“The right thing to do”: An insight to pro bono at Travers Smith

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Pictured above: Sam Cottman (left), Director of Pro Bono and Senior Counsel, and Chris Edwards (right), CSR & Diversity Director.

Ahead of National Pro Bono Week on 2nd-6th November 2020, AllAboutLaw caught up with Sam Cottman and Chris Edwards. Sam is the Director of Pro Bono and Senior Counsel at Travers Smith, and Chris is the CSR & Diversity Director at the firm.

In our discussion with Sam and Chris, it immediately became clear that pro bono is of paramount importance to Travers Smith, and the firm know how to utilise its strengths to address “the most pressing needs of society locally and globally” whilst continuing to provide a full-service of world class legal services to their commercial client base.

In what areas does Travers Smith provide pro bono advice and representation?

Our pro bono practice is structured around four pillars:

1. Climate, environment and sustainability
2. Diversity, inclusion and social mobility
3. Vulnerable groups (Refugees, Human Trafficking, Domestic Violence, Mental Health, Homelessness & Children)
4. Rule of Law
**Why has Travers Smith chosen these areas and causes in particular?**

Travers Smith is a law firm made up of diverse and talented individuals. It is committed to using its legal capabilities to address environmental risk and promote sustainability, to defend the vulnerable and promote a positive and inclusive global society where opportunities are available to all and the rule of law is respected. We have chosen these four pillars to our programme as they build on our existing pro bono expertise and address a number of the most pressing needs of society locally and globally.

**How do pro bono cases work behind the scenes? Do trainees look after their own cases and files or is there supervision from associates and partners?**

All pro bono matters are run in precisely the same way as paid work. Everything is supervised by associates and partners with further overall supervision provided by the Director of Pro Bono and CSR Partner.

**Tell us a little bit more about the outcomes of some of the pro bono work that Travers Smith has worked on. What makes some particular cases stand out?**

Travers Smith has a broad pro bono practice aligned with the four pillars. Three examples of particularly impactful work include:

**Refugees at Home**

R@H is a UK charity which connects those with a spare room in their home to refugees and asylum seekers in need of somewhere to stay. So far it has been responsible for placing over 2,200 guests for over 170,000 placement nights.

Travers Smith has been at the heart of Refugees at Home since before their formal inception in 2015, effectively acting as their in-house counsel and regularly advising them on both key strategic issues and a wide range of day-to-day queries. In practice we undertake some work for them almost every day. This has included major milestones such as setting them up as a company limited by guarantee and subsequently guiding them through the charity registration process, as well as a range of other work such as reviewing/drafting contracts with donors, suppliers, staff and other third parties, advising on data protection and IP, drafting policies, best practice on governance and assisting with disputes. We have guided them through every step of their growth into a major national charity provided essential shelter to a particularly vulnerable group.

This is part of our wider commitment to serving the refugee community.

**Domestic Violence Advocacy Unit (DVAU)**

In 2020, shortly after the country was placed into lockdown and the 'shadow pandemic' of domestic abuse began, Travers Smith launched its Domestic Violence Advocacy Unit (DVAU). The DVAU is led by Sam Cottman, the Director of Pro Bono, and a small group of senior associates. It consists of approximately 40 volunteer lawyers (including partners,
associates, trainees, paralegals, consultants and knowledge lawyers) within the firm's award-winning Dispute Resolution department.

The remit of the DVAU is to take on end-to-end case work, i.e. once a client is referred to the DVAU from the National Centre for Domestic Violence the Travers Smith team will take conduct of all matters to the conclusion of the case. This will include taking detailed evidence, drafting position papers, skeleton arguments and opening and closing submissions as well as detailed cross examination questions and conducting advocacy at ex parte, return and final hearings. Clients have ranged in age from 16 to 60 and experienced sexual abuse, extreme physical violence, threatening behaviour and correspondence, controlling behaviour, economic abuse and prolonged unauthorised filming.

This work is an integral part of the firm’s significant pro bono commitment to serving victims of domestic abuse. This includes running a family law clinic in East London since 2016 (alongside 5 other firms) and leading a monitoring group throughout lockdown which looks at the impacts of the pandemic on victims of domestic violence in liaison with a number of charities serving the full spectrum of domestic abuse victims.

JUSTICE
JUSTICE is an all-party law reform and human rights organisation working to strengthen the justice system in the United Kingdom.

Travers Smith is the Corporate partner for JUSTICE's expert panel investigation into the over-representation of BAME youth in the criminal youth justice system. This involves hosting and actively participating in 3 specialist sub-committees every other month and one full expert panel meeting in each of the intervening month over a 12-18 month period with the aim of providing an extensive written report of structural recommendations intended to make the criminal youth justice system fairer and address the racial bias that currently exists.

How can trainees get involved with pro bono work at Travers Smith? What is the process?
Every department will have a pro bono committee focussed on delivering pro bono projects within that department and in line with the firm's goals. Trainees will be given a talk about what projects are available to them when they join the firm and when they join a new department. The firm will then try to accommodate their preferences as far as possible.

How does the pro bono work that Travers Smith do benefit commercial relationships? Are there particular causes, for example, that Travers Smith can align with their clients on to go even further?
We do not take on pro bono work for commercial gain. We do it because it is the right thing to do and because our lawyers feel passionate about the issues.

That being said, the most natural example of shared value to the cause and firm is within the climate, environment and sustainability pillar of our practice. The work we do in this
space benefits the cause but is also of great interest to our commercial clients who are increasingly needing to pivot their investments and corporate structures towards sustainable investments and the transition to a greener economy.

How does the pro bono work that Travers Smith undertake align with the firm’s culture and working practices?

The firm’s culture is one of mutual respect. We respect people from all backgrounds and appreciate our fortunate place in society. We understand that as lawyers we have the ability to have a significant impact on some of the issues that we are facing. We, therefore, target the most impactful partnerships and legal work within the pillars of our programme in order to make positive change.

Expanding on this, how does the pro bono work that Travers Smith undertake interlink with the firm’s corporate social responsibility programmes?

Pro Bono is a core part of our CSR programme. It is very often the case that we provide pro bono legal support for both our CSR and D&I partners. For example, we have provided pro bono advice to organisations involved in promoting diversity and inclusion, such as Stonewall, Women’s Sports Trust and Give Out, and also to a number of our long-standing charity partners such as Mind, City YMCA, Giving Time, and Series Q.

Applications for Travers Smith’s work placement scheme are currently open. To apply and find out more please visit the firm’s graduate recruitment site.