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Solicitor

(Planning and Compulsory Purchase team)

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Solicitor in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase team

Organisation: Burges Salmon

Location: Bristol, UK

Salary: £48,000 - £63,999

How did you get to where you are now?

I studied Geography at Cambridge having done science A levels with Geography. Cambridge offers a range of modules so I did both human and physical geography through all three years of my degree.

In the summer holidays during my time at Cambridge I got some work experience at the European Parliament, working in the Brussels office of the MEP for my local area (south west). It was an amazing experience and helped me to understand what I am interested in. I think legislation and statutes are really interesting (I know, sounds strange) so being present whilst they were being written was very engaging.

Coming up to graduation I applied for vacation schemes and after attending one of those I was offered a job at the firm where I now work. I then chose to defer my place as I was offered the chance to work back in Brussels for 9 months. After working in the same MEP's office I then chose to stay in Brussels for an additional 3 months and got an internship at a Public Relations Agency (Weber Shandwick) working in corporate communications around food and sustainability.

After a year in Brussels I was back in the UK and studying the law conversion course (GDL) and the LPC before starting my two year training contract at Burges Salmon.

What do you do as part of your role?

As a junior in the team I work on a very wide range of matters. The idea is to build up experience of all the different types of work the team does over the first few years (there's a lot to cover!).

Some projects I have are very long-term – I'll be working on them for years. These include large infrastructure projects like offshore wind farms. I help more senior lawyers advise our clients on these types of projects which mainly involves research and drafting advice. I also get involved in preparing or reviewing the planning documents that become part of the application for planning permission for these projects.

Other work I have lasts for a few months. This includes 'contentious' planning work – i.e. going to court or planning inquiries and also involves preparing documents as well as attending hearings.

I also help with housing developments which normally involves drafting or reviewing / negotiating planning agreements which are between local Councils and developers to secure things like educational facilities.

I have some responsibility for small matters so have the chance to interact directly with clients and their agents. This responsibility will eventually increase as I progress through the firm.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Good communication is essential. Both verbal and written. Being able to write in a clear and logical manner will make life as a lawyer much easier. Same goes for verbal communication. It is less of a feature of my current work but eventually I will be contacting clients and discussing (potentially quite complex) legal matters in meetings.

Teamwork is also key. Being a solicitor means you are working with other people all the time. This could be colleagues within your team, other teams in the firm or teams outside the firm, for example with planning consultants.

Another important skill to have is attention to detail. It is crucial to be able to check work thoroughly, not just for typos or mistakes but also to critically analyse the advice you are giving and make sure it is accurate and comprehensive.

What is the most interesting or enjoyable project you've worked on, and why?

I assisted the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in a planning appeal for which they were an objector. The development was a high rise glass building in west London which if constructed would be visible from within Kew Gardens. Kew is a World Heritage Site so

it is given legislative and policy protection as a heritage asset. As such, planning decision-makers have to consider what harms might be caused to it by such a large building and balance that harm with the benefits of the development (like new housing, much of it affordable housing). In this case, we were part of a team who sought to argue that the development would be harmful to Kew because it would harm the setting of the asset. Kew was designed to be a sanctuary away from the bustle of the city and it was argued that views of a tall residential building would negatively impact on that sense of escapism which Kew achieves. I find it interesting hearing the various arguments for and against developments play out and the ways in which organisations and communities have established their approach to new buildings. There is no right or wrong answer and in that way it is very much like the approach I became familiar with whilst studying for my degree.

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

I attended a vacation scheme at Burges Salmon in the summer after I graduated. This was a two week paid work experience which culminated in a training contract interview. At the time I wasn't sure about a career in law and it really helped me to learn more about the profession and the work involved, as well as what the firm was like to work for. I'm not sure I would have ended up here if I hadn't done that scheme. After finishing my legal studies I then completed a training contract at Burges Salmon which involved two years of being a Trainee Solicitor. Myself and around 30 others rotated around 6 departments, moving every 4 months, so I had experience of a lot of the areas that the firm works in. This included commercial property, infrastructure projects, litigation, planning (where I have now got a job) and I also did a secondment at EDF Energy Generation. The secondment involved working with the in-house lawyers at EDF on their existing energy generation facilities.

Do you get to travel for your role?

There is quite a bit of travel within the UK. This can be for site visits where we are working on a new case. I was surprised just how much doing a site visit can help cement the details of the case in your mind. It is also a great opportunity to see technical experts in the field and talk to them about their approach. We also travel for planning hearings and inquiries as these are held in the community where the development is to take place in order to facilitate local community engagement. Clearly there has not been much of this during the pandemic and all hearings and inquiries went virtual but there will be a gradual return to previous habits.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

There are no direct elements of geography that come into my work. Instead it is the skills I developed over the course of my degree which I use. For example, I felt that geography was about broad concepts as well as the detail. The ability to marry those together or analyse things through that lens is very helpful for what I do. With a lot of the larger projects that I work on we have to consider the long-

term broad picture as well as the small details. They are all equally as important. I also find that geography has given me good analytical skills because during my degree I was constantly thinking about concepts from lots of different perspectives. That is also similar to what I do in my job as there are always many views on developments and planning applications and it is important to be able to put yourself in the shoes of someone else to consider how they would approach the development. Ultimately it then is about arguing your point in light of what others' views are which reflects taken in a lot of essays I wrote.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

Try to get on a vacation scheme if you can as it will help you decide which areas of law you like and which firms you might want to work for. Don't think of just getting legal work experience. I think firms value experience of other sectors and jobs as well (like my European Parliament experience) as there are many aspects to being a good lawyer and it can sometimes be easier to learn those skills or get that knowledge in other industries. My main piece of advice to all students irrespective of whether you want to go law or something else is take your time. There is no rush. Have a year out, or two, maybe three. Not suggesting a world tour is always the best option but do something a bit different. When you are likely to do the same (or a similar thing) for decades, a year of something else can be really refreshing.

What are the opportunities for career progression?

In law there is a fairly set path for progression. As you gain more years of experience under your belt you move up through the ranks. That process involves working on more complex pieces of work and taking on more responsibility for dealing with clients and managing cases. Eventually there is an opportunity for those who want it to become a partner in their firm. This usually involves demonstrating that you have a good relationships with clients and can bring in new business. It typically takes 10-15 years to become a partner

How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

I like to read and always have a non-fiction book on the go. I'm a bit out of touch with geographical academia but I try to read books on topics which I studied at university. I also attend geography lectures when I can but work can sometimes get in the way!

Why did you choose geography?

I just think it is so interesting. Who wouldn't want to learn about the world in which we live? Looking at the past, present and future and understanding the processes that have formed and are forming those. I love the combination of scientific and human elements of it as well, although I appreciate a lot of universities are set up so you have to do one or the other.

It is very tangible as well so if you don't just like learning about theories and concepts but also how they are applied then it's a great choice.



*** This interview was undertaken in 2021 and was correct at the time of publication. Please note that the featured individual may no longer be in role, but the profile has been kept for career pathway and informational purposes.**