

Securing investment to re-open and revitalise a closed visitor attraction



V4 Services were commissioned by Ards and North Down Borough Council to find a way for the Council to:

- ➔ Reopen Northern Ireland's only aquarium, the Exploris Aquarium and Seal Sanctuary in Portaferry.
- ➔ Simultaneously obtain nearly £1 million capital funding from the Northern Ireland, Department of Environment (DoE) for refurbishment of the facilities as well as continued revenue support towards the maintenance of the seal sanctuary.

Exploris was shut to the public in 2014 after years of falling admissions, a requirement for an increasing public subsidy which could no longer be afforded, and an unsuccessful earlier attempt by Ards Borough Council (one of the two merged authorities) to appoint a commercial operator to manage Exploris on a zero subsidy basis.

THE CHALLENGE

V4 Services were appointed in stages to:

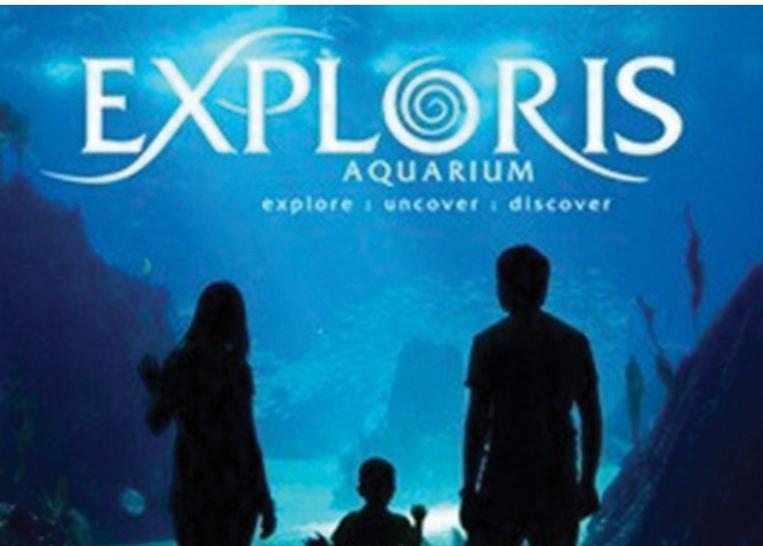
- ➔ Undertake an evaluation of the options for the future management of Exploris.
- ➔ Retest the market to determine whether the barriers to appointment of an operator experienced by Ards Borough Council had been sufficiently eliminated to achieve success this time around.
- ➔ Determine from the market what the Council would need to do to maximise the chances of a successful operator procurement.
- ➔ Develop a procurement approach which would be consistent with EU procurement rules, accommodate the requirements of the operator market, enable completion of the procurement within the tight timescales required to reopen Exploris for the 2016 season and obtain a time-limited capital grant from the DoE.
- ➔ Support the preparation of procurement documentation and subsequently a competitive dialogue-type procurement and operator appointment process.

The challenge was considerable with V4 Services appointed in May 2015 to work alongside expert lawyers, Pinsent Masons, throughout the entire process and the Council needing to reopen Exploris within 12 months.



“We could not be more delighted with the outcome of the project and the scheduled reopening of Exploris. Working with V4 Services we are very pleased to have appointed such an innovative company as Crumlin Road Gaol Ltd to operate the Aquarium and Seal Sanctuary for us. Their proposals are robust and promise to deliver a first class visitor attraction that will contribute to public understanding of marine life and make a very strong contribution to the regeneration and economic life of Portaferry, as well as the wider Ards and North Down area.”

**Alderman Deborah Girvan,
Ards and North Down Borough Council**





About V4 Services Limited

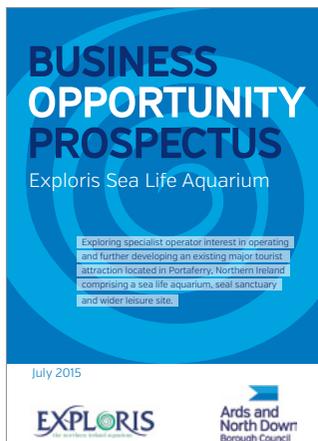
We have worked in partnership with over 120 UK public sector organisations including: councils, NHS, social enterprises and trading bodies providing hands-on delivery support to set up new business structures, improve the efficiency of in-house services, encourage a commercial approach and generate savings and service improvements.

THE SOLUTION

The options evaluation was completed within two weeks of appointment and by the end of June the Council decided to adopt the option of management of Exploris by a commercial operator, provided that this was supportable through positive operator feedback. To obtain feedback we undertook an early market engagement exercise on behalf of the Council. This comprised:

- ➔ Development of a commercial risk profile for testing with suppliers.
- ➔ Development of a Business Opportunity Prospectus and questionnaire.
- ➔ Advertising the opportunity and directly contacting those operators that had expressed an interest during the previous procurement process and other known operators.
- ➔ Identification of 17 potential operators from across the UK and Europe.
- ➔ Telephone interviews with interested operators.
- ➔ Preparation of a report for the Council setting out the feedback obtained and degree of confidence of the Council's objectives being met.

The market testing process demonstrated that there was strong interest in the opportunity and a formal procurement process started in September 2015.



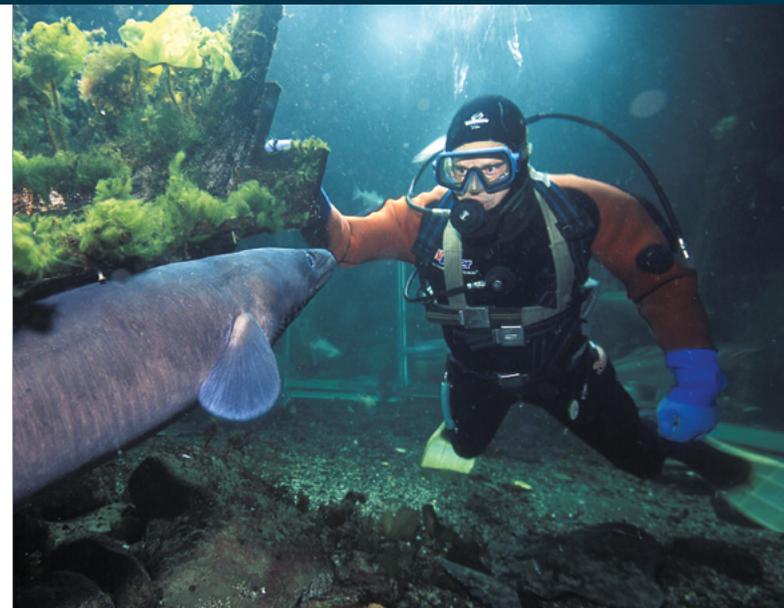
Throughout the project V4 Services worked closely with Council officers and Pinsent Masons in:

- ➔ Development of the EU Notice, procurement prospectus and prequalification questionnaire.
- ➔ Evaluation of expressions of interest.
- ➔ Evaluation of operator proposals and development of areas for further dialogue.
- ➔ The dialogue process with operators.
- ➔ Final award of the contract.

THE BENEFITS

Whilst at the final stage only two operators submitted proposals, the process led to a successful conclusion comprising:

- ➔ The appointment of the operator of the Crumlin Road Gaol, one of Northern Ireland's leading visitor attractions (supported by a specialist aquarium operator from the Republic of Ireland) to manage Exploris and the seal sanctuary under a 25 year operating agreement.
- ➔ Over £1 million investment in improvements to the Exploris facilities, largely funded through a capital grant provided by the DoE.
- ➔ A significant broadening of the range of marine exhibits and related attractions.
- ➔ Approximately 75% reduction in the maximum annual revenue subsidy required from the Council's annual budget.
- ➔ A share in operator profits above an agreed threshold.
- ➔ Transfer of all operating cost and income risks to the commercial sector.
- ➔ Continued provision of a seal sanctuary to serve the whole of Northern Ireland.



“It's going to be an exciting opportunity working with Ards and North Down Borough Council and other stakeholders in the Portaferry area to create a first class visitor attraction that will be entertaining and educational for visitors. With the expertise of Dingle Oceanworld, we will have the right team in place to ensure the aquarium becomes one of the best in Europe. We anticipate this project will be a catalyst for regeneration in Portaferry and the surrounding area and we aim to create 35 jobs at the facility.”

Kieran Quinn, Managing Director, CRG Ltd

