

# What is the Carbon Footprint of a Funeral?



By Julian Atkinson

In September's edition of *Funeral Director Monthly* Julian Atkinson, a member of the NAFD's Environmental Advisory Group, introduced the concept of calculating the global warming impact of the funeral sector.

In this second piece, he provides a useful guide to calculating the carbon footprint of your funeral business, drawing on his own business experience as Managing Director of JC Atkinson.

When you put it in context with other life events such as holiday travel, buying a car, heating your home, washing your clothes and even mowing your grass, the impact of a funeral on the environment is small. *A funeral is a once in a lifetime event.* The other activities listed are on-going.

## How can this statement be qualified?

By measuring the Carbon Footprint, it is possible to compare one activity to another. The Carbon Footprint is the carbon emissions associated with the activity, the fuel or energy used and the resources deployed.

## If the impact of a Funeral is small, why is it important?

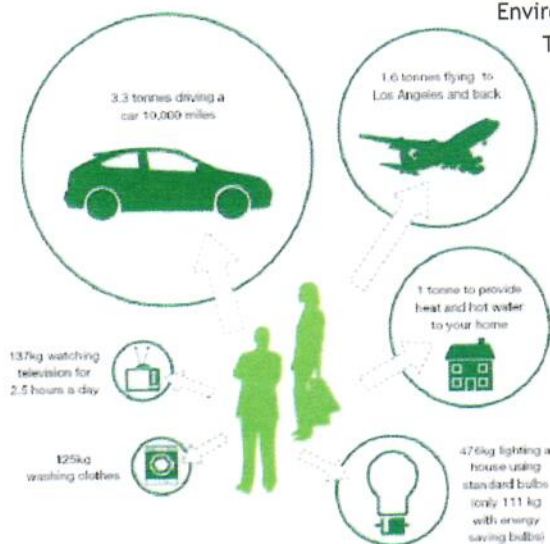
In my opinion, it is important because a growing number of your clients care about the environment and wish for their funeral arrangements to have as minimal an impact upon the environment as possible.

The generation of customers who did not question and followed tradition is giving way to a new generation brought up in times of greater opportunity, education and travel. This, together with more liberal attitudes, means funerals in the future will be more varied.

Environmental impact is one of the variables which will increasingly be considered. The best way to make meaningful dialogue and comparisons on 'green' options and issues is to consider the Carbon Footprint, or Global Warming Potential (GWP) of the service or product being discussed.

Funeral arrangers are then better able to communicate choices more effectively, achieving greater value and client satisfaction. By understanding the Carbon Footprint of a funeral and its options means the advice given (assuming it is appropriate) will be fair, impartial and objective.

For example, somebody wanting a 'green' coffin may choose a Willow Basket coffin because it looks 'green' - which is fine. A family who wants a traditional coffin or can't afford the additional cost of the willow option may feel short-changed. However the Carbon value of a wood veneer coffin (with wood handles) the Carbon Footprint is shown to be similar. By offering this as an alternative, the net result is that the clients in both cases can be satisfied.



1 tonne = 1,000kg

Moving to another example: a locally-held funeral with a cremation, at a nearby crematorium, has been debated to be 'greener' - having a lower Carbon Footprint - than a woodland/natural burial ground funeral arranged at a distance. Let us see if this is the case.

A cremation using a conventional gas-fired heated chamber gives on average about 180kg of CO<sub>2</sub> without coffin (This varies greatly, dependent on the size and composition of the deceased and the style of coffin used so estimates can only ever be used).

The use of a solid or chipboard coffin will reduce the need for fuel in cremation and save 40kg of CO<sub>2</sub> (given that sustainable wood is classed as a biomass) leaving an emission of 140kg.

The woodland/natural burial site funeral in comparison is probably located out of town and could facilitate vehicles involved with the funeral travelling a minimum of an extra twenty miles there and back.

An average car travelling 1 km will produce of 150g of CO<sub>2</sub>, thus multiplying

the extra 20 miles (or 32km) of travel per vehicle by the total number of funeral cars used, (lets guess this number at 12). The sum would be as follows 150 x 32 x 12 = 57.6kg of CO<sub>2</sub>. By looking at the extra travel factor, a more reasoned judgment is made.

Add this to the value of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with decay, the woodland/natural burial ground Carbon Footprint works out at 100kg - two thirds of that associated with cremation - making it the 'greener' option.

Obviously every funeral differs and the variables are massive so, in order to establish an estimate, one approach would be to take several differing types of the more typical funeral arrangements and work out an average.

In order to make a start you need to determine a typical funeral and ensure the examples you measure contain some of the more common variables. It is also an idea to consider what is incorporated in the funeral. Obviously there are all the necessary activities; some consumer-facing, some not. For

example, the removal of the deceased. If you have a dedicated vehicle again this is easy. A typical Mercedes Vito will produce 220g of CO<sub>2</sub> per km. If your removal vehicle has done 12,000 miles in the year, the total emission will be 220 x 19,200km = 4224kg of CO<sub>2</sub>. Divide this into the number of removals per year, let us say 300 for this example, the average removal cost in CO<sub>2</sub> would be 14.08 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> per funeral. This analogy would follow for all of your other services and overheads within your organisation.

To conclude where I started, our own Carbon Footprint for grass mowing (assuming it not a push mower) is approximately 4500 kgCo<sub>2</sub> in our adult lifetime. Unless the EU proposes abatement to lawn mowers, this is unlikely to change and will therefore remain a more significant contribution to global warming than your end of life arrangements.

This fact may appear flippant but in this analogy lies the answer as to why the Carbon Footprint of a conventional cemetery burial is higher than that of Cremation. Consider the thousands of acres of grass, requiring regular maintenance, in the cemeteries across the UK?

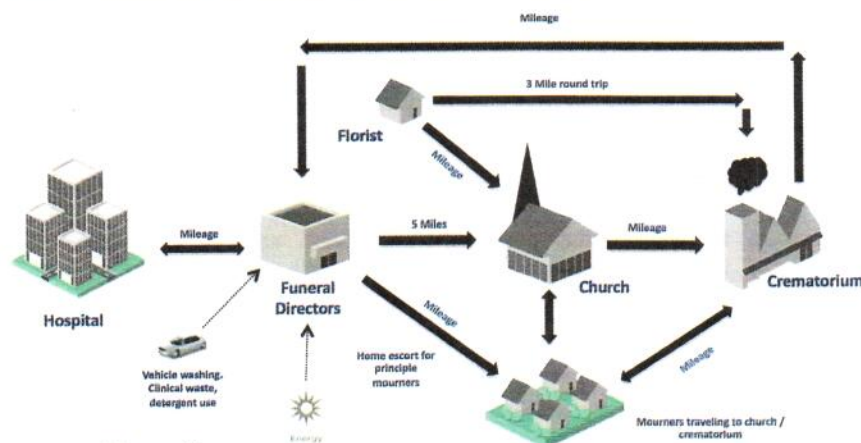
It is also worth considering that, if all crematoria re-used the heat they discharge for something meaningful, their associated Carbon Footprint would be reduced by around 50% making cremation also a very close contender to woodland funerals in terms of Carbon impact.

I understand people choosing "green" options for a funeral will not have a dramatic impact on the planet and also their understanding of the subject may be limited, but if the options were correctly referenced their choices would be more accurately understood and help funeral directors to meet the need to add client value to all funerals - which after all is what we all strive to achieve.

## Greener Goodbyes

How can Greener Goodbyes make a funeral greener?

### Step 1: Understanding the Carbon Emissions of the funeral



A typical funeral's carbon footprint

The National Association of Funeral Directors' Environmental Advisory Group will encourage and support members of the trade association in developing good practice within the funeral industry in matters relating to the environment.