

# Industry Interview:

## Fiona McAllister, President of the Scottish Young Lawyers' Association & Senior Solicitor at Burness Paull LLP

Fiona McAllister tells First Comment about why she chose law as opposed to music or journalism and talks about her passion for helping young solicitors, keeping fit and learning Japanese.

### What led you to the law industry?

I wasn't one of these people who always knew what they wanted to do. I was a bit of an all-rounder at school and didn't like the thought of narrowing my options. I applied to study law as one of many options, partly because I got the grades for it and wanted to prove my careers advisor wrong that I could do it!

I knew that whatever I ultimately ended up doing, it would be something that involved working closely with people.

I was also aware from an early age of how critical the law is to everyone and I felt that studying law would give me an opportunity to help people. Working in dispute resolution, or litigation, means I am trying to solve problems every day, whether it is for individuals or companies.

### What kind of work do you do with the Scottish Young Lawyers Association?

The SYLA is a non profit-making organisation that exists to represent, educate and entertain young Scottish lawyers and has been doing so since 1974. This breaks down into the following aims, which are stated in the Constitution of the SYLA:

- to organise CPD conferences, seminars and study groups - to keep our members educated on legal developments and on management skills;
- to represent the interests of members in all matters relating to the teaching and practice of law;
- to be a voice for young solicitors in Scotland and represent the views of members;
- to establish and maintain relations with other associations/bodies of young lawyers anywhere in the world;
- to publish or co-operate in the publishing of books, articles, papers, pamphlets and styles relating to the substance and practice of the law of Scotland; and
- to provide opportunities for social contact between young lawyers both in Scotland and elsewhere.

I started my time on the Committee as an ordinary committee member, before being secretary for a year, Vice-President for a year and then running for President. This year I was elected unopposed for my second and final year as President.

The SYLA is in quite a unique situation. For as long as I have been involved in the committee there hasn't been a need to round people up to join the committee. In fact, we have needed to hold elections in accordance with our constitution even for ordinary committee members. It's great there is so much interest and enthusiasm from young people to get involved.

The President has to chair the committee – we have a planning meeting for a full day on a Saturday at the start of our year and then monthly committee meetings thereafter. The President takes overall responsibility for the key areas – representation, education and entertainment.

I try to give committee members enough autonomy to run events but also ensure they know I am there to support them in any way they need me. Last year we ran an average of four evening educational sessions per month across Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

We also have an entertainment programme, which in some ways is just as serious as the training schedule! Meeting and socialising in a more relaxed environment allows people form the networks that will help them through their careers. It's good for lawyers to be able to meet other lawyers on neutral ground – away from the more competitive environment of business development.

Finally, arguably the most important aspect of our work is the representative role – working with the Law Society and Government to look after the interests of young lawyers facing difficulties in challenging times.

### **What will be the greatest challenge facing solicitors in the future?**

The "more-for-less" challenge and the increasing sophistication of IT are already driving a new model for delivering legal services and these will continue to change and develop. This has been perhaps most dramatically seen in Glasgow over the last 12 months, with the arrival of both Ashurst LLP's Legal Process Outsourcing Centre and Dundas & Wilson CS LLP's Legal Services Unit packaging and commoditising legal services, whilst also creating entirely new career paths for young people in the legal profession in Scotland.

Lawyers will need to start proactively asking themselves how can work be undertaken more quickly, cheaply and efficiently, and to a higher quality? More lawyers will recognise that if you do not drive change, it befalls you, even if this means disrupting and destroying current livelihoods, in order to find new and better ways of delivering legal services.

### **If you were to offer one piece of advice to newly qualified solicitors what would it be?**

Don't panic! A lot of trainees feel a level of comfort from the 'trainee' part of 'trainee solicitor.' I think that, when it comes to qualifying, some trainees think that they qualify on a Friday then on the Monday they are on their own and they are supposed to simply go off and 'be a lawyer.'

You're not expected to know everything the day that you qualify (or ever!) It's still ok to ask questions (in fact, it's much better that you do to ensure you are not giving out inaccurate or even blatantly wrong advice!) It will take time to learn the ropes of the area of law that you're working in. Colleagues and clients know and expect that.

**If you could do anything (other than practice the law), what would you choose?**

I think I'd either be a musician or a journalist. I played the saxophone in numerous bands through school and applied to study it at university. But I decided not to on the basis that it would always be part of my life anyway, as a hobby.

But I struggle to find the time and a band to keep it up. I ended up studying Law with English Literature at university. I thought that would help keep the door open for journalism. I think it would be fun and exciting to be out and about (instead of at a desk) speaking to people and finding stories to write/report.

**How do you keep busy when you're not at work?**

Well the SYLA could be a full time job in itself. Aside from work and the SYLA I am a mentor at the University of Strathclyde for the civil litigation project this year.

I have also recently become a Director on the board of LawWorks Scotland and personally volunteer at the Citizens Advice Bureau at Parkhead.

In my spare time I like to try and keep fit. I did my first (and only) marathon a few years ago but haven't quite built up to another one. My niece and nephew live in Japan so I try to learn Japanese with a view to communicating with them! I love to travel at weekends and for holidays.

**Which book, programme or website would you recommend?**

[www.syla.co.uk](http://www.syla.co.uk) - students, trainees, NQs and solicitors up to 10 years PQE can sign up to be members for free!

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