Will My Fire Detection System Automatically Call the Fire Brigade?

One of the most common questions we hear from strata committees, building managers and owners corporations is:

"If our fire alarm goes off, does the fire brigade automatically get called?"

The answer is: it depends.

Some buildings have monitored fire alarm systems that can notify Fire and Rescue NSW.

Others do not.

Even where monitoring exists, different alarm signals may trigger different response procedures.

Understanding what happens when an alarm occurs is an important part of managing a building's fire safety systems.

The Common Misconception

Many people assume that every fire alarm system automatically contacts Fire and Rescue NSW whenever an alarm activates.

In reality, there are several different types of fire alarm arrangements commonly found in strata buildings.

For example:

- A standalone smoke alarm inside an apartment does not automatically contact emergency services.
- A fire indicator panel may not be connected to a monitoring service.
- A monitored fire detection system may send signals to an alarm monitoring centre before any emergency services are contacted.

As a result, the response to an alarm can vary significantly from one building to another.

Understanding the Difference Between Detection and Notification

A fire alarm system performs two separate functions:

Detection

The system identifies a fire, smoke condition or other alarm event.

This may involve:

- Smoke detectors
- Heat detectors
- Manual call points
- Other fire detection devices

Notification

The system communicates that event to occupants, building management, monitoring providers or emergency services.

These are separate functions.

A building can have fire detection without automatic emergency service notification.

What Happens When an Alarm Occurs?

The exact sequence depends on the building.

In a typical monitored building, the process may look something like this:

1. A detector activates.
2. The fire indicator panel receives the signal.
3. The panel generates an alarm condition.
4. The monitoring service receives the alarm signal.
5. Alarm response procedures are followed.
6. Fire and Rescue NSW may be notified.

In a non-monitored building, the process may simply be:

1. A detector activates.
2. The fire indicator panel enters alarm.
3. Occupants hear warning signals.
4. Somebody contacts emergency services if required.

These two scenarios can produce very different outcomes.

What Is Alarm Monitoring?

Alarm monitoring is a service that allows alarm signals from a fire alarm system to be transmitted to a monitoring centre.

The monitoring centre can receive:

- Fire alarms
- Fault conditions
- System isolations
- Communication failures
- Other important system events

The monitoring provider then follows pre-determined response procedures for that building.

Monitoring helps ensure that important alarm events are not missed, particularly outside normal business hours.

What Is Alarm Signalling Equipment (ASE)?

In NSW, where a building has remote alarm monitoring, this is typically facilitated through Alarm Signalling Equipment (ASE).

An ASE is the piece of equipment that allows alarm signals from the fire indicator panel to be transmitted to a monitoring service.

In simple terms:

Fire Detector → Fire Panel → ASE → Monitoring Centre → Fire Brigade

Without an ASE, a fire panel may still detect alarms and operate warning systems within the building, but it may not be capable of transmitting alarm signals to an external monitoring provider.

Many strata committee members are surprised to learn that the fire panel itself is often not what communicates with the monitoring centre. The ASE acts as the communication gateway between the building's fire alarm system and the monitoring network.

What Does an ASE Look Like?

In NSW, an ASE is typically a small red communications device installed adjacent to, or inside, the fire indicator panel cabinet.

Below is an example of the Alarm Signalling Equipment provided by Romteck Grid.

It commonly appears as:

- A small lockable metal enclosure
- A communications module mounted within the fire panel
- A separate cabinet located near the fire panel
- Equipment displaying status indicators such as:
    - Power
    - Polling

    - Communications
    - Alarm
    - Fault

To a building manager, it often looks more like a telecommunications device than a fire alarm component.

Why Is the ASE Important?

The ASE is responsible for transmitting critical information such as:

- Fire alarm activations
- System faults
- Communication failures
- System isolations
- Other monitored events

If the ASE fails or loses communication, the fire alarm system may continue operating locally within the building while the monitoring provider remains unaware of alarm or fault conditions.

For this reason, ASE communication faults are generally treated seriously and should be investigated promptly.

Monitoring and Fire Brigade Response Are Not the Same Thing

One of the most common misconceptions is that a monitored fire alarm system automatically means Fire and Rescue NSW will attend every alarm.

Monitoring and emergency service response are related, but they are not the same thing.

Monitoring refers to the transmission of alarm signals from the building to a monitoring provider.

What happens after that depends on the building's alarm response arrangements, the type of signal received and the applicable response protocols.

For example, a signal indicating low battery capacity within the fire panel may be transmitted to the monitoring centre without requiring attendance by Fire and Rescue NSW.

For this reason, two buildings may both have monitored fire alarm systems while having different alarm response procedures.

Does Every Building Have an ASE?

No.

Many smaller strata buildings do not have monitored fire alarm systems and therefore do not have an ASE installed.

Other buildings may have:

- Smoke alarms only
- A fire indicator panel with no monitoring
- A monitored fire alarm system incorporating ASE equipment

If you are unsure whether your building has an ASE, the easiest place to look is near the fire indicator panel itself.

Who Provides Monitoring Services in NSW?

As at the date of writing, Fire and Rescue NSW lists four Automatic Fire Alarm Service Providers (AFASPs) with current contracts to remotely monitor Automatic Fire Alarm systems in protected premises in NSW:

- Chubb Fire Safety Ltd
- Johnson Controls Australia Pty Ltd
- Romteck Grid Pty Ltd
- Security 1 Pty Ltd

In practical terms, this means that where a building requires a monitored fire alarm connection to Fire and Rescue NSW, the Alarm Signalling Equipment (ASE) and monitoring arrangement will generally need to be coordinated through one of these FRNSW-contracted AFASPs.

Building owners and strata committees should confirm the current provider list directly with Fire and Rescue NSW, as this may change over time.

Does Every Building Have Monitoring?

No.

Many smaller strata buildings do not have monitored fire alarm systems.

Some buildings may only have:

- Smoke alarms
- Local warning devices
- Unmonitored fire panels

In these cases, emergency services may only become aware of an incident if someone contacts Triple Zero (000).

For many owners corporations, this comes as a surprise.

Why Do Buildings Choose Alarm Monitoring?

For some buildings it’s a requirement. In addition, monitoring can provide several benefits.

These may include:

- Faster awareness of alarm events
- Notification of after-hours incidents
- Monitoring of system faults
- Improved oversight of building fire systems
- Additional peace of mind for owners and residents
- Potential insurance benefits

Monitoring arrangements vary between buildings and should be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain appropriate.

What About False Alarms?

One reason building owners should understand their alarm response arrangements is the impact of unwanted alarms.

Unwanted alarms can be caused by:

- Detector contamination
- Steam
- Dust
- Building works
- Faulty equipment
- Inappropriate detector selection
- System deterioration

Repeated nuisance alarms can create significant disruption for residents and building management.

In many cases, the system is operating correctly and responding to environmental conditions such as steam, dust or contaminants.

Repeated unwanted alarms can also indicate that a system requires assessment, maintenance or modification.

The Better Question to Ask

Instead of asking:

"Does our fire alarm call the fire brigade?"

a better question is:

"What happens when our fire alarm activates?"

In many buildings, the answer to this question can be found in the system's Cause and Effect Matrix. This document records the programmed responses that occur when specific alarm, fault or supervisory conditions are received. Depending on the building, it may identify functions such as occupant warning activation, lift recall, door release, monitoring signals and other system responses.

Every strata committee should understand:

- Who receives alarm notifications
- Whether the system is monitored
- What response procedures apply
- Who investigates alarms
- What happens after hours
- How faults are managed
- What occupants should do during an alarm event

These questions are often more important than whether emergency services are automatically contacted.

Questions Strata Committees Should Ask

If you're unsure how your building's system operates, consider asking:

1. Do we have a fire indicator panel?
2. Do we have Alarm Signalling Equipment (ASE)?
3. Is the system monitored?
4. Who receives alarm notifications?
5. What happens after hours?
6. What is the procedure when an alarm occurs?
7. Who investigates alarm activations?
8. How are system faults reported?
9. Have there been recurring false alarms?
10. Is the monitoring arrangement still appropriate for the building?
11. Are there any known issues with the existing fire alarm system?

Why This Matters When Reviewing Your Fire Alarm System

When reviewing a building's fire alarm arrangements, many owners corporations focus on detectors, panels and warning devices.

However, it is equally important to understand how alarm signals are communicated, who receives them and what response procedures apply.

A review of the building's fire alarm system may also provide an opportunity to consider:

- Monitoring arrangements
- Alarm response procedures
- System reliability
- Nuisance alarm history
- Long-term building requirements

Understanding how the building responds to alarms is just as important as understanding how the system detects them.

Final Thoughts

Not every fire alarm system automatically contacts Fire and Rescue NSW.

The way a building responds to an alarm depends on the design of the system, monitoring arrangements and operational procedures that have been established for the building.

If you are unsure how your building's fire alarm system operates, now is a good time to find out.

Understanding what happens during an alarm event can help owners corporations make informed decisions about maintenance, monitoring arrangements, system replacement and long-term fire safety planning.

Full Circle Fire specialises in fire detection and alarm systems, including the maintenance, repair and replacement of ageing and obsolete equipment, as well as fire detection system works arising from Fire Safety Orders.