

THE INTERVIEW

Diane Miller: President of BIALL

Abstract: *Legal Information Management* co-editors **Jas Breslin** and **Mike Breslin** sat down with current President Diane Miller to find out what her role involves, where BIALL is going, and how members can get so much more from a deeper involvement with the organisation.

Keywords: BIALL; information professionals; leadership



Every organisation needs its doers. It stands to reason, for without doers nothing gets done. BIALL is no exception, and fortunately there are people who want to make a difference to the profession, and the organisation, at every level, whether it's as part of the Publications Committee, or the Supplier Liaison Group. But the 'doer in chief' is the President. More than any other individual in BIALL it is up to her or him to get things done, to make that difference.

The person currently making the difference is Diane Miller, who is Senior Knowledge Officer at Gowling WLG (UK) LLP, a role she enjoys immensely, particularly the research side of it. This element of the work was originally brought to her attention while she was at university, studying history and politics at Lancaster. "I wrote a politics essay and was very smug that I'd read everything on the reading list," Diane says. "As I handed in my essay to my professor, I said to him: 'I've read everything on

the reading list', and his response was: 'is that all you've done?' And I said: 'What do you mean?' He said 'what independent research have you done?'. I replied: 'what's that?' He said: 'I'll see you at the library tomorrow morning, 10 o'clock, and I'll introduce you to the librarians, because you need to make them your best friends'."

"So that's what happened," Diane continues. "He introduced me to everybody in the library team, showed me how to use the social sciences index, political science index, and all of those things. I remembered this advice when I did my masters at Durham: again, make friends with the librarians, and I was uber impressed with how amazing they were, being able to put their hand on anything and to give advice on how to do research, and so on."

Partly because of this inspiration, Diane went on to work as a library assistant at King's College London, in the nursing and gerontology library. But she found that she was irresistibly drawn to the law and in 1996 she applied for a post as a library assistant at Lawrence Graham (now merged via Wragge Lawrence Graham into Gowling WLG (UK) LLP). She was successful, too, and has been working at the same law firm ever since. "I loved library work and the library environment, but I wanted to be able to do more research alongside the normal library cat' and class' and collection management work," she says. "I wanted a bit more diversity, to get involved in doing research, and I felt that having a politics background would be useful in law. And so it has proved."

JOB SATISFACTION

It's that same diversity that keeps Diane engaged with her work to this day. "It's the fact that you never really know what's going to come up on any given day," she says. "You've usually got an idea of what you hope to achieve in the day, what tasks need to be done, but then you can be taken off in all sorts of different directions as a result of a call or email from someone wanting assistance. I recently changed my job title from Senior Information Officer to Senior Knowledge Officer, as my role, although still retaining some elements of traditional library and collection management work, has become

more focussed on knowledge solutions related work. I still like doing the traditional things but I love that I can be involved in supporting the business in other ways, such as providing support to a business development initiative – through research or developing a current awareness solution – or working on our intranet.”

As she admits, Diane is also slightly obsessed with improving efficiency in the workplace. “If I see something and I think, ‘oh, they could do that smarter, faster, better’, then I want to put my nose in. I try to make people and processes more efficient by applying the skills and knowledge I have as an information professional. I find it rewarding to feel I have made a positive contribution to making someone else’s life easier. That’s my thing.”

BIALL EXPERIENCE

Her other thing, right now, is working to improve BIALl in her role as President of the Association. She took on the position in July 2022, after being involved as a volunteer for around 20 years. “Back in the early 2000s I did a few sessions on Training the Trainer,” Diane says. “My role has always had a strong training element to it, so I was involved in running a couple of courses on that. And then in 2015 my line manager and I set ourselves the challenge of each getting involved with something BIALl related, as part of our commitment to professional development, and I ended up volunteering for the Professional Skills Framework Working Group.”

From there Diane went on to serve on the Public Relations and Promotions Committee, better known as PR & P. “When the Working Group finished, I thought, what else can I get involved in? What’s out of my comfort zone? BIALl offers you the opportunity to do things that you don’t do in your day job and I wanted to develop new skills, new knowledge. So I volunteered for the PR & P committee.”

The next step, and another that was outside of her comfort zone, was to take on the role of President, which brings us bang up to date. “The more I got involved with PR & P, the more I really enjoyed it,” Diane says. “I enjoyed speaking to people across the Association, outside of the law firm environment. That was a real eye-opener. There are so many things that I would hear in meetings and I would think: ‘oh, that’s useful, I’ll go and do that, I’ll try that in my workplace’, and I wanted more of that experience. And so I ended up where I am today.”

THE BEAST THAT IS BIALl

At the time of writing Diane was about six months through her spell as President (which is preceded by a year as President Elect and followed by another year as Immediate Past President). However, it has not been without its challenges. Chief amongst these is getting to grips with the sheer scale and complexity of the organisation. “I think the biggest challenge of being President is probably acquiring enough knowledge and understanding

about how the various elements of the Association work and are structured, in a timely enough fashion, to be able to make a useful strategic contribution during your Presidential year,” she says. “The Presidential year is passing by very quickly and BIALl is a far more complicated beast than you might think.”

Partly as a way of understanding the beast that is BIALl better, Diane has compiled a chart that maps out the different parts of the organisation, an abridged version of which is included in this article (Figure 1). “In order to assess and review where there are opportunities to add value and make improvements you need to understand exactly what’s there to start with and be able to assess the likely implications of any proposed change,” she says.

“When I became President Elect, I found out a bit more about the Association than I knew previously. But I hadn’t realised the gulf between the President Elect and President roles, because obviously you get involved in a lot more things as President and then you realise where the gaps in your knowledge are.”

The unabridged chart will be circulated to everyone volunteering in BIALl from the officers and Council, to committee members and working groups, to improve awareness of how the Association works. Diane hopes it will help people to see where there are opportunities to work together, and where knowledge or tools available in one part of the Association might be beneficial elsewhere.

But it’s not just about understanding who does what and where, Diane believes, it’s also about interacting with the many different facets of the Association. “I see an important part of the role of the President as being about engagement, not just with volunteers via Council and committee meetings, but with our members. And it’s not just about connecting with the people that you already know, it’s the people that you don’t know that you want to get out and speak to,” she says. “So, for example, as a law librarian in a commercial law firm in London I haven’t had much previous interaction with members in the academic sector or with Irish members. As President I have attended Academic SIG [Special Interest Group] meetings and Irish SIG meetings and hopefully have been able to join the dots and make some useful suggestions about how those members can interact with the Association and derive more benefit from their membership.”

But being BIALl President is not all give, and Diane says she also takes a great deal from the role, especially in terms of her professional development. “The range of experiences is just amazing,” she says. “There are lots of things that I don’t do in the day job, but they enhance my ability to do my day job. I find that the things I’m doing now as President give me a different perspective on my work, and it’s interesting that my line manager says that she can see how I am approaching my day job differently. In terms of how I talk to people, how I contribute to meetings, it’s totally different. I was never a shrinking violet anyway, but I just have a different approach now because of the BIALl experience. It’s making me far more effective in my work environment.”

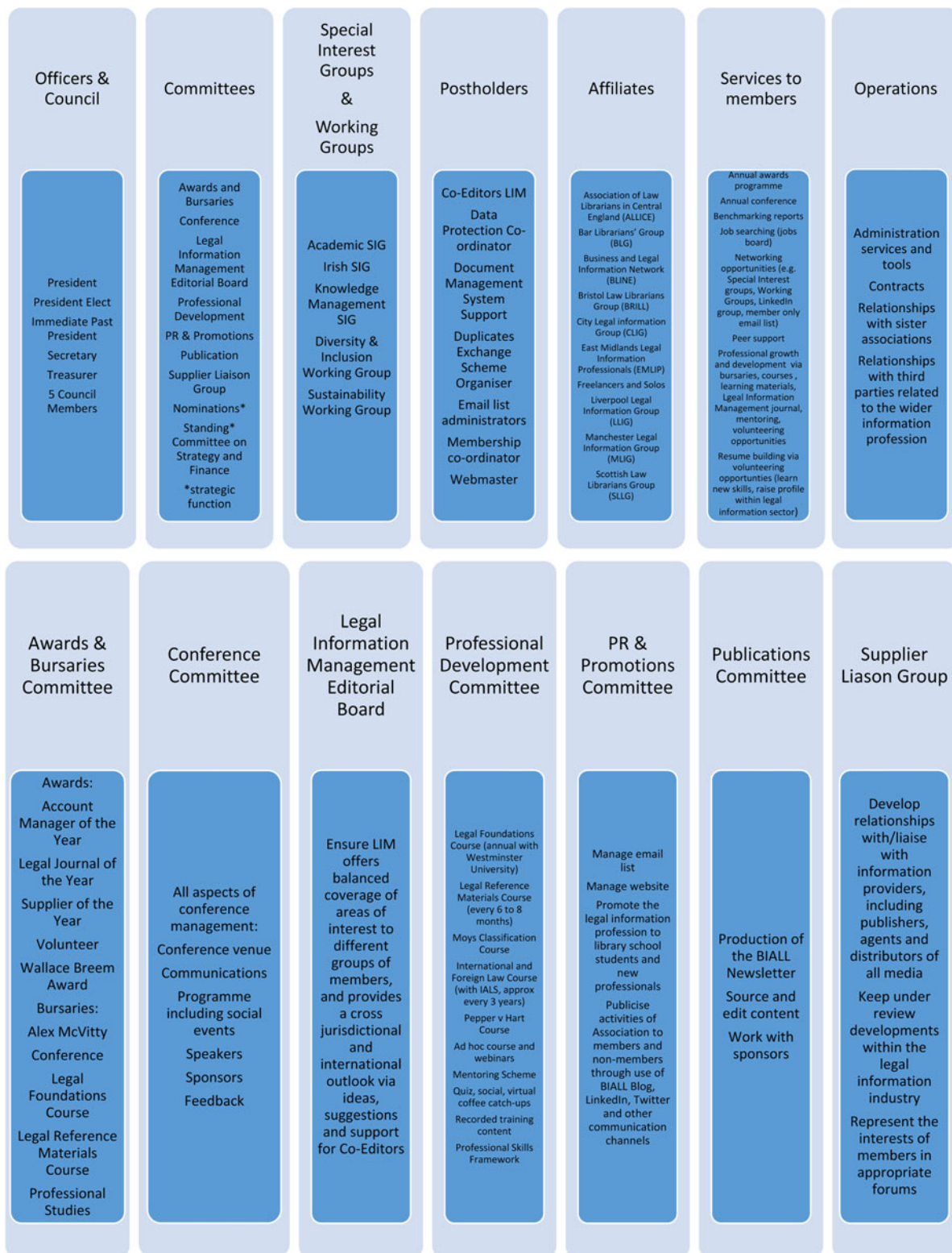


Figure 1: BIALL Organisation Chart.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Highlights so far during Diane’s time as President include helping to mould the Association to fit the ever-changing work environment, especially since the pandemic; for instance, being part of the drive to bring in a new

wellbeing initiative. “I am very proud to have been involved with the launch of our wellbeing initiative which saw our first wellbeing event held in November 2022. The event had over 60 attendees. Feedback from the event was very positive and we look forward to holding more events in future. Our D&I [Diversity and Inclusion]

Working Group, especially Council members Claire Fox and Mark Hobson, must be given the lion's share of the credit for getting this initiative off the ground.

"That was a new departure for us. I know that people are in working environments where usually there are things happening around wellbeing. But, there were notably a couple of things which happened within the Association during Covid which made us think there was scope to add value to members in a slightly different way and develop a wellbeing initiative to complement the work of the D&I Working Group. The KM SIG, under the excellent chairship of Council member Katy [Snell], held regular catch-ups which became a vital lifeline for many of us. In addition, we conducted our State of the Nation Report in 2021 and received member feedback about how we had supported them. Being part of BIALL is like being in a big family where we all want to look out for each other and offering something on wellbeing fits well with that."

The organisation is certainly changing then, largely thanks to Diane and other volunteers, but it still faces challenges, chief amongst which is the need for greater involvement from the membership. "Membership is healthy," Diane says. "But I would love to see more engagement from members. I don't just mean in terms of volunteering for Council, committee or administrative roles, but getting involved by participating in a Special Interest Group or Working Group that is of relevance, by filling out one of our benchmarking surveys, by getting in touch with someone in the Association to give feedback and ideas."

"How will we tackle that? We've got a few ideas that will hopefully come to fruition in the next few months or years. But, generally it's about making the Association feel relevant to people in their day-to-day life. There are lots of things going on across the Association such as giving people opportunities to network and provide learning opportunities. I just want people to maximise the benefit they get from being a member. Hopefully, getting involved with one thing will encourage people to consider getting involved with other things and to consider volunteering in some form, such as joining Council or a committee, or getting involved with administration of the Association."

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Volunteers are, of course, vital for an organisation like BIALL, but getting people to sign up to help out is not always easy, especially in recent times, says the President. "I think that the whole lockdown experience has fundamentally changed the way people do things, how they run their lives. People have got out of the habit of being involved in things going on outside their front door and I fully understand that."

"Personal circumstances may have changed too. So many people seem to be time poor these days, so to take on something that may involve doing things outside of working hours is not an option. Perhaps there isn't

support from employers to get involved in something which might on occasion impact on working life. Perhaps we need to do more to enlighten employers about the value of having people involved with BIALL? I've been very fortunate in that my employers are very supportive of my involvement in BIALL, they get it, and they understand that they benefit from me developing through my BIALL work, but not every organisation does get it."

Diane does see signs that people are keen to re-engage with professional development again, as was evidenced by the successful return to the in-person conference in 2022, and she hopes that this signals that more people will be willing to get involved as volunteers. Based on her own experiences, Diane says: "The best way to do professional development, if you're involved in the legal sector, is to get involved with BIALL. We need to get that message out to people."

CONFERENCE CALL

One of the greatest things about being involved with BIALL is, of course, the opportunity to go to the conference every year, and for those that don't necessarily agree that it is so great, Diane can reel off an impressive list of reasons why it should not be missed. "It gives you the opportunity to talk to people across the Association. It's the best networking opportunity that the Association offers. It provides a fantastic opportunity to meet suppliers face to face, rather than online, to find out about product developments and products you are not familiar with. You can also benchmark your services, resources, and your approach against that of your peers. And then there's the sense of not only being part of the BIALL community, but also part of the wider legal information profession, for instance through meeting guests from overseas and sister associations."

"It also gives you the chance to be curious, to step outside your comfort zone, to come up with ideas," Diane adds. "When I go to conference I take a notebook and I come back and it's full, it's absolutely full. I sit there and I think, 'I could do that, I could try that, I haven't thought of that. Oh, that's brilliant'. Or 'they do the same as we do'. That means it gives you some validation of the things you're doing, but it also allows you to think outside your normal box. Going to the conference gives you time dedicated to re-evaluating what you're doing, how you do it, and how you can make it better."

ADDED VALUE

Making it better is always important, of course, when you're supplying a valuable service such as legal information. But however valuable this service is, Diane believes that people do not always get the credit they deserve. "I think librarians or information professionals can sometimes struggle to show relevance and value to an organisation, especially in a commercial environment where other professionals in that environment are charging

their time to clients and you are viewed primarily as an overhead, with a sizeable budget attached to provide access to necessary services and online and hardcopy resources to lawyers," she says.

"For example, the value that the skilled legal information professionals give to organisations with regard to collection management these days should not be underestimated," Diane adds. "Collection management isn't just hard copy, it's managing all the resources. And it's more complicated these days, because we all have hybrid collections, the hard copy and the online, and you have to try and blend those things together to give your internal clients the best experience. And that's a really tricky thing to do."

Despite these frustrations Diane is confident that the information profession, as a whole, is in a good place. "Whilst the number of people entering the profession via the library schools route is fewer than it was a decade ago, due to the decline in the number of library schools, there is now the apprenticeship route to bring in new people and it is heartening to hear of library apprentices coming into the legal sector. BIALL does try to encourage library school students to consider the legal sector as a career option and we are involved in providing speakers for careers events at library schools. BIALL also reaches out to graduates and new professionals via an annual event

co-hosted with CILIP and the SLA [Special Libraries Association].

"I get a sense people are still interested in law but I don't know how many opportunities there are, especially in the academic sector," Diane adds. "It seems that people have been asked to be subject librarians across multiple subjects nowadays, rather than to just specialise in one particular area, and this has a lot of challenges associated with it."

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

BIALL also has its challenges, but Diane says the way forward is, in essence, quite simple. "The end goal is to ensure that the Association continues and thrives as it has done for the last 50 plus years," she says. "We need to ensure that we continue to get new members coming in and to retain existing members. We need to shout out about the benefits of membership, of getting more involved, of how BIALL can support the professional development of members from across the legal information profession, whatever sector they are working in and whatever role they are fulfilling within their organisations."

And who knows, maybe some of the members will enjoy the experience enough that they go on to volunteer, and maybe even become President. But most importantly, they will go on to get things done.