



THE GUILD OF MASTER CHIMNEY SWEEPS

Powering chimney sweeping into the 21st Century



CO Protocol – Advice and Guidelines for Sweeps

Introduction

There will be occasions where a chimney sweep is called to a house to sweep a chimney and either on the phone, or when they arrive, they are told that someone has been ill with suspected Carbon Monoxide (CO) poisoning.

In other cases there may have been a past CO problem but the customer is unaware that this has caused an issue/incident. The customer may provide information to the sweep that simply causes suspicion to arise. Further questioning may increase concerns. It is entirely possible that the sweep is the first person to reveal the realities of the situation.

In some instances these incidents should have been reported and recorded so that the claim can be investigated and if there are issues with the installation or maintenance of the appliance, these can be addressed by the investigation authority and any prosecutions started.

If there has been a CO incident / problem, then simply sweeping the chimney or moving baffles etc. could easily destroy valuable evidence and any investigation may be unable to identify / prove the actual cause of the incident. This can affect not only a legal case but also the correct medical treatment for the person who has been exposed.

It is important to both the industry, and more importantly, to the family concerned that these incidents are fully addressed and inspected. This will allow any failure to follow the regulations or any negligence to be identified so that the responsible individual or organisation can be held accountable. It will also help to prevent future tragedies.

The intention of this article and the protocol is to give some actions and guidelines to reduce the number of times a sweep inadvertently changes, damages or removes vital evidence, thereby preventing a proper investigation from taking place.

Sweeps – you will often ask a customer if there have been any problems with their appliance. During casual conversation you may be told that someone has been unwell in some way, or perhaps been to the doctors. Perhaps the reasons are unexplained and symptoms are unresolved. It may be reported that a CO alarm has gone off but the reason was not identified and no investigation undertaken. You may be told that someone has been exposed and this has been medically identified but it's still possible that you are the first person to look at the appliance. Or for some other reason you may simply suspect that someone has been exposed to CO.



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In any event, if you suspect a CO incident then you **must** have a system in place for dealing with this and making your decision to sweep the flue or to preserve the evidence and report the incident.

Protocol actions and guidelines.

If on initial inspection the sweep believes that something to do with the installation may have been a contributory factor then advice should be sought because the issue may be investigated by Trading Standards rather than the HSE.

The sweep must gather some information before they undertake the sweeping operation to enable them to make a decision on what to do next and what advice to give.

The following should be ascertained before sweeping any flue following a CO incident or if you suspect a CO incident.

- a) Is it possible that anyone has been injured by CO poisoning.
- b) Is the property owner occupied or rented.
- c) When was the installation carried out
- d) Has there been any significant changes to the installation, the room (such as new windows etc.) or the property as a whole (such as new kitchen with extractor fan etc.) or to the chimney or flue (such as cowl, terminal or liner).
- e) If the answer to d) is yes then you need to know what these changes are and when they were done and if the stove has been used regularly since then.
- f) If anyone else has been to work on the stove or chimney recently and if so how long ago and who.

If the answers to the above suggest that there may be a professional who has carried out work on the installation in the recent months (less than 6 months) then the following additional will be information required.

- a) The date and time of the incident
- b) Was there a CO alarm present and did this activate. If an alarm is present, make a note of its location and ask where the alarm was located when the occurrence happened. Record the make and model, photos are a good addition to written records. It might be that the alarm should be tested, so make sure this is preserved.
- c) Who was affected, to what extent and if medical help was required or have those affected been to a doctor? Please note that a negative test on a survivor for CO does not necessarily mean the survivor was not poisoned because tests tend to be after the survivor has been in the fresh air.



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Actions

If the answers to the above give rise to ongoing concerns then the sweep should take action and avoid sweeping the chimney or disturbing the evidence by removing a baffle or cleaning access. If in doubt, **don't touch it**, delay sweeping, take photos and notes and leave all the appropriate warning labels and notices to make sure nobody uses the installation.

Either make a report under RIDDOR or seek advice on the next step from a suitable organisation – listed below.

HSE – Form for reporting a dangerous incident:

<https://extranet.hse.gov.uk/lfserver/external/F2508DOE>

Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps – info@guildofmasterchimneysweeps.co.uk or call 01226 242357. www.guildofmasterchimneysweeps.co.uk

CO Gas Safety Society - Email Stephanie Trotter, OBE office@co-gassafety.co.uk Tel. 01983 564 165 or 01483 561633 or 07803 088688 www.co-gassafety.co.uk

If the sweep is advised or decides that the incident could not be investigated for a prosecution then they are free to sweep the chimney and provide all the correct advice to the customer to help prevent a repeat of the incident.

On all occasions the CO Alarm must be checked and if it is incorrectly sited then advice should be given on where it should be placed.

Further important information

As a Solid Fuel industry leader, the Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps recognised there was no protocol for what a sweep should do if they are advised of or if they suspect a Carbon Monoxide (CO) incident. Very importantly, there was no protocol for what a sweep **should not do**. With this in mind the Guild has produced the following CO protocol and advice.

The Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps has provided training and advice regarding CO for many years. Members advise customers on CO awareness. Many members supply and fit alarms and the presence of an alarm is recorded on the certificate for every job. The Guild also makes financial donations to leading CO charity CO Gas Safety and helps promote their work to consumers and the solid fuel industry.



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When a prosecution may be relevant.

It is not always the case that a professional or landlord has been negligent when a CO incident occurs. There are many reasons why it would not be an issue to clear the chimney and advise the user on the correct operation of the stove and the correct maintenance requirements to help prevent a repeat incident. However, carbon monoxide poisoning is often not recognized by the medics and is wrongly treated. Therefore if someone is ill with suspected CO poisoning it is best to suggest they should be tested to find out if they have been exposed and if so, by how many parts per million of CO because this will greatly assist a medic to take notice whereas vague symptoms do not. Testing will also clarify if there has been a CO incident that should be reported by you.

The times when there is a possibility of an investigation into an incident will be when there has been a recent involvement of a professional or when the user of the property is a tenant.

Below is an indication of the times when consideration should be given to the formal reporting of the incident.

When the incident occurred in a rented property

Because, under the Health and Safety at Work Act (and other legislation) the landlord of the property is responsible for the safety of their tenant and the maintenance of any fixed service they provide or maintain, then any incident in a rented property must be notified under RIDDOR and no action taken by the sweep until authorised to do so by the investigating authority.

Note this will include private rented, social housing and any holiday lets, including boats Yurts etc.

After an installation

If the incident occurs soon after the installation of the appliance then this will almost certainly be a reportable incident under RIDDOR (**R**eporting of **I**nfectious **D**iseases and **D**angerous **O**ccurrence **R**egulations).

It may well be that the installation is fully compliant and the user has abused the installation, and as such has been responsible for the incident but at the same time there are many parts of an installation and design that can increase the risk of the incident and so an investigation is likely to take place.

Issues could be; incorrect flue size (too small or too large), the use of a 90 degree bend and/or long horizontal section, connection to a damaged flue. connection to a leaking flue, incorrect or non-existent commissioning or even the fact that the customer was not left with the operating instructions.



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In all these cases the user may have been culpable but had the installation been correct and the commissioning and hand over been carried out correctly. the incident may not have occurred.

After a significant change to the stove, installation or its surroundings.

If there has been a significant change to the installation such as a new flue liner, alteration to the register plate, the fitting of a new flue pipe or terminal then this may have had an influence on the incident and would need to be investigated by the relevant authority.

In addition to this it may be that the changes have occurred in an adjacent or adjoining property. This could be where work has been carried out on another flue in the chimney or a dormer has been added or some similar alteration that could have made the terminal location unsuitable.

After a recent sweeping or servicing of the flue

As we are all well aware in the sweeping industry, older chimneys and liners can be damaged by the sweeping process, especially if an over aggressive method of sweeping has been used, or if a sweep has not taken the care to carry out the operation well or used the wrong equipment. Chimneys which are already damaged or somehow deteriorated can be further deteriorated by the sweeping process.

Most chimneys are in a constant state of slow deterioration and will eventually reach a point when they are potentially unsafe to use. Masonry can become loose and fall, metal can corrode. The sweeping process can cause further damage to already damaged / corroded chimneys.

Deposits left in e.g. a wet chimney can dry out, or dry deposits can become wet and can fall, partially or fully blocking a flue.

In addition when servicing a stove the seals can be damaged or incorrectly fitted, as can a baffle plate, grate or brick set. All of these can have an influence on the combustion process in the stove and cause excessive soot or tar formation and so even this can have an influence on an incident.

When a prosecution is unlikely

If the occurrence was in a privately owned property and after a long period of use with no maintenance (over 24 months), or, after a similar period of no use when the appliance had been used regularly previously, this is not likely to be investigated.

If the installation was fitted 24 months ago and not used but the incident occurred the first or second time it was used, this may be reportable, so seek advice.



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If the appliance has been in use for a long period with no maintenance then it is unlikely that the incident could be blamed solely on the last professional who was on site as the user should have had the system maintained.

In all situations where you are aware of a CO incident, whether reported to the HSE etc. or not, then notify the CO Gas Safety Society to ensure the statistics they have are accurate and up to date.

CO Gas Safety Society - Email Stephanie Trotter, OBE office@co-gassafety.co.uk Tel. 01983 564 165 or 01483 561633 or 07803 088688 www.co-gassafety.co.uk

CO Gas Safety is a charity that helps CO victims / survivors and their relatives.

The Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps would like to thank Michael Waumsley of Mick Waumsley Consulting Ltd, Stephanie Trotter of CO Gas Safety and Guild Chairman Lawson Wight for their assistance in producing this protocol.