



Case study: G. Wathall & Son Ltd, Derbyshire

Helen Wathall, Managing Director

How did your business identify the direct cremation challenge?

In recent years we've had a growing number of families asking for direct funerals. This has increased as more national providers have leapt on the unattended bandwagon. Their nationwide advertising campaigns have resulted in people coming into our premises asking for a direct cremation, often citing their brand and not understanding that there is no link with our business.

How did you design a response?

We've always offered unattended funerals but we decided in the current market that the best approach for us to engage the public was to offer a set of packages. So we have created a direct cremation package, a simple funeral package and then completely bespoke funerals. We have made sure these options are clearly advertised for customers in our premises, on our website and social media channels, although we have opted for organic advertising as opposed to paid-for adverts.

We've also communicated the packages to staff with the aim of ensuring clarity and clear boundaries for customers. For example, if you want a funeral service with a direct then it's not a direct.

Additionally, a big emphasis for us has been around local service, reminding people that they can have a direct cremation and that it's better if it's provided by a local funeral director rather than a national provider far away.

How has the local market responded to your direct cremation offering?

We've seen a shift in our funerals. Previously, around 70% of our funerals were what you might call traditional with the remaining 30% being either direct or very large funerals - ie both ends of the spectrum. But what has happened since Covid, and again since we started overtly marketing direct cremation is that the 70% has shrunk slightly and we've experienced an increase both in direct and in larger funerals. This hasn't affected our overall revenue as the unattended and tailored packages have balanced things out. People either want something direct or highly personalised.

In terms of what customers tell us, we have found that people still want to add things on to the direct package. For example, many people really value the opportunity to view their loved one in the chapel of rest. So, it's often the case that people will add further elements to a direct cremation when they are given the choice.

What are the key learnings from your experience?

Proactive engagement with staff has been crucial in ensuring a successful outcome with our approach to direct cremation. This has helped to allay fears about the direction of the business and empower colleagues to have clear and transparent discussions with families about costs and what a direct funeral entails.

Indeed, helping families to understand the process is vital. Our bereavement group is now starting to hear from people who are struggling to come to terms with their loss because a loved one had taken out a prepaid direct cremation plan and no one explained to them at the time that they wouldn't have a chance to properly say goodbye with a service.