

His Honour Judge Philip Gilpin

County Court Judge

Appointed 3 September 2019

Professional background

His Honour Judge Gilpin was educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and Queen's University Belfast. Following admission to the Roll of Solicitors in 1994, Judge Gilpin worked as a Solicitor in private practice until 2010.

In 2010 Judge Gilpin was appointed as The Solicitor to the Attorney General for Northern Ireland - a post he held until 2012 when he was appointed as a District Judge. On 3rd September 2019 he was appointed as a County Court Judge.

What attracted you to apply for a position in the judicial office?

In private practice I enjoyed the practice of law more than running a business and saw in judicial office the opportunity to practice law more and run a business less. I also considered the opportunity to experience change after a number of years working as a solicitor to that of a judge would be a healthy thing to do. In addition, I hoped it would provide a better balance and prioritisation of personal and professional activities whilst also providing a means of professional progression.

What is a typical day like as a County Court Judge?

There is a certain rhythm to the working day. This usually starts with time spent in chambers attending to paperwork and preparing for the day in court; then time spent in court hearing cases; and finally time spent in chambers or at home working on paperwork and preparing the next day. However, the demands made on you each day within that general rhythm can fluctuate significantly and without warning, depending on the events of the day. One case could be fairly straightforward while the next highly complicated.

In addition to the normal routine, activities such as attending committees, judges' meetings, writing reserved judgements, speaking at events and attending training all occur on a more occasional basis.

What are the biggest challenges you face in the role?

The biggest challenge I find as a judge is to be clear in my reasoning and ultimately decisive in my decision making. Very often you will be presented with very compelling arguments from both sides and at the end of the day the onus is on you as the judge to make a decision. This often exacerbated by the additional pressure of time where you are expected to make speedy, often important decisions, in the course of a trial.

A particular challenge comes with getting up to speed with unfamiliar areas of law and procedure; in recent times for me this has been criminal proceedings before the Crown Court.

Which aspects of your professional experience as a Solicitor, a Fee Paid Judicial Office Holder, The Solicitor to the Attorney General and as a District Judge have proven most useful when carrying out judicial duties?

As a solicitor I developed skills in case management and working as part of a team. I gained useful experience and understanding of the issues and pressures facing both litigants and the lawyers involved in court proceedings.

The experience I gained as The Solicitor to the Attorney General was also beneficial as I gained considerable insight into the interface between law and politics; in particular finding the balance between political will and legal restraint. Part of my role involved engaging with Government Ministers whose main driver would often be political, yet as a lawyer, I would be required to explain limitations or practicalities imposed by the law.

Another fundamental skill that is required of a County Court Judge is the ability to be decisive which I developed in my time as a District Judge, which prepared me well for my current role.

The experience I gained as a Fee Paid Judicial Office Holder was also helpful as it gave me the opportunity to explore whether I could be decisive, whilst also learning some skills in judicial case management.

Is the job what you imagined it would be?

I would say so. Having eased my way towards it via various Fee Paid judicial roles and then as a salaried District Judge I had observed what the role involved at relatively close quarters before I was appointed. The documentation issued by NIJAC as part of the application pack also provided an accurate picture of what the role entailed.

With the luxury of hindsight is there anything you wish you had known before applying?

There is often a misconception that Judges lead a lonely life. You certainly spend less time around others than in say a solicitors' office. However I have not found it to be an isolating role at all.

I had also not fully appreciated the extent of collegiality and support afforded by judicial colleagues or the level of resources available to you to help in the discharge of the role. I was aware that I had a deficit in understanding and experience in criminal law but the resources provided to me have been excellent, which vary from textbooks, online resources and courses organised by the Judicial Studies Board.

Would you recommend a judicial role to others?

A judicial role will suit some but not all. I was given good advice when I was first appointed – “You are paid to be decisive.” You will struggle as a Judge of any sort if you cannot be decisive. Before you apply for judicial office you might want to think whether, you can look someone in the eye and sentence them to a term of imprisonment for a considerable period or reject a civil claim made by someone who has pursued it at perhaps great emotional and financial cost.

Do you have any advice for those considering applying for judicial appointment?

For the above reasons I would certainly recommend those considering judicial office take time to carefully think through whether judicial life is for them. Some people enjoy the cut and thrust of representing clients and the aspects that come with managing a business as a lawyer in a private practice. They could well miss that aspect of life as a judge.

I would also recommend talking to current or previous judicial office holders; taking on a Fee Paid role, or undertaking a judicial shadowing placement. The exposure I gained in my Fee Paid posts played a large part in clarifying I did indeed want to apply for a salaried post.

It is also important that before applying you have built up a bank of experiences that will allow you to complete all aspects of the NIJAC Personal Profile by providing compelling examples.

I would also recommend that applicants take considerable care in drafting the NIJAC Application Form and, in particular, the Personal Profile section. This really must be done in accordance with the guidance NIJAC provide.

Finally, don't be put off from applying by not having succeeded in a previous competition. You are involved in a competition against others, many of whom will be eminently suitable for appointment to the limited number of posts on offer.

Would you say it is conducive to a good work life balance?

I would say that in the main it is. At particular times the role can of course make considerable demands on you. For instance, if you are running a jury trial in the Crown Court and there are several legal rulings to be given often at short notice and then the charge to the jury towards the end of the case; this can demand a lot from you for the period of the trial. However, it is only for a period of time, and on the whole I would say the role is generally conducive to a good work life balance, certainly more than I experienced in private practice.