

# What new solicitors need to do get £160,000 salaries

The salaries of newly qualified solicitors are on the up.

Almost daily I get an email from one legal publication or another telling me how London law firms are hiking the pay of their newly qualified solicitors (NQs) to a level considerably more than partners in many Welsh firms earn.

NQs are solicitors who have completed their solicitors' exams and undertaken training of up to two years while working at a law firm. It's a long time since I did my training contract but my recollection of it was that although there was quite a lot of letter writing and legal research there was far more accompanying partners to meetings to take notes and bag carrying to and from court. You learned a lot in those two years, but the day you qualified you were still pretty inexperienced.

Last month it was reported in Legal Cheek that US headquartered law firm Goodwin Procter had hit a new high for London NQs' salary when it increased them to £160,000. This was just ahead of two other US firms Milbank (£159,000) and Vinson and Elkins (£153,000).

Goodwin also announced an additional perk called Recharge on Goodwin. Eligible solicitors being ones who have billed 1,950 hours in 2021, can choose from a selection of week-long trips including island escape, urban exploration, winery tour, spa and wellness and family friendly Disney trip packages.

Most newly qualified solicitors are aged around 25 to 26 and a salary of £160,000 per annum chugs out a monthly net salary of around £8,000 per month. Before you start wondering why all the solicitors in Wales and not just the junior ones are not jumping on a London bound train, let's consider that target of

1,950 hours billable hours.

1,950 divided by 47 weeks (so taking out holiday weeks) is only just over 40 hours a week and most people work a 40-hour week so is 1,950 billable hours that big a deal, particularly for that level of pay? And most law firms not just London ones have tough billing targets so isn't this just what junior lawyers know they are signing up to when they choose law as a profession?

Well yes, up to a point. But unless your law firm counts time for training and business development as billable hours (and some do) you don't achieve 1950 billable hours by being at work for 1,950 hours.

Not every second of the day you spend at your desk can be billed to a client (although the recipients of legal bills might feel otherwise) and to achieve eight billable hours a day you usually have to be at your desk something closer to 10 to 12 hours a day.

If you can't fit that in because you have to leave to attend a business development event or, you know, get some rest, you end up working on weekends to catch up. How long is that sustainable?

Not very, says DWF chief executive Nigel Knowles, who is extremely well known in the legal community having grown the firm he joined as a trainee solicitor in 1978 via a series of mergers into DLA Piper.

Mr Knowles wrote a letter to the Financial Times last week in which he said: "Offering more and more money to young people is only a sticking plaster. It is not a sincere, sustainable or healthy solution for anyone. Failure to find better ways of incentivising people and building a healthier workplace environment means the British legal industry risks losing talent to more enlightened sector."

The billable hours required also impact on the number of women remaining in the profession and reaching partner level. Whilst an equal number of women enter the legal profession, a report from the FT in 2020 showed that only about a fifth of partners in London firms were female.

Women it seems will put up with long hours for high pay at the beginning of their careers but over time choose to leave working in private practice rather than continue to work in that way, meaning that law firms lose out on their talent.

And then there's the house prices. The terraced houses on the scruffy street in South London where I lived when I worked in London now sell for in excess of £1m, meaning that someone on £160,000 per annum would struggle to get enough mortgage to buy one.

Lawyers in Wales work hard too of course, and we often have to put in long hours to meet client's needs. But most of the time we leave work at a decent hour to go home to a house we could afford to buy and without a long commute either. The bigger question to my mind is why all those London lawyers aren't jumping on a train to Wales.

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