



Use of Auto Shutdown Functions in Crematoria – Update October 2019

In May 2019, a guidance note was compiled entitled 'Use of Auto Shutdown Functions in Crematoria' and subsequently distributed to all member crematorium sites. In addition, the FBCA have also shared the ICCM's guidance for the information of their own membership.

Overall, the response has been positive with numerous sites deciding to adapt to alternative processes where possible or begin the conversation regarding the use of Auto Shutdown programmes.

As we understand that the same guidance note could be divisive, we have also identified that there have been several common questions that have arisen and the Board of Directors and Officers of the ICCM feel that it would be beneficial to our members to address these points below:

Is the document 'Use of Auto Shutdown Functions in Crematoria' guidance or statutory?

The previous document is purely guidance. It was written with the intention to address the issues that may arise from a process that has been seen as 'the norm' for several years. It is felt that there could be risks associated with its use that authorities may wish to explore, particularly with regard to how it is currently determined that a cremation has been properly completed.

Is Auto Shutdown the automatic finishing of the cremation or the shutting down of the cremator itself?

It is understood that different sites may use different terms, however in this instance it is highlighting cremations that are finished by using a mode on the cremator which can be enabled after a set number of minutes (generally 30-45) after the coffin has been charged which will continue to cremate for a further set number of minutes and close the machine down at the same time without a technician in attendance.

If there is a problem with cremations being left unattended, how is this different to when a technician leaves a cremation to cover chapel duties for instance?

It is appreciated that this can commonly be the case due to working and staff restrictions at crematorium sites for the technician to also cover the chapel services. During this period however, the technician would still be on site and able to identify and rectify any alarms as described in sections 4.35 to 4.42 of the Process Guidance Note 5/2 (12) Statutory Guidance for Crematoria. Should the technician be off site, then this cannot happen until the site re-opens and the following morning.

What is the difference between using an Auto Shutdown function and holding a coffin over for cremation the following day?

Wherever a coffin is able to be held over, this should always be done with the applicant's consent. This is usually obtained by providing an opt in or out option on the Preliminary Application for Cremation. This process for holding over has been widely adopted joint guidance from stakeholder organisations since 2011.

In instances of using Auto Shutdown, families/applicants are currently unaware of the process and are not afforded the choice as they are with holding over a coffin.

The previous note appears contradictory as under recommendation 3 it states:

“As a minimum, for adults, the ashes should be raked down from the cremator hearth into the cooling well before the technician leaves site. For babies and infants cremated using a baby tray, it is acceptable to allow the remains to cool down at a slower rate within the tray on the hearth of the cremator once the cremation has completely finished under a qualified technician’s supervision”, yet earlier in the guidance it says that leaving infant or baby remains on the hearth is an unattractive prospect?

The third recommendation in the previous document set out the intended minimum expected under the guidance. Ideally, it would be advantageous that every cremation would be completed, and the hearth left clear before the technician leaves at the end of the day. The Scottish Government Working Group Meetings found that, in consultation with bereaved parents, although the prospect of leaving baby remains on the hearth was an unattractive prospect, they also found that this was acceptable if necessary, providing that the cremation had been completed before shutting the cremator down. This mirrored their view that ashes from an adult cremation should also be cleared from the hearth before shutting down. Both of these opinions wouldn’t be met by using the Auto Shutdown process.

Both points were raised in the previous note to offer that choice to an authority adopting the guidance, however it would remain the ICCM’s view that wherever possible, all remains should be removed from the main primary chamber once the last flicker of flame has ceased after a cremation.

If you leave a cremator fully working in full Auto Shutdown mode to complete a cremation, with no one in attendance and no one will be until the following day; if there is a mechanical failure, gas leak or any number of operational problems, how does this affect your insurance and public liability if there is damage to the machines and/or buildings?

There is currently no universal answer to this question, however the ICCM would note that due to several recorded flue fires occurring in crematoria within recent years, it would be strongly advised for an authority to speak with their own site’s insurance company for clarification.

What should I do next?

Based on the information above it is recommended that you draft a policy for your crematorium that clearly explains what happens (or could happen) to a coffin after the committal process in the chapel. This should include information on holding over and leaving remains on the hearth if you choose to do so. This policy should be shared with staff, service users and members of the public if they have any queries or concerns. ICCM Officers will be pleased to assist members and discuss what any policy should include.

Whether to continue to use Auto Shutdown or not is a matter for individual Cremation Authorities to consider and may take into account factors such as a reduction in cremation numbers or a change in working practices to accommodate this.

22nd October 2019