition, Warren provides fire safety legal training for a wide range of public and private sector groups.



Alexander Wildish
Deep impacts (p40)

Alexander has acquired more than 14 years of investigative experience working for the UK government, the police and various engineering consultancies. He has a Master's degree in Building Services and is a Chartered Engineer registered with the Institute of Mechanical Engineers, as well as a fellow and chairman of the disciplinary committee for the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering. Since 2015, Alexander's consultancy, Engineering Forensics Ltd, has specialised in providing expert advice on major losses involving escapes of water, oil and waste water. Following expansion, the company now investigates major fires and construction failures and also runs its own materials laboratory.