



**REPORT ON PUPILLAGE PROCESS
2025**

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Introduction

This is the third 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 2025 process, in which we recruited 4 pupils to start in October 2026, each taking a specialist pupillage in one of our practice areas (crime, family, business and property, and personal injury/employment). Some of what is said in this report draws on what was set out in previous reports, though the figures and specifics have been updated.

We have added a couple of new sections below under 'Points to bear in mind generally': one is on general points for dealing with sets, based on how we have seen some candidates inadvertently get it wrong this year; the other is on the use of generative AI. Please do ensure that you take some time to digest those.

Why are we writing this report?

The days of interviews resembling medieval torture are now (or should now be) well and truly over. Not only are such interviews unfair for those who have not even begun their career at the Bar, they fail to create the best environment for candidates to show their potential, and often have the effect of putting candidates off joining a set. These days, whether traditionalists like it or not, this process is a two-way street – it's no longer the case that candidates are expected to grab the first pupillage offer they receive, but instead the better candidates often have their pick of multiple offers.

We have no interest in keeping our process secret. We have seen from recent years that, the more transparency there is, the clearer the candidates can see what comprises a good application and a successful interview; standards have gone up, and everyone is better off for it. We don't think that academics and outside interests are the correct predictors of future performance, and those are not the key aspects to any successful application at St Philips – instead, we run a meritocratic and objective process, and veer away from simply recruiting people who sound or behave like us.

Despite the noise imported in recent times from certain sectors of political opinion from across the Atlantic, we have no doubt that the diversity of our members is essential to strong business growth. Diversity does not mean compromising on quality – instead, what it does is to make change and progress easier, and allows us to move with the times. It is absolutely the right thing to try and ensure that the Bar is 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.

We hope that this report allows candidates of all backgrounds to see, in a clear and transparent way (a) what will be required of them, (b) how they can maximise their chances of success, and © whether, if they are successful, this is the kind of place they would like to work at.

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](#), [Harry Marriott](#) (business and property), and [Colin Baran](#), [Bruce Frew](#), [Sofia Ashraf](#) and [Francis Mortin](#) (employment/PI). For the final-round interview we co-opted both [Kirsty White](#) and [Michelle Caney](#) onto the business and property panel.

All are, of course, volunteers, and many 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, Megan Blackwell 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 2025, and closed in mid-February 2025. We conducted first-round interviews in early April, final round interviews in early May, and made offers on 9th 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 pizza 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.

Candidates should use those examples as guidance only – one candidate recreated one of the sample answers almost word-for-word on their paper application, which did not assist them.

In attendance were around 75 potential candidates, together with a dozen or so 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 online 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 not (based on our experience over many years of running this process) 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 question 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 19, and the way to reach the score out of 40 was $20+9+19 \times 0.67 = \underline{32}$). 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, however, the first-round interview was an advocacy exercise in person, which worked especially well. The topic of remote interviews at first round remains under discussion in other practice areas. For the non-crime interviews, 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 33% 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, 1 in employment/PI, and 1 in business and property. Our first-choice offers in employment/PI, family (x1) and business and property were accepted. In family, we did not consider that there were other candidates this year who met the standard of excellence which we require, so we did not fill the second space; this was highly anomalous, as family is often a very competitive field. In crime, our first-choice offers were not accepted (one desiring an earlier start date than we could offer, the other going to a set with which he had a long-standing affiliation), but we were delighted that our reserve choice candidate, who also clearly met the threshold of excellence, accepted our offer.

We are accepting of the fact that recruitment at the Bar is nowadays a competitive process on every level. In previous years, we have been fortunate enough 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.

Points to bear in mind generally

Contact with chambers

Happily, the vast majority of our candidates were unfailing polite, pleasant and professional. The below list, rather than being a litany of complaints from us, are points to help candidates to give the best impressions when dealing with not just St Philips, but with all sets.

- Make sure to read all available information on the chambers website before asking questions about the process. Nearly every email/telephone query we received would have been answered by the candidate simply looking at the ample resources on the website. If you do have queries, try your best to collate all your questions, and ask them in one go.
- Chambers will not pre-determine applications in any way, so emailing questions about whether certain grades, past conduct etc will detrimentally affect an application is not going to lead to any answers. Do your best on the form, and have a go, but nobody can tell you in advance whether you will succeed or otherwise.
- We do not set the pupillage portal timetable. We appreciate that, often, final-round interviews are close to law school exams – unfortunately, there is nothing we can do about that, and that is a complaint better directed at the industry regulator. Indeed, multi-tasking and dealing with difficult scenarios, however difficult those may be, will be core skills at the Bar; to grumble about an interview date on the basis that it interferes with exam revision is unlikely to enhance chambers' assessment of your ability to thrive at the Bar.
- Disappointingly, we had two candidates pull out from interviews shortly before they were due to attend, one for 'unforeseen circumstances' which (when invited to do so) they did not give any detail about. The latter, in particular, is unacceptably discourteous in a professional context; further, that candidate deprived another person of a potential interview slot by withdrawing so late.

The use of generative AI

We are alive to the fact that generative AI has its uses, and that it will be used in this industry in the future for some purposes (for example, accurately summarising the facts set out in a long judgment, or writing social media posts). However, it has no place in our interview process. This year, we will make it explicit in our application form that the use of generative AI will be prohibited in the written and interview stages; we will be selecting samples and running them through software which detects its use, and if it is detected then we will seriously consider reporting the candidate to their Inns. In our experience, this is not a Luddite or retrograde approach – generative AI currently does not provide the insight or judgement required in a career at the Bar, and cannot be effectively used as a replacement for what was, until a year or two ago, considered to be the 'normal' way of working.

For those candidates who are not aware of it, we would strongly suggest reading the judgment of Mr Justice Ritchie in the recent case of *ex parte Ayinde v LB Haringey* [2025] EWHC 1040 (Admin) - a

deeply unfortunate episode in which a junior barrister's apparent use of generative AI in court proceedings has resulted in a lot of trouble, and may not yet be finished.

We were also somewhat astounded to spot the use of generative AI by one candidate during the course of their first-round interview. It seemed from their arm and eye movements, and their regular requests to repeat the question, that they were typing the question into ChatGPT, and were then reading the answer to us as if it were their own work; this was corroborated by one of the interview panel asking follow-up questions to which the answers were nowhere near as fluent or structured, and by another panel member simultaneously typing the question into ChatGPT at the same time to see whether the answer being spoken matched the answer displayed on the screen (it was a very close match). The only reason that this candidate was not reported to their Inns was because we had not explicitly prohibited the use of generative AI in our process, and so the 'misconduct' was not clear enough; however, any future recurrences will be dealt with seriously.

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 since we started publishing this report and running Pupillage Information Evenings, yet another improvement on what we had previously seen.

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 – non-crime)

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.

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 (the leadership role of the US in world affairs, the monarchy in the UK, politicians receiving 'freebies', etc).

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 previously seen emerging as a trend.

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.

Interviews (first round – crime)

In addition to the above points about how to present oneself at interview, during the in-person crime interviews at first round, the best candidates were those who were able to carry out the advocacy exercise as follows:

- A clear structure to their submissions.
- Picking only their best points to run with.
- Being prepared to defend their position when pushed, but being flexible enough to make the odd concession where appropriate (e.g. when the Judge would clearly be against them, and it would 'poison the well' for the rest of their case).
- Being confident – appreciating, of course, that every interview candidate will be nervous, and most will be inexperienced. Sometimes a candidate simply needs to outwardly present as confident, even if they don't feel it (the same is true for even the most experienced barristers!).

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', allowing for thorough research but not spending so much time that they lose the 'wood for the trees'.
- 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. The best candidates did not spend time going through each avenue they were about to tell us would not work, in a misguided attempt to demonstrate how well they know the topic (no client would appreciate such a poor use of time).

- 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. Often the candidates with the most notes were the least confident, because they felt 'tied' to the papers before them. There are no extra points given for presenting with no/minimal notes, but they need to be a mere guide for the interview, not a script.
- The same point is made, as set out above, regarding outward confidence – candidates must never under-estimate the consistent need to look and sound confident, even if they do not feel it.
- 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.

Two of our successful candidates had previously applied to St Philips on multiple occasions, and we were delighted to see the progress they had made over that time. We are proud that plenty of our junior tenants (and indeed one of our current pupils) had previously been unsuccessful in their applications to St Philips, but felt comfortable enough to apply again – 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.

One of our successful candidates received an offer from another provider, and we were delighted that they chose to accept a place at St Philips instead. As mentioned above, we had two 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.

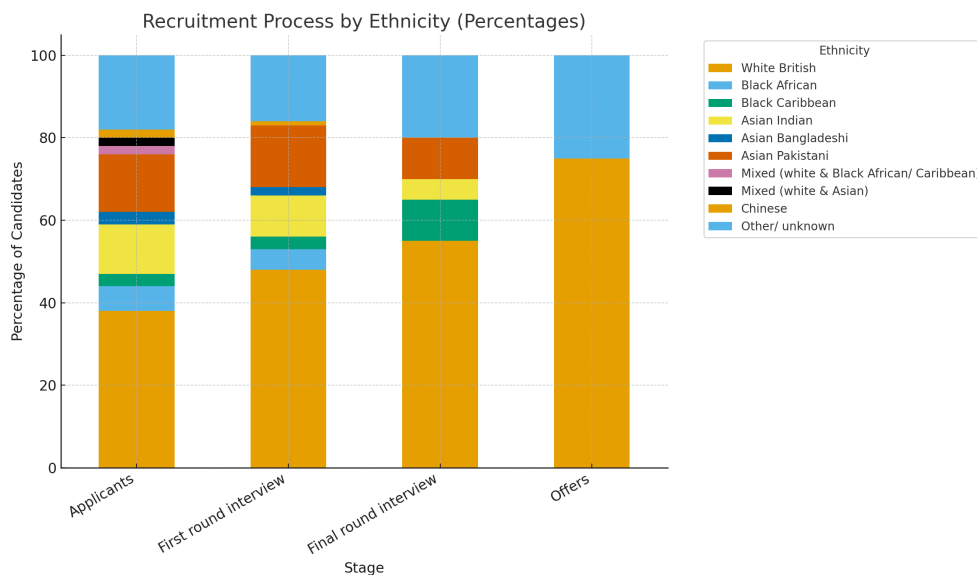
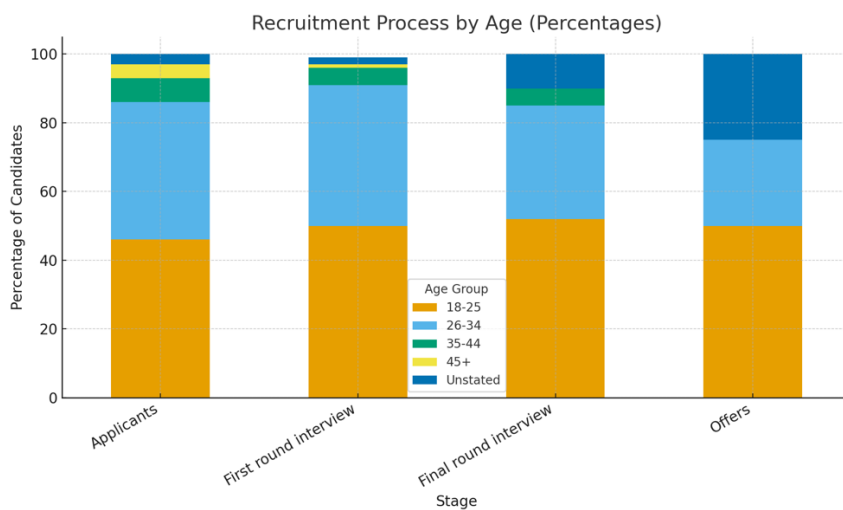
As last year, there was no common trait between the successful candidates as to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, education history or outside interests. They were recruited on their own merits, having demonstrated that they had the necessary traits for a successful career at the Bar, and that they would flourish in our environment and culture. We are very excited to see them again in 2026, 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.

September 2025

Relevant statistics



By gender (as percentages)

Stage	Male	Female	Unstated
Applicants	32	65	3
First round interview	29	68	3
Final round interview	38	57	5
Offers	0	75	25

By age (as percentages)

Stage	18-25	26-34	35-44	45+	Unstated
Applicants	46	40	7	4	3
First round interview	50	41	5	1	2
Final round interview	52	33	5	0	10
Offers	50	25	0	0	25

By ethnicity (as percentages)

	Applicants	First round interview	Final round interview	Offers
White British	38	48	55	75
Black African	6	5	0	0
Black Caribbean	3	3	10	0
Asian Indian	12	10	5	0
Asian Bangladeshi	3	2	0	0
Asian Pakistani	14	15	10	0
Mixed (white & Black African/ Caribbean)	2	0	0	0
Mixed (white & Asian)	2	0	0	0
Chinese	2	1	0	0
Other/ unknown	18	16	20	25