



## INTERVIEW WITH PENNY RINTA-SUKSI

The Thames Valley is the UK's fastest-growing region. It is no surprise then, despite the pandemic, that the Thames Valley legal market remains exceptionally buoyant. Our South-East consultant Penny Heighway speaks to Blake Morgan Thames Valley Commercial Partner, Penny Rinta-Suksi.

"Our Commercial team were ranked in Tier 1 in the prestigious Legal 500 Guide for 2022"

**You moved from Bevan Brittan in Birmingham to Blake Morgan in the Thames Valley. What would you say to someone considering a move to either Oxford or Reading?**

The Thames Valley is an exciting and inspiring place to live and work. The tech sector in particular is huge, with science parks and the space economy vital to the region and the rest of the world. Oxford is right up there in terms of opportunities to work with leading businesses. The volume of start-ups coming out of Oxford University puts us second in the world, after Zurich. The future is being built here.

There are many achievements to celebrate in Oxfordshire at present. In health, there is the world renowned Oxford University collaboration with Astra Zeneca on development of its life saving vaccine, the rapid construction of the new vaccine manufacture centre at Harwell (on which Blake Morgan provided legal support) and also our client, the Oxford Academic Health Science Network has been a national pioneer for the rapid deployment of new technologies like Oximetry to address Covid treatment challenges. In addition, there have been important infrastructure schemes such as the Osney Lock Hydro, the prize winning Earth Trust's Earth Lab, the Springfield Meadows development in Southmoor, the Zeus Development at Harwell and the CABI HQ in Wallingford – all examples of sustainable development.



The Oxford Colleges as well as the University have historical importance to the area and continue to retain prominence in leading academic thinking at a global level.

Reading is seen by many as the "UK's Silicon Valley", with tech parks and an excellent university. Innovation, tech and growth are all words you hear about Reading, which makes it an exciting place to work. Our Blake Morgan team is experienced in advising the impressive tech companies around Reading from start-up to scale-up to exit.

We also have a long-standing relationship with Reading Borough Council and provided support for the operational transfer of Reading leisure centres to a social enterprise organisation in July 2021. This is part of a project to overhaul and improve Reading's leisure services – a £38.5 million programme which includes the construction of a new leisure centre at Rivermead, as well as two new swimming pools and other upgrades across the region's leisure facilities.

## **You are a Non Executive Director at Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) - can you tell us a little about their work.**

OxLEP is about growth and funding coming into Oxfordshire and unlocking problems with the infrastructure eg housing, travel and transport, to make that happen; but the vision is to achieve this in a sustainable and inclusive way; without detracting from its natural assets and outstanding areas of beauty. Crucial to maximising growth and potential is creating confidence and building on Oxfordshire's reputation as a centre of knowledge and innovation. OxLEP are looking for the County to be 'a vibrant, sustainable, inclusive, world-leading economy – driven by innovation, enterprise and research excellence.' Science Vale UK and its Enterprise Zones act as great hubs for significant commercial opportunities and leading businesses.

## **What makes Blake Morgan and your Commercial Team different and sets you apart from other quality legal teams?**

Our Commercial team were ranked in Tier 1 in the prestigious Legal 500 Guide for 2022 and undertake a wide range of work. Infrastructure and health are two core focuses for the team. Clients include Inhealth Group, local authorities such as Reading Borough Council and Buckinghamshire County Council, Oxford University Innovation Limited, Reading University, Harwell Campus, UKAEA, Gigaclear, Astroscale Limited and Oxford Biomedica plc. We have also worked closely with the NHS on significant projects, including supporting it to meet the challenges raised by the pandemic during the last two years, as well as major public health challenges like the fight to eradicate Hepatitis C. We have such a wide variety of work and are able to turn our hand to many different sectors and client types in a supported environment – to include education, telecoms, energy, utilities and franchising. From day one, our lawyers (and trainees) are exposed to varied, high quality work and have a great deal of direct client contact. Learning and Development is very important to us as a firm, no matter how experienced we are as individuals, and we are given daily opportunities to learn on the job. We think that a gentle push outside of our comfort zone is healthy and it is something that we are known for across the firm.

## **During the difficult last two years, what work would you say your team have been particularly proud of?**

The Thames Valley and wider national health and care team is in the life sciences and healthcare space, acting on the development and procurement of new and innovative treatments, drugs and diagnostics. This includes supporting drugs trials, drug approvals, new procurement and treatment models and new ways to introduce innovative processes into healthcare. An example of this was the team's work designing innovative national programmes to support the development and managed use of new anti-microbial resistant drugs, a vital international healthcare challenge.

During the pandemic, as well as supporting national programmes to ensure continuity of supply for key medicines, Blake Morgan's healthcare team assisted with the fast tracking of particular cancer drugs to help patients receive their treatment regimes in new settings. The team is also



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providing support for the introduction of major new national initiatives in diagnostic testing to support early population level identification of key health risk factors and disease markers; this has the potential to improve knowledge of conditions at an early stage and enable treatment to start much sooner.

### **How did Blake Morgan respond to the pandemic and where do you see the Thames Valley offices in the next 5 years?**

Our aim is to be:

- Bigger, better and bolder in terms of people, purpose, turnover and profitability.
- A business with a very clear purpose which aligns all the way through our teams.
- A fabulous culture where every individual has the opportunity to develop and perform at their best, regardless of their individual circumstances.
- To continue our commitment to adopting a hybrid working model that is permissive, flexible and allows us to operate most effectively.

Most teams now work in a blended way, balancing working in the office with working from home; which means team members can participate more in flexible parenting, household chores and errands without compromising their career ambitions. Blake Morgan aims to support the whole person and not just the lawyer. The firm's support during the unknown of the pandemic was comprehensive and immediate. We promote positive mental wellbeing and work hard to ensure that help is available whether it be through coaching or mentoring, our mental health first aider scheme or firm wide webinars about how we can up our self-care, protect our posture or start a conversation to ask for help. Our community support work is also important to us, where we have lots of fun raising funds and awareness.

We have been working to improve diversity and inclusion within our business, and are incredibly proud to have been included in the Inclusive Top 50 UK Employers List 2021/22 for the fifth year running. Our new Board was elected earlier this year, including our first female Chair, Kath Shimmin.

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) has rightly come to the fore. We want to make our purpose clearer, which is a live project. Following the recent UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) and the UK Government's commitment to combatting climate change, more businesses are putting sustainability front and centre of their operations, and the Blake Morgan environmental team is actively supporting clients on this. The ESG focus is also reflected within the firm, which is committed to being a sustainable and environmentally conscious business – a commitment which was recently boosted by being awarded the prestigious ISO 14001 Environmental Standard certification in August this year.



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## **What type of lawyers are you interested in hearing from as part of your growth strategy?**

We want to hear from people that are interested in developing themselves and embracing the challenge of a wide variety of work; people that are hardworking and enjoy the autonomy of running their own matters in a supported environment; who enjoy being part of an inclusive and high-performing team. We live and breathe by our "ACTS" framework which sets a tone of being Astute, Committed, a Team Player and Straightforward. We always welcome hearing from likeminded individuals! A large part of our success over the last two years has been down to our willingness to work as an integral part of client project teams, which is both exciting and satisfying for our lawyers.



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## **And finally, what would you like to see change/more of in the legal profession?**

Going forward, I would like to see more diversity in management positions; a world where people are seen as humans with different skills and thinking - not leaving behind sections of society due to a skewed playing field of unequal access to decent education, housing, and social mobility. I would like our profession to encourage more role models, access to opportunity and chances for all; also a less macho professional world, where men can take more of an active role in parenting and being role models to a better breed of humans! Gender blending is helping that progress.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) is so important, which is why we have recently created a new role, an EDI Specialist. Victoria Hand will be a key member of Blake Morgan's EDI Committee and HR leadership team. She will lead EDI initiatives in a key step in making sure that genuine improvements and progress are continuously being made. This is a journey that we have already started, witnessed by the fact that we are ranked in the Inclusive Top 50 UK Employers for the fifth consecutive year.

**Please contact Penny Heighway at Chadwick Nott for further information on the Thames Valley market.**



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