

# Government Legal Service

## Building Britain's legal future: headline-grabbing careers for the right (honourable) candidates

While even the doyens of the corporate legal world have to flick through to the business pages of the broadsheets to read coverage of their professional achievements, those who turn their hand to the demands of public and administrative law with the Government Legal Service (GLS) regularly find that the fruits of their labour are discussed and debated the length and breadth of the country in schools, offices and hospitals – not to mention that spiritual home of mooting, the Palace of Westminster.

“For those interested in the interaction between law and politics and how that affects the daily lives of people in this country, there is no more fascinating place to be. You really do feel that you are at the heart of what is making the country tick,” effuses Susanna McGibbon, a senior lawyer with the GLS. Susanna oversees the trainee recruitment effort for the GLS and, having begun her career in private practice at the Bar, can offer an informed opinion on the comparative merits of effectively working for a single client: Her Majesty's Government (HMG).

For those of you who don't know, GLS lawyers work in some 30 government organisations, from departments of state such as the Home Office to public bodies such as the Office of Fair Trading. The body is made up of around 2,000 government lawyers, including at any one time around 50 trainee solicitors and pupil barristers. The Treasury Solicitor, a post currently held by Paul Jenkins, is the head of the GLS.

GLS lawyers are mostly employed by the department in which they work or by the Treasury Solicitor's Department. The GLS brand is used primarily for recruitment purposes and for offering training and support to GLS lawyers.

A training contract with the GLS follows a similar format to that of most commercial law firms, with four six-month seats under the supervision of senior government lawyers. “The work our trainees do is all real work, alongside qualified lawyers on the major projects of a department,” explains Susanna. “A trainee who is in a team preparing a bill to take through the Houses of Parliament will be able to go and see that bill as it is debated on the floor of the house. Similarly, if an issue involves high-profile litigation, they will be sitting behind some of the best QCs in the country. They will get to see a Court of Appeal case; they will see legislation in the making and may even get to draft their own legislation in the form of a simple statutory instrument or regulation.”

Aside from the initial structural symmetry, the career of a GLS lawyer is unlikely to mirror that of a commercial lawyer. “There is a very broad spectrum of work to get involved in. We encourage people to move around, acquiring experience and expertise in a variety of areas. That is one major difference between a career with the GLS and that with a firm. It is unlikely that a GLS lawyer will only do one kind of law throughout their career.”

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After completing an MBA in music industries at Liverpool University, followed swiftly by the GDL and LPC at the College of Law in Chester, Timothy Jones joined the GLS as a trainee in the Treasury Solicitor's Department. He is currently based in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. During his final months at university he had been applying for training contracts at commercial firms, but a chance meeting with GLS representatives at a college law fair persuaded him to try out a different tune and changed the course of his professional life forever: "I initially applied to a handful of firms and did some work experience during the summer. It was at the Birmingham College of Law fair that I first got chatting to the GLS representatives and I really liked the idea of it. I had always enjoyed public law at law school and from then on I concentrated my efforts on the GLS."

Tim recalls that the application process was markedly different from that of law firms: "I remember thinking it was more rigorous, to be honest. The questions being asked during the interview stage certainly differed from those of a firm. We are unique in the kind of law that we do, so the questions were less commercially oriented and more focused on politics and current affairs."

Once through the door, Tim was immediately involved in some fascinating projects and even worked on some headline-news cases. "My first seat was in general public law and within the first few weeks I

was involved with the litigation surrounding the Al Gore documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. It was an action brought against the secretary of state for education's decision to provide copies of the DVD to schools," he explains. "The application was brought on the basis that it was a political document; that it was partisan. I spent time in court looking at figures relating to whether polar bears really were dying because of environmental change. Seeing that as the main item on the BBC news that night was really thrilling."

And the excitement has not stopped since. From just a two-year career, Tim can detail many other intriguing examples of the work he has been involved in: "My first case in the High Court felt like a real milestone. I was given responsibility for a case involving custody time limits. I was allowed to take carriage of the thing, running the meetings with counsel and the clients. We then cited that case in a subsequent case as a precedent, which was really rewarding. I also did a seat in the European Division. It was all quite high-level work and it's great fun going to the European Court of Justice and having cases before the highest court in Europe."

Both Susanna and Tim agree that the most significant and beneficial element of participating in a training course at the GLS is the opportunity to work with and learn from the vast pool of experienced public lawyers who make up the team. "The style of training does differ slightly in each department," explains Susanna, "but the



common thread throughout the GLS is the serious consideration given to the choice of supervisors. We ask only our most senior and experienced lawyers to look after trainees. There are training courses and lectures specifically for trainees to introduce them to the work of the departments and to government legal issues more broadly, but the majority of the training is simply about gathering information and experience while on the job.”

Offering the trainee’s perspective, Tim has found that there is always a friendly colleague on hand to guide him through the complexities and idiosyncrasies of his various seats: “The office is fantastic and always has a really lively atmosphere. It’s all open plan, which promotes a collegiate style of working and encourages you to talk at length with colleagues. We have one client really, which is HMG, and although we are dealing with different departments, there is very little scope for conflicts of interest so a lot of knowledge sharing goes on and you are encouraged to go and ask advice from more senior lawyers.”

As you can imagine, this unique scheme is extremely well subscribed: this year the graduate recruitment team received initial applications from over 1,800 candidates, up 100% on the previous year. The application process comprises an online verbal reasoning test and a ‘challenging question’, which applicants must complete within a set time. This can be accessed by anyone who

meets the nationality requirements and has a 2.1 from university. Those who perform best are then invited to an assessment centre, where they are tested further under exam conditions, participate in a group exercise and attend a traditional interview.

Over and above the excellent academics and intellect also demanded in other areas of the law, selectors are looking for applicants with an aptitude for and interest in government work; the best candidates can also demonstrate an ongoing commitment to public service. However, do not let the rigours of the process put you off. Selection criteria have been specifically designed to ensure a level playing field and eliminate any advantage for the silver-spooned, as Susanna makes clear: “We don’t have preconceptions about which school or university people have been too. We appoint on merit, so we choose the people who perform best on our tests; everything else is irrelevant. It is all done blind as to gender, colour, race and class.”

So for students with political nous and an ability to look at issues from both sides, the career choice is equally transparent: your country needs you!

For further information visit [www.gls.gov.uk](http://www.gls.gov.uk) or telephone **0845 300 0793**.

By **Tom Gillett**

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