

Case study: Doughty Street Chambers

Doughty Street Chambers (DSC) was set up in 1990 by 30 independent-minded barristers, who were aiming to break the mould of traditional chambers by moving out of the Inns of Court and setting new standards of professionalism and excellence in the legal world. That desire for justice and excellence remains the driving force behind all that they do in Chambers

DSC is now three times its original size with 90 members, including 16 QCs. Its aim is to provide an outstanding, accessible and sensitive service to a broad range of clients in accordance with their commitment to the promotion of human rights and civil liberties through the law.

Company values

The values that define DCS can be summarised as a commitment:

- to human rights; this includes a recognition that the poorest citizen is not made equal to the richest corporation simply by according them the same rights, and is part of a liberal tradition of defending freedom and citizens' rights irrespective of the popularity of the cause or the client
- to maintaining an undisputed reputation for excellence, providing a service that is efficient, responsive and at a price customers are prepared to pay
- to ensuring that principles of equality, respect and diversity are embodied both in the service it provides to clients and in the recruitment, training and support policies it promotes

The interview was conducted with Robin Jackson, Director of Services. Robin's background was in the military, where he helped develop and implement the Equal Opportunities Policy for the army, and subsequently in operations roles in the commercial sector.

Applications for pupillage

Doughty Street Chambers offers three pupillages a year. For these, it receives around five hundred applications. It usually offers one placement, or tenancy, per year to the pupils, as long as they meet their criteria and performance requirements.

Like many chambers, DSC uses OLPAS, the online pupillage application system, which is accessed through www.pupillages.com. This is a comprehensive site providing access to all pupillage vacancies in England and Wales, including non-OLPAS ones, as well as information about each of the Chambers and the terms of the pupillage.

DSC sets its remuneration levels at about the average. It also recruits non-legal staff and both junior and experienced barristers' clerks.

A common denominator for all its vacancies is a requirement to demonstrate a commitment to human rights. Robin Jackson says:

"[The original members had] a very strong civil liberties, human rights angle to both their ethos and their practice ... and we still maintain that form of ethos and apply that to all our recruitment."

Applicants may apply for a pupillage direct from university after completing a law degree or the law conversion course and either before starting or after completing the Bar Vocational Course (BVC). This is a year-long vocational course for graduates intending to become barristers. Once you have completed the BVC, you have five years to secure a pupillage with a set of Chambers.

Pupillages are awarded a year in advance, so DSC would make an offer at the end of July to be taken up in October the following year. DSC tends to attract applicants who have some previous work experience, "maybe with a humanitarian NGO, a UN organisation or with some

organisation furthering civil liberties like Justice or Reprieve. But ultimately, it's the calibre and dedication of the applicant that is the key, not their background or previous experience."

Sifting applications

The sifting of the typically 500 applications per year is done by five or six panels of two barristers who would "look at all the applications... and assess them and grade them, swap them over, get together, discuss any discrepancies between their marking... Then all the panels get together to discuss all the applications."

Each panel uses the same criteria, which are made available on OLPAS. The panels would select 50 candidates for interview.

Interviews

The first interview panel is made up of two to three barristers, at least one of whom will be a senior barrister. These interviews are conducted against criteria that the candidates are told about. About 10 candidates will be invited back for a second interview with a panel of five, chaired by a QC.

"We've already identified quite a few checks and balances along the way to make sure that there is the opportunity for every applicant to show their ability and that there is very little scope for a purely subjective opinion."

Five candidates would be offered pupillages, which would commence a year later.

Pupillage

Pupillage is divided into two six months periods, known as 'first six' and 'second six'.

"First six is very much learning the procedural ropes and the second six is actually getting out into court."

During the pupillage, pupils will have a supervisor who is a senior barrister, and, if necessary, a criminal law barrister as a further legal mentor. They will be given different supervisors for the first and second sixes. In order to ensure that assessment is based on as wide an appraisal as possible, pupils will be encouraged to both seek and be given work by other barristers.

Every three months they will have a formal review with their supervisor and a written assessment. They do three pieces of formally assessed work throughout the twelve months, set and marked by different barristers.

Doughty Street Chambers would usually offer one of the pupils a tenancy at the end of their pupillage, as long as they meet the criteria and level of performance throughout the year. This decision is made by every member of Chambers at a vote. They will have been supplied with copies of all the assessment reports, the results of a formal interview and advocacy test, and references from people with whom they have worked.

Other recruitment routes

When it comes to recruiting tenants other than from pupillage, this would be based on the business requirements, linked to each team's annual action plan and then agreed by the Management Committee.

All posts are advertised (on DSC's website or in the Bar Council journal), except in exceptional cases where DCC might either approach someone or respond to a request. However, the company would still need to go through the standard application process.

All interviewees are given feedback from their interview, although DSC does not routinely give feedback to applicants who do not make it to the interview stage.

Mini-pupillage courses

DSC also organises two mini-pupillage courses each year. On each occasion, it takes 10–12 pupils. On each day of the course pupils are offered the opportunity to attend court or other hearings, or to work in Chambers. Early evening sessions are also organised on specialist areas of work (with practitioners), legal information, and on building a career at the Bar.

The courses aim to give individuals an understanding of life in Chambers as well as an insight into the workings of the legal system. The mini-pupillage weeks are intended purely for work experience. The criteria used for assessing mini-pupillage applications are different from those applied to pupillage.

Outreach

DSC also holds seminars, which it advertises on its website and through various legal publications. These are often attended by university students. The company also has a programme of sponsorship and donations to causes that are related to the ethos of the Chambers.

DSC has a stand at the National Pupils Fair:

"We obviously want to display as accurate a picture ... as possible so we send along a mix of senior [and] junior barristers as well as ... existing pupils. DSC does not overtly state that they want to recruit from particular sectors but in the way we talk about the Chambers we can represent the relatively successful diverse mix of the people who make up Chambers, both on the staff and the barristers' side. As far as disability is concerned, we make sure that we would accommodate anyone with a disability or anyone with difficulties ... in the selection process."

Conclusion

The desire for justice and excellence which informed the setting up of the Chambers remains the ethos and informs its recruitment. However, the Chambers also sees the business case for diversity:

"I see anything other than diversity as a narrowing of opportunity and that's not just narrowing opportunity in the people who might come and work with you, but it's probably a narrowing of opportunity in all sorts of business you might attract... There is a strong business case ... for diversity."

DSC has achieved the cooperation of all of Chambers in its recruitment process, which ensures that all are committed to diversity. This also ensures fairness, as so many people are involved in the assessment of each pupil and in the final decisions on tenancy, so individual bias is avoided. Robin also emphasised using other people's good practice – "don't try and reinvent the wheel."