

## THE INTERVIEW

# A law firm's biggest asset

**Kathleen Russ** is **Travers Smith's** first ever female senior partner. Here she speaks to Alice Tchernookova about how she's making sure plenty more will follow

**H**aving served as a partner in Travers Smith's tax department since 2011, Kathleen Russ was appointed senior partner on 1 July 2019. A former member of the British Private Equity & Venture Capital Association tax committee, she specialises in private equity.

As part of its diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, the firm has already made great strides in creating a more inclusive workplace. Recent initiatives include a launch of an innovative series of activities aimed at promoting effective allyship and role modelling. Supporting this ambitious D&I Programme is the firm's Diversity Board, as well as its employee network groups. Not only do these offer high level strategic input, but also present opportunities to everyone across the firm to get involved in helping shape inclusivity.

As she settles into her new role, Kathleen Russ tells IFLR's Women in Business Law group about what makes Travers Smith's company culture so special and reveals her ambitions for the future.

### Why is D&I important to you, and how did you first get involved in D&I-related initiatives at Travers Smith?

For the 10 years I ran the tax department here, I always focused on recruiting and then nurturing people who showed great potential. When I began, it wasn't really branded as diversity and inclusion. But I always wanted to nurture talented people – and a lot of them turned out to be women.

In my practice, we've been particularly successful in supporting and enabling women to realise their career potential. 6 of the 9 partners in the tax team are women. Building on this experience, I've become passionate about helping instil gender equality across the wider profession.

But it goes beyond gender of course. As I settle into my role as Senior Partner. I am increasingly aware that, people are our biggest asset. So, the question is – how are you going to get your best people, and where are you going to get them from? Are you recruiting and retaining people from all different backgrounds and types?

It's all about wanting Travers Smith to be the best it can be. The best law firms are made up of people from diverse backgrounds with a broad range of experiences. Not only is creating a workplace where diverse talent can thrive and reach their potential the right thing to do, it also helps ensure we are able to meet the diverse and complex needs of our clients.

### Which issues is Travers Smith's D&I board actively involved in?

The firm is involved in all aspects of D&I, not just gender equality. I personally have a big focus on social mobility and ethnicity, and creating

a more inclusive workplace for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME). We have been running a series of training sessions aimed at mitigating racial biases and examining the impact of micro-aggressions to help drive inclusion. We have also been re-examining, and amending where needed, the entire recruitment process to ensure it is as inclusive as possible.

### How close would you say you are to achieving the goal of a fully inclusive workplace?

We are on a journey. I don't think any law firm would be able to say they've completely cracked it.



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**Some clients have declared they would not work with a given law firm unless it showed diversity**

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But we are really improving: two years ago, we had an all-female partner recruitment round, in which four female employees were promoted to partners. Since then, we have also recruited a significant number of women that have come through to the partnership and we now have 2 women on our partnership board.

We have made good progress on LGBT+ inclusion, and last year ranked 25th in Stonewall's list of LGBT inclusive employers in the UK. Our stats on social mobility are also improving, and our various efforts aimed at widening our recruitment pool seem to be paying dividends.

We are a work in progress on BAME inclusion. We are making progress but we have further to go.

### **Around 23% of Travers Smith's partners are female. How does that compare to the industry as a whole?**

It's probably about average for the City. But some departments are doing really well; our disputes team is a good example, but we have further to go as a firm.

### **Which area has proven to be the hardest to make progress on in terms of equality?**

I would say it's probably social mobility and making sure we are recruiting and retaining people from less privileged backgrounds. Travers Smith, together with City law firms, in general, are still recruiting large numbers of people from private schools and Russell Group universities and there are of course many really good people from those backgrounds. However, we are very keen to spread the net wider. In 2016, we introduced a contextualised

But the issue goes further than this. A high proportion of people from relatively privileged backgrounds apply for careers in law but a legal career could be available to many more. Our Corporate Social Responsibility Programme delivers a number of initiatives aimed at helping raise aspirations of younger people including our Pathways to Law, Lawyers in Schools, and our Prime work experience offering.

### **So in practice, what will you do to change that?**

First of all we want to open up our recruitment process, and we are actively engaging with a wider group of universities than we used to. We are also thinking about ways to improve our interviewing processes and our vacation schemes, making sure that we recruit people based on their real potential, as opposed to being disproportionately focused on current levels of "polish".

That polish can be important, but it isn't always indicative of a person's potential in the long term. So we are trying to dig deeper.

### **How well do you think the legal industry is doing as a whole with regards to D&I?**

Diversity across the City, and indeed the wider profession aren't uniformly inspiring. Gender diversity at partner level is on average still only around 23-25% for City law firms, which isn't ideal if you consider that 50% or more of graduates coming into law are women. The legal industry is probably not where it should be yet, but I do think there's a real determination from the industry to change.

Recently, there has been a lot of pressure coming from general counsels within big

their image, but I do believe that others – including Travers Smith – are totally committed to resolving these issues, not just because of their reputation but because they are convinced both that it is central to their success, and that it is morally the right thing to do.

### **Do you feel you have personally been one of the strongest D&I advocates within your firm?**

I am one of them, but by no means the only one. In particular, our managing partner and my predecessor as senior partner have been forceful allies. The firm as a whole is strongly committed, and my election probably stands as a symbol of that. We also have an excellent D&I Director who has made a significant impact.

### **When it comes to equality and diversity, how does the UK compare with its EU peers?**

My experience tells me that UK law firms are slightly further advanced on these matters than certain other countries in Europe. Having said that, many of them are already doing terrific work in promoting inclusion in their own firms, and are collaborating with each other, and across jurisdictions (including with us) in order to share knowledge and best practice.

### **Looking ahead, what are the main goals that you are setting for yourself, and for the firm?**

I'm keen to showcase everything that is so special about Travers Smith. In doing so I am fortunate to be able to build on our heritage of success.

I have been a core part of our outstanding private equity and financial sponsor practice and I am proud of our market leading position in this area. This is complemented by our highly successful corporate M&A practice. As senior partner, I now have the privilege of overseeing the firm's success in other areas of law including our outstanding dispute resolution and advisory practices.

Regarding D&I, I am determined to continue improving our gender balance and ethnic diversity, and to make real progress on social mobility. Those are my three main targets.

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## **We are trying very hard to go and talk to a lot more universities than we used to**

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recruitment system which enables us to take applicants personal circumstances into account in order to help create a more level playing field. The system also enables us to help identify any barriers candidates may have encountered and their level of potential. We are now trialling blind CVs as a way to open up opportunities further.

companies to try and enforce that change. Some clients have declared they would not work with a given law firm unless it showed a diverse client engagement team. I do think that client input is important in encouraging change.

You may argue that some firms out there are mostly advocating change in order to protect