



Emma McDonald is an Associate with Town Legal LLP. She joined in 2021 having trained and qualified with Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner. Emma advises a wide range of clients in respect of contentious and non-contentious planning matters. I was fortunate to work with and place Emma with Town Legal last year. She has kindly agreed to answer a few questions about her experience as a junior lawyer in planning, her route to joining Town Legal, and why planning law is an interesting and thriving sector to work in

Tell us about your route to becoming a lawyer and any challenges you faced along the way?

I studied Law at university so I didn't venture too far from the common career paths! I did however find the application stage quite daunting, particularly as I didn't know anyone who worked in the legal sector so found it hard differentiate law firms from one another. I found websites such as 'Chamber Student' really helpful in summarising what particular firms are known for and what their culture is like. I also found going to law fairs and speaking to trainees/associates at prospective firms a useful way of understanding what day to day life as a lawyer looked like.

Given the variety of sectors a lawyer can qualify into, why did you choose planning?

I started my training contract with an open mind, but I soon realised I had a love for property due to its tangibility; it doesn't get old being able to walk past a building and say that you worked on it!

What I love about planning is that it combines the private law world of property with public law considerations of how land should be utilised; there is a delicate balance between the rights of land owners to use and develop their land as they wish and the wider interests of the general public. It is also an incredibly wide ranging and constantly changing field, one day you can be negotiating a section 106 agreement for a residential development in the suburbs and the next working on a claim for judicial review against a high profile London office development. I can see myself having a long career in the sector and never getting bored.

You qualified with Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, who are a global practice with over 1300 lawyers to join a busy boutique practice. How would you describe the difference?

Whilst both types of firm ultimately strive to provide the best service for clients, the way in which they operate is quite different. Town is a much smaller and 'newer' firm, and therefore my role is more expansive than just a lawyer. There is a big focus on business development and maintaining client relationships, as well as understanding how a law firm operates as a business. Working in a smaller firm also fosters a much greater emphasis on culture and inclusivity; something you might get in the department of a big firm but rarely across the entire firm itself.

Why is Town Legal a good place to work?

I could talk about this for days! On the work side of things, the work is incredibly diverse; this naturally stems from having 10 partners who all have various specialisms and expertise, but is also supported by the fact you are encouraged to flag particular areas you would like more experience in.

In terms of people, the firm is fantastic. At a formal level, you are allocated a supervising partner and more junior 'associate buddy' who you regularly meet with to discuss workload, ask any questions, or just to have a chat about what you got up to at the weekend! At an informal level, everyone is very approachable, and the firm makes a great effort to ensure a collegiate and collaborative atmosphere amongst all 'Townies'.

What is like transitioning from a trainee solicitor to a fully qualified solicitor and what advice would you give to an aspiring lawyer with an interest in planning?

I have really enjoyed the transition. There is definitely more responsibility with being an associate, you can expect to be the first point of contact for a client and to be trusted to do most of the day to day work on a matter. However, you are fully supported and are not expected to suddenly be an expert on every topic, there will always be a supervising partner on each matter who is more than happy to answer any questions you have or step in where necessary.

I would advise anyone with an interest in planning to read around the subject as much as possible. Planning law is extremely wide ranging and if you can grasp the various different branches of it e.g. planning policy, planning agreements and contentious elements then it should help to ensure that you are going into the right field. I also found sitting in the real estate department as part of my training contract really helpful in terms of understanding the overlap between property law and planning law so would recommend doing a seat in real estate (in addition to a seat in planning) if possible.

How was the interview process at Town Legal and what advice would you give to someone about to go through a similar process?

It was as enjoyable as an interview process can be. There were two interviews and a case study. The first interview was a 'get to know you' style interview which was a nice way of introducing me to the firm and ensuring both that I was a good fit for Town and that Town was a good fit for me. The second interview was more technical, but it felt like a conversation between three people interested in planning law rather than a grilling!

I would advise anyone going through a similar process to think about transferable skills – just because you haven't worked on every type of project doesn't mean that you don't have the relevant experience to bring to it. For example, work organising bundles during your litigation seat could be really handy in a planning inquiry context. Most importantly, be yourself – it's a cliché but a job interview should be a two way street and if you need to ask questions to find out if the role is a good fit for you then do.

As a junior lawyer qualifying in the middle of a pandemic how did you deal with remote working?

It wasn't the most ideal of situations but thankfully I was able to make the best of it. Town arranged 'virtual coffees' so that I could chat to everyone at the firm and this meant that I felt comfortable calling them to discuss matters or ask questions as if we were in the office. I think that with any form of home working it is important to put practices in place to ensure that you don't feel isolated, I have found having regular virtual catch ups with team members a great way to still maintain the office environment whilst being home.

What opportunities do Town Legal offer in terms of wider personal growth and opportunities to give back to the local community?

On the non-fee earning side of things, the firm has a great emphasis on corporate and social responsibility; we have a 'CSR Day' each year which is a day dedicated to giving back to the local community. We also regularly host fundraisers for a number of charities; including XLP, a local charity who work to create positive futures for young people in inner-city London, and FoodCycle, who aim to make food poverty, loneliness and food waste a thing of the past for every community.

We recently started working with Big Voice London who aim to improve social mobility in the legal profession. We hosted several workshops on careers in law and life as a planning lawyer, these were a great way to reflect on pathways to law and to encourage those from non-traditional backgrounds to pursue a career in law.

About The Author – Stuart Phillips

Stuart entered the recruitment industry having graduated with a Law Degree from Southampton in 1995. He subsequently spent 4 years serving with Essex Constabulary before returning to his true vocation in legal recruitment in 2002. He has always handled recruitment assignments for firms in London and the Thames Valley.

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