

A Day in the Life of a Master

A Master writes about their experience in the role below.

The night before

For me, today always begins at the end of the day before, when I pick up all those letters, reports and consultation papers I did not have a chance to read during the day. I also check my diary for the following day – likely to contain at least 2 hearings. The papers for each may run to over 300 pages, so I simply select the claim, the defence, the witness statements and the 2 written submissions from counsel. My train journey home is real quality time, allowing me to read, write and think about my papers without interruption.

First thing: name-changes and celebrity libel

I arrive back at court just before 9am, and find a dozen or so letters and emails, as well as paper applications which may range from requests to change a child's name to the settlement of a celebrity libel trial. My colleagues – some 9 other Masters – will regularly come in with a query or request, or to pass the time of day, and the manager of the central office I am responsible for will use the time to raise issues of practice or keep me in touch with the problems of the 90 staff who form one of the most experienced court administrations in the country. My PA and I will also deal with correspondence and any reports I have written on the train.

Early cases

The morning brings an appointment with a parent and the trustees of a family trust, to plan the use of the money held in the trust for the welfare of the children named. The court is responsible for these children until they turn 18. I also see my room fill with QCs, junior counsel and solicitors, as we consider an order covering all aspects of a wide-ranging piece of litigation resulting from an oil depot fire. My task is to draw up a code of practice enabling the issues of fact and law to be heard, so a fair result can be achieved with the least time, labour and costs.

International impact

Before lunch, a group of civil servants consult me about drafting a civil procedure treaty with a foreign state to bring about closer relations with our Government. After lunch – which I spend with the other Masters, catching up with the gossip – I deal with a contest arising from American litigation, where a US court has requested that evidence be taken from witnesses in this country, and documents obtained. The case concerns a singer injured on a concert tour in the United States, and the insurance cover for cancellation of the tour. Like the oil depot fire case earlier, I might have made up my mind provisionally from reading the papers, but I frequently find after hearing from counsel that I modify my views or change my mind. At 3.55pm I make my decision and give my reasons, and these are recorded in case either party wishes to appeal.

Governance matters

At 4.30pm I rush to the Royal Courts of Justice video conference unit, for a meeting of the Judges' Council on judges' terms of appointment. There are 5 of us at the meeting – 3 in the room, 1 judge on circuit in Exeter and a judge who sits in Newcastle. We finish by 7.00pm, I return to my office to check on the next day's work, and then collect my speaking notes and directions as I have a dinner to attend in the City.

Last thing

Much later, I read through the papers for the next day before collapsing into a deep and welcome sleep.