



Localism Bill impacts business fire protection

The Fire Industry Association (FIA) has warned that if the fire and rescue services charge to attend false alarms, as proposed in the Government's new Localism Bill, it could have a serious impact on fire safety in England and Wales.

FIA CEO, Graham Ellicott, comments, "If fire and rescue services charge for false alarm attendance they run the risk that companies will switch off their fire alarm systems to avoid being fined, which could have serious, potentially life-threatening implications."

The Localism Bill, which is now before the Parliamentary Bill Committee, is part of the Government's much publicised devolvement of powers to councils and neighbourhoods, and it includes the proposal that fire and rescue services are to be given the power to charge for attending false alarms.

With recent budget cutbacks fire and rescue services want to minimise time wasting due to recurring false alarms but the increased fire risk to buildings and the financial and environmental consequences must be considered, says the FIA.

Who foots the bill?

Graham Ellicott adds, "If the day comes when charging is levied for false alarm attendance who will the bill be sent to? This is not a clear cut issue as many have assumed that it would be the owner of the building, which in itself could lead to the serious consequences I have already alluded to. However, in the past, bills were sent to the transmitter of the alarm signal - that is the ARC. If that is to be the case again, then given the ARC's current view of the ever changing way that the brigades are treating false alarms, they have to strongly consider whether they want to be involved with the fire sector, especially as the security sector is larger and better regulated!"

A positive factor to be taken from the Localism Bill is that it will apply only to businesses. Graham Ellicott says, "We take some comfort from the fact that homeowners and tenants will not be subject to potential fines and that the Bill will not therefore impact on domestic fire safety. However, for business, the issues still remain and we urge the Government to look at the potential consequences very carefully in their consideration of the Bill."

Reader Reply No.54

FIA view

The Fire Industry Association welcomes the strategic review, but has serious concerns over the idea to expand fire service charging and trading, as its chief executive **Graham Ellicott** explains

THE FIRE Industry Association (FIA) welcomes the independent *Fire Futures* initiative. Such a sector-led review is very unusual and may be unique in the fire world.

The process for gathering the views from within the sector varied by work area. But, while the three work areas in which the FIA were involved used markedly different techniques, it is fair to say that our views were listened to and appear – albeit in a sometimes watered down form – in the reports.

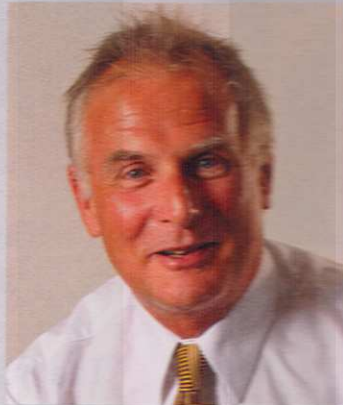
Of most concern to the FIA are the comments arising from the efficiency, effectiveness and productivity work area with regard to giving further consideration to fire and rescue service charging and trading as a method to recover costs and increase funds.

False alarm charges

Charging for attendance at false alarms, for example, is fraught with difficulties. Who do you charge; how do you define a false alarm; what do you charge?

Contractually, it is difficult to ascertain who the fire service has a contract with, so who do they send the bill to? It has been suggested that the alarm receiving centre is the obvious recipient of any invoice, since it is they that pass on the call to the fire service. However, in many cases, the alarm receiving centre has little or no ability to ascertain whether the call is 'genuine' or not. If the invoice is sent to the responsible person at the company where the false alarm occurred, they may counter with the argument that they did not ask for the service and thus will not pay.

“Charging should be discouraged but, if it does happen, there must be consistency in terms of who gets billed and how much they pay”



Charging for false alarms should be discouraged. But, if it is to be implemented, the charging issues will need clarification and there will need to be a consistent approach, both with regard to who gets billed and how much they pay.

Getting it wrong is not an option because, in the worst case, this could lead to an increase in fire deaths due to alarms being switched off to avoid being billed, and/or to the alarm receiving centres considering their commercial future in the fire sector.

Trading concerns

As to trading, fire and rescue services having the right to trade, as long as they do so with arms-length companies. There is Government guidance as to how this should occur, but it does not address the use of the fire and rescue service brand. It is the latter about which the FIA has severe reservations.

The fire and rescue service brand has enormous value and has been developed using taxpayers' money. In general, the arms-length companies formed to date are using the brand of their associated service. But surely this is using taxpayers' money to subsidise the trading company? One has to question whether these trading companies are truly operating at arms-length.

The FIA has no problem with fire and rescue services trading, as long as they do so in accordance with the Government guidance and as long as they do not use taxpayers' monies to subsidise their operations – for example, via the use of the fire and rescue service brand. Indeed, the FIA will welcome into its membership any of the arms-length trading companies, as long as they meet the membership criteria.

The FIA also provided input into the national interests work area, and is fully in support of its conclusions with regard to the built environment. For the localism and accountability work area, the Association emphasised the fact that local communities include local businesses, as well as individuals and other organisations. Local fire businesses must not be forgotten, as it is they that can provide expertise to complement that of the local fire and rescue service ■