

# Shifting the weight of your experience: Becoming a family mediator

**Austin Chessell** shares his experience of moving into the field of family mediation and the challenges and liabilities involved

**L**egal aid may have gone for a lot of family and children legal matters, but there are still other avenues to consider to complement your family law background.

I have been involved in the family law sector since 2005. In 2010 I decided that I did not want to work only as a family solicitor; I wanted the challenge of working with separating couples, not just individuals, and to focus on the families' interests rather than having a fixed position. After looking into how this could be achieved, I decided to train as a family mediator.

Five years on, I am now doing more work as a mediator than as a solicitor.

## Becoming a family mediator

It can be quite expensive at the start of the mediation journey, with the mediation foundation course fee and regular supervision meetings.

It takes time to build up a mediation caseload. Find time to plan how many clients you would like to work with and decide what action and networking needs to be done to achieve this. I find that my plan is always changing, but at least if you have a plan you have something to aim for.

Marketing can often take place outside work hours, so if you are attending breakfast events or late night networking, aim to attend events that you enjoy being at. I tend to find having a chat with one to two people works better than going round the whole room and trying to speak to everyone, but again you need to find a networking strategy that works for you.

I am now working at a fixed office for family mediation meetings. Five years ago I used to rent rooms in several offices across London: this was good initially to keep the room hire costs

down, but I found that a lot of time in the day would be lost travelling from north, east, and central London, so I now aim to get clients to meet me at one location.

Make sure that you have mediation insurance in place and that you have the right level of cover, especially for financial mediation matters.

Once you have started to mediate, then you can build on the foundations of your mediation knowledge. For example, a lot of the families I work with have an international element to their issue, so it is important to keep up to date in this area.

I have also been on an online mediation training course as I am getting more and more clients who are not based in London. Last month I did a Skype mediation for a client based in Ireland who had a disability and another case where a mother lives in Hong Kong to focus on financial and children matters. (As an aside, if you do Skype mediation sessions, make sure you do a test call first.)

Most of my family mediation cases work on the model of 90-minute joint sessions, but half-day and full-day mediation sessions are possible if the clients have a court case taking place very soon. The first mediation session allows separating couples to discuss strategies on how communication and trust can be worked on and improved, even before we start to discuss childcare and financial matters.

I want to be known as a specialist solicitor and mediator. A lot of clients when they come to you want to work with someone who is a specialist in their area. I think it is harder to get this message across if you work in lots of areas of law.

In family law I work within the areas of divorce, finances, children, relocation, pre-nuptial >>



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**The courts are becoming more aware of the role of family mediators**