thornton legal

COMMERCIAL PRIVATE PRACTICE

Manchester

Legal Salary Guide 2026

Salary benchmarks by practice area, experience and firm type

Manchester commercial private practice | NQ to Partner | Indicative base salaries

SCOPE AND MARKET CONTEXT

Understanding the Manchester market

Commercial legal careers span international firms, established regional practices and specialist independents. Salary comparisons need to reflect those differences.

What this guide covers

Manchester commercial private practice across corporate and commercial, banking and finance, commercial litigation, real estate, employment, and insolvency and restructuring. In-house roles, insurance litigation, personal injury, legal aid and general high street practice are excluded.

Where hiring pressure sits

Thornton Legal's 2025 and 2026 recruitment activity points to recurring difficulty recruiting experienced Associates, broadly three to seven years' PQE. Firms often need lawyers who can run matters, manage clients and support junior colleagues with limited supervision.

Three practical firm groupings

Large corporate covers international and national commercial practices. Regional commercial covers established regional and multi-office commercial firms. Boutique and specialist commercial covers smaller commercial and specialist practices. These groupings describe business models and pay positioning, rather than quality rankings.

How to read the figures

The tables show annual full-time equivalent base salary, with bonuses and benefits considered separately. Use the relevant practice area and level of experience as a starting point, then consider the work, responsibilities and overall package.

Salary is one part of the career proposition. Quality of work, team support and credible progression also influence the value of an opportunity.

SALARY BENCHMARKS

Large corporate firms

International and national commercial practices

Illustrative firms: Addleshaw Goddard, DLA Piper, Eversheds Sutherland and Pinsent Masons

ANNUAL BASE SALARY | £000 | INDICATIVE 2026 RANGES

PQE / level	Corporate / commercial	Banking / finance	Commercial litigation	Real estate	Employment	Insolvency / restructuring
NQ	£68–84k	£68–84k	£68–84k	£68–84k	£68–84k	£68–84k
1 PQE	£70–85k	£71–85k	£69–85k	£69–85k	£69–85k	£70–85k
2 PQE	£72–87k	£73–87k	£71–87k	£70–87k	£70–87k	£72–87k
3–4 PQE	£77–92k	£78–92k	£74–90k	£73–88k	£73–88k	£75–90k
5–6 PQE	£82–98k	£84–98k	£78–95k	£76–92k	£76–92k	£80–96k
Senior Associate broadly 7+ PQE	£95–120k	£98–125k	£90–115k	£85–108k	£85–108k	£92–118k

Published NQ rates vary materially between employers. Beyond qualification, compare responsibility for matters, client exposure and the nature of the work alongside PQE when assessing an opportunity.

SALARY BENCHMARKS

Regional commercial firms

Established regional and multi-office commercial practices

Illustrative firms: Brabners, JMW, Hill Dickinson and Freeths

ANNUAL BASE SALARY | £000 | INDICATIVE 2026 RANGES

PQE / level	Corporate / commercial	Banking / finance	Commercial litigation	Real estate	Employment	Insolvency / restructuring
NQ	£52–64k	£52–64k	£52–64k	£52–64k	£52–64k	£52–64k
1 PQE	£55–67k	£56–68k	£55–66k	£54–65k	£54–65k	£55–67k
2 PQE	£58–70k	£59–72k	£57–69k	£56–68k	£56–68k	£58–70k
3–4 PQE	£63–78k	£65–80k	£61–75k	£60–73k	£60–73k	£62–77k
5–6 PQE	£70–88k	£72–90k	£68–84k	£66–81k	£66–81k	£69–87k
Senior Associate broadly 7+ PQE	£80–100k	£83–103k	£76–95k	£73–92k	£73–92k	£78–98k

Budgets vary between teams and disciplines. The overlap with larger firms reflects the role, client responsibility and experience required. An employer's category alone does not establish the salary available for a particular appointment.

SALARY BENCHMARKS

Boutique and specialist commercial

Smaller commercial practices and specialist firms

Illustrative firms: Pannone Corporate, Kuits, Primas Law and Bermans

ANNUAL BASE SALARY | £000 | INDICATIVE 2026 RANGES

PQE / level	Corporate / commercial	Banking / finance	Commercial litigation	Real estate	Employment	Insolvency / restructuring
NQ	£48–56k	£48–56k	£48–56k	£48–56k	£48–56k	£48–56k
1 PQE	£51–59k	£52–60k	£50–58k	£50–58k	£50–58k	£51–59k
2 PQE	£54–63k	£55–65k	£53–61k	£52–60k	£52–60k	£54–63k
3–4 PQE	£59–72k	£61–74k	£57–68k	£56–67k	£56–67k	£58–70k
5–6 PQE	£65–80k	£67–82k	£62–76k	£61–74k	£61–74k	£64–78k
Senior Associate broadly 7+ PQE	£72–90k	£75–93k	£68–85k	£67–82k	£67–82k	£70–88k

This grouping covers commercial and specialist practices, excluding general high street work. A smaller team may offer substantial client contact and responsibility; the work and expectations of the role deserve as much attention as firm size.

SENIOR ROLES AND TOTAL REWARD

Beyond the Associate salary

Legal Director and salaried Partner estimates are shown separately. Their responsibilities and remuneration structures are not interchangeable.

Firm category	Legal Director / equivalent	Salaried Partner
Large corporate	£100–135k	£120–170k
Regional commercial	£85–110k	£105–145k
Boutique / specialist	£75–100k	£90–125k

Base salary across commercial disciplines, excluding equity profit shares and capital arrangements. At senior level, the responsibilities and commercial purpose of the appointment have a substantial influence on remuneration.

The senior business case

At this level, billings, client relationships, leadership and succession requirements can matter more than PQE. Understand whether the firm needs technical capacity, team management, new work or a future practice leader, and assess the proposed package against that responsibility.

Understand the arrangement

Clarify whether the appointment is employed salaried Partner, fixed-share or equity. Check variable reward, any capital requirement and the treatment of benefits. A Legal Director role may be a long-term position or a stage towards partnership; candidates need clarity on which is intended.

CAREER MOVES AND RECRUITMENT

What sits behind the salary

The useful comparison includes the work, expectations and direction of the team, alongside the financial package.

Practice experience matters

Corporate transactions and advisory commercial contracts are grouped in the tables, but their markets can differ. Banking products, real estate investment and development work, specialist disputes, and contentious or transactional insolvency also require more specific comparisons. The table is a starting point for that discussion.

Progression needs substance

Thornton Legal's recent candidate conversations repeatedly involve progression, whether through stronger work, greater responsibility or partnership. Candidates need to understand what the next step requires, who supports it and whether there is a realistic opportunity within the team.

Experienced Associate recruitment

A firm seeking somebody to manage matters and absorb Partner responsibility may have limited scope to substitute a junior hire. Salary compression can also make the cost difference between junior and experienced lawyers relatively modest. That helps explain why a firm may reconsider the seniority or budget of a search.

Packages and working patterns

Review bonus eligibility, thresholds, discretion and payment history. Separate joining payments from recurring reward. Compare pension, holiday and protection benefits, as well as actual and full-time equivalent pay for part-time roles. Hybrid arrangements and office expectations need to work in practice for the candidate and team.

A credible move needs a clear account of the work, team and progression available. A headline salary alone cannot answer those questions.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

Methodology and contact

Manchester commercial private practice | November 2026

How to use the ranges

Thornton Legal's indicative salary ranges draw on recruitment experience, previous benchmarking and available market information. Figures represent full-time equivalent base salaries and vary according to firm, specialism, responsibilities and individual circumstances. Firm examples illustrate broad market groupings rather than confirmed employer pay scales.

Published NQ reference points

CMS: £68,000 for Manchester, published in its Legal Cheek profile. Pinsent Masons: £69,000 for relevant English regional offices, published on its training contract page. Eversheds Sutherland: £80,000 regional rate, reported on 30 July 2026. DLA Piper: £84,000 including Manchester, reported on 8 July 2026.

CMS profile

Pinsent Masons

Eversheds announcement

DLA Piper announcement

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For tailored salary benchmarking, recruitment advice or a confidential career conversation, get in touch.