

A year like no other: the chambers' perspective

How have chambers changed in the face of the COVID crisis? One year on, **Jane Bewsey QC** of Red Lion Chambers provides a status report



With 23 March 2020 marking the anniversary of the first lockdown, it seems like a good time to look back over the year of COVID-19—and what a very long year it has felt. In April 2020, I wrote about how our chambers, Red Lion Chambers (RLC), was coping with the nature of the crisis and what impact it was expected to have on our work and working practices (bit.ly/30SaUha). I wrote at a time when the courts were shut, the work pipeline had been turned off, and there were very real fears about the future survival prospects for many chambers and individuals practising at the independent Bar.

One year on, we have seen some courts reopening, we have learnt how to do remote hearings, and Teams/Zoom meetings have become a routine part of all our lives. Each of us has had our own individual challenges—personal, professional and financial. Some have fared better than others. As a chambers, we have been fortunate throughout the year to have had outstanding leadership from our joint heads of chambers, Gillian Jones QC and Antony Shaw QC, excellent financial management from chambers' treasurers, and a dedicated and professional clerking team led by Mark Bennett, our practice manager. But there is no getting away from it—this year has been tough.

Rapid response

How has chambers coped? The short answer is, perhaps, better than we feared we might when I was writing a year ago. Even before lockdown was announced, chambers had set up a COVID Response Team (CRT) comprised of members and staff, to be responsible for implementing measures and communicating action to members. The aim of the CRT was to put in place a fluid strategy to meet the fast moving and changing challenges. We had a plan to meet the logistical and financial problems that were ahead. That plan was swiftly put into operation. It has been reviewed and updated throughout the year as government advice and the challenges changed.

From the outset, the CRT was acutely aware that the individual wellbeing of all members and staff had to be placed front and centre. It

was soon obvious that the challenges being faced by the junior members of chambers and our pupils were different to those of us at the other end of our careers. Measures providing financial support for those at the outset of their lives at the Bar were put in place. As the courts began to reopen, there were further challenges thrown up and faced. There were a great many discussions about how to protect the safety of individual members and pupils attending court. The CRT was clear that although it was always an individual's decision, members would be supported if they felt unable to go to court.

One of the biggest challenges has been how to keep members and staff connected. Microsoft Teams was provided to all members and staff at the outset of the pandemic. Everything to do with chambers life, both professional and social, moved online. The clerks room became virtual overnight, our clerks quickly adapting to remote working, with some in the clerking team furloughed until the workflow picked up. The RLC lecture series successfully adapted and moved online (bit.ly/3bW7U9V). Pupils received advocacy training over Microsoft Teams. Chambers set up weekly members' virtual chats mirroring call bands, giving every member a voice, and distributed a bi-weekly newsletter as well as practice updates to keep everyone connected. We have had quiz nights and other ad hoc virtual social events. In other words, all of us have adapted and learnt new ways of working, ways of connecting and of coping. But with the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel afforded by the vaccine roll-out and the government road map out of lockdown, all of us are now beginning to look to the future and start to plan for the post-lockdown world.

Reasons to be cheerful

Throughout the pandemic, RLC remained committed to promoting a strong, diverse, independent Bar. We supported the Bridging the Bar initiative with the aim to increase diversity in the profession, and continued our bespoke mentoring programme with East London Business Alliance as well as supporting the SHIFT25 campaign promoting

justice and equality for all. We also continue to champion Women at the Bar, recently celebrating the International Women's Day #ChooseToChallenge campaign. Furthermore, we will be holding a fundraiser webinar event with Clean Break Theatre in late April entitled 'Endless Sentences: How communities can extend women's sentences after release', looking at women who go through the criminal justice system and the challenges they face upon release (bit.ly/38TFiw4). The plans and campaigns we support ensure chambers will remain at the forefront of their commitment now and for the years to come.

There are things which we have learned that have worked really well and made our lives during lockdown easier. I expect that we will continue to have virtual conferences and committee meetings over Teams/Zoom where they are more time efficient than meeting face to face. Remote hearings for short administrative hearings again offer time efficiencies. How we order our working lives and use our buildings in the future is a conversation that is happening in organisations large and small across the world. Chambers is no different. Many of us hope that flexible working practices are here to stay and will become the norm given their potential benefit in supporting a better work/life balance going forward.

These are just some of the things that we have adopted out of necessity that we will keep when this is all over, but, there are some things that are just better when you do them in person, face to face, in real life.

When we surveyed our members during lockdown, the thing that was mentioned most often by those of every age was that they missed social interaction—not the formal meetings, but the bumping into someone in chambers, the quick chat over a coffee, the post-court drink, the chance to bounce an idea off another. So rather than looking back at all that we have missed, I am choosing to look forward to meeting again in person, to working together day to day, and perhaps a jolly good party!

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