Managing Monitored Automatic Alarm Systems in accordance with fire services' legislation

Guideline No. 46

Author: AA & FSSPR Units

Sponsor: Alarm Assessment

Authorised by: Director, Fire Investigation and Alarm Assessment

First issued: August 2013
Review date: February 2023
Version number: 4

1 PURPOSE

The purpose of this guideline is to provide information to owners and their representatives of buildings and properties on managing buildings and properties that are protected by monitored automatic alarm systems and to provide practical assistance in understanding Section 75B of the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*.

2 SCOPE

This guideline is applicable to buildings and properties where a monitored automatic alarm system is installed within by an approved alarm monitoring company.

3 DEFINITIONS AND ACRONYMS

For the purpose of this document, the following definitions and abbreviations will apply.

'Alarm monitoring company' means an approved monitoring company, of which there are three (3) currently operating in Victoria, being ADT, Chubb and Romteck Grid.

'ASE' – Alarm signalling equipment. It is a device that connects a fire alarm system to an approved monitoring company.

'ASE Key' means a device placed into the ASE that will allow the equipment to be put into an altered state, i.e., within test mode and/or isolate/disable mode. The ASE Key can take the shape of a traditional key, a magnetic attachment, or a USB type device.

'Disconnection' means where the signal from the ASE is prevented from being transmitted to the approved monitoring company and FRV, usually on a permanent or long-term basis.

'ESTA' – Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority.

'Fire alarm system' means all the components that are installed to serve a building or property in the event of a fire or other emergency. It includes, but is not limited to detection systems, sprinkler systems, fire indicator panel, valve monitoring devices or alarms, ASE.

'FDCIE' – Fire Detection Control and Indicating Equipment. Within the state of Victoria, an FDCIE is also commonly referred to as a fire indicator panel (FIP). The FDCIE and FIP acronyms are used interchangeably throughout this guideline.

'FRV' – Fire Rescue Victoria.

'Isolate' means where the signal from an activated component of the fire alarm system is prevented from being transmitted to FRV via the approved monitoring company. The term 'isolate' has the same meaning as *disable* and is used interchangeably within this guideline.

'Monitored automatic alarm system' means a fire alarm system that automatically sends an alarm signal to FRV, via an approved alarm monitoring company.

"VMA" – Valve monitored alarm.

4 INTRODUCTION

Many buildings and properties are protected by a monitored automatic alarm system that enables an 'alarm of fire' signal to be sent direct to FRV. The signal is sent by an ASE that connects the alarm system at a building or property to an approved monitoring company, who transmits the signal to FRV via ESTA. Many automatic alarms are installed as a requirement of a building's fire safety solution or insurance obligations, and they must be maintained in accordance with the building's essential safety measures requirements, which are identified in the building's Occupancy Permit or maintenance determination.

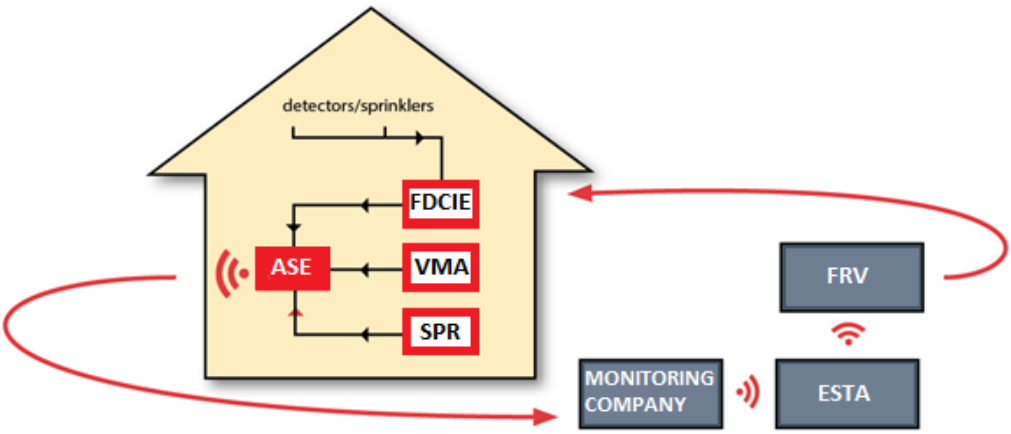
Once installed and activated, an ASE shall be monitored and not be disconnected. A building permit from a registered building surveyor must be obtained to modify an alarm system, of which guidance is provided by Victorian Building Authority Practice Note ESM-06.

Monitored automatic alarm systems are configured to send an alarm signal to FRV via the ASE installation, upon the detection or activation of an installed essential safety measure.

It is also important to note that not all buildings and properties containing an automatic alarm system or sprinkler system, have a monitored ASE installation.

Figure 1 depicts a building that is provided with a fully monitored automatic alarm system that will automatically notify FRV upon the activation of detectors and/or sprinklers, via the VMA or FDCIE to the ASE.

Figure 1 – Alarm signalling equipment configuration



5 LEGISLATIVE OBLIGATIONS

Section 75B of the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958* contains specific provisions that address actions leading to the damage or interference with a fire indicator panel (FDCIE) or other apparatus within buildings and properties.

There are two main parts to this legislation, which are explained below.

5.1 Resetting a Fire Detection Control and Indicating Equipment (FDCIE)

It is an offence in Victoria to reset a FDCIE, if the FDCIE detects a fire (or simulated condition) and sounds an alarm, unless the owner or occupier has the consent of FRV or a reasonable excuse. The owner or occupier of the building or property may be liable for a fine of up to 60 penalty units[1].

There have been an increasing number of incidents where owners and/or occupiers reset the FDCIE after a false alarm and before FRV's arrival to the building or property. Resetting the FDCIE following an alarm activation removes information about the source of the fire or the potential fault in the installed fire detection system.

The action of resetting the FDCIE potentially lengthens the attending FRV firefighters' response activities as they are required to search the building or property to identify the location of the fire or fault.

Some owners and/or occupiers mistakenly believe they can avoid a charge for a false alarm by resetting the FDCIE, however this is not the case. In fact, because FRV's firefighters need to spend more time searching the building or property, higher charges for the call out are likely.

Many buildings and properties are authorised to delay the transmission of the alarm signal to FRV as a result of a building permit or occupancy permit decision from a registered building surveyor. Regardless, for all alarm activations where the signal is sent to FRV, the FDCIE is not to be reset.

[1] Penalty units are used to define the amount payable for fines relating to offences. The value of a penalty is raised in line with inflation on 1 July each year in line with the *Monetary Units Act 2004*. One penalty unit is currently $192.31, from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024.

Important Messages:

- For **fully monitored automatic alarm systems** – DO NOT reset the FDCIE. Wait for FRV to arrive and interact with the FDCIE.
- For **local fire alarm systems** where the alarm and the FDCIE are not connected to FRV, the FDCIE may be reset after the owner or occupier has thoroughly investigated the cause of the alarm activation. (The local fire alarm system may be monitored by a private security company.)
- For **partly monitored automatic alarm systems**:
  - If the monitored part of the system has triggered the alarm – DO NOT reset the FDCIE or system. Wait for FRV to arrive and interact with the FDCIE.
  - If the non-monitored (local only area) part of the system has triggered the alarm, the FDCIE may be reset after the owner or occupier has thoroughly investigated the cause of the alarm activation.

5.2 What is meant by a reasonable excuse, damage or interference?

FRV has observed that many building owners, including their authorised representatives or tenants, routinely engage in practices resulting in automatic alarm systems being isolated, disabled or disconnected, so as to avoid false alarm callouts. These practices occur contrary to legislative expectations and create a risk to life, property and environmental safety.

Interference with an FDCIE includes any action that causes the transmission of the signal from the FDCIE to be isolated, disabled or disconnected.

To avoid committing an offence, building owners, including their authorised representatives or tenants, must ensure they have a reasonable excuse for each isolation or disconnection of the installed automatic alarm system. A reasonable excuse comprises of, but not limited to—

- Building work that is authorised under a valid building permit, which is issued by a registered building surveyor), whereby all appropriate procedures have been implemented; or
- The carrying out of routine (essential safety measures) maintenance to the installed automatic alarm system.

Building owners, including their authorised representatives or tenants, are reminded that damaging or interfering with an FDCIE may also constitute an offence under Section 16 of the Building Act 1993, as a building permit is required for every alteration and/or permanent disconnection of an automatic fire alarm system. A building permit will often be required to isolate or disable the ASE and for some temporary disconnections.

Additionally, damaging or interfering with an FDCIE may also constitute an offence under Sections 40 and 51 of the Building Act 1993, whereby an occupancy permit imposes specific essential safety measures maintenance obligations associated with the use of the building or the conduction of public entertainment.

Damage or interference with an FDCIE may also invalidate or nullify an insurance policy that applies to the building or property.

6 MANAGING YOUR MONITORED AUTOMATIC ALARM SYSTEM

The owner of a building is responsible to ensure that the essential safety measures that are provided within their building are maintained and functional. This includes ensuring the fire alarm system is functioning in accordance with the conditions and obligations outlined within the building's Occupancy Permit or any maintenance determination.

Any changes to the fire alarm system are required to be duly authorised by a registered building surveyor. If an owner is uncertain or needs assistance to understand the functional requirements of their installed fire alarm system, they should seek advice from their essential safety measures maintenance provider.

6.1 Frequently asked questions

Can the ASE (or its separate inputs) be isolated or disabled?

The owner of the building or property is responsible to ensure that the ASE is fully functional, at all times. The only circumstances in which it may be reasonable to isolate or disable the ASE are—

a. When a building permit for the ASE isolation has been issued by a registered building surveyor; or
b. When exceptional maintenance requirements of the fire alarm system can only be performed with the ASE isolated/disabled. Most maintenance can be performed with the individual circuits, zones or detectors of the fire alarm system isolated/disabled (at the FDCIE).

It is important to note that the approved alarm monitoring companies provide records to FRV that identify when an ASE is isolated or disabled.

ASE isolations are **not** to be made to prevent false alarms from normal day to day activities or building work which may cause an alarm.

Can individual circuits, zones or detectors of the fire alarm system be isolated or disabled at the FDCIE?

A temporary or short-term isolation or disabling of circuits, zones or detectors may be made at the FDCIE whilst routine maintenance of the fire alarm system is undertaken by the essential safety measures maintenance provider.

Where a long term or regular isolation of the fire alarm system is proposed, which is not associated with an essential safety measures obligation, the building owner (or their agent), should consult with their insurer as well as seeking advice from a registered building surveyor to ensure that a building permit is obtained, and the safety of the occupants is not compromised.

Alterations to a building or property – what is required?

All proposed alterations to a building or property, which impact installed essential safety measures, including the installed fire alarm system, require a building permit to be obtained.

Examples of alterations to a building or property that impact the installed essential safety measures include—

a. Moving or changing the type of detector, the recalibration of the aspirating detection system, moving sprinkler heads, or relocating a Manual Call Point location,

b. Changing the monitoring status of inputs to the FDCIE, i.e., from a monitored automatic alarm to a local alarm,
c. Amalgamating or rationalising inputs to the FDCIE,
d. Implementing a time delay on the ASE's transmission signal to FRV.

FRV also recommends that the owner notify their insurer when alterations to their building or property are proposed.

Temporary disconnections – what is required?

For emergency work, e.g., in the case of equipment breakdown, or for prolonged maintenance requirements that require the ASE or its separate inputs to be disconnected, the alarm monitoring company may agree to a written request to disconnect the ASE for a maximum of 24 hours without a building permit. In these circumstances, the disconnection is carried out by an authorised representative of the alarm monitoring company. For all other temporary disconnections, a building permit must be obtained and a copy of it must be provided to the alarm monitoring company together with a nominated reconnection date.

Where a temporary disconnection is proposed as a consequence of additions or alterations to a building or property, whereby parts of the building or property remain occupied, a documented emergency plan that is consistent with the requirements of Australian Standard *AS 3745-2010 Planning for Emergencies in Facilities* should be prepared and accompany any application for a building permit.

Permanent disconnections – what is required?

Once an ASE is installed, a building permit must be obtained to disconnect an ASE. A copy of the building permit must be supplied to the alarm monitoring company alongside a written request to disconnect the ASE.

6.2 Alternative Fire Safety Procedures

Should any part of the monitored automatic alarm system be isolated or disabled or temporarily disconnected, the building owner and/or occupier must adhere to the requirements of the emergency plan, including any specific conditions that have been included by the building surveyor, within the building permit that they have issued.

If this information is not readily available, the building owner and/or occupier should consider implementing the following actions.

- Rostering of additional wardens or other staff members to undertake fire safety patrolling duties.
- The provision of 24-hour security surveillance or nominating a responsible person who works or resides at the building or property to conduct regular visual monitoring of the installed fire alarm system, which includes patrolling the areas that have been isolated. This nominated representative should also meet FRV's firefighters upon their arrival.
- Informing all building occupants, including the chief fire warden and floor wardens, of the isolation/s or temporary disconnections.
- Informing all building occupants to ring triple zero ("000") for emergencies.

- Installing advisory signs at manual call points (MCPs) to ring triple zero (“000”) in the event of an emergency,

- Installing a notice at or near the main entrance to the building that advises of the isolation/s or temporary disconnections, including instructions to ring triple zero (“000”) in the event of an emergency,

- Inform all building occupants when the fire alarm system is back online.

6.3 Notifying insurers

When a change to a fire alarm system is proposed, i.e., the isolation, disabling or disconnection of any part of the system or where building work is proposed and programming alterations to the system are necessary, FRV recommends that the building or property's insurer is promptly notified in writing of the proposal. It is important to note that an insurer may require the building owner and/or occupier to implement other temporary or permanent fire safety measures.

6.4 Fire alarm system maintenance obligations

The Building Regulations 2018 requires that essential safety measures, which include fire alarm systems, to be maintained on a regular basis.

a. Buildings constructed on or after 1 July 1994

   The required level of maintenance of any installed essential safety measure is listed either on an occupancy permit, maintenance determination or maintenance schedule, which is issued by the relevant building surveyor. The frequency and standard of maintenance of any installed essential safety measure must be conducted in accordance with the requirements of Australian Standard *AS 1851-2012 Routine Service of Fire Protection Systems and Equipment*.

b. Buildings built prior to 1 July 1994

   Where occupancy permits may not be evident, maintenance must be undertaken to ensure that that the essential safety measure will fulfil its purpose. Australian Standard AS 1851-2012 Routine Service of Fire Protection Systems and Equipment can be used as a basis for the maintenance to be undertaken. FRV recommends that building owners (and their agents) seek professional advice in determining the appropriate frequency and standard of maintenance that is undertaken in respect of an installed essential safety measure.

When routine essential safety measures maintenance is undertaken, FRV recommends the use of the 'test mode' when performing specific fire alarm system work. Details of test mode usage, including activating a simulated alarm condition to the ASE, are automatically recorded by the alarm monitoring companies and such records may be provided to FRV upon request.

FRV recommends the use of qualified and experienced fire system maintenance providers to maintain the essential safety measures of a building.

6.5 Keeping records of changes to the fire alarm system

In addition to the maintenance and inspection checks that Australian Standard *AS 1851-2012 Routine Service of Fire Protection Systems and Equipment requires*, AS

1851 requires all changes to an installed fire alarm system to be accurately recorded to inform essential safety measures maintenance providers, building managers and regulators (FRV, Municipal Building Surveyor, VBA) of the occurrence.

Changes typically include—

- Isolating or disabling individual detectors, zones or circuits,
- Isolating or disabling the entire ASE,
- Isolating or disabling inputs of the ASE,
- Temporary disconnection.

Every change (or event) that is recorded in the relevant essential safety measures logbook should include the following level of detail.

- The event type, e.g., isolation,
- A description of the event - where the isolation is taking effect, e.g., zone 3A: first floor tenancy,
- A reason for the event,
- The name of person responsible for changes to the fire alarm system including their or their employer's contact details,
- The qualification or title of person responsible for making the changes to the fire alarm system,
- The event's commencement time,
- The event's completion time.

6.6 Emergency plans and practice evacuations

FRV recommends that all buildings and properties have a documented Emergency Plan which include emergency response procedures, evacuation diagrams and a training schedule (Chief Warden, Wardens and Occupant use of Extinguisher), which is consistent with the requirements of Australian Standard *AS 3745-2010 Planning for Emergencies in Facilities*.

When undertaking practice evacuations, a building owner or their appointed agent should ensure that the fire alarm system is managed by a trained and responsible operator to provide best public safety outcome. Should the ASE or individual circuits, zones or detectors need to be isolated or disabled, the building owner or their appointed agent must ensure they are returned to normal operation as soon as possible.

6.7 Preventing the occurrence of false alarms

FRV's website contains contemporary **information that building owners and their agents can refer to, to prevent the occurrence of a false alarm activation. This additional information is updated regularly and can be located at** www.frv.vic.gov**.au/fire-alarm-systems**.

7 GUIDELINES FOR TESTING, ISOLATING/DISABLING, ALTERING OR DISCONNECTING A MONITORED AUTOMATIC ALARM SYSTEM.

These guidelines provide supplementary information to the brochure on Monitored Automatic Alarms issued jointly by the Victorian Building Authority, ADT, Chubb, Romteck Grid, CFA and FRV. Please read these guidelines in conjunction with the brochure, which can be located at www.frv.vic.gov.au/fire-alarm-systems.

Description of Action/Mode	How the Alarm Signal is Affected	Recommended Use	Additional Actions
Test Mode via ASE			
The ASE is placed into test mode by use of a 'key' (usually magnetic or insertion type).	An alarm detected by the fire equipment is sent to the monitoring company only. **The signal will not be sent to the fire services.** **Test mode will automatically deactivate after 2 hours if the key is left in the ASE.**	Recommended use is to perform maintenance of essential safety measures including testing to Australian Standards - do not use this mode for any other purpose. No building permit is required.	Records should be kept including time and identity of person (including qualifications) responsible for the test. (It is sufficient if your fire maintenance logbooks record this information.)
Isolate or Disable Individual Circuits, Zones or Detectors			
Specific detectors or areas (via zone/circuit/loop) are selected for isolation or are disabled at the fire indicator panel.	An alarm emanating from the isolated area will be received by the fire indicator panel. **The signal will not be sent to the monitoring company nor the fire services.** **Isolated areas will remain in isolation until manually reactivated.**	Recommended use is to perform standard maintenance of essential safety measures. All other isolations of this kind must be kept to a minimum and carefully assessed for suitability. Situations where temporary isolations might be suitable for your site are for minor renovation work, building maintenance, or alarm system defects waiting for parts. Long term, on-going or regular isolations of this nature should be discussed with a registered building surveyor as they may need a building permit. **Ensure minimum isolation period**.	Records should be kept including time, identification of isolated area, the reason for the isolation and identity of person (including qualifications) responsible for the isolation Ensure all alarms are re-set prior to de-isolating. **Alternative fire safety procedures are to be implemented.**
Isolate or Disable mode via ASE - entire ASE or individual inputs.			
The ASE or individual inputs are placed into isolation mode by use of a 'key' (usually magnetic or insertion type)	An alarm detected by the fire equipment will be received by the fire indicator panel and/or ASE and may enable the warning bells but **the signal will not be sent to the monitoring company nor the fire services.** **Isolate mode will automatically deactivate after 12 hours**	Recommended use is for exceptional maintenance requirement of the fire alarm system where such maintenance can only be performed with the ASE isolated (e.g. draining a sprinkler system where the VMA and/or sprinkler are on separate inputs). Should not be used for other reasons. Most maintenance can be performed with the individual circuits, zones or detectors isolated at the FIP.	Records should be kept including time, identification of isolated input/s or entire ASE, the reason for the isolation and identity of person (including qualifications) responsible for the isolation. **Alternative fire safety procedures are to be implemented.** Request your building surveyor to include instructions for these procedures whilst the ASE or input is isolated. We recommend that you advise your insurance provider.

Description of Action/Mode	How the Alarm Signal is Affected	Recommended Use	Additional Actions
Temporary Disconnection – emergency/maintenance up to 24 hours only			
Temporary disconnection of alarm signal by the monitoring provider for 24 hours or less.	An alarm detected by the fire equipment is not sent to the monitoring company thus **the signal is not sent to the fire services.**	Contact your monitoring provider and comply with their request process. Equipment breakdown is an example of a situation which may require temporary disconnection.	Records should be kept of the disconnection times and actions. **Alternative fire safety procedures are to be implemented during the disconnection period.** We recommend that you advise your insurance provider.
Temporary Disconnection - non emergency/maintenance			
Temporary disconnection of alarm signal by the monitoring provider.	An alarm detected by the fire equipment is not sent to the monitoring company **thus the signal is not sent to the fire services.**	A building permit is required detailing reconnection date or best estimate date. May be required for structural renovation affecting the entire site protected by the ASE, or non-occupancy of the building.	Records should be kept of the disconnection times and actions. Request your building surveyor to include instructions **for alternative fire safety procedures** whilst the ASE is disconnected. If none are provided, refer to the information provided in 7.2 of this document on alternative fire safety procedures. We recommend that you advise your insurance provider.
Permanent Disconnection			
Removal of the ASE and/or permanent disconnection of alarm signal by the monitoring provider.	An alarm detected by the fire equipment is not sent to the monitoring company thus **the signal is not sent to the fire services**.	A building permit is required from a registered building surveyor specifying the disconnection of the ASE. Forward the permit to your monitoring provider and comply with their disconnection process.	We recommend that you advise your insurance provider.
Modification/Alteration			
Any modification/alteration to the installed fire alarm system.	Various depending on the modification or alteration.	A building permit is required from a registered building surveyor specifying which equipment is to be modified or altered. Examples include moving or changing types of detectors, altering the monitoring status of inputs or detectors, amalgamating or rationalising inputs, or placing a time delay on the signal.	We recommend that you advise your insurance provider.

8 CONTACT INFORMATION

Victorian Building Authority	P 1300 815 127	www.vba.vic.gov.au
ADT Fire Monitoring	P 131 238	www.adtsecurity.com.au
Chubb Fire & Security	P 131 598	www.chubbfiresecurity.com.au
Romteck Grid	P 1300 658 158	www.romteckgrid.com.au
Fire Rescue Victoria	P (Helpdesk) 9665 4688 E alarmassessmentenquiries@frv.vic.gov.au	www.frv.vic.gov.au

Note: *this is a controlled document and may only be modified by authorised personnel after review by FRV's Fire Safety Strategy, Policy and Reform Unit.*