

Practice & Law



Town Legal's Elizabeth Christie, Meeta Kaur, Patrick Robinson and Simon Ricketts

Profile Jess Harrold meets the partners at London's new boutique planning practice, Town Legal LLP. Portraits by Jon Enoch

NEW IN TOWN

inside

APC process

Jon Lever reviews last year's key APC changes and looks ahead to what's in store for candidates in 2017
PAGE 86

Practice points

A buyer's equitable interest in land, pending registration of a transfer, was subordinated to a right of way thanks to the doctrine of overreaching
PAGE 88

Housing association insolvency

Legislation soon to take force creates a new special administration regime for private providers of social housing
PAGE 89

Flexibility on the boundaries

Jacqui Joyce and Peter Bourke look at current issues regarding the process of resolving boundary disputes
PAGE 90

Legal notes

Cases involving mitigation of damages often depend as much on their own facts as well-established legal principle
PAGE 91

Case summaries

Camden Market Holdings Corporation v Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Ltd (in special liquidation), *Knapper v Francis*
PAGE 92

ONLINE THIS WEEK

LAW REPORT The Estates Gazette Law Reports are now available exclusively on EGI each week. This week we report *The Portman Estate Nominees (One) Ltd v Starlight Headlease Ltd*.

“Excellence, ingenuity, enjoyment.” That, according to managing partner Patrick Robinson, is the mission statement for new specialist planning law firm, Town Legal LLP. Town for short – or, as its stylishly simple logo has it, “tn.”. The practice has united five experienced solicitors, all drawn from major firms, and one highly regarded planning barrister. Together they are setting out to offer clients a unique, high-quality service – and to have a little fun while doing it.

“We all actually enjoy doing the work,” Robinson explains. “In a big law firm – I have seen this increasingly over the years – the structure is such that, as the partners become more and more senior, they see less and less of the actual hands-on work. We have day-to-day involvement, and we absolutely mean to maintain that. That is a great differentiator with clients. They really want experienced people to deliver the best market practices and legal advice, and to do it in a cost-effective way.”

The story so far

The firm opened its doors this month, but just one year ago it was merely a gleam in the eye of partner Simon Ricketts – a gleam, it turned out, that others shared. How did it become reality? “Serendipity and alcohol,” jokes Ricketts. In February 2016, he was having a drink with Clare Fielding and shared his “inner fantasy” – one he believes most planning lawyers have – of starting his own firm. Fielding had similar ideas, which she had already shared with Robinson – and brand-conscious Ricketts had the straightforward yet memorable name in mind.

One thing led to another and others joined the Town movement – including fellow solicitors Elizabeth Christie and Meeta Kaur. Completing the picture is the firm’s sixth partner, barrister Mary Cook.

“Mary is a crucial component,” Ricketts says. “A leading planning barrister who has joined us as a founding partner. It is a modern, seamless approach to the way in which solicitors and barristers work for the benefit of clients. That is pretty unprecedented for a planning practice.”

Town had its people, next it needed a home. According to Fielding, they “were not intending to be a City firm”, but the firm’s floor at 1 London Wall Buildings, EC2, “fell into their laps” (aided by Digby Flower’s team at Cushman & Wakefield, in particular Danny Golding.)

The team is full of praise for everyone who helped them through the process, including their landlord, their own legal advisers and the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

“The strange thing we have found is that everyone wants us to succeed,” says Robinson. “They want to see these different offerings in the market...”



Battersea Power Station: Town Legal is acting for the developer

“The idea is very much to be very collaborative, so that when clients come here they are not just getting that one person assigned to their matter. It means a client is going to get a broader range of experience and the benefit of all the people in the room”

Everyone is saying this makes so much sense. They are saying, ‘You’ll regret you didn’t do it several years ago’ – and I can see why. The lack of bureaucracy and suffocating management, which we had all become used to, is quite a wonderful thing. Now we can actually adapt what we are doing to meet what clients want. It has been immensely liberating.”

Collaborate to accumulate

While outside aid and a little luck may have played its part, the fact that Town met its January 2017 target is mainly down to teamwork and hard graft, with the partners dividing up the many key responsibilities – whether it was drafting the lease arrangements, choosing the right shade of grey for business cards or installing the all-important coffee machine. “We have been playing to each other’s strengths,” says Robinson, who nevertheless finds it remarkable how well everything has come together in such a short timeframe.

Collaboration is key to the Town philosophy – based in a modern, open-plan office, with a non-hierarchical structure, the emphasis is on sharing knowledge.

Kaur says: “The idea is very much to be very collaborative, so that when clients come here they are not just getting that one person assigned to their matter. It means a client is going to get a broader range of experience and the benefit of all the people in the room. I think planning as a practice area lends itself to that.”

Ricketts believes clients are familiar with the approach from other professions, including planning consultancies and architects, and that it will increasingly take hold in the legal world.

“Specialist areas of practice are best addressed through boutique offerings rather than necessarily the department store concept,” he says. “We intend to work very closely and collaboratively with the large firms, which are fantastic at large, complex transactions but do not necessarily have the strength in depth of planning law expertise that we have.”

Town’s ethos of togetherness extends to its earning structure, according to Fielding. “One thing close to our hearts is the way the firm is run and the way the people in it are incentivised,” she says. “We have not replicated a chargeable hours target culture. What we do have is more of a John Lewis-style structure – so everyone in the firm has equity. Everybody is aligned in

terms of delivering great service. Literally everyone, from top to bottom. We all share in our success.”

So far, that is six partners, three associates and support staff – but they are recruiting for talent and prepared to grow organically.

“We all enjoy practising not in a big law firm,” Fielding says. “We are not in danger of becoming a big law firm any time soon, but we are not going to turn good work away, and the firm will grow with that.”

Robinson believes that the firm’s structure will appeal to talented planning lawyers, who will want to be part of a strong team doing high-quality work.

Off to a strong start

As for that work, Town has certainly hit the ground running. The firm’s focus is on major mixed-use schemes, large commercial developments and urban extensions, both within and outside the capital, as well as heritage or cultural projects and “smaller interesting things that take our fancy”, as Fielding puts it.

A quick run-through of current business includes the former Pinnacle site at 22 Bishopsgate, EC2, on which Town is “very active” for AXA; Battersea Power Station, acting for the developer; the revised masterplan for Wembley, comprising 4,000 dwellings; an urban extension to the north-east of Leicester; representing a group of Colchester town centre investors opposing an out-of-town scheme; and appearing at the examination in public of the Luton local plan.

Next month, Town will make its Supreme Court debut, in the combined appeal in the cases of *Richborough Estates Partnership LLP and another v Cheshire East Borough Council* and *Suffolk Coastal District Council v Hopkins Homes Ltd and another*.

It is a workload that demonstrates that the partners in Town did not embark on this venture for a quiet life – far from it.

“It is the exact opposite of setting up a smaller firm to start winding down,” Kaur says. “Sometimes people leave large firms to set up on their own because they want to scale down – that’s not the intention here.”

Encouraged by the reaction from clients and the marketplace, they are ambitious to succeed – and to build something that lasts. To give the last word to Ricketts: “This is a firm for the long term.”

LISTEN TO SIMON RICKETTS DISCUSS MORE WAYS PLANNING LAW COULD BE IMPROVED AT [HTTP://ESTATESGAZZETTEPODBEAN.COM](http://estatesgazettepodbean.com)

TOWN’S PEOPLE

We asked the six partners in Town Legal what they would most like to change about planning law



PATRICK ROBINSON
(MANAGING PARTNER)
● Solicitor
● Spent entire career at Herbert Smith Freehills since 1978

● Former property lawyer turned planning specialist, focusing on major development and heritage projects in London

● Works with Law Commission on right to light reform

“When you have policy that says cities and towns should become denser and buildings should be taller and closer together, the law on rights to light is shamefully still rooted in Victorian times. It is one of the bedevilling factors that holds back development with planning permission.”



ELIZABETH CHRISTIE
● Solicitor
● Spent nine years at Herbert Smith Freehills
● Specialises on central London projects, including heritage projects

“I would standardise section 106 and section 278 agreements, introducing a national version that everyone has to use, so we do not have to reinvent the wheel every time. You would then edit the standardised agreement just like you

do with a construction contract. This should get agreements made far more quickly and at less cost to the clients.”



MARY COOK
● Barrister
● Called to the Bar in 1982 and in continuous practice ever since
● Regularly promotes large and complex planning cases of high commercial value for developers and landowners

“A moratorium on ministerial statements changing policy at the drop of a hat for two years, please! I would ensure consistency of approach between the examination of local plans and neighbourhood plans, with a test of soundness for both, and bring all the neighbourhood planning legislation into one Act.”

“I would get rid of the ‘plan-led’ system in favour of a ‘harm’ approach. A development might not comply with policy and still be a good thing. Philosophically, why should I not be allowed to do what I want with my own land as long as it doesn’t harm anyone else?”



CLARE FIELDING
● Solicitor
● Former partner at Gowling WLG (previously Lawrence Graham) and Herbert Smith Freehills
● Focuses mainly on central London development

“I would get rid of the ‘plan-led’ system in favour of a ‘harm’ approach. A development might not comply with policy and still be a good thing. Philosophically, why should I not be allowed to do what I want with my own land as long as it doesn’t harm anyone else?”



MEETA KAUR
● Solicitor
● Began career as town planner at Westminster Council before 12 years at King & Wood Mallesons (previously SJ Berwin)

● Works on a spread of large-scale development inside and outside London

“The issue is the amount of tinkering that has gone on with the system for a number of years now. I know the intention is to make it less bureaucratic, with less red tape, but if you look at the legislation it is just getting longer and longer. It’s not helpful; it doesn’t make the system any less opaque or easier to use.”



SIMON RICKETTS
● Solicitor
● Spent 17 years as a partner at King & Wood Mallesons (previously SJ Berwin)

● Practice split between central London mixed-use, out-of-London major development and contentious judicial review work

“Community infrastructure levy needs to be reformed, to simplify it and give flexibility back to developers and local authorities when dealing with strategic-size schemes so there can be efficient ways of delivering infrastructure to the benefit of communities.”