

Harbinson Mulholland: Leading the way in forensic accounting

Barry O'Donnell FCA MABRP has been appointed as director of **Harbinson Mulholland's** forensic accounting team, developing a team of experts working across corporate and criminal cases. Harbinson Mulholland is a top tier forensic accountancy firm and recognised within the courts in Northern Ireland across its specialist divisions and often the first port of call for many of NI's leading law firms

What helps set Barry apart from many others working across his field, aside from his skills and experience, is his rare dual role.

He's been a stalwart within the Harbinson Mulholland team for almost 20 years, working as a licensed insolvency practitioner but with a degree of commercial overlap as both forensic and insolvency work involves a critical eye and a sense of professional scepticism.

"My primary area was within insolvency, but I have always also been involved in forensic accounting and the opportunity arose within the firm to join those two roles together," Barry says.

The forensic work Harbinson Mulholland is involved with is varied and requires a multitude of different skills and disciplines across the team.

"It can be very wide ranging – working on cases with quantum as low as £5,000 right up to cases in the tens of millions across areas such as contracts and procurement, for example.

"In terms of industry, it can be anything – haulage, transport or professional services for example.



The criminal and commercial forensic team: Courteney Jamison, Callum Coulter, Barry O'Donnell and James McCullough

"The biggest part of what we do involves a very wide selection of corporate and commercial cases. We can work for the plaintiff or defendant. It could be anything from a breach of contract to professional negligence or a loss of profits.

"The role of a forensic accountant is always to assist the court and present their opinion in a clear and concise manner."

Barry says he and his team also often work

across complex criminal cases. "That could include benefit fraud, proceeds of crime or theft," he says. "The role would be to calculate the financial loss that has resulted from the alleged crime." The team also works across high net value matrimonial cases whereby shares, in a private company for example, may have to be divided.

And Harbinson Mulholland's forensic accounting team can help and assist a host of businesses from across the sectors, proactively.



"Companies normally come through referral from a solicitor," he says. "For example, they may be worried they are a victim of fraud or there could be an insurance claim. We can investigate the claim, analyse, and quantify the value, examining what is key and what documentary evidence is there to support our opinion

"For accounting work, your duty is to the court rather than the client. You have to remain independent.

"From a business perspective we can apply our skills and expertise in areas such as data analysis and assess what has gone wrong and quantify the effect – that could be overpayment, fraud or financial instrument overcharging, for example."

He also says the team and the firm as a whole is doing increasing levels of work in both fraud prevention and education.

"Through our work with large criminal cases we have expertise in fraud and fraud prevention and awareness. It's become a bigger

part of our work and it has many facets to it. It's something we are all dealing with day-to-day.

"It's about keeping those fraudsters at bay. They have moved on from being fairly unsophisticated to being an organised crime game, financed and with resources which can be rolled out globally"

"Covid was manna from heaven for fraudsters. With people working from home, more electronic communication and moving to electronic banking platforms, cyber fraud meant a great deal of exposure for people and businesses."

Barry is one of two licensed insolvency practitioners at Harbinson Mulholland – something he's been specialised in and working within for many years.

"In terms of advice for business, the message we trot out is early intervention is the key. I was taught many years ago that with enough time and money, you can solve most problems.

"Good forward financial planning should highlight issues. There is the need to identify and be aware of what's going on before then forming a plan to see whether something like restructuring is required."

Since the establishment of the commercial hub in the High Court of Northern Ireland, a particular area of growth is that of alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

Another element of what Barry does is trying to sort matters through discussion or alternative dispute resolution in order to avoid full court proceedings. However, commercial litigation can include shareholder disputes, business interruption, contract disputes, and any litigation which involves a degree of financial analysis.

Barry has been involved in several ADR cases, acting in expert determination and mediation where there is a high degree of financial complexity.

In terms of what helps set Harbinson Mulholland apart from other firms, Barry says along with its experience, is having dedicated specialist teams.

As well as the commercial and criminal division, the firm has a leading personal injury division, led by Dearbhail Beatty whose knowledge and experience are highly sought after in this complex area which can include everything from road traffic accidents, accidents arising from health and safety breaches, or medical negligence cases.

As well as lots of in-house experience, Barry and his team as draw on connections with law enforcement and other experts from across the globe.

Working alongside Callum Coulter, Courteney Jamison and James McCullough, he says: "We are also able to deal with very large cases which include the processing and analysis of high volumes of data.

"We have experience across the UK and a well-connected, multi-judiciary network for areas like fraud and money laundering cases." ■

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