



Legal landscape

BOUTIQUE LAW FIRMS: FINDING A NICHE

New law firms, while news, are not necessarily deserving of a full page in a specialist magazine like *The Planner*. But when we heard about the founding of Town LLP, we had to invite the founders to write for us as it reflects a trend of 'boutique' but 'full-scale' practices that's now apparent in other professional service sectors. It's the first we know of to do so in planning and it might well be a bellwether of market change.

Town also has a healthy approach to inclusivity that dovetails with this issue's broader theme. Founding partner Meeta Kaur offers her insight.

Less than a year ago a small group of planning lawyers were coming together around a single new idea. Fast-forward to 3 January and Town Legal opened its doors as the first full-scale specialist planning law firm of its kind.

Those initial conversations brought together five experienced planning solicitors from three city law firms: Patrick Robinson and Elizabeth Christie from Herbert Smith Freehills, Clare Fielding from Gowling WLG and Simon Ricketts and me from King & Wood Mallesons. The sixth partner is barrister Mary Cook, a former head of Cornerstone Barristers.

A major motivation in establishing Town was a

desire to provide a high-quality, flexible service in a way that works for clients, while continuing to work on interesting projects. This aspiration inevitably meant working outside of 'Big Law', its bureaucracy and more inflexible management structures.

Large law firms are still ideal for carrying out big transactional work and they provide an excellent structured and comprehensive career for many lawyers. But planning is low on the investment priority list of any large international law firm. And so it seemed increasingly clear that planning as a specialist practice area could be more efficiently provided from a boutique-style firm.

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lawyers in different practice areas from other law firms, especially where the client adopts a panel approach to its legal needs. Sitting in a separate office from the other lawyers we work with was never going to be a problem.

A key part of the Town philosophy is to work collaboratively in providing services to clients. Collectively, Town has many years of legal planning experience, so the idea is very definitely that clients should benefit from all that experience, not just that of the lawyers directly assigned to their project. All six partners, associates and other staff share an open-plan office. The structure and ethos is deliberately non-hierarchical, and the firm operates a John

Lewis-style profit structure across all its staff.

Although not intentional, we are proud that Town is a majority female partnership, and take our diversity credentials seriously. We have started to engage with other groups on diversity issues, and intend to build on that.

Another distinctive aspect of Town is that it has solicitors working alongside a highly experienced barrister. The intention is not that all our clients must instruct her, but Mary's presence gives the collaborative style of Town a unique dimension.

It also gives us the ability to provide a fast and seamless service should a client need it, something that is already proving useful for clients who want joined-up advice from both a solicitor and counsel quickly. Projects we are acting on include 22 Bishopsgate, which will be the tallest building in the City of London once completed, as well as the mixed-use redevelopment of Battersea Power Station.

Exactly a week from the time of writing, we are due in the Supreme Court acting for Richborough Estates in one of the most important cases to come before the courts, on the interpretation of paragraph 49 of the NPPF. We are acting on the Parkhurst Road inquiry in Islington, where the major issues centre on the politically sensitive matter of viability and its impact on affordable housing supply.

Specialist consultancies have trodden this path successfully before. We are sure that there will be challenges, but looking over the laptop at a roomful of like-minded planning lawyers, this is already feeling like home. 

Meeta Kaur is a founding partner of Town Legal LLP