



# REPORT ON PUPILLAGE PROCESS, 2024

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# Introduction

This is the second published review of St Philips Chambers' pupillage process, and we hope that it will be a helpful guide to those thinking of applying to us. It is based on the January-May 2024 process, in which we recruited 4 pupils to start in October 2025, each taking a specialist pupillage in one of our practice areas (crime, family, business and property). This year we did not recruit a pupil in employment/personal injury work, for reasons explained below. Much of what is said in this report draws on what was set out in last year's report, though the figures and specifics have been updated.

## Why are we doing it?

We wrote the following passage last year, and nothing has changed, nor requires amendment. Here it is in full:

Pupillage applications have hugely changed over the years, primarily for the better (hopefully no more questions like "which biscuit would you be, and why?"), but they retain an element of mystique and, unfortunately, inconsistency across the board.

At St Philips, we have taken the view that candidates' academic history and current interests are not accurate indicators of future performance, nor do they encourage diversity within recruitment – people naturally recruit people who look, sound or behave like themselves, and that's no way for a business to grow.

Quite apart from trying to ensure the success of St Philips in the years to come, we are firm believers in equal opportunities at the Bar, which has to be representative of the people who make up our client base. Our recruitment of barristers in recent years reflects this ongoing commitment to encouraging

applications from diverse backgrounds, but we know there is more work to do

Part of the task involves removing any air of mystery from the process, and allowing potential candidates to know

- a) what will be required of them,
- b) how they can maximise their chances of success, and
- c) whether, if they are successful, this is the kind of place they would like to work at.

We hope that this report goes some way to doing exactly that.

## Who are we?

The Pupillage Committee (“PupCom”) this year comprised [Ali Tabari](#) as chair, together with [Ben Close](#), [Jonathan Barker](#), [Carl Templar-Vasey](#), [Matt Cullen](#), [Cat Ravenscroft](#) (all crime), [Sarah Buxton](#), [Nick Brown](#), [William Horwood](#), [Anna Peaston](#), [Bethany Armitage](#) (all family), [Gavin McLeod](#), [Jonathan Gale](#), [Natalie Kearney](#) (business and property), and [Elizabeth Hodgetts](#), [Colin Baran](#), [Bruce Frew](#) and [Sofia Ashraf](#) (employment/PI). For the final-round interview we co-opted [Kirsty White](#) onto the business and property panel; Kirsty is fully BSB-trained in fair recruitment practices, and is the deputy chair of the Recruitment Committee in chambers.

All are, of course, volunteers, and some are also qualified pupil supervisors. All participated in marking the paper applications and conducting interviews, and all had a vote when it came to choosing the candidates to make offers to.

We are also enormously grateful to members of chambers staff, without whose invaluable help no pupillage process could have been carried out. Juliette Print as chambers administrator, Pamela Paul and Vas Papantoniou on reception, Lauren Matthews and Guy Dunwoody in Events, and Joe O'Donnell and Leon White in IT – thank you all so much.

# The pupillage calendar

St Philips is not on the Pupillage Portal, but we follow the same timings, to ensure fairness; we intend to do the same next year. Our applications opened in early January 2024, and closed in mid-February 2024. We conducted first-round interviews at the end of March, final round interviews at the end of April, and made offers on 10<sup>th</sup> May.

In early January, we ran a Pupillage Information Evening in chambers, which was openly advertised as being a relaxed and informal evening where any potential candidate could attend and ask their questions (and have some drinks and snacks too).

We outlined the pupillage application process, and gave practical tips on what makes a good paper application – we tried to steer clear of the usual platitudes about spell-checking the form, and brought out some real-life examples of previous answers which had worked well, and which had not.



In attendance were around 80 potential candidates, together with 11 current St Philips pupils or junior tenants, who were all available to answer questions from our guests. We did not ask senior members of chambers to attend, because we did not want any of our guests to feel inhibited, or as if they were in an informal interview – it was explicitly **not** a networking evening, and instead was entirely focussed on helping candidates do their best. As we will detail below, it had the desired effect.

# Our process

Candidates filled out an application form which contained their personal details and academic history, provided any additional relevant information in 250 words or fewer, and then answered 5 questions, each limited to 250 words.

## Name-blinding

Our chambers administrator removed the personal information from each form (keeping them only for reference), and labelled each form as 'SP001', 'SP002' etc. This 'name blinding' exercise aimed to minimise the risk of subconscious bias creeping into the minds of the markers.

## Academic history sift

The academic history and 'additional relevant information' section were given to the PupCom chair. His task was to see whether each candidate had an academic history which was at least sufficient to support a successful application. Generally, a candidate with at least a 2:1 degree and BBB at A-Level or equivalent was the standard required and, if they have completed law school, at least a pass on the GDL/LPC/BPTC; however, exceptions were made for those with older degrees or A-Levels (roughly 2010 and earlier) which had been more than compensated-for by relevant work experience in the meantime.

Several candidates explained the mitigating circumstances behind any sub-standard exam performances, and these were treated on their own merits on a case-by-case basis – often those performances were a blip in an otherwise solid academic history, and were clearly anomalous. Unfortunately around 10% of the applicants demonstrated an academic history which was consistently below the level which would support a successful career at the Bar or would withstand the rigours of the interview process and, in order not to give false hope, we declined those applications.

For those who passed this stage, their academics were simply a gateway to the next stage – their academic history would not become relevant at any other stage, unless in the exceptional circumstance that two final-round candidates were in a 'dead heat', in which case academic and

work history might be a factor (amongst others) to play a part in making a decision. That was not the case this year.

## Written applications marked

Of the remaining 90%, the written applications were distributed to PupCom members to mark, with all personal information stripped out. All that the markers saw was the 'SP--' number, and the answers. Each of the 5 questions carried 4 marks (so that no marker was able to 'sit on the fence' and give a score of 3 out of 5), and each form was marked by two separate PupCom members who did not see each other's marks – this meant that each candidate achieved a total score out of 40 at the end of this process.

Where the difference between the two markers was 7 points or greater, it was marked for a third time by the PupCom chair, again without knowing what the scores were. That third score was added to the others and then multiplied by 0.67 (for example, if a candidate was scored 20 and 9, the chair scored them 18, and the way to reach the score out of 40 was  $20+9+19 \times 0.67 = 32$ ). Pleasingly, this type of disparity was very rare.

Candidates who achieved a score of 29-31 or more (depending on practice area) were put through to the next round, which comprised around 30% of the paper applications. This was not a number that was set in stone, but allowed us to take a sensible number of applicants through to the interview stage, where we could be confident that they would have a reasonable chance of being successful.

These scores and answers did not become relevant again until the final round, when they may have formed the basis of some questions asked in the second half of the interview.

## First round interviews

Those successful candidates then faced a 10-minute interview by Zoom, in which they were asked the same three questions as every other candidate in their chosen specialist practice area. In our interviews for criminal pupillages it is very likely that we will revert to a presumption in favour of in-person interviews at this stage, and the topic remains under discussion in other practice areas. Two questions were based on the candidates' chosen area of law, and the third was on a current affairs topic; again, this is under review for next year's process, though it is highly unlikely that we

will revert to 'old style' interviewing techniques which do not allow for accurate and consistent marking.

The panel knew nothing about the candidates' personal details (except their name), nor their academic/work history, nor of how they scored in the paper application. Of those candidates, approximately 38% were advanced to the final round.

## Final round interviews

Each final round candidate was sent a problem question a week in advance of their interview, each one tailored to the specialist area of practice they had applied for. It was only at this stage that the interview panel saw anything of the candidate's academic/work history, and their answers to the written questions. The in-person interview lasted up to 35 minutes, and was run by PupCom members in that specialist practice group: the first half involved the candidate giving their presentation on the problem question, and taking follow-up questions from the panel; the second half was a structured interview about the candidate's CV and experience, particularly work experience (including pro bono) and mooting/debating.

We offered 2 pupillages in crime, 2 in family, 2 in employment/PI, and 1 in business and property. Our first-choice offers in crime (x2) and business and property were accepted. In family work, our first-choice offers were not accepted, as each candidate had received offers from highly prestigious sets in London which they marginally preferred, but pleasingly a reserve choice candidate who also clearly met the threshold of excellence accepted our offer. In employment/PI, both of our preferred candidates received offers from high-quality sets in their home city, and we did not consider that there were any other candidates who had passed the threshold of excellence to warrant a reserve offer being made. As a happy addendum to this particular aspect of our recruitment, we have made an offer of Probationary Tenancy to an excellent candidate from a top set in London specialising in personal injury work, an application which only emerged 2 months after we closed our pupillage process, and for whom there might not have been space had we filled our pupillage place.

We are accepting of the fact that recruitment at the Bar is nowadays a competitive process on every level. Last year we were fortunate that all of our first-choice candidates accepted our offers of pupillage, and we are philosophical about the fact that this cannot be guaranteed every year. We



will continue to make our offering as attractive as possible for all prospective candidates, and will listen to feedback from current and past pupils in order to make it so.

# What went well, and what didn't

## Paper applications

We felt that the quality of applications on paper was, following on from a real uptick in quality last year, yet another improvement on what we had previously seen – we are increasingly of the view that the tips given in the Pupillage Information Evening had a positive influence.

Much like last year, the strongest candidates demonstrated some common traits in their written answers:

- They submitted their applications long before the deadline. Those who submitted their forms within a day or two of the deadline often rushed their answers, and were guilty of some basic and avoidable errors that, with more time, would have been avoided.
- They saw 250 words as being a limit, not a target. Sometimes less is more, though it is always a balancing act not to make the answer too skeletal.
- They evidenced everything they asserted, and avoided general statements with no firm foundation to it (“I have a passion for pro bono work”, rather than the much better “I advanced my passion for pro bono by working on projects X, Y and Z during my undergraduate years”, etc).
- They talked about more than just law and legal experience. The best learnings often come away from studies or a workplace, or non-legal volunteering.
- They understood the ‘question behind the question’. For example, why would chambers be asking a question about what you have learned about persuading a hostile audience, or how you make decisions in tight situations? What we are really asking is how you go about your advocacy when the odds are stacked against you, or what you will do when you are on your feet with little or no time to think deeply about a tough call?
- They had clearly thought hard about whether their examples really went to the core of the question, rather than forcing into an answer some point or anecdote they wanted to use at all costs.

- They did not just explain what they did, but how and why (those being the bits we really want to hear about).
- They did not use the same experience (e.g. participation in a project or mooted competition, or an impressive-sounding job) for more than one question.
- They avoided trite or cliché answers. It is not especially impressive to tell us that you worked hard on an undergraduate group project (one would think that effort is the bare minimum to contribute), but it is much more impressive to tell us about a tricky decision that you made where getting it wrong would have been a disaster for you and others.
- They avoided banalities and 'fillers', and avoided attempting to flatter St Philips or 'name-dropping' or (worse still) puffing up their own experience to unrealistic levels of achievement or importance.

Weaker candidates did the opposite of the above. It is always frustrating to see candidates with excellent material available to them, and yet failing to make the most of it.

## Interviews (first round)

A 10-minute interview rewards a candidate who is able to hone in on an issue and discuss it authoritatively, and quickly roots out candidates who rely more on 'padding' to survive. Conducting it remotely has the obvious downside of preventing many candidates from expressing their personalities as well as they might otherwise do, and might well exacerbate nerves – we were aware of this, and made appropriate allowances for it. As mentioned above, the criminal and regulatory group next year will be conducting interviews face-to-face from the outset, and we will assess and keep tabs on the influence this has on interview outcomes.

We are conscious that making candidates potentially travel a long way for a 10-minute interview during a working week could lead to a drop in applications from those with caring responsibilities or those from outside the West Midlands – we are not prepared to narrow our own recruitment net in that way, nor to unwittingly create barriers to the profession (which would run entirely counter to our other efforts to increase diversity at the Bar). We still think that the benefits of remote interviewing, in most circumstances, is likely to outweigh the drawbacks, but will continue to keep an open mind.

The stronger candidates shared similar characteristics, as follows. It is unsurprising that the same points recur year-on-year:

- They were structured in their answers, but the structure was expressed in a natural, not formulaic way. This meant that the interview became a discussion, rather than resembling a series of formal submissions.
  - Candidates who began every answer with a robotic “I have three points I would like to make in response to this question. The first is XYZ...” were scored lower on their communication skills than those who led with a more relaxed approach.
- They knew their topic. It was clear which candidates had ‘crammed’ for the interview by reading the last month or so of legal press on their chosen practice area, and which ones had clearly taken a genuine interest for the past year.
- They did not repeat their points.
- They came to a conclusion – any conclusion, and it’s not the conclusion we were necessarily judging – and did not remain neutral or indecisive.
- They were prepared to defend their answers, even when challenged by the panel, and to do so with proper reasons. This goes back to knowing their subject-matter.
- Especially on the final question on current affairs, they clearly took an interest in the world around them, and were able to advance well-considered arguments on a range of diverse topics (private members’ clubs, National Service, Russian athletes in the Olympics, and a smoking ban).

We were very pleased to see a massive reduction in the number of candidates who, as a matter of course, asked for time to write down their answers, which makes the interview very stilted, which we had seen lots of in 2023.

We marked candidates on: communication, effective advocacy, analytical thinking, and ability to respond to questions, each out of 10 for a total of 40 points. The candidates put through to the final round generally achieved scores of 29-32, which was the result of our attempt to strike a balance between consistency, on the one hand, and flexibility, on the other.

## Final round interviews

The final-round interviews involved problem questions devised by specialists in the field, and were designed to be difficult (though always calibrated as to not to give undue advantage to candidates with experience in that field). The questions rewarded detailed preparation; those who failed to give the questions proper time and research were found out remarkably quickly.

The strongest candidates had some common traits:

- They had plainly spent a long time researching and planning their answer – somewhere around 8 hours seemed to be the 'sweet spot'.
- They gave firm advice, albeit sensibly caveated in appropriate places. A client receiving their advice would have had a clear steer, rather than a range of options from which to choose with no hint as to which one was best.
- They identified the key issues, and had those as the central focus of their answers. This allowed them to avoid being sucked too far off course by the questioning, and allowed them to retain a proper structure to their advice, because they knew when to deal quickly with dead-end points/'red herrings'.
- They properly considered and anticipated the practical implications of the legal advice they were giving the client. This demonstrated clarity of thought and common sense, which are essential traits for any barrister.
- Where a part of the advice was a tight call, they identified it as such, but were not afraid to tackle it head-on.
- They were able to deal well with questions, which all came from knowing the material well, and being confident in their preparation.
- Their presentations were engaging and interesting, which includes good variation of tone and pace, and the use of ordinary and not over-formal language.

Candidates should be aware of something rather counter-intuitive about these interviews. The harder the panel pushes a candidate, the more it shows how impressive they consider the candidate to be – the harder questions are designed to test the outermost limits of the candidate's ability, and should be taken as a compliment. An interviewee who stands up to the advanced question will inevitably be a realistic choice for pupillage.

# Who received offers of pupillage?

The candidates who received offers all gave exceptional performances at interview. Some had some relevant work experience in the field, but this year more than in recent years there was a much more level playing field for those who were still students, which we were pleased to see as rewarding our effort to recalibrate the focus and challenge of our questions.

We have plenty of junior tenants (and indeed one current pupil) who had previously applied to St Philips and been unsuccessful – we continue to reiterate that we value those who react to adversity with determination and focus, and there is no future 'black mark' against any unsuccessful candidate. We know that candidates develop and improve over time, and their potential is not 'fixed' at any one point in their journey. Having said that, candidates who had previously progressed to interview with us were not guaranteed to get past the paper sift if their written answers were not up to the required standard, and this was the case for some candidates; again, we would love nothing more than to see them take on the feedback and come back stronger next year.

Some of our successful candidates received offers from other chambers, and we were delighted that they chose to accept a place at St Philips instead. As mentioned above, we had some candidates who chose to take pupillage at other sets; we also had candidates who we did not offer pupillage to, but who secured pupillage elsewhere, and we congratulate them wholeheartedly. We take all of this as being signs that our recruitment process consistently identifies excellent candidates who are extremely attractive propositions.

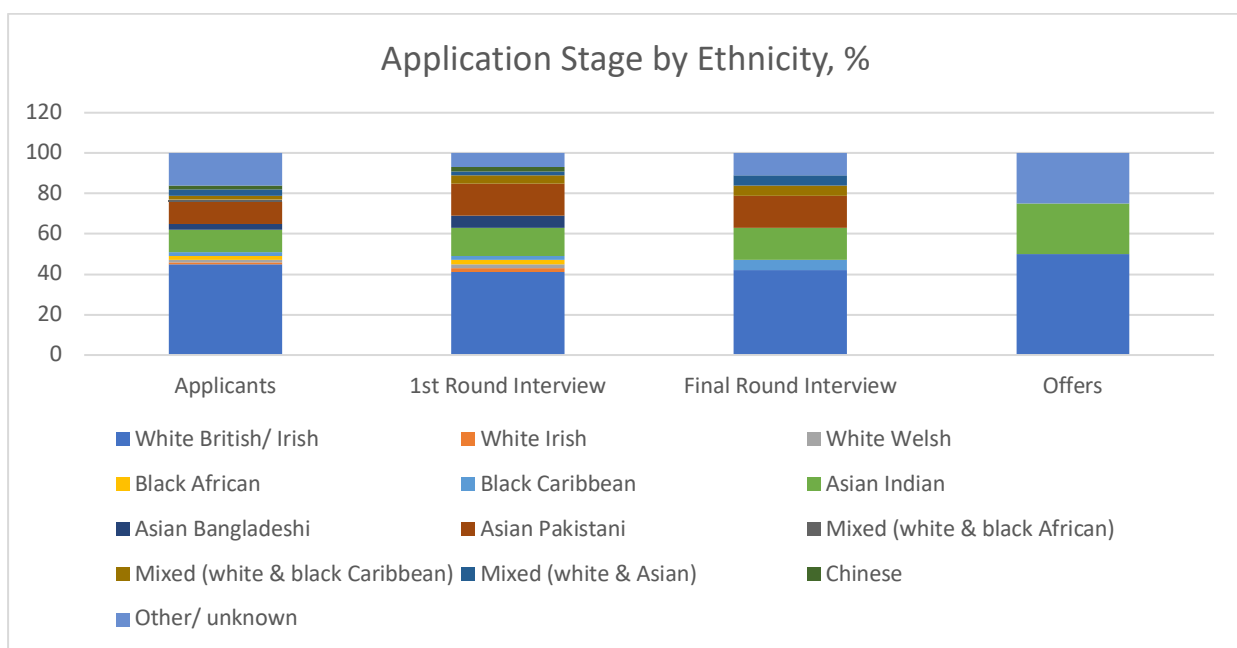
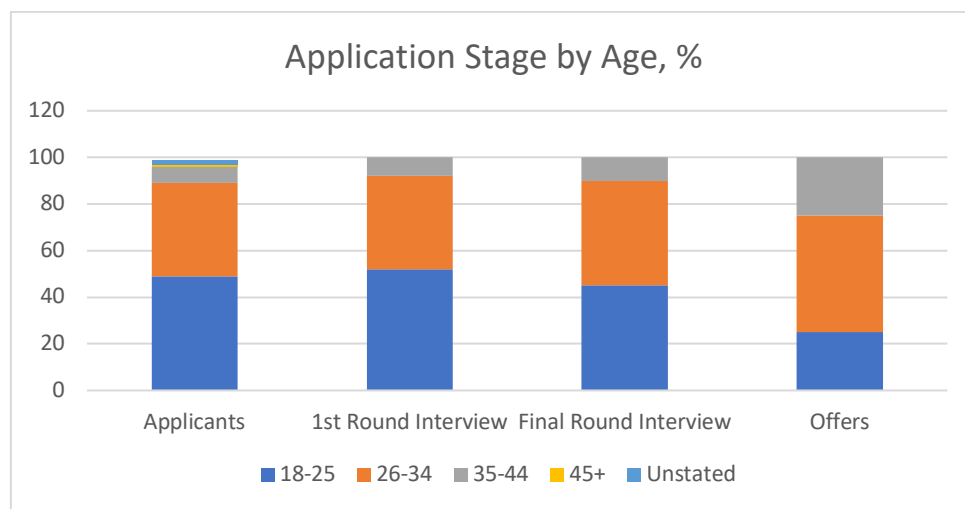
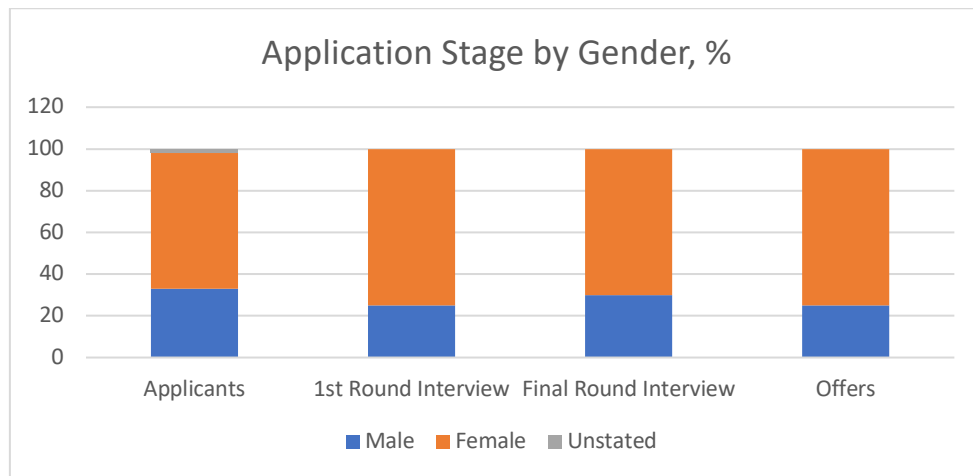
As last year, there was no common trait between the successful candidates as to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, education history or outside interests. They were recruited on their own merits, having demonstrated that they had the necessary traits for a successful career at the Bar, and that they would flourish in our environment and culture. We are very excited to see them again in 2025, and to see more excellent candidates in the competition next year.

# Conclusion

We hope that this report has been helpful in setting out our process, and giving some indicators of what successful candidates tend to display, both on paper and in interview. We wish any prospective candidates the very best of luck in finding pupillage, and we strongly encourage you to consider St Philips in the next round of applications – it really is a wonderful place to work and, whoever you are, you will fit in.

**October 2024**

# Relevant statistics



**By gender (as percentages)**

Stage	Male	Female	Unstated
Applicants	33	65	2
First round interview	25	75	0
Final round interview	30	70	0
Offers	25	75	0

**By age (as percentages)**

Stage	18-25	26-34	35-44	45+	Unstated
Applicants	49	40	7	1	2
First round interview	52	40	8	0	0
Final round interview	45	45	10	0	5
Offers	25	50	25	0	0

**By ethnicity (as percentages)**

	Applicants	First round interview	Final round interview	Offers
White British	45	41	42	50
White Irish	1	2	0	0
White Welsh	1	2	0	0
Black African	2	2	0	0
Black Caribbean	2	2	5	0
Asian Indian	11	14	16	25
Asian Bangladeshi	3	6	0	0
Asian Pakistani	11	16	16	0
Mixed (white & Black African)	1	0	0	0
Mixed (white & Black Caribbean)	2	4	5	0
Mixed (white & Asian)	3	2	5	0
Chinese	2	2	0	0
Other/ unknown	16	7	11	25