

# Use of buildings when a fire alarm is out of service



## 1. Introduction

This guidance will help you make decisions about which actions should be taken if a building's fire alarm system is out of service. Buildings without a fire alarm system fitted are not covered by this guidance.

## 2. Overview

It is essential that all occupants of a building can quickly be alerted if a fire occurs. This is to ensure everyone can evacuate the building effectively and that the University complies with fire safety legislation. Any delay in building users being alerted to a fire, for example due to a fire alarm failure, could lead to the escape from a building taking longer and increase the risk of serious injury or death. A building's alarm system may be out of service for a range of reasons including planned maintenance or faults and failures. It is possible the issue may affect only a section of a building or a part of the system, such as the smoke detectors or call points. A complete failure of a building's fire alarm system can occur, but this is rare.

## 3. Immediate actions required

These actions must be taken in the event of a fire alarm failure:

1. Report the alarm failure to the Maintenance help desk on 89898 and report as urgent. If calling out of hours, contact Security on 87848, who will contact the Maintenance representatives on shift.
2. Notify the Fire Safety Adviser as soon as possible once Maintenance or Security has been contacted. Contact the Fire Safety Adviser on 07811088143.

Each case where the alarm system is out of service will be different, but a risk assessment must be always carried out to make an informed decision about whether to continue occupying the building.

## 4. Making decisions about building occupancy

Whether to close a building due to the lack of a working fire alarm is a joint decision made by the Campus Division, Safety and Health Services and major building occupiers. The closure, or part closure if appropriate, would be communicated to the Faculty and School by the Facilities Manager.

Possible options include:

- a. Completely close the building to all occupants until it can be safely reoccupied.
- b. Partially use or occupy the building with restrictions in place to limit the use of certain areas or activities.
- c. Keep the building in full use with appropriate precautions in place to ensure risks to building occupants are adequately controlled. If partial or full use of the building is

chosen (options b or c above) then the full range of circumstances affecting the building must be taken into consideration. These include:

- The extent and nature of the alarm system failure, such as whether this was a total failure, one area of the building, a call point failure or detector failure.
- How long it will take to restore the system to full operation.
- What other suitable methods of detecting fire and raising the alarm are available.
- Whether evacuation in the event of a fire being discovered can be effective.
- The building's use and the activities carried out within the building examples such as:
  - activities and or experiments involving chemical reactions,
  - building opening hours,
  - noisy activities potentially preventing building users being made aware of the need to evacuate,
  - public events,
  - use of naked flames,
  - use as sleeping accommodation.
- The number of people at risk in the building, including students, staff, visitors, contractors, or event attendees. You should also consider lone working.
- Individuals' capabilities, for example building users with disabilities.
- The size and complexity of the building, whether it is single or multi-storey and whether it has a large or complex layout.

## 5. Control measures to be implemented

To make a building safe whilst the fire alarm is out of service, the following measures need to be taken:

- Fire search inspections of the affected area at an appropriate frequency throughout the duration of the alarm failure, covering the whole of the affected area and, in particular, areas that are unoccupied or present higher risk.
- More than one search team may be required depending on the size and complexity of the building and the length of time taken to complete a search.
- Cover may need to be provided for individuals involved in the search to take rest breaks.
- Security may be able to provide assistance out of hours.
- Search teams must be equipped with a suitable means of raising the alarm or attracting people's attention, such as:
  - whistles, bells, two-way radios, klaxons, air horns,
  - keys may also be needed to gain entry to some areas or rooms.
- Individuals carrying out the inspections should be trained in using fire extinguishers.
- Make building users aware of the issues and any temporary procedures being implemented, providing information on:
  - what to do if a fire is discovered,
  - how to raise alarm,
  - the restrictions that are in place, and
  - warning notices around the building.
- Suspend non-essential activities that could lead to a fire developing until the alarm system is restored. For example, suspending the use of a naked flame or experiments that may lead to a fire starting. If it is essential that an activity takes place that could lead to a fire, guidance should be obtained from Safety and Health

Services. The activity must be individually risk assessed and only allowed to continue if suitable additional controls are in place.

- Restrict public and student access during the failure.
- Restrict overnight running of experiments to only essential, suitably risk assessed and supervised activities and equipment.
- Lone working, especially out of hours or overnight must be reviewed and only permitted if necessary and if suitable control measures are put in place.
- All non-essential electrical items should be turned off when not in use.

## 6. System fully restored

Once the fire alarm system has been restored to full service, normal operations within the building can resume. The Facilities Manager should carry out a non-scheduled review of the fire risk assessment and Building Fire Manual.