



GUIDANCE FOR OCCUPIERS AND LANDLORDS OF SHELTERED HOUSING SCHEMES

Avoiding False Alarms in Properties Monitored by an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC)

Introduction

Many sheltered housing schemes are fitted with a fire detection and fire alarm system that is monitored by an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC). This means that if the alarm sounds, the ARC automatically contacts the fire and rescue service.

This arrangement provides an essential safeguard, especially where residents may have reduced mobility or other health conditions that make it difficult to raise the alarm themselves. It also provides peace of mind for families, carers, and landlords.

However, when the fire and rescue service is called unnecessarily due to a false alarm, it causes serious problems:

- Fire crews are taken away from real emergencies.
- Residents can be disturbed, frightened, or put at risk during evacuations.
- Frequent false alarms can lead to complacency, meaning people may not take alarms seriously in a real fire.
- In some cases, the landlord or housing provider may face financial charges for repeated false calls.

Why False Alarms Happen

False alarms can occur for many reasons, and sheltered housing has particular risks due to the nature of day-to-day living. Some of the most common causes include:

- **Cooking fumes** (from toasters, frying, grilling, or unattended pans).
- **Steam** from showers or bathrooms drifting towards detectors.
- **Aerosols and sprays**, such as deodorants, hairsprays, air fresheners, or cleaning products.
- **Dust and insects** inside detectors if maintenance is not carried out regularly.
- **Faulty equipment** or overly sensitive detectors.
- **Accidental activation of manual call points** by residents, staff, or visitors.

Why Avoiding False Alarms Matters

Nearly 30% of all fire and rescue service call-outs every year are the result of false alarms. In rural areas, part-time (retained) firefighters are often called out from their homes or workplaces unnecessarily. This wastes public resources and can delay response to real emergencies.

In sheltered housing, false alarms are even more disruptive:

- Residents may have to evacuate repeatedly, which can be distressing and harmful for vulnerable people.
- Night-time false alarms cause confusion, disorientation, and in some cases medical risks.
- Staff and emergency services spend valuable time investigating non-existent fires.

Responsibilities of Occupiers

As a resident of a sheltered housing scheme, you can help reduce false alarms by:

- **Taking care when cooking:** always stay with your food, use extractor fans where possible, and keep kitchen doors closed.
- **Managing steam:** close bathroom doors while bathing or showering, and ensure ventilation fans are used.
- **Using sprays carefully:** avoid spraying deodorant, hairspray, polish, or cleaning products near smoke detectors.
- **Reporting problems:** if you notice a detector that activates for no clear reason, inform staff or your landlord immediately.
- **Treating every alarm as real:** never ignore the alarm, even if you suspect it is false.

Responsibilities of Landlords / Scheme Managers

Landlords and housing providers play a key role in minimising false alarms. Best practice includes:

- **System design and maintenance:**
 - Ensure detectors are correctly positioned, avoiding locations where cooking fumes or steam are common.
 - Use appropriate detector types (e.g., heat detectors near kitchens instead of smoke detectors).
 - Arrange regular servicing and cleaning of detectors to prevent dust or insect build-up. The system should be serviced at least every 6 months.
- **Monitoring and recording:**
 - Keep accurate records of all alarm activations.
 - Identify patterns of false alarms and take corrective action.
 - Review whether detector locations or system settings need adjustment.
- **Resident engagement:**
 - Provide clear written and verbal guidance to all residents about avoiding false alarms.
 - Run awareness sessions or include guidance in tenancy packs.
 - Respond promptly to reports of problem detectors or equipment faults.

Key Reminder

If your system is monitored by an ARC, **every single alarm results in the fire and rescue service being called out**, therefore:

- Always treat every alarm as a potential fire.
- Always evacuate safely and promptly when the alarm sounds.
- Do everything possible to prevent false activations.
- Make sure the system is maintained properly.

Summary

Remote monitoring of fire alarm systems in sheltered housing is an important safety measure, but it comes with responsibilities for both residents and landlords to ensure that only genuine fires trigger a call to the fire and rescue service.

By following this guidance, as documented in BS 5839-6 Figure F.1, you can:

- Reduce disruption and distress for residents.
- Avoid unnecessary strain on the fire and rescue service.
- Ensure that when an alarm sounds, it is treated seriously - because it is likely to be real.