

The Bar Council has been working closely with the Chairs of the Education and Training, and Ethics, Committees to assess whether the Pupillage Gateway timetable ought to be extended in response to recent government guidance covering self-isolation, social distancing and non-essential travel.

We are conscious that the outbreak of coronavirus has already caused a significant level of disruption for the Bar and, when assessing the risk attached to continuing with the current timetable, we have had to balance the interests of every AETO using the Pupillage Gateway; some of whom have expressed a desire to see the timetable extended and others who have already completed their interview processes and are now waiting to make an offer. Perhaps more importantly we have also had to consider the position of those applying for pupillage and we take the view that any delay to pupillage decisions would operate unfairly on the candidates, in so far as it might serve to further impact upon the anxiety many of them will currently be facing and will leave some having to decide whether to pay for relevant training prior to having secured a future pupillage. We believe that in the current climate it is important to offer applicants some stability as to their future careers and we are confident that AETOs will be able to use remote methods to interview. Further, we are concerned that a widespread delay in offers (causing a reduction in the number of pupillages being secured in May 2020) will lead to an increase in the number of prospective barristers paying for the new vocational element of Bar training without having the security of a future pupillage; a position we sought to correct some years ago by moving the Pupillage Gateway timetable from Q2/Q3 to Q4/Q1.

Whilst we are naturally sympathetic to those who are concerned that they will not be able to complete face to face interviews before 7 May 2020 we think that it is better to use alternative methods for interviews, rather than to postpone, especially given that there is no basis on which to judge when that extension ought to run to.

We are, as ever, keen to support AETOs with the continuation of their recruitment. We offer the following advice:

- We encourage all AETOs to expedite their processes to ensure that they can offer enough flexibility to those candidates who may not be able to attend as a result of self-isolation i.e. by aiming to have completed any final round interviews before the week beginning Monday 20 April 2020 (thereby ensuring they have two weeks in which to run any postponed interviews). The Bar Standards Board has announced that the April BPTC Centralised Assessments have been cancelled, which should offer all AETOs increased scheduling flexibility.
- We suggest that all AETOs take as flexible an approach as possible, particularly where candidates are asking to reschedule during a period of self-isolation resulting from illness.
- Due to the fact that the Government has made it clear that we should be seeking to distance ourselves socially, we encourage all AETOs to avoid having candidates physically present at their offices and to run future interviews by video conference, using either internal equipment, Skype, Google Hangouts or similar. We are conscious that, for many, this isn't the most desirable method of interviewing.

However, it is commonplace in other industries and is necessary in the current environment.

When contacting candidates, we suggest that AETOs ask for them to provide any details required in order to participate in the interview, including a number on which they can be reached should the connection fail. We also advise AETOs to offer prospective pupils some guidance on their expected attire, to reassure them that they will be assessed based on their answers and not their surroundings, and to ask them that they avoid distractions by, for example, switching other devices to silent or asking those who share their home not to disturb them for the duration of the interview.

Where an AETO is unable to continue with their current recruitment process or timetable either resulting from financial uncertainty or insuperable technological difficulties, they can defer their decision making and the time at which they make offers until after the Pupillage Gateway timetabled date of 09:00 on 7 May 2020.

If they intend to do this we've asked that they ensure that they have communicated this to all who have applied to them and that they defer the making of any offer until at least 22 May 2020, by which time all candidates will have had an opportunity to accept any offers they received through the Pupillage Gateway.

Relevant AETOs have also been asked to note that their recruitment process must be completed by close of business on 30 October 2020 at the latest i.e. the day before the new single mandatory recruitment timetable is enforced.