



The Bar Council

Pupil Survey

March 2024



Introduction

The Bar Council represents almost 18,000 practising barristers in England and Wales and promotes the values they share. A strong and independent Bar exists to serve the public and is crucial to the administration of justice. As specialist, independent advocates, barristers enable people to uphold their legal rights, often acting on behalf of the most vulnerable members of society.

The Bar makes a vital contribution to the efficient and effective operation of criminal and civil courts. It provides a pool of talent, from increasingly diverse backgrounds, from which a significant proportion of the judiciary is drawn and on whose independence the rule of law and our democratic way of life depends. The Bar Council is the Approved Regulator for the Bar of England and Wales: it discharges its regulatory functions through the operationally independent Bar Standards Board (BSB).

This report was generated from a survey of pupils, the third undertaken by the Bar Council. The first, conducted in March 2021, assessed the pandemic's impact on pupils working lives. The second, carried out in March 2022, examined pupils' working lives more broadly. This year's survey incorporated pupils' experience in 2023, exploring any changes in the last two years to the experiences of this key group of the profession.

Methodology

This year's survey was sent directly to pupils via email as well as chambers and AETOS. It was open for ten days and reminders were sent.

Pupils were asked to fill in the short questionnaire to help us identify the areas where support and solutions are needed. All responses were anonymous. The survey included a free textbox where pupils could give more detailed feedback.

The survey was closed on 20 February 2024, having collected 173 completed responses, the exact same number as in 2022. The response rate was slightly lower (32%), compared to 42% two years ago. However, this still represents a good response rate and number for a survey of this type.

Pupil profile

The respondents to this survey are largely representative of all pupils recorded in the main database as of February 2024¹:

- 62% of respondents are female (62%).
- 28% of respondents are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (25%).
- 90% are in the first six, the same as in the main database.
- 22% indicated that they have a disability (18%).²
- 10% care for a child (11%).
- A third (35%) worked primarily in crime and 70% worked in what is broadly the publicly funded Bar (crime, civil and family).

One area where there was some discrepancy between the survey data and the main data was in schooling: 44% of respondents said they went to a non-selective state school (27%). However, it is worth noting that the question was worded slightly differently in the survey than in the main database. Plus, the response rate to this question in the main database was low.

Overall, the data suggest that the findings from this survey can be assumed to be highly representative of the population of pupils.

Findings

Application process is challenging

Almost half the pupils surveyed said they found the application process ‘quite challenging’ (47%), and 44% said the process was very challenging. This was broadly the same as the last survey in 2022. The need to persevere was reflected in the number of attempts aspiring barristers made to secure pupillage as 69% of respondents said it took two or more rounds:

- A third (34%) said it took two rounds.
- Just under a third (31%) of pupils said that they gained their pupillage after one application round.
- 18% said three rounds.
- 17% said four or more rounds.

Non-selective state-educated pupils were more likely to say that the application process was difficult. The data highlighted that 52% of this demographic found the process ‘very challenging’ compared to 39% of independent and selective school-educated pupils.

¹ The main monitoring data on all barristers is collected in the General Council of the Bar’s database when a pupil registers or a barrister renews their practising certificate each year.

² Disability is defined under the [Equality Act 2010](#) as a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

Better feedback highly requested

When asked what would improve the process, the most frequently cited changes were:

- 'Better feedback on failed applications' (77%).
- 'Chambers replying to applications' (43%).
- 'Improving the Pupillage Gateway platform' (38%).
- 'Advice from current barristers' (35%).

The pupils surveyed wanted the above changes more than improvements to financial resources, access to scholarships and bursaries, support from the Bar course provider, access to professional networks and networking and opportunities, organisations using the Pupillage Gateway, the Bar Council's recruitment portal, and support from the Bar Council. These responses were cited by 30% or less.

I would have liked more avenues of professional networking/recruitment advice during the application process, as I feel that only now in pupillage do I have access to the resources I wish I had earlier.

Greater access to, and information about, mental health support specific to the search for pupillage. Many find this a very challenging process, yet there are almost no resources or information available on how to cope with it. It is also very difficult for anyone outside of the profession to understand precisely why the process is challenging and so it makes talking about it to anyone difficult.

More guidance on what chambers are looking for. Since starting pupillage, I have realised how many people have assistance from barristers in various chambers on their applications or being a 'backer' for them in interview. Those people who do not have that support are significantly disadvantaged. The feedback is an extremely important part of pupillage applications.

Quality and quantity of supervision is well regarded

Pupils surveyed said they were highly satisfied with the supervision they received, both in person and online.

When asked how often and where they met with their supervisor:

- Two-thirds (67%) of pupils said they had in-person or remote supervision with their pupil supervisor at least once daily. This remains stable compared to 2022 (65%).
- Most (72%) said the supervision was mainly in-person.
- Pupils who reported having a disability were more likely to indicate that their supervisions were 'mostly' or 'all remote' (29% compared to 11% of those who did not report a disability).

In-person supervision

When asked how they felt about their in-person supervision: two-thirds of pupils (67%) were 'very happy', 21% were 'broadly happy', and just 6% were 'unhappy'.

Remote supervision

Pupils felt slightly less positive about remote supervision: 57% were 'very happy' and 19% were 'broadly happy'.

Disabled pupils were much more likely to report that they were 'unhappy' (15%) or 'very unhappy' (6%) with their in-person supervision than those pupils with no disability (2% and 1% respectively). There is a similar difference in responses about remote supervision. A fifth (21%) of pupils with a disability said they were 'unhappy' or 'very unhappy' with their remote supervision compared to just 3% of pupils with no disability.

My supervisor takes a very hands-on approach and is regularly reviewing my workload and work product to ensure it is appropriate and meeting my needs and interests. I am very grateful to be working with someone who shows such a keen interest in supporting me with my career path.

One supervisor in particular gave the most comprehensive and detailed feedback I've ever received. Each piece of work would be marked up with what I did well and what could be improved. It was incredibly helpful and reassuring. As well as comprehensive written feedback, he would go through the document with me and give oral feedback to expand on point. It was a gold standard of supervision.

Pupils satisfied with pupillage experience

The overwhelming majority of respondents said their experience was positive as was seen in the last survey. However, satisfaction varied depending on practice area and educational background. As was seen in the responses on supervision, those with a disability were more likely to have a negative experience.

- 86% said that their overall experience of pupillage had been positive compared with 89% in 2022.
- 47% said their experience was 'very positive'.
- Pupils mainly working in crime were more likely to be 'very positive' about their experience (57% compared to 41% of all other pupils).
- Pupils who went to state/non-selective schools were more likely to indicate negative responses (23% compared to 8% of the other pupils).
- Those with a disability were more likely to have had a 'negative experience' of their pupillage so far (22% compared to 3% of those with no disability).

My chambers made me (and my co-pupils) feel so welcome and supported from day one. We complete a lot of work, but we always feel like we can ask for help/support. That has made such a significant difference and, when speaking to friends at other sets, has made my experience much better from an educational perspective as well.

I have found that my chambers has not been supportive regarding my mental health.

Issues with mandatory advocacy training

The most frequently mentioned issue was the mandatory advocacy training. Nine in ten pupils (90%) have been able to book their mandatory advocacy training with their Inn of Court. However, many pupils told us that they found it difficult to book the training. It is worrying that 10% have not been able to book this mandatory course.

Booking onto a pupillage advocacy course was incredibly difficult as there are plainly not enough places made available on such courses run by either the circuit or inns, particularly for those based outside of London. Because of this, I will now have a delayed start to my second six because there were no available places left on courses taking place within my first six. I feel this is something which needs addressing immediately by the Inns.

In addition to challenges with booking, pupils had issues with the course and its content, finding it time-consuming and basic.

I found the amount of work expected for the advocacy course was quite significant.

Chambers will have assessments at different times, or indeed may assess every piece of work. The advocacy course as currently structured can undermine one's ability to perform well in assessments, and thus obtain tenancy.

The mandatory Advocacy Training is incredibly unhelpful and frustrates any pupil I have spoken to. Pupillage is challenging as it is without mandatory sessions which are not of the same quality as what we do during pupillage.

The Advocacy Training provided by my Inn was very inefficient. It was pitched at a bar course level and repeated large amounts of material studied on the bar course (e.g. telling us all what leading questions are). It required days of time commitment and preparation during a key part of most pupils' second seats. I do not understand why it is required at all.

The whole pupil advocacy course run through the Inns is a shambles. It occupies an inordinate amount of time and energy for very little gain.

Thoughts on early career

Most felt a career at the Bar was viable moving forward. Women and those working in crime were less likely to say this. However, those who had a disability were less positive with more than 50% saying it was impossible.

- Two-thirds (65%) said a career at the Bar was viable going forward (61% in 2022).
- 33% said it was somewhat viable (same as in 2022).
- Women (56%) and barristers mainly working in crime (53%) were less likely to say that a career at the Bar was viable.

- Only a handful said it was not viable, most said it was ‘somewhat viable’.
- More than half (53%) of pupils with a disability said they see a career at the Bar as ‘not viable’ (9%) or only ‘somewhat viable’ (44%). The difference in response to pupils with no disability is vast: 2% and 28% respectively.

Drawbacks to a career at the Bar

Work/life balance — or rather lack of it — was the main reason (26%) given as to why a career at the Bar was potentially not viable. Women (32%) were twice as likely as men (16%) to mention work/life balance. Pupils with a disability were also more likely to mention this (50% compared to 19% with no disability).

Pupils with a disability were six times more likely to mention the **culture at the Bar** (24% compared to 4% of pupils with no disability).

‘Insufficient remuneration’ was given as a reason by 14% and concerns about the **viability of their chosen career** (10%). However, these reasons were given more by pupils in crime:

- Pupils mainly working in crime were three times more likely to mention remuneration than all other pupils (26% compared to 7%).
- Pupils working in crime were five times more likely to be worried about the sustainability of their preferred area of practice (21% compared to 4% of all other barristers).

More recommend a career at the Bar

Most pupils surveyed said they would recommend a career at the Bar to others. This year shows a significant improvement in views as 94% said they would ‘definitely’ or ‘possibly’ recommend it compared to 73% in 2022.

- Four in ten (42%) said they would ‘definitely recommend’ it.
- 52% said they ‘possibly’ would.
- Pupils with a disability have a less positive view (15% said they probably would not recommend a career at the Bar compared to just 4% of pupils with no disability).

Legal aid work

More than half (60%) ‘definitely’ envisage doing legal aid work, and a further 14 per cent said they ‘possibly’ would. In response to the same question about pro bono work, almost half (49%) said they ‘definitely’ intend to do it and 43% said they ‘possibly’ will.

Women (69%), state-educated pupils (67%), and those working in crime (88%) and publicly funded areas of the Bar (70%) were most likely to say they ‘definitely’ intend to do it.

Chambers has introduced a 'fair allocation of work' policy which works for all members. Ability to be able to shadow other advocates but keep in touch with my supervisor is very helpful showing me different styles of advocacy so I can find my own. My chambers incentivise pupils to engage in marketing, networking, and skill-sharing opportunities so that we can be integrated into the career from an early stage.

Awards, debt, and financial hardship

Those training to become a barrister in England and Wales receive pupillage awards from their set of chambers. From 1 January 2024 onwards, the minimum pupillage award is £23,078 for 12-month pupillages in London and £21,060 per annum for pupillages outside London.

Our report found that there has been an increase in the pupillage award with the median this year being £30,000-39,999, compared to £20,000-29,999 in 2022.

- Men (29%) are twice as likely as women (14%) to have pupillage awards of £60,000 or more.
- Pupils mainly working in crime are almost twice as likely as those working in other areas to have awards of under £30,000 (58% compared to 30%).
- In publicly funded areas of work (crime, civil, and family) just 7% held awards of £60,000 or more compared to almost half (49%) of those not in publicly funded areas of practice.
- Similar differences were apparent between state/non-selectively educated pupils and other pupils in obtaining awards. More than half (53%) of state/non-selective educated pupils had awards of less than £30,000 compared to 30% of those who were privately educated or went to selective state schools.

Although the pupillage award has increased, the median anticipated debt level has also increased to £50,000-59,999 from £40,000-49,999 in 2022. Most pupils said they were in 'some' or 'a lot' of financial hardship.

- One in four (24%) men had no debt compared to just 7% of women.
- 25% of pupils who were educated in selective/overseas/private schools had no debt compared to 6% of those who went to non-selective UK state schools.
- Four in ten pupils (39%) said that they were in some degree of financial hardship at present. This is almost unchanged since 2022 (42%).
- 9% said they were in a lot of financial hardship.
- Women (50%) were twice as likely as men (24%) to report being in financial hardship.

- State/non-selective educated pupils were also more likely to report financial hardship (49% compared to 32% of those who were not educated in non-selective state schools).

Like many, I am affected by the cost-of-living crisis and am concerned financially as I don't have privilege to rely on like others.

Working hours

The median working hours for pupils remain at 41-50 hours per week, the same as reported in 2022. Although, the average number of pupils working more than 50 hours a week has increased.

- Four in ten (44%) said they work 41-50 hours per week (slightly fewer than the 48% reported in 2022).
- Just 15% work fewer than 41 hours (20% in 2022).
- 41% work more than 50 hours per week compared to a third in 2022 (32%).
- Half (51%) of pupils who work in crime say they do more than 50 hours per week, compared to 36% of those working in other areas of practice.

Stress

Most pupils said their stress levels were 'high' or 'moderate' with no difference in response by area of practice or demographic. Eight in ten (82%) respondents characterised their work-related stress levels as 'moderate' or 'high', a slight increase from 2022 (79%).

The understanding and reasonable adjustments for my disability and medical leave has been exemplary.

Support

Eight in ten pupils said that they felt 'well supported' by their chambers/employer. 47% said they felt 'very' well supported while 37% felt 'quite' well supported.

Importantly, although the overall responses were very positive, pupils with a disability are less likely to feel 'quite well supported' (29%) or 'very well supported' (38%) by their chambers than pupils with no disability (38% and 52% respectively).

My chambers regularly had one-to-one coffees with the head of the diversity team to check in on how I was coping with the workload. I found this helpful and supportive.

Bullying, harassment, and discrimination

While incidents of bullying, harassment and discrimination are lower among pupils than they are across the Bar in general, they are relatively high. A similar level of incidents were reported in 2022. As was seen in the last report, pupils are much more likely to report that the incident took place in person than online.

- One in five (18%) pupils indicated that they have personally experienced bullying, harassment and/or discrimination, either in person or online (19% in 2022).
- When including observation of bullying, harassment, and discrimination, the above figure increases to 26%.
- 44 respondents out of 173 said they experienced or observed bullying, harassment, or discrimination.
- One in twelve (8%) indicated personal experience of bullying and harassment and 15% indicated they had personally experienced discrimination.
- Personal experience of bullying, harassment and/or discrimination is considerably higher among women (28%) than among men (3%).
- Bullying, harassment and/or discrimination is more prevalent among disabled pupils (41% compared to just 13% of pupils with no disability).

Members of chambers [are] mostly all friendly, supportive and approachable, but one supervisor is known for bullying. Little is done to protect pupils from this and the nature of pupillage makes it difficult to raise/challenge. Complete lack of reasonable adjustments or discussion around "hidden" disabilities/neurodiversity, particularly compared to visible/physical disabilities.

What is this behaviour linked to?

Among those who said they had experienced or observed bullying harassment or discrimination, most said it was linked to a protected characteristic.

- Four in ten (39%) said it was linked to **gender**.
- 30% said it was linked to **race**.
- 25% said **disability**.
- 16% said it had to do with '**feedback or work**'.
- 7% said it was **sexual harassment**.

Who was responsible?

Most often responsibility for the bullying, harassment or discrimination was seen to be **another barrister** (43% of the 44 respondents), one in five (21%) said it was their **pupil supervisor**, and 16% said a **member of the judiciary**.

I was told that I needed to be careful about talking openly about my disabilities online as that may and likely will result in me being discriminated against by solicitors. Not super encouraging.

I've heard comments said to others which made me feel uncomfortable - it's all been said by a senior person in chambers in a 'workplace banter' context. The other people who receive these comments seem fine, but I sometimes feel uncomfortable and wish that there was an option to not be spoken to like that. But at the same time, it might just be the way that person communicates and it's not a huge issue, it just makes me feel uncomfortable sometimes.