

# Top of the game

**Catherine Calder, joint chief executive of Serjeants' Inn Chambers, tells UK Bar editor John van der Luit-Drummond how her set offers a bespoke client care service to the benefit of both instructing law firms and clients**

**I**'d be wary of ascribing special skills to either gender, but I do sometimes wonder if there is something special about female friendship, and whether that provides a particular support to women in the workplace,' replies Serjeants' Inn Chambers' Catherine Calder when asked if women can bring different expertise to leadership roles at the Bar.

'Certainly I feel lucky to be able to call on the advice of some very clever, canny, and funny female friends both inside and outside chambers,' she continues, 'and I'm definitely better at my job as a result. I try hard to provide the same back to my colleagues and contacts.'

2019 will mark two decades since Calder began her career in chambers. After qualifying and practising as a solicitor at Macfarlanes in the early '90s, she turned to the advertising sector, spending several years as an account manager at the Bates Dorland agency (part

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of the Saatchi Group) where she worked on the campaign relating to the formation of Halifax plc and assisted Amnesty International with its refugee campaigns. However, in 1999 the law once again beckoned and she joined Radcliffe Chambers in a client care role, becoming one of the first former solicitors to work in a set of chambers.

Few other senior clerks or chief executives can rely on such a range of experience to the benefit of their chambers. 'I draw on my legal background every day but it is my time in advertising that really informs my approach – it was an excellent education in clients and communications,' she says. 'I feel very fortunate to have found a way to apply the commercial and creative approach I learnt at Saatchi to the profession I always wanted to work within. And it's the law, it fascinates me.'

In the summer of 2014, after more than a decade at Radcliffe Chambers, Calder made the move from the Chancery set's home in Lincoln's Inn to Fleet Street and common law set Serjeants' Inn. It's a move she has not regretted, and neither has chambers (23 legal industry

awards in just three years has been dubbed 'the Calder effect' in some quarters).

Blessed with 'a longstanding, well-deserved, reputation as one of the best clinical negligence sets in the UK' and known as 'an ever-growing police set with excellent juniors and nationally recognised silks'. Serjeants' Inn climbed this year's The Legal 500 UK Bar rankings to challenge the ever-impressive 39 Essex Chambers in our Court of Protection (CoP) guide. The rise to the top tier follows the set's involvement in some of the most high-profile CoP cases in recent years and the recruitment of the talented Nageena Khalique QC and Emma Sutton – both previously of No5 Chambers – to add greater strength in depth, in London and on the circuits. This comes as part of a strategy of 'intelligent expansion' which has seen the set recruit 13 barristers in 13 months, including a further silk in Dijen Basu QC and a former judge in His Honour Brian Barker CBE QC.

If there is one thing which sets Serjeants' Inn apart from other chambers it's its bespoke client care

team which, as Calder explains, she created to work alongside solicitors in tailoring the 'perfect service' for lay clients. The feedback from instructing firms speaks for itself. Described as 'a marvel' in the latest UK Bar edition, Calder has 'set new standards in client care and is to be highly commended for the results she has achieved in recent years'. Or as another solicitor said: '[They are] at the top of their game and also at the forefront, particularly with BD being led by Catherine Calder. You know from the first point of contact with them that you're in safe hands and they are expert at what they do.'

'It fits the set and follows from the nature of our work and approach,' says Calder. 'Clients choose us to steer them through crucial cases, such as the Deepcut and Westminster and London Bridge terrorist attack inquests. It informs our "trusted when it's critical" branding, but more importantly I hope clients see the difference it makes on a day-to-day basis. Barristers at Serjeants' Inn acted in the recent Charlie Gard and Alfie Evans proceedings, which were highly challenging for all involved. Our work has legal, human, and ethical importance, and I'm glad to be part of a team supporting counsel, solicitors, and lay clients with that.'

The set's clerks' room 'has always been strong', and has a 'great understanding of solicitor needs and time pressures', according to instructing firms in this year's research. So how does the client

care team differ from a traditional clerking setup? Isn't client care what clerks are responsible for? 'Although the teams have separate remits there is some overlap,' explains Calder. 'For example, we may get involved on major fee negotiations and, of course, the clerks have their own relationships with clients and are building those in hundreds of conversations with our solicitors every day. But the addition of this unique team gives us insight and resource to work in partnership with clients in a new and different way.'

Currently a team of three – comprised of Calder, client care manager and 'name to note' Isabel Biggs, and client care executive Bronwyn Gray – the set brings in additional resource for specific projects. 'For example, we retained a former City litigation partner earlier this year to conduct a three-month review of our processes,' says Calder. 'She worked with us to assess how we handle a case, from the first telephone inquiry to the invoicing at the end, and identified how we might improve the process for clients, barristers, and clerks.'

While Serjeants' Inn has received plaudits for this innovative approach, Calder is at pains to explain that the new team's introduction was 'a natural development of the very client-focused approach' which chambers had taken long before she arrived four years ago, under the guidance of 'brilliant' senior clerk, Lee Johnson and others. 'I suppose it would have been difficult if

the clerking team had felt undermined in any way by the creation of the new team, but that didn't arise – the clerks are held in hugely high regard within chambers and had the confidence to embrace the idea. It is undeniably an investment in salaries but, for us, it has proved worthwhile.'

For those sets thinking of replicating the Serjeants' Inn experience, Calder says the starting point is ensuring your client care and clerking teams are fully aligned: 'Our teams have always got on well but we don't take that for granted: there is no magic to this but we do try to take every opportunity to encourage communication – for example, we knocked down walls to put us all in the same space; we have weekly all-staff meetings; we circulate a monthly bulletin on what we have achieved together; we solicit comments and complaints via an anonymous online feedback facility; we have Friday drinks in the clerks' room and other social events.'

'As a next step we plan to create a chambers common room – we want to encourage people to gather, chat, and relax. It will promote wellbeing but also we know that it will facilitate the exchange of views and ideas within the set. It will take up expensive space and is difficult given our recent expansion, but I know my co-chief exec, Martin Dyke, will find a way to make it work. He deserves the credit for our modern

premises which are such a crucial part of our success.'

Calder and the former chambers' business director Martin Dyke were appointed the set's new joint chief executives earlier this year. While the duo combine forces to deal with management and business planning, Calder notes that the set is led overall by the joint heads of chambers, Angus Moon QC and John Beggs QC, who provide 'immense vision and direction'.

From her new leadership position, Calder (who is also now co-chair of the Legal Practice Management Association) is keen to empower more women to work in chambers: 'A priority is to develop and promote individual talent both among barristers and staff. In two years at Serjeants' Inn, four female tenants have taken silk and we have been able to promote key women in the clerking and client care teams.'

'This is important for the set as a whole as well as the individuals concerned: they are role models and mentors for others in turn and their success helps to address the unconscious bias which the Law Society's recent Women in the Law survey identified as the biggest barrier to equality within the legal profession.'

A genuinely flexible approach to working is also key and it is important to highlight how such a policy can benefit men as well as women. However,

if the latest Bar Council statistics are accurate (57% of mothers at the Bar were primary carers, compared to just 4% of fathers at the Bar) then we have some way to go before such a policy is distributed evenly across the sexes.

Nevertheless, Calder's own experience in chambers is heartening: 'My heads of chambers agreed to my working mainly from home for two months last year when my twins were taking their GCSEs,' she says. 'And my experience in interviewing applicants for our set is that men are just as likely to raise flexible working as women, which may be a small sign of progress in itself.'

Despite its history of being a difficult place for women to work and get ahead – especially in a leadership function – the Bar is beginning to modernise. Looking back on her almost 20 years in chambers, I ask Calder what has changed for the better and what is still in need of reform?

'The Bar Council identified some key steps following its most recent report on equality and diversity issues (Snapshot: The Experience of Women at the Self-Employed Bar, 2015) so that seems a good place to start. One of the recommendations is that the Bar "promote[s] women's marketing networks for barristers ... specifically focused on developing relationships

with professional clients"'. Serjeants' Inn has already put this into practice by supporting the First 100 Years project, run by charity Spark21, of which Calder is a trustee. Backed by the Law Society and the Bar Council, the project tracks the journey of women in law since the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act enabled women to enter the profession for the first time in 1919.

'It holds numerous events – such as a recent debate featuring female Supreme Court judges from jurisdictions around the world – to introduce, inform, and inspire women within the profession. Serjeants' Inn has seen the benefits both socially and commercially and I'm sure other sets would do too.'

Having had the benefit of almost a year in her new role, I ask Calder what she believes are the biggest challenges facing a chambers' CEO. 'There are many! But a key challenge for the Bar is how to modernise while preserving its identity and independence. Of course, clients expect us to be absolutely at the cutting edge in terms of legal skills and service delivery, but I don't think anyone wants us to homogenise into standardised corporate machines. That's a difficult, delicate line to steer.' ●