

Adjudicator, Northern Ireland Traffic Penalty Tribunal

Maura Hutchinson

Maura Hutchinson is an Adjudicator with the Northern Ireland Traffic Penalty Tribunal (TPT) which was established in November 2006 to hear and determine appeals concerning the new decriminalised system of parking enforcement in Northern Ireland.

What attracted you to this post?

I was admitted as a solicitor in England and Wales in 1996 and I practiced in a large London commercial practice, specialising in immigration law. I was admitted to practice in Northern Ireland in 2001 when I began working as an immigration solicitor at Law Centre (NI). I was attracted by the prospect of joining a completely new Tribunal and in my view the TPT was a good introduction to sitting on Tribunals in Northern Ireland.



When did you take up the position of Adjudicator?

I was appointed in November 2006. I also sit as an Immigration Judge in the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the First Tier Tribunal.

How do you manage the different roles?

The two areas of law are completely different and it is unlikely therefore that any conflicts would arise.

In terms of managing the sittings for my two roles, I currently sit more frequently as an Immigration Judge as the number of hearings required the TPT is, at present, more limited. It is reasonably straightforward to accommodate the one hearing a month (approximately) required of each of the four TPT Adjudicators.

What does the role of Adjudicator, TPT entail?

In my role as Adjudicator I was involved in the initial induction and training period which included input from the Traffic Penalty Tribunal in England which has been operational for a number of years.

Adjudicators consider appeals in person and paper (or 'postal') appeals. Appellants can choose whether or not to have an oral hearing (normally held in Belfast, although the Tribunal can sit throughout Northern Ireland if the need arises) or request that the case be considered on the papers. The Tribunal is also in the process of introducing telephone hearings in certain circumstances.

TPT hearings are conducted by a single adjudicator. If an oral hearing is requested it will normally be attended by the appellant in person and a representative from the Roads Service (which is responsible for enforcing parking regulations in Northern Ireland). The hearings are relatively informal and normally last between 10 and 20 minutes. Decisions are normally given at the end of the hearing and are followed in all cases by a written decision.

I also attend meetings and training connected with the role. The Tribunal maintains its close connections with its counterpart in England which is helpful in terms developing best practice in both jurisdictions.

Describe your typical working week.

Every week is different which adds to the variety of my roles. I have a young family and currently I have chosen not to practice as a solicitor but balance my family life with approximately 2 days a week spent on my two judicial posts.

The Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the First Tier Tribunal sits in various centres in the UK and I sit in Belfast, Glasgow and Bradford which can mean a reasonable amount of travelling. The advantages of a part-time fee paid post (which both my judicial posts are) is that the post holder can normally specify availability and normally choose sittings that are convenient to other commitments. I can normally plan my sittings a number of weeks in advance.

I try to prepare my papers for the TPT a few days before the oral hearings. After the hearings I write my decisions. I normally do this in my home office, before returning the written decisions and files to the Tribunal administrative staff.

What advice would you give to someone thinking of a role in judicial office?

I would highly recommend applying. In the TPT I am the only woman and the only solicitor but do not find either a disadvantage!

In meeting other judicial colleagues in different roles, it is apparent that the route to judicial posts is becoming more diverse. Judicial roles are challenging and rewarding and often offer an opportunity to expand into a completely new area of law.

However, I would also echo what some other colleagues have mentioned in their profiles about the role sometimes being isolated. If you are not sitting on a panel, you have to rely on your own knowledge and judgment. For those who have worked in a solicitor's firm, with support from colleagues, this initially may be a little daunting.

In my role as an Immigration Judge there are currently hundreds of other part-time judges and hearing centres and training courses provide opportunities to develop good collegiate relationships which assist in remaining up-to-date with the latest developments in the law and its practice.

For anyone new to a judicial role, it is essentially about adapting to a different way of working but with the right training and support, this should pose no difficulty.