

'A Day in the Life' of a Government Lawyer

1) Please give a brief description of what you do & the company you work for?

I am a solicitor. I am employed by the Government Legal Department and work in the Agricultural law team in the central government Department for Environment food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

2) What does your average day entail? Where do you work? (Environment - Office, home, studio etc.) What is your work pattern? (full time/part time etc) What are the main activities during your day? (i.e. meetings, emails, practical tasks, visiting clients etc)

I work part time. I do not work on Mondays; I work from home on Tuesdays and Friday mornings. I come into the office in London on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Whether I am working from home or in the office it is normal to have several meetings a day (when at home I dial into meetings and they are held "virtually"). We have regular team meeting on a Wednesday. I spend a large part of my day reading and responding to emails giving legal and procedural advice in response to questions from clients. Those questions can be detailed and specific (how to handle a particular case) or much more general (advice upon general principles of public law). I also have to draft statutory instruments (particularly those connected with exiting the European Union). I have to review policy papers that are sent to the department's Ministers (George Eustace, Michael Gove and Lord Gardner) and provide legal input. I can be called into Ministerial meetings to discuss these papers (though I have not yet had to do that; lots of my colleagues have). I occasionally travel to visit clients in Newcastle and I have, just once, been to Brussels to assist with negotiating new regulations (this was really exciting!).

3) What skills and qualification are required for your role?

In order to work as a government lawyer you need to be either a qualified solicitor or barrister. To become a solicitor or barrister you need to have either a law degree or a degree in a different subject and the law conversion course. You must then take the relevant professional exams and if a solicitor completes training or, a barrister complete a pupillage. I studied history at university and then took the law conversion course (1 year) and then the solicitor's professional qualification (1 year). I was then a trainee solicitor for 2 years before I was qualified. The Government Legal Department offers training for both solicitors and barristers.

4) What do you enjoy most about your job? What are you least favourite aspects of your job?

My job is extremely varied and is therefore always interesting. I like finding out about new things and there are plenty of opportunities for that in my job (I have found out that often things that sound like they won't be interesting turn out to be fascinating when you get into them; the opposite can also be true, something that sounds interesting can actually be quite dull!). My job is intellectually stimulating and sometimes really very difficult so always challenging. I love the fact that my work is topical. I work with interesting colleagues and it is a great public service to help the government develop and deliver policy within the law. I prefer to work to a deadline and there are always plenty. The least favourite aspects are when deadlines overlap and the pressure mounts or when the administrative systems let you down.

5) What were your favourite subjects at school? Why? Do these link/relate to the job you do now?

I went to Simon Balle school many years ago! I studied History, Geography and English at A level. I also really enjoyed drama, debating and public speaking. (Drama and Politics were not available subjects then!). One of the key things to learn in history is to uncover as many different sources as possible and to evaluate them. Lawyers must research legal points, looking at case law and learn to evaluate the strength of an argument or the risk of legal challenge in taking a particular course of action. All my A level subjects involved me writing and as a lawyer I have to write advice for a variety of audiences often explaining complicated points as clearly as possible. The debating that we used to do at school taught me the value of arguing persuasively with evidence even if I did not believe or emotionally connect with the position. As a lawyer it is necessary to analyse the strength of your client's argument as well as the strength of their opponent's arguments.

6) How did you get to where you are now? (i.e. academic routes, professional development, career opportunities).

After my A levels I studied history at Manchester University. I then studied for the law conversion course and the solicitor's professional exams at the College of Law in London. I then trained as at a big city law firm (now Hogan Lovells). On qualification I specialised in commercial property law at city firm Macfarlanes. I left the city and joined the government in what was then known as the Treasury Solicitors department but that is now the Government Legal Service. I have held several roles within the Government Legal Service including working with bona vacantia (ownerless goods) and the Assets Recovery Agency (for civil wrongs). I have had 2 periods of maternity leave and a career break. I returned from the career break to my current role.

7) What advice would you give to our aspiring students who are interested in pursuing a career in your profession?

I think that it is important to try and get some work experience in a legal offices, it is not as it is portrayed on the TV. I think that it is important to get the highest grades that you can as this will help you progress and make you feel confident. If you want to work for the government be interested in current affairs and watch the news! I think that potential lawyers need to develop discipline; attention to detail is a valued skill and enables expertise to be acquired, read the question carefully provide evidence to back up the points that you are seeking to make and learn to present a coherent argument. A good lawyer needs to be able to understand the true motives behind their client's request. It is therefore good to also look at the big picture particularly if you want to conduct commercial negotiations or litigation. Good lawyers are often problem solvers, to be the best it is necessary to be a creative thinker as well as one that can see the bigger picture and be disciplined enough to pay attention to detail! Sounds impossible? It isn't but I would recommend that any aspiring lawyer does not let go of their creative interests. I would also advice aspiring lawyers to stay curious and continue to enjoy learning new things.

8) In your current profession what are the potential development and progression opportunities?

I am a civil servant where there are clearly defined grades; I could become a senior lawyer managing team, a deputy director in charge of the lawyers in a policy subject area or even a

Legal Director in charge of all of the lawyers in the department. The head of the Government Legal service is the Treasury Solicitor. He has access to the central government's most senior civil servants and political figures, he is for example regularly in Brussels assisting with EU exit negotiations. In theory these opportunities are all before me and would be before anyone else entering the Government Legal Service.