

THE FEATURES

REGIONAL FOCUS: CARDIFF

INTERVIEW WITH... PAUL HOPKINS

In the sixth instalment of Modern Law's regional focus, Charlotte Parkinson, Modern Law spoke to the new President of Cardiff & District Law Society, about keeping members connected to the business of law, and hopes for his tenure.

Q What are the main challenges Cardiff & District Law Society faces at the moment and why?

A Cardiff & District Law Society was founded in 1886 and is the largest local law society in Wales with over 1500 members. The Membership covers the greater Cardiff area including Barry and Penarth. The Society is a member of the Confederation of South Wales Law Societies and the Associated Law Societies of Wales. The Society covers a large cross section of legal interests and firm sizes, including sole general practitioners, mid-sized specialist crime and family practices and large commercial firms based in the city. We also attract the membership of national legal brands and Alternative Business Structure models. Each of these types of firm or legal business has its own distinct issues and interests that need to be serviced and represented by the Society. One of the main challenges for the Society is ensuring that the services and benefits offered to this diverse membership are relevant to their respective interests. In addition, the Society recognises that resources are finite and that our members have many other financial commitments. The challenge is therefore to ensure that the services provided by the Society are of interest to, beneficial and attractive to the Members and provide value for money.

Q What are your core aims during your tenure as President of Cardiff & District Law Society?

A A core aim must be to make every effort to ensure that the Society represents the interests of its Members as effectively and efficiently



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as possible and provides services and benefits of value to the membership generally. Unlike many local law societies, Cardiff & District Law Society does not have a permanent home. Currently the Wales office of the Law Society accommodates meetings of the Society including council meetings and the various committees meet at the offices of council members. As President I would like the Society to find a permanent home. We are currently exploring a number of possible options. Communication with the membership is also key.

The Society currently communicates effectively with members through social media (predominately Twitter), regular e-newsletters to Members, a hard copy bi-monthly publication called *Legal News*, which covers legal issues and social events and a recently re-vamped and regularly updated website. However, more can be done to reach out to our members and one of my core aims will be to improve on the Society's existing communication with its members. We are currently reforming how we interact with our ever-growing (and ever-digitised)

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membership across a variety of communication platforms and social events, to ensure our members fully benefit from and understand the value they receive from their membership. The Society is in a reasonably healthy financial position. However, I would like to see greater transparency in relation to the Society's finances. I am looking to use technology to improve the financial information available to council (i.e. decision-making) members and to the membership generally, with the aim of securing long-term financial sustainability for the Society.

Q How have the needs of members changed over the last three years?

A The last three years have been very challenging for the legal profession in South Wales and nationally. Issues such as changes to legal aid funding, court closures, dramatic increases in court fees, criminal legal aid duty contracts, conveyancing panels and the changes to the regulatory environment have had a significant impact on members. This has inevitably resulted in changes to legal service delivery and within the legal market and to pressure on Members to adjust to this rapidly evolving environment. Cardiff & District has the highest population of lawyers in Wales but we as a Society are conscious of the legal deserts that are arising elsewhere across the Country. The Society has developed positive links with other local regional law societies through, for example, its membership of the Confederation of South Wales Law Societies as well as with Monmouthshire Law Society, which stretches across South East Wales including Newport, Monmouth, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent. This helps us to provide support and meet the

needs of the profession both locally and in the wider region and by being able to answer members' questions, highlight best practice and share pressing legal and other issues.

Q How do you and the team at Cardiff & District Law Society ensure the Society maintains its relevance to the profession?

A The Society has a number of working committees comprised of council members and co-opted members drawn from the membership. These committees assist in forming policies, dealing with issues that affect the profession and responding to Government, SRA and Law Society consultations. There is also close contact and liaison between the local judiciary and the Society on issues affecting the operation of the local courts. Additionally, the Society looks to the future through regular contact and liaison with the local Junior Lawyer's Division, which is represented at Cardiff & District Law Society monthly Council meetings. Members are also entitled to free CPD courses run by the Society and discounts on Kaplan Altior courses and courses run by the Confederation of South Wales Law Societies. In addition we are also about to relaunch our education proposition for members, to move away from the oversubscribed marketplace of CPD technical legal training and, instead, offer a series of professional and legal business growth and support conferences, seminars and events. We want to see our membership 'thrive, not survive' and we hope to be able to give them the tools to do that. We are working closely with trusted advisers and our sponsors to deliver business-critical and relevant advice from marketing and business

development to financing cases, recruitment, expansion, costs and processes.

It is also important to provide the membership with a varied social programme so, in addition to our President's Annual Dinner in April, the Society organises regular smaller social events during the year, including a very popular children's event at Christmas. Members of Cardiff & District Law Society also receive a platinum membership card, which entitles them to benefits and discounts from various local businesses, including local restaurants, hotels and shops.

Q What are the aims of the Law Society 2020 Discussion and what do you hope it will achieve?

A The Law Society Strategy 2015-2018 appears to promote a positive vision and strategy for the profession. However, the proof is in the delivery. There remains a considerable amount of scepticism about whether and how the Law Society will be able to deliver this strategy. In particular there are ongoing concerns that the Law Society is failing to speak up effectively for the profession on key issues such as access to justice, protecting the legal market and the independence of the legal profession. There also remain reservations about the Law Society structure and governance.

Q How important is the role of regional Law Societies in representing, supporting and promoting the needs of practitioners on a national level?

A Regional law societies such as Cardiff & District Law Society have a critical role to play in representing and supporting local practitioners on a national level. The Society's knowledge and understanding of local issues affecting members is invaluable and the Society regularly puts forward local views and contributes to national debates on issues of importance to the profession. Our contribution

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has recently included responding to national consultations on referral fees in criminal matters, consumer credit activities, protecting clients' financial interests and PI insurance and proposals for introducing the Solicitors' Qualification Examination. There is an added dimension in Wales in relation to devolution, the Welsh Government and the creation of a distinct Welsh body of law. The Society actively contributes to the on-going devolution debate and recently hosted a series of seminars on the subject involving key players such as the Counsel General for Wales.

Q How do you think solicitors are perceived by the public? Do regional Law Societies have a part to play in building relationships on this level?

A Unfortunately the public perception of the legal profession is not good at the moment. Much of this is driven by the perception that legal services are hugely expensive and do not deliver value for money. There has also generally been a dumbing down and commoditisation of legal services, which we as a profession have been slow to address. We have also not been effective in promoting ourselves and the positive contribution that we make to the wider society. At a local level, regional law societies can deliver a positive message about the work of the profession and seek to address these misconceptions by showcasing the fantastic pro bono work, charitable fundraising and CSR initiatives undertaken by legal professionals.

Q Do you feel that Cardiff & District Law Society has a voice in wider conversations with the Law Society?

A Yes we do. The Society works closely with the Wales Office of the Law Society and with Chancery Lane to ensure our member's views are taken into account in relation to the various issues that affect the Profession. This is achieved through responding to consultations or hosting a meeting with the Chief Executive of the Law



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Society. We are also fortunate that the Law Society Council Member for South Wales (David Dixon) sits on the Society Council and is an immediate past-President. David provides a direct link into the operation and activities of Chancery Lane and provides regular reports to council and the membership.

Q What does the future look like for the legal profession, on a regional and national level?

A It is not always possible to judge what will happen next but I am generally optimistic about the future notwithstanding the challenges facing the legal profession both regionally and nationally. Our members are resilient, still here, willing and prepared to support one another and collaborate across the boundaries of the regions. Although ongoing issues relating to regulation and access to the profession, market liberalisation, funding of legal services, central government

intervention and the impact of technology continue to have an inevitable impact on the profession, it is generally in a healthy position and well placed for the future. In South Wales, we are seeing increased recruitment and growth across all sectors and there is no doubt that there is a wealth of young bright talent coming out of the local colleges and universities. Nevertheless, the profession needs to continue to evolve, innovate and adapt to changes in the global and national business economic environment, within wider society generally, to developments in technology and processes and to the ever changing political agenda. Cardiff & District Law Society is well placed to continue to support its members in this process by keeping members informed, connected to the realities of the business of law and able to support and sustain each other, whatever is thrown at us.