



In Association With...
Commercial Real Estate
Legal Association (CRELA)



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As part of this month's, 'In association with...', we speak to Robert Highmore, Joint Head of the Property Litigation Group at Charles Russell LLP and founding chairman of CRELA.

Please introduce your role.

I am Joint Head of the Property Litigation Group and Head of the London Team at Charles Russell LLP. I specialise in property and landlord and tenant litigation and dispute resolution. I act for a range of clients including institutional funds, landed estates, property companies, occupiers and individuals.

Why did you set up CRELA?

The reason that I instigated the formation of CRELA in 2009/10 was because, at the time, although I am a property litigator, I had a management role at my firm as head of the real estate service. It occurred to me that the real estate lawyers were "missing out" from the benefits afforded to their property litigation colleagues by the Property Litigation Association, which I had a hand in forming in 1994 and of which I am a past Chairman. I therefore arranged for a group of commercial real estate lawyers to meet and discuss whether they considered such an association could be of interest and use to their branch of the profession. There is of course a good deal of common interest between those lawyers practising in the contentious and non-contentious fields. We identified the need for shared technical training in certain respects (but very different topics in other respects), the

need to keep up with developments in the property industry and the wish to network as well as maintain a high standard of service delivery to clients.

Why should lawyers join CRELA and what benefits are there?

Until the Commercial Real Estate Legal Association was formed in 2010, there was no organisation dedicated to commercial real estate lawyers.

The objects of CRELA are:

- to promote specialist non-contentious commercial real estate legal skills within the property industry and among others with interest in real estate;
- to provide a forum in which members can share knowledge and information with a view to improving and enhancing transactional and other procedures for the benefit of practitioners and clients;
- to provide a network for social, educational and training events.

Membership is open to lawyers who mainly undertake non-contentious transactional and advisory work relating to commercial property (but not for lawyers who are specialists in environmental law, planning, construction or residential property who have their own associations). Professional support lawyers and in-house lawyers who

qualify for membership are most welcome. Collectively, members of CRELA have a greater voice in the property industry than any one firm or individual. The industry will listen to the views of a well informed group from across the legal world. Organisations and individual speakers will readily speak to a group of CRELA members whereas they may prefer not to speak to one individual firm. Equally, CRELA can promote to others in the industry the benefits of using firms and individuals, whether in private practice or within industry and other organisations, who are attuned to the constantly changing needs of the property sector.

CRELA has two committees, the membership of which is on the website at www.crela.org.uk. The main committee runs the Association and leads on most of the events, and the practice and procedure committee leads on reviewing draft legislation, discussions with other organisations such as the RICS, to bring enhanced benefits to respective members and has been involved in organising training events. This committee also led on setting up a new website and the members' forum which recently went live. The idea with the forum is to have a members' only discussion area on relevant points of law, practice and procedure.

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has from the beginning supported us by advertising our events and until recently hosting our website. Willis Plc has lent us their excellent conference centre for key events since 2010. We are also now grateful to EGi as well as PLP for sharing items on our website and advertising our events.

CRELA must not be seen as a threat to other organisations such as the Local Law Societies. CRELA's intention, as a non profit making body, is to work alongside such associations and to provide additional benefits to their members in a specialist field.

How do you plan to increase your members and expand through the regions of the UK?

The potential membership of CRELA is very significant and the current membership of about 350 is a good start, but we aim to increase membership ultimately to several thousand. To date we have held most of our events in London, with two held in Birmingham. Whilst we believe there is considerable scope for increase in the London membership, we recognise that, in order significantly to increase the scale of the Association, we needed to expand into the regions. We are well represented with lawyers from Scotland, but there is also scope for expansion in Scotland, Eire and Northern Ireland. Our current plan to increase regional membership is to attract individuals who will act as coordinators in their regions to arrange regional events, supported by the Committees.

We have some "seed corn funding" available and members of the Committees are willing to travel to the regions to support the initiative. Whilst it is possible we shall hold regional property industry related events (e.g. speakers of local or national interest), we believe that training events will attract most members and guests at the outset. Whilst many regional firms undoubtedly have excellent training resources, there are other firms who rely on external training and we believe there is an unmet need for high quality inexpensive training that attracts CPD points. Once there are occasional events in a region, we hope a regional committee will form as it is not the intention of the London Committee to try to run regional events itself.

The regions we are seeking to promote first, due to individuals being interested in taking the lead, are Liverpool/Manchester, Yorkshire, Thames Valley and West Sussex / Hampshire. We are still working on defining the regions generally.

What common challenges do you anticipate and how will you overcome these?

Our challenge is to maintain interest in the Association by organising useful and relevant events and expanding our membership. We shall achieve this by demonstrating the benefits to prospective members, some of whom may be initially sceptical about networking with other lawyers and "the competition". Actions will speak louder than words and ultimately we are confident that CRELA will go from strength to strength. We are not

seeking growth for its own sake. The point of increasing membership is not only to increase access to resources, but also to attract more easily key industry speakers and, in due course, be able to hold an annual conference and a training day. A larger organisation will also have a greater voice when it comes to consultation on prospective legislation and how the profession can improve ways and means of doing things both for members of the profession and, importantly, for their clients.

What work are you most proud of since setting up CRELA?

The Committee is proud of the fact that CRELA has now reached a point where we expect it to be "here to stay" with its recognition in the property legal world increasing. We hope and expect that before long all commercial property lawyers will see the benefits of becoming members and their clients and contacts will expect them to be involved in CRELA to help them to keep abreast of what is happening in their specialist area. **LM**

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