

# Focus on New Zealand: Q&A with Shan Wilson, NZ's first dedicated pro bono partner



Simpson Grierson's Wellington office staff with staff from Community Law Wellington and Hutt Valley

Shan Wilson is NZ law firm Simpson Grierson's dedicated pro bono partner, a role that was created early 2020. We asked Shan to talk about her appointment, developing a pro bono practice, and future opportunities for the growth of pro bono in NZ.

## Q. What were the driving forces that led you to becoming Simpson Grierson's (and New Zealand's) first dedicated in-house pro bono partner?

I have always felt passionate about the part we can play to alleviate disadvantage and poverty in New Zealand, both at a personal and a professional level.

In 2019 Simpson Grierson consulted with staff to collectively update our values and purpose. Giving back to our communities emerged as a key theme; it felt like a natural fit for me to want to progress our pro bono offering. I had spent a number of years as a partner in the firm's employment law team, so it was exciting to take on a new career challenge, in a workplace I trusted the values of.

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## Q. How did you go about setting up the practice?

I had much to learn, so was lucky to have the opportunity to travel to Sydney at the start of 2020 to learn from established pro bono leaders.

Clayton Utz Sydney invited me to sit alongside their pro bono team and learn first-hand from their experiences. I spent time with pro bono practitioners David Hillard and Jessica Morath, who were instrumental in sharing their knowledge about setting up a pro bono practice, what works and what doesn't.

I really appreciated the help of other practitioners I spoke to on that trip and their insights, ranging from conversations with Gabriela Christian-Hare at the Australian Pro Bono Centre and Chris Povey at Justice Connect, to Michelle Hannon at Gilbert + Tobin.



Simpson Grierson (Shan Wilson, Jess Dellabarca and Rebecca Rendle) appear before the New Zealand Parliament's Governance and Administration Committee (Chaired by MP Ian McKelvie, with the MPs Rachel Boyack, Dr Elizabeth Kerekere, Niasi Chen, Rachel Brooking)

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**Q. What has been your approach to implementing a pro bono practice from scratch?**

Early on I saw the importance of having clear policies, guidelines and targets so that we can focus resources on where we can make the most difference.

A large part of our pro bono practice has been focused on supporting some very worthwhile charities and non-profit groups who are trying to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage in New Zealand.

We also consider referrals of individuals, where they come in from the charities we work for, or from a community law centre. When I spoke with law firms overseas, I learnt that this was a better model than trying to filter through - and make choices between - direct requests for assistance from the public.

***“There are so many charities in New Zealand that don’t get free legal assistance and they are so incredibly grateful for any help we provide. Our collaborative approach means we work with multiple charity organisations.”***

**Q. What sets Simpson Grierson’s pro bono practice apart from other firms in New Zealand?**

What sets us apart is that we now track the time of every individual lawyer when it comes to pro bono work, so that it becomes part of their success story in performance reviews and applications for promotions. We’re normalising pro bono and it’s woven through our values and culture, making it part of our everyday operations for all lawyers.

Of course, we are also showing its importance by having a partner dedicated to leading it, and reporting back to our partners on it. We view pro bono as part of our professional responsibility. We’re not just doing the business of law, it’s actually part of our professional give back, and therefore a source of pride for us.

**Q. How has your collaborative approach translated into on-the-ground work for your clients?**

We welcomed partnering with, and deepening, our relationships with community law centres, charities and non-profit organisations. There are so many charities in New Zealand that don’t get free legal assistance and they are so incredibly grateful for any help we provide. Our collaborative approach means we work with multiple charity organisations, some of them include: Youthline, The Period Place, The Hearing House, E Tipu E Rea Whānau, Cystic Fibrosis NZ, Refugees as Survivors NZ.

L-R: Waikare Komene (of The Papatoetoe Food Hub), with Shan Wilson and Joanna Lim (of Simpson Grierson), Raju Ramakrishna (Papatoetoe Food Hub) and Julio Bin of The Southern Initiative

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**Q. Since commencing your dedicated pro bono practice, what piece of work are you most proud of and why?**

We partnered with Youthline to enable gender-diverse rangatahi (a Māori term meaning our younger generation) to make applications to the Family Court to get the sex marker on their birth certificates changed.

Our work meant that we could assist those who identify differently to the sex they were assigned at birth, to apply to the court for a declaration as to their true sex, after which, they can have their birth certificate changed.

We took on this project because it throws up access to justice issues given the complexity of the legal tests as well as the requirement to file evidence and legal submissions in support. The legal system can be overwhelming and expensive for those making these applications, which is what we're trying to solve. As part of our commitment to improving access to justice



in this area, we've gone on and made written and oral submissions for law reform.

**Q. Where do you see the future opportunities for embedding pro bono work for SG, and other law firms in New Zealand?**

Aotearoa Community Law Centre is developing a new digital platform called 'Te Ara Ture' and we are an initial pilot firm. The platform aims to better connect willing pro bono lawyers with people who need help and it has the potential to take away barriers to accessing justice.

In time, New Zealand law firms should look to set a minimum number of pro bono hours for each lawyer but, at present, we are still some way away from the buy-in and investment needed from the profession. Unlike Australia, we still need to put our building blocks in place to create a legal pro bono community here. ■



*Shan Wilson is Simpson Grierson's dedicated pro bono partner, a role that was created at the start of 2020 and was a first in New Zealand.*

*Prior to taking up this role, Shan was a partner in Simpson Grierson's employment law team, clocking up 28 years of experience advising many leading businesses and public sector organisations. She also worked extensively*

*with the education sector advising school boards on governance issues, student discipline matters, and all manner of issues arising from the Education Act.*

*Shan considers her experiences as an employment and education lawyer as instrumental in her decision to move into the role of pro bono partner, as those areas of law immersed her in people based issues and the need to find workable solutions.*

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