OCORIAN

DIFC private wealth structures: a new era for global wealth management

The future of wealth preservation

Expertise. Trust. Scale.

Foreword

Ocorian – a global leader in fund services, corporate and private client services, capital markets, and regulatory and compliance support – and Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) have enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship in supporting clients through the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Middle East and beyond. The strength of our relationship has directly benefited clients who are looking at structures which offer succession planning and asset protection.

There's never been a better time to be a client with DIFC touchpoints, as the centre undergoes significant growth. In the first half of 2025 a record number of new firms established operations in the centre; the total number of active registered companies grew 25% year-on-year to 7,700; 1,081 new active registered companies joined DIFC; and the number of professionals working in the centre rose to 47,901 – a 9% increase.[1]

In this paper, we explore the reasons for that growth in the private client space, DIFC's competitive edge, the private wealth ecosystem, cross-jurisdictional working, and how global providers like Ocorian are helping contribute to the centre's success.

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1 https://www.difc.com/whats-on/news/difc-records-best-ever-performance-for-the-first-half-of-a-year

Report Findings

The UAE as a magnet for private wealth

The UAE's competitive edge

DIFC private wealth ecosystem

- Foundations
- Trusts
- Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs)
- Family Offices
- Variable Capital Companies (VCCs)

Cross-jurisdictional private wealth solutions

Case studies and practical insights: working together

The UAE as a magnet for private wealth

In recent years, the UAE has seen an influx of service providers who make for a thriving private client ecosystem: asset managers, private banks, wealth management firms, law firms, multi-family offices, tax advisors and other essential service providers which have opened or expanded their operations in the region to take advantage of its growth. The Henley Private Wealth Migration Report 2025 anticipates 9,800 UHNWIs arriving in the UAE this year, to bolster an already-significant number.[2]

Over the past decade, the UAE has undergone a profound transformation, positioning itself as a leading global hub for private wealth. This evolution has been driven by a series of strategic government initiatives and reforms across multiple domains, including legal and regulatory frameworks, ease of doing business, healthcare infrastructure, lifestyle offerings and investment opportunities. Notably, the UAE has embraced innovation by supporting emerging asset classes such as digital assets, further enhancing its appeal to HNWIs.

This domestic progress has coincided with a period of global volatility. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, capital controls in China, and the growing stringency of tax regimes in various jurisdictions such as the abolishment of non-dom status benefits in the UK have prompted HNWIs to seek more stable and accommodating environments. The UAE's combination of physical security, financial openness, and long-term residency options has made it an increasingly attractive destination for individuals seeking both personal and financial solutions.

2 https://www.henleyglobal.com/publications/henley-private-wealth-migration-report-2025

The UAE's competitive edge

There is no doubt that international clients are viewing the UAE as a wealth-friendly jurisdiction with DIFC at its core, where they feel welcome, as well as supported. Governmental and policy changes in traditional wealth hubs like the United Kingdom and United States, and geopolitical factors in more-unsettled regions around the world have all made the stability on offer in the UAE considerably more appealing.

The UAE is actively looking to support these lifestyle choices as a complement to its own growth ambitions. The region's well-established tax incentives are backed by the launch of DIFC Funds Centre, a first-of-its-kind initiative designed to accommodate hedge fund spinouts, boutique firms, and global asset managers through flexible infrastructure and peer-to-peer engagement platforms. In parallel, DIFC Family Wealth Centre, established in 2023, offers a comprehensive ecosystem for UHNWIs and family businesses, providing services in succession planning, governance, and intergenerational wealth preservation. It is an exclusive club that shares thought leadership, hosts networking events, and has fostered a sense of community—making the region welcoming to wealth, with strong government support.

Regulatory reforms have further reinforced DIFC's appeal, including the enactment of DIFC Family Arrangements Regulations, which replaced the Single-Family Office regime with a simplified framework that supports Single Family Offices, while eliminating the need for DFSA registration.

Looking ahead, DIFC aims to deepen its role as a global private wealth hub by expanding its accreditation programs, enhancing legal structures for family governance, and fostering strategic partnerships to attract next-generation investors and financial innovators.

For investors, asset managers and service providers, DIFC's commercial laws that are based on Common Law are a familiar and welcome system that they can easily understand and enable the larger global players to relocate team members who already have this knowledge from other jurisdictions. With trusted advisors come loyal clients, who recognise that their increasingly sophisticated needs require specialist support.

DIFC private wealth ecosystem

Foundations

While Foundations have been a staple of the centre's offering for a while, they have grown in popularity in recent times. Local and expat families alike have become more comfortable with the concept and understand the benefits that one can derive by using a Foundation to structure local assets such as UAE real estate. Especially given Foundations are the only private client structure that is recognised by the UAE land department. That said, Foundations can also be used to host other local assets such as UAE businesses as well as international assets, with the aim of protecting their assets, their family interests and putting in place a legacy plan for generations to come.

A Foundation is a separate legal structure which holds the assets for a purpose or for the benefit of beneficiaries. The assets held under a Foundation are owned by the Foundation and are separate from the personal assets of the founder. They are governed by a specially appointed council who will carry out the wishes of the founder as set out in the charter and by-laws. Foundations are a hugely flexible option that offer greater control for a family and safeguard assets professionally and securely.

Many clients appreciate the lack of ambiguity that Foundations make possible and the fact that the Foundation has the right to legal title, this is not the case with Trusts, where the trustee would be deemed to be the legal owner of the assets.

As legally distinct entities, Foundations offer increased privacy and discretion, a robust governance framework, and peace of mind that assets are not readily accessible to creditors, governments or other family members. There are also no legal restrictions in terms of the type of assets to be held under a Foundation, and the Special Purpose Vehicle regime also allows a Foundation to segregate the assets in terms of sectors or geographically.

Securing a family's legacy is often a key driver of Foundations, but the local legal ramifications are also pertinent – foreign Trusts and Foundations cannot hold UAE real estate, for example.

DIFC Foundations established as Family Foundations may also benefit from 0% UAE Corporate Tax through tax transparency, provided they meet specific structuring and activity conditions. One of the more interesting and unique features of DIFC Foundations Law is the inclusion of a "duress clause." This provision allows a council member to disregard instructions from the founder if those instructions are given under duress—particularly from a foreign court or authority. In such cases, the council is empowered to act independently and in the best interest of the beneficiaries. It's a thoughtful safeguard that reinforces the autonomy of the Foundation and protects it from external pressures that could compromise its purpose or governance.

Trusts

Trusts are an established part of DIFC's private wealth ecosystem, offering a sophisticated tool for asset protection, estate planning and succession management.

Trusts are not legal entities in their own right, instead trustees are appointed to act on behalf of the settlor and their beneficiaries. Most often this will be a specialist trust company or provider, so that the settlor knows their assets are in the hands of professionals, but there is flexibility in who can serve as a trustee.

While Trusts remain an option in the UAE, they have not achieved the same level of popularity as Foundations. Often families and UHNWIs who already utilise Trusts in other jurisdictions prefer to use a DIFC Trust rather than a Foundation. Trusts have certain limitations, as the UAE is a civil law jurisdiction, in practice, major stakeholders such as families and local banks still struggle to grasp the concept of a third-party holding assets on behalf of an individual or family.

Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs)

SPVs are passive holding companies established to ringfence and isolate assets and liabilities from financial and legal risk; they represent a flexible and potentially low-cost option to protect assets, as they cannot conduct any commercial or operational activities.

Many families and UHNWIs use SPVs to hold Dubai real estate in a clean and simple structure, but they're equally useful for holding assets as varied as intellectual property to shares.

The centre has placed great emphasis on meeting the needs of the future investor and client, and SPVs are designed to hold increasingly common but still relatively new assets such as digital assets and currencies, aircraft and vessels – all with their risks and liabilities sensibly ringfenced.

DIFC SPVs are renowned for their tax efficiency and access to global markets, making them an attractive way to separate liabilities in an easy, cost-effective manner.

Family Offices

Family Offices (FO) have become increasingly attracted to DIFC since a 2023 legal change that replaced the Single-Family Office regulations with the Family Arrangements Regulations.

This change streamlined regulatory requirements and meant that FOs no longer needed to register with DFSA as a Designated Non-Financial Business or Profession (DNFBP), reducing the level of compliance needed and simplifying the setup and operation of a FO.

Due to the lesser complexity of compliance requirements, FO seems to be appealing to wealthy families who are increasingly expanding their business activities.

Privacy is another benefit of establishing a FO in DIFC, with a private register available for those families who wish to maintain discretion around their key stakeholders including their principal.

Conflict management solutions through private arbitration provisions add another layer of privacy to DIFC's offering.

Variable Capital Companies (VCCs)

The newest part of DIFC private wealth ecosystem is the upcoming VCC regime, which is a private limited company that can be standalone or act as an umbrella structure for segregated cells or incorporated cells.

VCCs allow for segregation of assets through cells but retain a centralised management function, offering economies of scale that appeal to a diversified family or UHNWI.

They are a vehicle that is especially suited to the sophisticated modern client, who is increasingly looking for the flexibility of structuring with distinct liabilities, risk profiles and asset classes. DIFC is attracting more and more of this client profile as the world's UHNWIs, and families recognise that the centre is rolling out vehicles just like the VCC that meet their needs and enable efficiency backed by a recognisable legal framework.

The ability to convert or restructure a VCC adds to the flexibility and allows families to work with their advisors to play an active role in portfolio and asset management that responds to their circumstances at any given time.

Cross-jurisdictional private wealth solutions

With an enviable set of solutions available in DIFC, it's no wonder that international firms like Ocorian are actively contributing to the centre's growth through their facilitation of cross-border clients.

Everything that DIFC has done to establish and position itself as a global hub is paying off, as providers increase their presence in the centre and strategically consider how it fits the needs of international client bases.

For many providers, the centre's geographical centrality is a huge advantage. Sitting at the intersection of growing Asian and African wealth means that the UHNWIs and families of those regions can interact and take advantage of cross-border opportunities through the facilitation of an international firm on the ground in DIFC. European and North American experience and footprints in many of those firms further opens up access for inbound and outbound investments, clients and solutions.

The Common Law-based legal system, regulations and marketing efforts have all contributed to establishing the centre as a global hub, and for private clients DIFC is increasingly the location that makes the most sense for asset structuring, protection and growth.

This is all backed by an ecosystem that was developed with privacy at its core. The privacy and data protection regime protects the privacy of family details, interests and holdings and DIFC's unique 'Privacy Vault' was established in lieu of a UBO register.

Families also appreciate the private register that is available alongside the Family Business Register (FBR). The FBR records onshore family businesses or DIFC entities controlled by a family, administered by the Registrar of Company (RoC) who holds information such as shareholders, directors and officers privately, rather than making them public. The private register can be home to any family entity or family office which has applied to be registered here rather than in the public register.

Ocorian's team in DIFC is well established and is having great success in rolling out the firm's wealth lifecycle offering for clients who are already in the centre, and for those who want to be in the centre.

The wealth lifecycle has been designed to provide a consolidated global offering to the UHNWI or family or business, recognising the clients increasingly need end-to-end solutions spanning everything from cosec to succession planning, treasury services to directorships. By combining every element of service that a UHNWI or family will need, Ocorian offers a holistic approach to wealth management and can combine this with colleagues in funds, corporate services, regulatory & compliance and more to ensure the full range of requirements are being met by one trusted provider.

DIFC and firms like Ocorian have actively positioned themselves as strategic partners for global wealth, and the combination of a recognised regulatory framework, working knowledge of the centre and a range of solutions means that cross-jurisdictional working has never been more valued or utilised.

Case studies and practical insights: working together

Ocorian has recently worked on a number of interesting cases for clients, including:

- Helping large families from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait establish meaningful family offices and teams in DIFC so they can collaborate to manage assets, pool capital and take advantage of the centre's global links.

- Working with growing African wealth – especially from French-speaking countries including Senegal and Morocco – to restructure what were purely corporate considerations into something more practical and beneficial for the families. DIFC is the perfect home for this type of structuring due to geographical proximity, fast-adapting regulation and solutions, and the overriding growth agenda which matches client ambition.

- Facilitating international connections for increasingly outward-looking Chinese and non-resident Indian (NRI) clients in DIFC. These clients have reacted to geopolitical changes and adapted their requirements accordingly and Ocorian is helping them get access to the right solutions for their revised expectations and needs.

Rapid growth can be a challenge for an international finance centre, and DIFC's journey has been characterised by learning lessons quickly and adapting to meet client needs. The centre continues to move at speed and make it as easy as possible for global wealth to not only relocate assets to the centre, but also their lives.

The golden visa scheme, modern banking regulations and willingness to embrace digital assets are all examples of the centre looking at other IFCs and tweaking what already exists to make it more user friendly; it makes for a dynamic environment in which to do business and work with clients.

Ocorian and DIFC enjoy a collaborative relationship that is directly benefiting many clients in the region and around the world. The two have combined to host roadshows, produce marketing materials and consult on the latest client demands. Clients are assured that when they work with Ocorian they are working with a firm that understands DIFC and has the calibre and expertise to deliver what they need.

A productive relationship with the regulator has seen Ocorian proactively advise on the types of structures that clients need – whether first-time setups or complex restructurings – and help to bring about pragmatic change that sends a clear signal that DIFC is open to business and is a serious contender for hosting global wealth.

Key DIFC takeaways

DIFC is enjoying huge growth because of its global centrality, strategic vision and adaptive regulatory regime.

The centre is embracing future asset classes and seizing the initiative to be the structuring solution for global wealth.

DIFC is increasingly a global hub with firms like Ocorian playing a key role in facilitating the needs and desires of wealthy clients from within Dubai and the Middle East, and around the world.

DIFC's range of structures demonstrates its versatility, global standing and user-friendly private wealth ecosystem.

About Ocorian

Sophisticated end-to-end wealth structuring & administration solutions

Ocorian are experts in looking after complex, high-value structures for family offices, family businesses and ultra-high-net-worth individuals across the globe.

We cross borders to protect, preserve and administer our clients' financial affairs, offering sophisticated solutions regardless of where you or your assets are located or what stage of the wealth lifecycle you find yourself.

We remove administrative headaches, minimise friction, stay ahead of regulatory change and use tech-enabled solutions to ensure your wealth is safeguarded with accountability, so you can focus on what matters most.

Speak to Ocorian to learn how DIFC's robust range of private wealth solutions is catering for the wealth of the world.

Meet Ocorian's Middle East team

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Ocorian in numbers

25+
Office locations

2,000+
Staff worldwide

20,000+
Structures under administration

$275bn+
Assets under administration

9,000+
Clients

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