

District Judge (Magistrates' Courts)

District judges sit alone in the magistrates' and family courts and are all qualified as solicitors or barristers. Most criminal cases will start and conclude in the magistrates' court. Workloads can be high, and defendants, witnesses and victims may present vulnerability and issues ranging from substance abuse to learning difficulty and mental illness. I often say that the greatest skill necessary in our work is the ability to effectively engage with our court users. Like many of us, I sat in the family court. It makes life changing decisions as to whether it is necessary to remove children from their parents or resolving disputes between parents and families as to arrangements for their care. It is a very different place to a criminal court and can be more emotionally charged. The Senior District Judge (Chief Magistrate) personally hears a special jurisdiction of cases across England and Wales. She provides leadership to the judges across the country and supports the important partnership with the justices of the peace. She is supported by a deputy and a small office who help administer the deployment of part-time deputy district judges across the country.

The youth court

Nearly all cases involving youths will be concluded in the youth court. I am authorised to hear serious allegations of sexual assault which would once have been heard in the Crown Court. Youths present their own challenges. They are vulnerable and the court has, also, to consider their welfare and what needs to be done to prevent further offending. Communicating and engaging with young people requires attention and sensitivity. I sit in the youth court several times a month and often travel to other courts to deal with the more serious sex cases.

Prison adjudications

Several days every month I spend time in prisons as an independent prison adjudicator. There, I conduct hearings in relation to prisoners alleged to have breached Prison Rules. I deal with the most serious cases. Smuggled mobile phones and drugs use in prison fundamentally undermine security and will warrant the inmate serving extra days.

Not just a life of crime

These days, however, I spend most of my time dealing with extradition cases. It is specialist work and requires a good knowledge of extradition and human rights law. I never practiced in the area and like many judges, I have learnt the law through experience of deciding cases.

Out of court

Advocates will not always see us in the courtroom. There will often be papers to read before I start my day in court or a written judgement to prepare after the hearing. I may also be on call in the evening or over the weekend to deal with police applications to detain suspects for extended questioning or applications in terrorism investigations. I also spend time engaging with community groups and students, dispelling myths, and telling them about what we do. It is important work and I do that in my own time. The life of a judge in the magistrates' court is varied and rewarding. I cannot recommend a better career for a lawyer.