

**Mr Michael Ranaghan**

**District Judge (Magistrates' Courts)**

Appointed 19 September 2017

**Why did you apply for judicial appointment?**

I was largely attracted to the role based on what I had heard from others, I also felt I was ready to apply having already gained experience from holding fee paid judicial office roles and other self-employed legal roles.

**Is the role what you imagined it would be?**

The pace of the job was a lot quicker than I imagined. The criminal courts in particular have a much faster pace. You have to be able to make decisions efficiently with limited preparation time. I hadn't dealt with family law cases before so I had to familiarise myself quickly with an entirely new area of law, and family law cases often involve more preparation. Improving my knowledge of new areas took a bit of time, but that is something you learn as you go.

**Did you have support?**

There was very much a learning curve, and I was able to turn to any number of colleagues for support who had experience in family law. Some pre-appointments training was also provided which was very helpful as well, and essential to ensure your knowledge is up-to-date. I would have to say the real assistance was the support of colleagues who I was able to call at anytime for advice.

**What would a typical day look like for a District Judge?**

For a criminal case, I would typically check my itinerary the night before to get a broad overview of what to expect for the following day. On the day I would arrive in chambers an hour before the court, and use that hour primarily to go through the paper files and see what issues might arise during that day, what applications I could expect to be made, deal with those in custody that need to be dealt with urgently, and manage any bail applications that need special consideration. The rest of that morning will then be spent dealing with applications from police for, say, warrants for searches, and then I would go to court between 10am or 10.30am depending which court I am in. I would then work through the list of applications beginning with the most urgent, and open up the court to additional applications. I would typically take half an hour break and return to court for 1pm, but I would still handle any urgent matters during that time.

Generally speaking afternoons will be dedicated to contentious matters, and you can expect to deal with between two and seven contests in an afternoon. The pace is something that took me by surprise. Contests require 100% concentration as you need to take in all of the evidence and at the end of the

contest you will go into chambers and decide your verdict, once decided you return and deliver the verdict, and repeat the process until all the contests are done. A typical day can end at any time between 2 and 5pm.

Family proceedings days are slightly different as you would get the family files the day before which means you would have an evening to go through the paperwork, which can be considerable. This can take anywhere between three and six hours. The next morning, I would still arrive about an hour before and look through the timetable and list for the day, and handle any ex-parte applications. This could involve bringing the solicitor and client into the chambers to discuss the application. The Family list would generally start at either 10am or 10.30am, and I would begin by working through any mentions or adjournments. I would also be joined by two Lay Magistrates in the family proceedings court, who work with me to arrive at decisions. Again, there would be a short thirty minute break for lunch, and I would return with the Lay Magistrates to hear contested family cases. My primary role as is to guide the panel of Lay Magistrates on points of law. The decision in family cases is made by the panel and the District Judge does not have the final say. After hearing the evidence the panel rise to consider its verdict in Chambers. I draft a written decision once the verdict has been reached and the panel returns to court to deliver the verdict. The day would follow that pattern until all contests were heard.

### **What are the biggest challenges you face in the role?**

The biggest challenge with criminal cases is the pace of the day. You can have a lengthy list with up to one hundred cases and you have to get through them and arrive at decisions quickly. You need to be very sure of your sentencing powers, and if you are uncertain you ask the prosecution for guidance and they should be able to assist you. This is where a bit of preparation does help, but there will always be a sense of the unknown because any application could be handed to you for an urgent matter and you will have little time to consider it. If it is particularly complex and you need more thinking time it is important to take some extra time to arrive at the correct decision despite the length of the list. The biggest challenge when managing criminal lists is maintaining 100% concentration, especially when it comes to sentencing.

With family law the biggest challenge is the volume of information that you receive in any one day. You will receive the files the evening before and have time to study them and prepare for the case. However you will also receive new information throughout the day at great pace by representatives on what has happened since you were last in court. Again it requires 100% concentration, and you have to be able to take in substantial amounts of information and be able to distil the most important facts in order to arrive at decisions efficiently and effectively.

### **Is the role conducive to a good work life balance?**

It does provide for a good work life balance. Before I was appointed I didn't have that – I would be working weekends and evenings in my self-employed

roles, but now there is more time for getting involved in your children's activities etc. You find that most 'criminal' evenings are free so that makes up for the additional preparation required in family cases.

**Would you recommend a judicial role to others?**

I certainly would. One of the main advantages is the independence of the role. The independence of the judiciary is of the utmost importance. Nobody can direct you do something that you consider is wrong. You arrive at decisions as best you can, based on the evidence. In addition, I think the independence helps you grow as a person because of the responsibility that comes with being a judge. It makes you aware of how important independence is within the judiciary.

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

My advice would be to study NIJAC's website. There is a lot of useful information on the website, whether in relation to written tests or judicial roles. I would also suggest talking to people who have been through the process. Spend a great deal of time on the application form, which can be a challenge especially if it is your first time applying. You need to put a lot of time and effort into researching how to approach the actual interview. It is very much a skill in itself. Any applicant should consider utilising the judicial shadowing scheme before applying.