



The Law Society

A career as a solicitor in local government: working for the community

career
opportunities

A career as a solicitor in local government: working for the community



An introduction from Sir Les Elton

A solicitor who chooses to work in local government can enjoy a career of unrivalled variety. They can continue to practise law, manage others or move into one of many and various generalist roles which abound and which are constantly developing and changing. They can also use the experience and knowledge which they gain as a launching pad to other opportunities in the public or commercial sectors.

My own career covered a period of 35 years to 2004 and I was able to work for five different local authorities in different parts of the country, doing different things in each one. Even with the benefit of hindsight, I would not change one part of it.

I have been able to contribute to the success of large organisations which exist to make things better for the areas which they serve and the people who live there and to see where we have made a difference. Whether in providing and developing services or in physical development it is always clear why everyone is working hard to do things and how the efforts of each individual contribute to the whole.

To me a lawyer's training has always been the learning of a particular way of thinking. We learn to think in an analytical manner examining all sides of an issue with detachment, to present arguments thoughtfully and in a way designed to find the correct answer rather than simply to win and we can reduce complex issues to clear and understandable summaries. This is a set of skills which is well fitted to be the base of a career in local government.

If you are interested in public service then I can think of no better place to be than in local government.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Les Elton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Sir Les Elton is a solicitor with 35 years' experience in local government. He served as Chief Executive of Gateshead Council and Clerk to the Northumbria Police Authority for twenty years and has chaired a number of independent reviews for central government. He is a Visiting Professor at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne Business School and Governor of Northumbria University. He was knighted for services to local government in 2004.

This brochure has been produced collaboratively by the Law Society and Solicitors in Local Government Limited.

The Law Society is the representative body for 120,000 solicitors in England and Wales. It supports members in their careers and in their practices. It acts as the voice of the profession to the public, government and regulators, builds market opportunities and influences the development of effective law. www.lawsociety.org.uk

Solicitors in Local Government Limited (SLG) is a non-profit making company formed from the former Local Government Group and is a recognised group of the Law Society working to support, develop and represent solicitors working in local government. SLG represents its members in fire authorities, police authorities, passenger transport executives and national park authorities as well as local councils.

This brochure describes working for a local council. Further information about the other bodies represented by SLG is available at www.slgov.org.uk

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Why work in local government?

Working as a solicitor in local government is fundamentally different from working in private practice and other sectors, both in terms of the clients you serve and the range of projects you are likely to be involved in. The work is varied, challenging and rewarding and offers the opportunity to make a real contribution to the local community.

Some 4,000 solicitors work for local government organisations in England and Wales. Essentially their job is to provide a legal service to the council itself and within that to the many professions working in local government.

Councils provide an extensive range of services to their communities, any of which their legal department might work on.

You could find yourself:

- Drafting building agreements, lease agreements and partnership agreements for the development of new housing on council land
- Representing the local authority in court in child protection cases
- Advising a committee on granting planning permission for anything from a residential extension to a new hospital
- Helping to formulate policy in any of the council's areas of work including homelessness, benefits, debt recovery or employment
- Advising in main council meetings and other council meetings such as the standards committee and local area committees
- Advising the monitoring officer or becoming the monitoring officer for your authority.

Solicitors in local authority legal departments may specialise in a specific area such as litigation or property, or may be required to advise on all areas of work, particularly in a small authority which has only a few legal staff.

Legal departments advise a wide range of professionals including architects, engineers, planners, accountants, social workers and teachers. They can handle projects involving large sums of money and are directly involved in the provision of services to local people.

Career opportunities are good. There is an increasing need for good lawyers with local government experience as the financial constraints on councils tighten and the complexity of legal work increases. Furthermore training in local government offers a sound basis for career flexibility and many solicitors move between private practice and local authority practice during their careers.

What local authorities do

Together local government organisations employ more than two million staff, serve a client base of over 55 million and spend billions of pounds each year on service provision.

Funded by central government and council tax payers, they provide services to their communities either directly, through contracts with other organisations, or in partnership with other organisations.

They enforce regulations, for example in the areas of environmental health, development control (planning), licensing and economic development.

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How local government is structured

Much of England has a two-tier system of county and district councils. County councils are responsible for education, social services, consumer protection, libraries, highways, police, fire and transport. District councils are responsible for environmental health, planning, licensing, recreation, housing strategy, elections and council tax collection.

In London, the large conurbations and throughout Wales, metropolitan or unitary authorities provide all council services.

What the job involves

Advising clients

The clients of a local government legal department are primarily the council itself, then also the officers (staff), elected councillors (members) and the committees that make many of the authority's decisions.

The role includes:

- Advising officers and councillors about their statutory powers and duties and whether a decision is lawful and reasonable.
- Advising councillors on how their personal interests could conflict with their role as an elected member.
- Giving legal advice to committees and guidance on how to operate within the authority's constitution.

Representing the authority at court hearings and tribunals

A local authority advocate represents their authority in courts and tribunals, at public inquiries and in appeal processes on issues such as school place allocations, homelessness applications and in cases of judicial review (the court proceedings in which a judge reviews the lawfulness of a decision or action made by a public body, against the authority).

There is a wide variety of legislation which councils may use to prosecute in appropriate cases. Councils must comply with the Code for Crown Prosecutors in such work and so the advocate must consider what is in the public interest as well as the instructions that he or she has. Cases may be taken in the areas of food hygiene, noise nuisance, breach of bye laws, benefit fraud, animal neglect, breach of rules about houses in multiple occupation and many others.

Civil litigation may be conducted in the areas of housing possession, debt recovery and commercial property. Cases may be required to be defended in the Employment Tribunal. Cases of judicial review are heard in the High Court and in some cases may be appealed to the Court of Appeal and to the House of Lords. Your expertise will often be called upon to brief counsel in cases which will create precedent for other local authorities.

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The skills and aptitudes you need

Working in a council legal service you will need to be able to:

- think quickly and clearly in a high pressure environment
- analyse problems
- communicate effectively
- be flexible
- work as part of a team
- be apolitical. Political groups are a feature of life in local authorities and as an officer you must provide objective and impartial advice.

The working environment

Be prepared for constant change

Because of its political and statutory nature, local government is subject to constant change. This means that there is a need for local authority solicitors to constantly update their knowledge in these changing and brand new areas of law and there is a need to get up to speed rapidly on how to operate within new legislative frameworks as they emerge.

The Lexcel practice management standard

Many local authority legal departments are accredited with the Law Society's practice management standard (Lexcel) which shows that they have efficient administration, case management and time recording systems.

Providing best value services

Local authorities are required by government to provide best value services which means that they must demonstrate continuous improvement. Legal services are required to demonstrate value for money in the service they provide. The performance of the service will be regularly assessed. Legal services will have time recording and case management systems and you may be required to collect performance data for the work that you do.

Salaries and conditions of service

The salaries of trainee solicitors usually exceed the minimum set by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. Trainees may additionally receive incremental increases during their contract. The salaries of qualified solicitors vary from authority to authority and are reviewed annually.

Most councils offer their staff some or all of the following benefits:

- local government pension scheme
- around 25 days annual holiday entitlement
- season ticket loan
- flexible working schemes
- car leasing scheme
- opportunities for part-time and job-share working.

Many authorities offer family-friendly working policies including flexible working arrangements and term-time working contracts.

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Finding your first job

Work experience

Work experience in a local government legal department will almost certainly help you when you are applying for your first job. Some authorities offer placements either with or without pay. For temporary work, contact the head of legal services at local authorities near you.

Training contracts

As elsewhere, training contracts in local government are limited in number and competition can be tough. There is no national recruitment scheme or list of local authority training contract vacancies. However a list of authorities that have been granted permission to employ trainees is available from the Solicitors Regulation Authority (www.sra.org.uk). This list is reviewed annually. Each local authority advertises and recruits according to its own requirements.

Vacancies are usually advertised in the national press or in relevant journals such as *The Law Society Gazette*. They may also be advertised on the Solicitors in Local Government website at www.slgov.org.uk

Making a successful application

Local authorities have set application procedures for permanent posts which are designed to be fair and impartial. Your application will be considered against the job description and person specification for the post.

The employer will consider the details on your application form, including your academic record and work experience, to decide if your skills and experience meet their requirements. You must complete the application carefully and in full; it is not sufficient simply to attach your CV.

Many authorities guarantee interviews to people with disabilities under the Guaranteed Interview Scheme.

What to expect

From day one you can expect considerable responsibility for the cases that you deal with. You may start off shadowing qualified lawyers in your team and gradually build up your own caseload.

Training and development opportunities

Many authorities offer high quality training. As well as undertaking the training required by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, you may be encouraged to attend further internal and/or external courses.

As a local authority employee you may enjoy rights of audience before the magistrates court or before a judge in chambers in the county and High courts in accordance with court rules. This is a great opportunity to gain first hand litigation experience that is not available to trainees in other sectors.

Some local authorities establish partnerships with private law firms, which allow trainees to carry out some of their training contract with that partner or another organisation such as the Crown Prosecution Service.

Career opportunities

With experience you can choose either to continue as a legal advisor and progress to a team leader position or to focus on administration, management and policy. There may be less legal work involved in the latter role, although the ability to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of a particular course of action and to argue for and defend your authority's position all require the use of your legal skills. In many authorities you may become a manager and continue to hold your own caseload.

A post often filled by senior lawyers is that of monitoring officer. The monitoring officer has statutory responsibility to ensure that the council acts lawfully. The role is complex and vital to the council. It is key to the operation of the members' code of conduct, the council's standards committee and its constitution.

If you become head of legal services and/or monitoring officer, you can expect a challenging and exciting role in which you shape the provision of legal services, guide the lawful operation of the authority and resolve difficult issues.

Once you are an experienced local government solicitor the career opportunities are very broad indeed. Beyond the role of head of legal services, which may include responsibility for democratic services, scrutiny, elections and land charges functions, there are director posts within each council. And there is a significant history of local government solicitors becoming chief executives.

Whether you want to stay with one particular authority or move around England and Wales working for different types of authorities, the prospects for promotion are excellent. Each legal service will be structured in a slightly different way although they often have a structure that includes a number of different legal teams and a management team. As local authorities are equal opportunities employers, full time posts are invariably advertised, often in *The Law Society Gazette* or on the Solicitors in Local Government website.

Your experience as a local government solicitor can be very valuable to an authority. Your career progression may simply depend on what you want, so aim high.

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Career profile

Name

Emma Campbell

Council type

Large city council

Current job title

Trainee solicitor

Academic qualifications

LLB, LPC

My day

My day is never predictable! However, a normal day will generally entail telephone conversations with clients and other solicitors, research, drafting documents and letters and attending meetings with lawyers in my team.

Three things I like about my job

1. The wide variety of work that the city council undertakes and that trainees get involved in, both contentious and non-contentious, including exposure to high profile matters.
2. The flexibility of the council's training contract - they will try to accommodate any (reasonable!) requests you make.
3. Remuneration and benefits in local government are usually attractive compared with most private practices - my council currently pays trainees almost £3,000 more than the Solicitors Regulation Authority minimum which makes a lot of difference when you're struggling with all your post-LPC loans! Also flexible working - being able to take time off in lieu of hours accrued over normal contract hours - is an attractive benefit and rewards you for working hard.

My career to date

During my law degree I spent each summer holiday working in the criminal department of a solicitors' firm in my home town. This gave me an insight into private practice, particularly legal aid work, and I decided that this was what I wanted to do.

After completing the full-time LPC I began to look for training contracts and found it an almost impossible task. With rejection letters becoming a daily treat and bank loan repayments looming, I decided to take an alternative route and pursue paralegal work to give me some experience, a wage and also a 'foot in the door'.

I joined an agency and the first placement they gave me was in the social services team of Birmingham City Council's legal department. I worked there for almost a year and continued to apply for training contracts in my spare time, mainly to legal aid firms offering criminal work. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the team and began to consider whether legal aid work was the career I wanted.

I was quite surprised at the wide variety of work that the council undertook and the quality of lawyers that worked there. I decided that getting a good training was a priority over pursuing a career in legal aid. When the training contract at the city council arose, I decided to apply.

Despite never having contemplated a career in local government, I soon realised that the training contract they offered was one of the best available. I was awarded the training contract with the council after a fairly gruelling three rounds of interviews!

Being such a large authority means they can be fairly flexible and tailor your training contract to your interests. Working in local government is an interesting, rewarding and enjoyable experience and I would urge all trainees to consider it.

Three top tips for entering this area of work

1. Consider working as a legal assistant in a council's legal department. This will give you an insight into the work and help you become familiar with the constitution, policies and workings of a council.
2. Don't give up! Obtaining a training contract in any area of the law is extremely difficult. Don't get disheartened by rejection letters.
3. Try to think of ways to make yourself stand out from the other applicants. If you're like me and have average academic results, make yourself shine in another way - for example make your application really good. If you are lacking in practical experience, try to get unpaid work at a solicitors' firm or local council to make some contacts and add this to your application. If you impress them they may offer you temporary paid work!

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Career profile

Name

Kemi Okunnu

Council type

County council

Current job title

Senior legal adviser

Academic qualifications

LLB, LPC

My day

My day depends on whether or not I am on duty as the first point of call for enquiries from social workers and other professionals. A non-duty day involves checking statements to be filed and care plans for children, and dealing with correspondence from other parties.

Three things I like about my job

1. The variety
2. My work colleagues
3. The flexible working arrangements

My career to date

My A level results were Cs and Ds which were disappointing for me. However I gained a 2.1 at Sheffield Hallam University and then passed the legal practice course in 2003.

I started legal life as a paralegal in a small personal injury company in Birmingham. Then I moved to Derby City Council as a litigation paralegal and this is where my preference for local authority work developed. As a result I targeted my training contract applications at local authorities.

In 2005 Bristol City Council took me on as a trainee and I gained experience in a wide spectrum of local government work. This included childcare, which I really enjoyed, and confirmed that I wanted to work in this area.

I qualified on 1 August 2007. Before I completed my training contract I was appointed to a 'newly qualified' post and now I am enjoying the start of my career as a solicitor.

Three top tips for entering this area of work

1. Get as much experience as you can observing solicitors and counsel in meetings and in court. This will make it easier to be prepared for most situations when you are flying solo.
2. Make sure you enjoy your work - this will ensure that going into the office does not become a chore!
3. Don't get personally involved in any of your cases - if you do, you will be less effective for the authority.

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Career profile

Name

Habib Aziz

Council type

City council

Current job title

Housing lawyer

Academic qualifications

LLB, LPC, Diploma in Local Government Law & Practice

My day

Each day presents its own challenges. One day I could be advising a housing management organisation about gaining repossession from a squatter, while the next I might be advising on the housing aspects of a major regeneration scheme.

I could be involved in advising on implementing new laws such as the Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing or helping the Council to respond to national consultation documents.

My role includes advising officers at all levels, as well as dealing with queries from elected members. I regularly provide training to officers on the existing law as well as any proposed changes.

I can't think of much that I don't enjoy about my job. I enjoy advising on the variety of issues that I deal with on a daily basis.

My career to date

I have worked for a large commercial firm as well as a smaller high street firm. I have spent the last four and a half years in the public sector.

I am a member of a private sector housing legal advisory panel which provides advice and guidance to support local authority services. I also head a housing special interest group, which is a discussion forum for lawyers on housing law and associated areas.

I have spoken at national conferences and events and written articles for a number of specialist magazines. In 2007 I was awarded the Solicitors in Local Government Young Solicitor of the Year Award for my work in housing law.

Three top tips for entering this area of work

1. Hard work. You need to be prepared to work hard in preparing for your interview and stand out from the crowd. Do your research.
2. The ability to think of solutions 'outside the box'.
3. Commitment to the public sector.

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Career profile

Name

Jill Coule

Council type

London borough council

Current job title

Principal solicitor

Academic qualifications

BA Hons, LPC, Dip LG, Masters in Employment Law & Relations

My day

Varied, busy, challenging, exciting, thought-provoking, inspiring, stimulating, rewarding, interesting, productive; it requires a number of different skills and a wide range of knowledge; never dull, occasionally frustrating, and frequently exhausting!

Three things I like about my job

1. Solving problems and giving legal advice in a political environment.
2. Working in and providing an environment where clients and staff have the opportunity to grow and develop personally.
3. The people - wherever I have worked I have been fortunate to be surrounded by motivated, hard working, like-minded colleagues. I have also had lots of opportunities to network with staff from other councils and other parts of the profession.

Three things I'm not so keen on

1. Some of the bureaucracy that working in the public sector and a large organisation inevitably has - but you do get used to finding creative ways to deal with this!
2. Late night meetings - I'm a morning person!
3. The 1970s concrete building I work in.

My career to date

I trained at Derby City Council, which became a unitary authority during my training contract.

On qualification I was appointed as a planning and environment lawyer with the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. During my time there, this authority also became unitary. After five years I had become a senior education and employment law adviser.

In 2002 I joined the London Borough of Harrow. I have held three different positions to date. In my latest role, I provide legal advice on high profile employment law cases and corporate governance matters. In addition I manage the legal practice manager and support staff, the elections team, the land charges team, and the Registrars team which includes births, deaths, marriages, cemeteries and citizenship. Burial law is surprisingly interesting! I am also the deputy monitoring officer and the training principal.

Such roles bring with them a tension in prioritising time between being an excellent lawyer and a manager. I'll patent the solution when I have found it!

My ambition to be a director of legal services and monitoring officer will be fulfilled in 2008 when I start my new job with a district council.

Three top tips for entering this area of work

1. Never be afraid to say that you don't know the answer to something - research your answer and give your legal opinion.
2. Practising lots of different areas of local government law has given me a very rounded local government experience which I draw on daily.
3. Take advantage of opportunities - you never know where they will lead you.

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Career profile

Name

Nigel Roberts

Council type

Large county council

Current job title

Director of Law and Administration

Academic qualifications

MA Law

My day

My day rarely follows a set pattern. It can begin with an 8am meeting with the chief executive after a 45-mile commute, or with a mad dash to the standards committee at 10am after taking my children to school. I leave the office any time between 4.30pm and 7.30pm, depending on the crisis of the moment, but always with a pile of papers to work on that evening.

Three things I like about my job

1. The diverse nature of local government law. In my view you don't get the same breadth of specialist disciplines anywhere else in legal practice.
2. The flexibility. You certainly don't enter local government for financial reward, but I like to be able to take my children to school from time to time. And if you have the right attitude, there are opportunities to experience many different disciplines and career variations.
3. The community development aspect. I like to be involved in project implementation and policy development that has an impact on the communities that are served by local democracy.

My career to date

I was admitted in 1982 after serving my training contract in a general high street practice. I remained in private practice for six more years, became disenchanted with the culture and went into banking for four years. I liked the culture there even less!

Searching for a career with a vocational element, I took a considerable step backwards in terms of salary and benefits to begin my local government service as an advocate and litigation solicitor in a small district council.

After five years I moved to become head of service and monitoring officer in another district, tried local government administration (rather than law) as a strategic director for two years in another district, then returned to law when I joined this authority four years ago. I now have 15 years' continuous local government service, longer by far than my time spent in other disciplines.

This job has its challenges, three of which are as follows:

1. As monitoring officer, it sometimes feels that I'm caught between a rock and a hard place!
2. Local government is still hideously bound by the minutiae of process, procedure, regulation, inspection and audit.
3. In cultural terms, councils tend to be over-managed, while there is a desperate need for brave and imaginative leadership.

Three top tips for entering this area of work

1. Don't burden yourself with an inflated sense of your own importance - the status of lawyer cuts no ice with the multitude of other professional disciplines you rub shoulders with on a daily basis!
2. Work on your interpersonal skills as you will have a very high profile position in a febrile political environment.
3. Be prepared to think imaginatively. The buzz you get from wading through the treacle of bureaucracy to deliver something that can have a positive impact on the lives of real people is second to none.

Further information

Solicitors in Local Government

www.slgov.org.uk

The Law Society

www.lawsociety.org.uk

Solicitors Regulation Authority

www.sra.org.uk

The Municipal Year Book

gives contact details for many heads of legal services or senior solicitors in local authorities
(available in main libraries)

For more local authority legal career descriptions

www.LGcareers.com

(see: Career Descriptions)

List of local councils

www.direct.gov.uk

(see: Directories)

Local Government Diploma

www.college-of-law/qualifiedlawyers



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