

The Honourable Mr Justice Huddleston

High Court Judge

Appointed 7 January 2019

Professional Background

On 7 January 2019 Mr Justice Ian Huddleston was sworn in to the High Court by the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, Sir Declan Morgan, following a legal career spanning almost three decades. He is the first solicitor to be appointed directly to the High Court Bench in Northern Ireland.

Mr Justice Huddleston was admitted to the Roll of Solicitors, firstly in Northern Ireland in 1991 and, then, in England and Wales in 2009. He was a partner in various commercial firms both in Belfast and in London. Over the course of his career, Mr Justice Huddleston has been involved in both fee earning and senior management roles specialising in the areas of property, structuring and private client advisory work. Prior to his appointment Mr Justice Huddleston was also a fee paid legal member of the Tax Tribunal with a UK wide jurisdiction in relation to all direct and indirect taxes and, also, sat on the Charity Tribunal hearing charity appeals in Northern Ireland. Mr Justice Huddleston was President of the Law Society of Northern Ireland from 2016 to 2017 having served as a council member for approximately 10 years before that. During that period he served as the Chairman of the Society's Education Committee and was a member of the Council of Legal Education – reflecting his passion in legal education generally.

Why did you seek appointment to the High Court?

I sought judicial appointment because, after 20+ years in private practice, I thought that the role would provide both new challenges and opportunities to make a difference. I felt that having been a solicitor I might be able to bring a slightly different perspective to the job.

What is the role of a High Court Judge?

The role is a lot more varied than I thought. A newly appointed judge like myself will get to experience all of the divisions of the High Court to a greater or lesser extent. Coming from my background – essentially as a commercial solicitor – this was a bit of an eye opener particularly in relation to those cases which appear in the bail and family courts each of which raise very human issues. There is no doubt that one has to get up to speed quickly not only with those new areas of the law but also with the new practices and procedures across each of the varied workloads of all of the divisions.

What is a typical day like?

The first point I would make is that there is no typical day. As I have said the role is very diverse. In general terms I will generally start the day - or the evening before - reading into cases which are listed for the following day, either for administrative review or full hearing. Obviously longer trials require greater preparation time. The morning will then be initially taken up with dealing with the administrative aspects of case reviews which will be generally followed by the hearing of a substantial case. Writing up is fitted in between!

Is the role conducive to a good work life balance?

The main difference between private practice and being a judge at the High Court is that the work pressures which one experiences are generally condensed into the hearing itself. In private practice that pressure is more constant throughout the day. In terms of looking after the administration of cases and writing up judgments there certainly is no less work involved but as a judge you do have the ability to shape your day around hearings which in turn allows for a greater degree of flexibility than is possible in practice.

What is the biggest challenge you face in the role?

If, like myself, you did not come from the Bar, or have not experienced litigation in the courts there will inevitably be a steep learning curve. You will need to get up to speed with new practices and procedures, how courts operate and how the different divisions function.

What support have you had in the role?

Both my judicial colleagues, the advocates who appear in front of me and the court staff have been incredibly helpful and accommodating in relation to my own particular journey. Having that framework of support has been important when transitioning from private practice to the Bench.

How has your professional experience as a leading solicitor proven useful when carrying out judicial duties?

As I mentioned, the role of a High Court Judge is extremely varied. In a similar way the role of a solicitor is very varied and involves a lot of time dealing with clients face to face and understanding their particular personal drivers, expectations and reactions. There is no doubt that that training is something which translates very directly into the judicial role where one has to interact with a wide variety of people each experiencing the legal context in a different role. People management skill becomes second nature in practice and is a skill which is easily transferrable to the role of a judge. As a solicitor one is also well versed in managing a business and developing commercial acumen – experiences which have been particularly helpful for me in relation to the business which comes before the Commercial and Chancery Divisions which is where I spend most of my time.

Over the course of my legal career, as I have mentioned, I sat as a fee paid legal member for 10 to 12 years on the Tax Tribunal and more recently on the Charity Tribunal. Both of those roles have proved very useful in preparing me for the High Court Bench in terms of learning how the court system works, considering points of law, writing up judgments and generally dealing with parties and experiencing exactly how tribunals function.

Is the job what you imagined it to be?

By and large it is what I imagined but there is a lot more to it. The demands on a High Court Judge are considerable and very varied. You need to have the ability to balance not only a heavy caseload but also to be able to move between cases and issues as needs demand. As a duty judge, for example, one can be dealing with anything from habeas corpus application to an emergency judicial review or

injunction or even dealing with an application from a medical practitioner in respect of an incapacitated patient. To be able to react to those issues you need to be a versatile character who is able to deal with those type of demands as they arise efficiently, effectively and hopefully with empathy where that is required. In the context of the legal world I cannot think of another role which has a greater depth and variety but, of course, with that also comes responsibility.

With the luxury of hindsight is there anything you would wish to have known before applying?

Given my previous experience in the Tax and Charity Tribunals I was fairly aware of what the role entailed but, if anything, I would say that the challenge of moving from private practice to a High Court Judge was greater than I had expected. If, however, you are resilient and enjoy utilising your skills and common sense then that is actually part of the enjoyment and meets the aspiration for the challenge I was seeking.

Would you recommend a judicial role to other solicitors?

Yes, if you like a challenge, like the law, have the ability to be creative, have an enquiring mind and, overall, a desire to make a difference then there is no other better career. I would say that if you do have a non-traditional background then I would encourage you to apply. Everyone brings their own particular perspective to the job and that is what makes it relevant. The judiciary needs people who have seen society in all of its manifestations to be able to face all of our societal challenges head-on.