

## Securing your future through Commercialism – iCo Memorial Sales

With the public sector facing the biggest shake up in public finance for over 30 years, there has never been a more pressing time on local authorities to look at opportunities to deliver new sources of income.

Times are challenging with ongoing budget cuts and pressure to deliver savings across council services. Efficiency savings and “tightening our belt” alone is not enough to plug the gap or, more importantly, sustain the life of our bereavement services. What we also needed was to develop a more commercial-minded approach to running our business whilst still balancing out the need to deliver the best service possible to bereaved families.

Islington & Camden Cemetery Services (ICCS) has been a joint service since 2004, with Islington as the lead council. The service was set up as a “ring fenced” trading account which essentially means the service is self-managed and responsible for generating its own income. The benefits of this has meant that the services income is reinvested back into the cemetery service only. This has given us an opportunity to carry out projects and make improvements that historically never happened.

ICCS is one of the largest sites in London at 192 acres, which also has a crematorium within its grounds. Additionally, it is also responsible for 2 other sites – Trent Park Cemetery in Enfield & Hampstead Cemetery in Camden. Therefore, operational and maintenance costs are considerably high and the need to generate income is essential.

This has been all the more challenging with diminishing space and limited opportunities to create more business as we sit amongst four other crematoria within a mile and a half in each direction!

Given these pressures and constraints, four years ago we as a service challenged ourselves to be more innovative in our thinking and analysis of the service in order to create new sources of income. During this process we identified we often received a large number of enquiries from bereaved families wishing to purchase a burial memorial for a loved one’s grave but found the selection process daunting when having to navigate various suppliers.

Like most bereavement services across the country we have a garden of remembrance and were already providing cremated remains memorials. Having identified this demand, introducing the concept of providing burial memorials too seemed an appropriate and viable next step.

We were aware that there was already discussion in the industry around this but no one had yet actually started selling, especially with a view to make a surplus and not just to cover costs. We also knew there could be some challenge as the National Association of Memorial Masons (NAMM) were actively against the concept of local authorities entering the memorial market and expressed concerns about the impact this increased competition could have on the stone mason industry. As an organisation, we too received objection from one stone mason with similar concerns who also cited a perceived unfair advantage.

Throughout this, it was always our position that we would not be entering the market to compete with masons. Instead we would represent the customer in the process of making a choice which we saw would add value to the overall process.

To support this, we developed a framework of approved stone masons we would use under this arrangement and invited them to join, creating the same opportunities they currently have to supply their product to the customer.

Having decided to move forward we needed to decide the appropriate model and vehicle to trade. There were a few models we briefly explored based on other authorities' general commercial experiences such as joint-partnership, mutual "spin outs" and outsourcing, but none of these fitted how we wanted to operate.

Fortunately, Islington at the time were pro-actively seeking to encourage a more commercially minded workforce and had already set up a trading company, Islington Limited Company (iCo) using Section 95 of the Local Government Act 2003. This enabled council services to be set up as commercial businesses and operate in the private sector for "profit" as long as it was done through a limited company.

As a separate entity iCo has its own board responsible solely for the company and a governance structure in place where its accounting, business planning and monitoring procedures sat outside of the council.

Using this we set up iCo Memorials with a focus to not only generate income to sustain the life of the service, but also to offer a better and improved service for the bereaved where we give choice, flexibility on price and add value whilst servicing residents.



We recognised early on that shifting from normal local authority operations to a more commercial environment was always going to have its challenges. What we were proposing meant we had to take staff from a mind-set of just service provision and budget management to one of sales and promotion; business planning, market analysis as well as the concept of profit and loss.

Some of the new skills required are not always readily available in a local authority context. A cultural shift was required, and we needed to fill this void in order to meet the challenges ahead and be successful.

To facilitate this, we invested in training for all our staff covering everything from legislative process to sales techniques and most importantly product knowledge; we even organised a day trip to a mason! All processes were reviewed, and new ones introduced from day to day operations through to accounting.

Management needed to be more cost conscious and become more pro-active in surveying the market for new products and services, as well as forming closer business relationships with suppliers. A new structure was also introduced to ensure we had the right positions in place to help the business grow and develop new opportunities across the site to add to our offer.

A lot of this was facilitated directly by the service but where specific expertise was required, we were able to leverage internal support service help. Services such as Legal assisted in reviewing all

existing agreements and forms to ensure that everything was compliant with legislation. Our communications team were also instrumental in helping us develop our branding and promotional materials.

The organisation had also formed a central commercial board where we were able to utilise other specific expertise.



Four years on we now have a fully established service that has grown year on year. Because of this we have been able to reinvest back into the service to sustain the life of the cemetery, improve service to the bereaved and move towards a self-sustaining model ultimately saving money for the wider authority.

Looking forward we have plans to relocate staff to a new onsite sales office and have a number of projects in the pipeline that in the long term will provide sources of renewable income whilst still providing choice for our residents.

Having established the service, we are now also looking at exploring a number of joint working initiatives with other bereavement services and welcome any discussion with cemeteries currently facing the types of challenges we faced; if only for advice.

In conclusion, whilst the journey so far – we are not finished yet – has seen some lessons learned and also had its challenges the rewards have definitely outweighed all of these. For anyone embarking on the commercial journey I would say there is no one size fits all and that there are multiple models you can follow. Overall, however, I have found the following is always needed to embed a commercial approach in the culture of your service organisation:

1. Member and corporate board buy in
2. A clear vision and strategy
3. Clear governance and accountability
4. Profit and loss accounting
5. Investment in the workforce – Managers and Staff.

As a cemetery service we have seen this as an opportunity to further help the bereaved and provide them with choice at an affordable cost. At the same time, it also means we can give something back and make ongoing improvements and developments to our sites.

Anywhere we can help support others, our doors are always open.

Sofia Allana – Islington & Camden Cemetery Service