How to investigate and take action when the fire alarm is activated
Introduction

The advice given below is to help you develop a concise and clear procedure for investigating your premises once your fire alarm has sounded. This is Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service’s recommended best practice guidance; however we are aware that there may be other predetermined procedures which are tailored to suit the risk in the premises.

How to investigate

Remember you’re looking for signs of a fire or a reason for the alarm to sound and not a fire itself. If there’s an obvious fire there’s no need to investigate - simply phone 999 telling us what has happened and we’ll be on our way.

• If the fire alarm sounds, ensure the evacuation has commenced in line with your building’s alarm policy.
• Check the fire alarm panel to find where the alarm has activated – it’s vital that you have a zone or detector plan displayed immediately adjacent to the panel.
• Consider searching in pairs; where possible don’t search for signs alone.
• Have another member of staff at the alarm panel and remain in contact (mobile phone or short range radios are ideal for this purpose).
• When investigating look, listen and smell for signs of fire. It might be smoke, unusual noises or heat and could be one, some, or all of those signs.
• Before opening a door feel it with the back of your hand, as high up the door as you can reach, for signs of heat. If it is hot do not open the door, otherwise always open doors with utmost caution.
• If at any time you discover signs of fire, confirm the alarm, report back to the panel, get out using the nearest fire exit and call the fire service on 999.
• When the call to the fire service is made, clearly state that an investigation has taken place and this is a call stating that you have evidence of a FIRE and not just an alarm sounding.

No Sign of Fire

Reset procedure following a fire alarm activation

The following advice will help you to comply with fire safety legislation, keeping your staff and premises safe and avoiding future false alarms:

• It is good practice to allow the evacuation to be completed wherever practical (in a care home environment consideration for residents should be taken into account). Interrupting an evacuation is confusing and leads to a false sense of security assuming that every alarm is false.
• Ensure that whoever has been given the responsibility to reset the fire alarm is trained and competent to do so. If arrangements have been made with a third party to ensure the alarm is reset, (such as an on-call fire alarm company), details of how to contact the company should be displayed immediately adjacent to the panel.
• If the alarm is the result of a fault and the control panel cannot be reset, summon a competent fire alarm engineer as soon as possible. The system may be silenced. Ensure you consider temporary measures whilst the system is faulty; these could include staff patrolling risk areas at regular intervals, and the use of public address system or loud hailer in the event of an emergency.
• Any third party company contracted to reset your fire alarm should be able to attend within a reasonable time period as some fire alarms may not detect another fire if they are in 'silenced' mode or have not been fully reset. Ensure that staff are aware of the functions and capabilities of your Fire Alarm because some may be able to detect another fire whilst in silenced mode.

• Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service firefighters will not reset your fire alarm system for you. It is the business’s responsibility to reset, or employ an on-call alarm company to reset for you.

• Ensure the details of any false alarm are recorded in the fire alarm logbook. Record why it happened (if known) and its specific location. This is essential to demonstrate your compliance with fire safety law and to ensure the correct information is available to prevent it from happening in the future.

• Do not reset your fire alarm if you are aware that the fire service has been summoned. Wait for their arrival and their investigation before resetting.

• All false alarms should be reported to the premises manager so that appropriate action can be taken to avoid further false alarms.
Causes and potential solutions to avoid false alarm

Many false alarms result from activities carried out near to fire detectors, particularly smoke detectors. To prevent false alarms, you should consider the following common causes and solutions and take action to prevent them from happening in your workplace:

**Cooking fumes**
*(all types of appliances)*
Ensure cooking is only allowed in designated locations which have appropriate detection (usually heat). Correct use of extractor fans and the closing of doors between designated cooking areas and detector heads can further prevent false alarms. Implement cleaning regimes for cooking appliances.

**Steam (from the shower room)**
Ensure there is adequate ventilation in the shower room and that doors to outer rooms are kept closed. Sometimes signage can help guests/staff to understand the need to close doors and take action to avoid the build-up of excessive steam.

**Steam (industrial processes)**
Ensure an appropriate detector type is fitted—seek advice from a qualified fire alarm engineer or a qualified electrician.
Climate (weather, water ingress and insects)
During storms or heavy rainfall, if a building is poorly maintained water can enter detectors and cause them to falsely signal a fire. Conversely, in hot weather insects can enter detectors and have the same effect.

Smoking (cigarettes)
Should only be allowed in designated locations protected by appropriate detectors i.e. designed to be suitable for the risk whilst not being susceptible to actuation from cigarette smoke.

Aerosol sprays
Where possible, you should prevent the use of aerosols in the vicinity of fire alarm detector heads; where this cannot be avoided use of alternative products should be considered.

Hot work/dusty
Consider fitting temporary covers on detectors while the work is being carried out. Temporary covers should only be fitted by approved staff and removed immediately after the activity has ended. Whilst detectors are covered in this way, staff working in the area (including contractors) should be briefed to activate a ‘break glass’ call point if they see a fire.
**Incense and candles**
Prohibit their use or change detector to a more suitable type for this problem.

**Physical damage**
Consider protecting susceptible ‘break glass’ call points with a ‘break glass’ approved cover or guard. If the cause could be deliberate or as a result of works processes then consider relocating to avoid unwanted damage.

**Testing or Maintenance**
Prior to starting any testing or maintenance you must inform your alarm centre to take your system ‘off line’ for the duration of the activity.

**Changes to the use, or practices within the building**
Ensure the fire-detection system is appropriate for how the building is being used.

Some of the solutions above are management related and can be resolved by management actions alone, others rely on changes to the fire alarm system. Changes to fire alarm systems should only be undertaken by a competent person or contractor. Any such changes should only be undertaken after a fire risk assessment has been carried out and should be documented by way of an appropriate certification kept within your fire safety logbook.

Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service’s Unwanted Fire Signal Policy is available upon request.
Further fire safety advice and guidance is available at the CLG website: http://www.communities.gov.uk/fire/firesafety/firesafetylaw

Help regarding Fire Safety in non-domestic premises is available from Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service Fire Safety advice line on 0115 957 5231 or by emailing fireprotection@notts-fire.gov.uk.