

Introducing the Solicitor of the Year – Private Practice Shortlist: Q & A with Manjinder Kaur Atwal, Director at Duncan Lewis



What do you enjoy most about working in housing and property litigation?

Client interaction – I enjoy dealing with complex legal issues but simplifying them for clients and achieving a successful case outcome. I like to be challenged by the diverse issues of a case and I get personal satisfaction from ensuring that a client is in secure housing and not at risk of losing their home. When acting for private landlords regarding the possession of a property, the requirements and intricacies for successful possession are complicated, so I thrive on this challenge of ensuring the case is successfully resolved for the client. I assist both landlords and tenants achieve their objectives and having a fantastic team supporting my work is crucial. In leading the department, I have been given the opportunity to develop our practice in dealing with many diverse areas of housing in both private and Legal Aid matters, involving injunctions, evictions, disrepair, landlord and tenant disputes and contract disputes. Litigation matters form much of my work, including homelessness and assisting vulnerable clients. Proceedings are diverse and can vary from the County Court, to the High Court and to the Court of Appeal.

Why have you chosen to work at Duncan Lewis?

The career progression opportunities at Duncan Lewis are excellent. I started here as a two years' PQE solicitor and in less than five years I have been promoted to department director. Implementing new ideas on the direction of the department and business are encouraged by the management and you are assisted in progressing new ideas. If you want to undertake a course or new qualification to develop your work, the funding and guidance are available. You are given the opportunity to shine, hard work is recognised and ultimately, the firm fosters innovation within your department.

What would be your advice to a prospective lawyer looking to specialise in housing and property litigation?

Be motivated to succeed and don't turn away from the challenges which appear along your journey as they will shape your progression. At 15 years old, when I spoke to my school careers advisor, they suggested that I didn't have the ability to fulfil my ambition of becoming a solicitor and should work in drama due to my creative talent or IT due to my academic success in this area. Contrary to this advice, I did move into law as a solicitor, but I first took a degree in IT and programming at university. After I sourced the solicitor conversion route, I spent time networking and creating contacts in order to get a foothold in the legal industry I was about to enter. I successfully completed the Graduate Diploma in Law, followed by the Legal Practice Course and next undertook a training contract which ultimately led to my position at Duncan Lewis today. Overall, I would stress the point that you will come across challenges in your career, but never give up on your ambitions and keep reading and researching the law as it is constantly changing. Modifying your career by converting to law from another industry is not a hindrance: it shows you want to be challenged and have the ambition to achieve targets.

What is your ultimate goal for the successful outcome of a case?

My main goal is client satisfaction and working to get the best result for my client in a case which may contain complex issues. Mediation is key in negotiating a good result for the client without the pressure of court proceedings. I enjoy speaking to others in my industry about their experiences of matters comparable to mine and understanding their perspective on different areas of law. I am proud to represent my firm at networking events and build relationships with people who are passionate about their work.

Is there a law in existence today that you would like to see changed or reformed?

I would change the possession proceedings process. The form filling process is too open to mistakes being made and is not clear enough for the client. We need to make the law easier for the layperson to understand their position and how they can move forward. Despite the lack of legal training a litigant in person may possess, it is difficult and time consuming for the court to ensure all parties are on an equal footing regarding understanding of a case; the court will try to ensure all parties comply with litigation rules but a litigant in person is unlikely to have the knowledge to comply. So this compliance is statistically unviable at present, a situation which can be reversed by simplifying the possession proceedings process to accurately take into account the starting position of all parties.