

Working Lunch with Jonathan Hughes: The local face of international law

With a background covering property transactions around the world working out of London and Sydney, Jonathan Hughes brings a global perspective to Ogier's Local Legal Services Team.

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Luxury resorts on tropical islands and budget hotels in downtown St Helier don't initially appear to have much in common. But for Jonathan Hughes, transactions are less about the location or the scale of the deal, and more about the results and relationships involved.

As Head of Ogier's Local Legal Services, Jonathan has been involved in some of the most significant M&A and Commercial Real Estate transactions in the Channel Islands over the last ten years. In recent months Jonathan's team has advised the Caledonia Group on the £118 million acquisition of the Liberation Group, acted for Starwood Capital on the £27 million refinancing of the Royal Yacht Hotel, and the sale of the Sandpiper Group for an undisclosed sum.

All this, and Jonathan's previous experience in Hotels & Resorts, were key factors in Premier Inn appointing Ogier to assist with the purchase of the Charing Cross site in St Helier to build their first Channel Island hotel.

Jonathan said: "We have 25 people in Jersey working in Local Legal Services providing a wide range of skills and specialities that we can pull together for each transaction depending on what is required.

"For the Premier Inn deal, my experience in Hotels and Resorts was a factor, however, we also have people like Claire Smith, who has vast experience in Planning and construction, working on transactions such as legacy sites for the London Olympics, along with many other talented people.

"At Ogier it's all about teamwork. We are a very commercial and user-friendly company, and are certainly one of the newer generation of law firms. We have a dynamic and energetic partnership, and we have a pragmatic approach, supporting clients and helping them get the end result they want. We always try to get to the point quickly and don't 'over-lawyer' things."

Born in Derbyshire, with law degrees from Newcastle and Sydney universities and a Masters in International Commercial Law from the University of Nottingham, Jonathan qualified as an English solicitor and as an Australian solicitor, before qualifying as a Jersey Advocate having joined Ogier in 2007.

He said: "I started out working in a City firm in London and after five or six years moved to work in Sydney. I worked in Asia/Pacific for another five or six years then moved back to London, but missed the lifestyle of Australia, so started thinking about where we would like to live. Jersey came up as a place that would offer me the career satisfaction I would get in London, with elements of the more outdoorsy lifestyle I had in Australia.

"When I joined Ogier in 2007 I came in as a Commercial Real Estate specialist, and progressed to a broader role, looking after Local Legal Services across Jersey, Guernsey and Cayman, covering property, employment, commercial and competition law.

"It's nice dealing with people and I really enjoy the personal interaction you get looking after private clients face-to-face. It's equally interesting dealing with companies, but you use a different set of skills. No matter how big the corporation, companies are still made up of people so it can be just as challenging."

Nine years after moving to Jersey, Jonathan still enjoys surfing, along with golf, and running. Exercise is reserved for early morning so he can spend time with his children, Harry, four, and Zara, six, after work. Twice a week Jonathan runs for six to eight km around the lanes of St Saviour, culminating with a workout in the field opposite his house.

"Having an audience of 12 Jersey cows as you do your sit ups and crunches is quite motivating," Jonathan said, polishing off his Asian Beef Salad, of which he noted 'my trainer would approve'.

Jonathan's time in Jersey means he has also lived through the peaks, dips, and rebound the local property market has recently gone through.

He said: "Ten years ago the property and mergers and acquisitions markets in Jersey were very good, then we went through a quieter spell during the financial crisis. About three or four years ago things started picking up again and we're back up to previous levels of values and transactions.

"We're seeing a positive cycle for property in Jersey at the moment – the market is active and there are more transactions and

rising values. I think it should continue to be an upward trend for both residential and commercial property. Within residential property it's across the property spectrum; from first time buyers to the top end."

Jersey is also in a positive position for commercial property. In August Ogier acted for the buyer of the £18 million BHS site on King Street. The new owners plan to bring Flannels, a high-end designer shop to the island, creating up to 50 jobs.

Jonathan said: "Recent acquisitions and expansions are positive indicators for retail, and for the economy. Retail in Jersey is a unique proposition. Unlike UK retailers who can operate out of large hubs, within a radius of millions of potential customers, shops in Jersey have an audience of around 100,000.

"However, Jersey is an attractive destination and we're seeing plenty of investment, both from companies based outside Jersey such as Waitrose and Next, and from local companies such as the Coop and SandpiperCI. It all shows the future of the economy is heading in the right direction."

A significant part of Jonathan's role in Local Legal Services is helping HNWI (High Net Worth individuals) and businesses relocate to Jersey.

He said: "HNWIs have a positive impact on the local economy, both directly through their contribution to stamp duty, and through what they spend setting up home in the island, and by investing in the island.

"There's also a trickle-down effect from HNWI and UHNWI coming to Jersey which is much wider as people use services, employ local people, and set up businesses. Helping people relocate to Jersey is not just about helping people deal with the legal aspects of a move or buying property. We end up advising clients on so much more, often informally about everything from schools to buying cars, or even which plumbers and builders to use, that we end up being more like a concierge service.

"Our offshore relocation services are designed around what individuals and businesses are looking for. We can become part of someone's team when they move over – someone they can rely on and trust. This is the same for individuals and families and for companies. We create a team for clients across different services they require so they can access specialists in areas such as business and competition law, but we ensure they have a single point of contact so that they can assess who is the best fit for each task. It means we can offer a much more joined up service.

"We're seeing a shift in the sort of people coming to Jersey. We're seeing a lot more entrepreneurs and young families, rather than older, semi-retired people. There are a lot of people coming out of London and UK regions. The independence referendum in Scotland has also helped increase the number of HNWIs coming out of Scotland. And we're also seeing an increasing number of fund managers moving out of London and Switzerland.

"People look at Jersey because of the location – we're so near London and Europe – and because of the lifestyle. Jersey is very well set up for professional services and for financial services platforms.

"Transport links to Jersey are already good, but the prospect of Jersey getting links to London Heathrow again would also be a real boost. Jersey presents itself as the whole package; Visit Jersey and Locate Jersey do a great job. It's all about saying Jersey is open for business and that people are welcome."

Just as the type of clients Jonathan deals with changes, the working practices of lawyers at firms such as Ogier have to change too. Tech is ever more important as a way of enabling team members to work anywhere, and communicate with clients at any time.

Jonathan said: "We work off Microsoft Surface tablets so that we can be agile and work from anywhere in the world – whether we're travelling or at home. It's especially important for private clients to be able to get hold of you but having the right IT system and tech means we don't need to be at our desks all the time."

Ranked top tier by Legal 500 for Dispute Resolution, Employment Law, and Property, Planning and Construction Law, and top tier by IFLR for local business advice, this year has also seen Ogier named offshore law firm of the year by the Chambers Europe Alpha Awards and Hedgeweek Global Awards.

Jonathan said: "Attracting talent to the business is very important, especially as we grow. We also invest in our training and are one of the few firms in Jersey to offer the sort of training programme most UK firms offer. We are in a very strong place as a firm because we have a good corporate culture, an energised partnership and don't have any problems attracting good people."

Ogier's Local Legal Services team in the Cayman Islands and the Guernsey Property, Construction and Planning team, are modelled on Jersey's Local Legal services division. Local Legal Services also covers local M&A on business transactions. This includes due diligence over assets and liabilities, competition law, and employment law.

Jonathan said: "The principles are the same whatever the size of the deal. It's about understanding what the clients need to make something happen, and what we are doing to make this happen. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, at this level, results and relationships are what counts."

This article first appeared in Connect in December 2016.

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