



## **Implementing Barmark in Chambers**

In 2010 Apex Chambers took the decision to apply for Barmark. Recognising that significant changes were afoot in the market in which it operated, including the prospect of tendering for private and legal aid work, it seemed a pragmatic approach to ensuring its preparedness and competitive advantage, should such eventualities transpire.

This is Apex Chambers story of how it approached Barmark and the benefits obtained so far...

### **Starting out**

As a relatively small set of chambers and with limited administrative support, the Management Committee decided to seek external help with implementing Barmark. As part of the application process, a review of Barmark requirements soon showed us that specialist help was needed in order to ensure all aspects were covered to an appropriate level. We opted for a Gap Analysis to identify where chambers already complied with Barmark and to understand what still had to be done before we would be in a position to invite the auditor in. This two day, independent assessment proved invaluable and left us with no illusion of what was required and the commitment expected.

Quite soon into the process it became clear to us that Barmark, with its far reaching elements, was going to ensure better management controls and decision making protocols thus supporting the achievement of chambers' objectives. Whilst some procedures were already in place, the need to document these was apparent as well as appreciating the benefits of a more rigorous approach, generally. The advantages of documenting decisions also became clear, particularly as additional committees were formed to take responsibility for issues previously not (formally) considered by chambers. Soon, we were holding regular meetings, making considered, strategic decisions and allocating responsibilities accordingly. Chambers was becoming a forward thinking, strategic entity.

### **Taking our time**

When chambers embarked on its journey to obtain Barmark it had no real appreciation of what was involved or how long it would take. By contracting external help, we were able to continue with day to day business and incorporate the additional meetings and reviews into it. Not surprisingly a lot of the work fell to me as Senior Clerk but as members volunteered to join the new committees, a broader sense of ownership and responsibility was established.

The advice to chambers was to allow sufficient time not only for the new procedures and practices to be implemented but also for them to be embedded into day to day practices. By adopting this approach we got used to the new way of doing things but also demonstrated to the auditor that chambers were under control and operating smoothly. Without this advice we may have rushed into the audit and paid the price. Chambers spent seven months implementing Barmark and preparing for the audit.

### **The Barmark Audit**

By the time the audit came and we had experienced a “dummy” audit by our consultant, we felt as prepared as we could be. The audit was very comprehensive and covered all aspects of Barmark. It was at times surprising how one question could lead swiftly into another seemingly unrelated one and we had to be prepared for this. Never the less, the auditor managed the audit well and at the conclusion of the three day audit we received our report, Barmark recommendation and comprehensive feedback.

### **Learning Points**

By implementing a Barmark compliant management system chambers have gained direction, discipline and focus. It has broadened our appreciation for planning and reviewing performance and encouraged us to work more closely with our clients in order to deliver new and existing services in line with their expectations.

### **Benefits of Barmark**

Apex Chambers is a more efficiently run set with greater ability to respond to opportunities and problems. Pre determined plans and processes mean that if Chambers should suffer a disruption of any kind, the service offered to its clients will not be impacted. A broader understanding within chambers of its relationship with clients and other critical stakeholders has brought us together as an entity as well as developed a mutual respect amongst its members and staff.

### **Advice to chambers thinking of applying for Barmark**

Employ an experienced consultant who gives an impartial view of chambers. Embrace Barmark; although it creates more work the results and benefits are worth it. Achieving Barmark is just the start so you need to keep working at it. Good luck!

**Craig Mansfield, Senior Clerk**

**Apex Chambers, Cardiff**