



Case study: Stockman & Loram, Devon

Seb Loram, General Manager and Funeral Director

Identifying the market challenge

In recent years we identified a growing demand for completely unattended cremations, a trend that spiralled during the coronavirus pandemic and has continued in the time since. Initially, we were always very conscious of offering direct cremation - it was something we would offer if we asked, but would not proactively market.

But we became aware of the growth of certain national companies - and received feedback from local end-of-life healthcare professionals that many people didn't know we offered unattended. Additionally, families said they wouldn't have used a national company had they known about our service.

How you designed a response

We made the decision to tackle the challenge head on by increasing public awareness, enhancing how we cater for the provision at need, and being clear about how our offering differs from others.

We began working closely with our local crematoria, which were also noticing a significant fall in numbers, and have utilised the Diamond Partnership with Westerleigh in addition to making separate arrangements with other crematoria.

We added the direct cremation option to our advertising artwork and on our website. This included an SEO campaign and Facebook marketing activity. We also raised awareness among professionals we work with and we refer to direct cremation in our literature and mail drops, as well as in talks and presentations.

We also now offer a direct cremation with options to add family viewing, memorial jewellery and other services. For example, we can provide a special coffin at cost if requested. But if the family really wants a basic hands-off service, we can complete all the arrangements remotely.

How the local market has responded

Engaging families about our options led to several families holding a simple service in our service chapel or at the crematorium. This approach has helped to increase revenue and customer satisfaction, as people feel they have been listened to and helped with their decisions, meaning they are more likely to return to us in the future.

Before the pandemic, annually between 1 - 5% of our funerals were direct cremations. But this soared to around 40% during the height of Covid restrictions. Since then, it's steadied at around 10 - 15%. Fewer families are using out of area providers and we very rarely have situations where we take initial instructions then have to relinquish to a national provider. Our local crematoria have seen numbers recover and we receive significantly more enquiries and completions regarding pre-need direct cremation.

Any learnings from your experience

The key take-aways from our experience, feedback and results are that direct cremation is not going away. The public are largely unaware that they can get this service locally. National companies are targeting your community with aggressive and persistent marketing - can your community see you?

It's also important to stand your ground when asked to facilitate viewings and provide assistance to national companies - that is a key part of making sure that they cannot hoodwink families into thinking they are somehow providing a suitable level of service.

And finally, independent funeral directors who assist national companies for short term gain are complicit in the harm being done to the independent profession. Collectively this can be transformed from a threat to an opportunity.