

N E W S R E L E A S E

Ref no: MA

Issued: 1st February 2011

Birmingham City Council leads the way for Pupillages in Local Government

Having completed the Bar Course, Patrick Keith took paralegal work with some corporate solicitors' firms while applying for pupillage. One day, he replied to an agency advert for an employment paralegal with Birmingham City Council ("BCC").

BCC employs over 50,000 people and the employment team within the Legal Department is exceptionally busy. Patrick was given responsibility and opportunity to be heavily involved with the Single Status litigation, which dealt with thousands of claims of unfair dismissal following the pay and grading reviews. In recognition of his efforts, he was promoted to a solicitor grade.

When BCC offered its very first Pupillage in Local Government, in open competition, Patrick keenly applied and there was a three-stage selection process; which included the preparation of a briefing note for leading members.

As the largest local authority in Europe serving a population of just over a Million, with an annual budget of £3.4 Billion, Birmingham has the largest in-house Legal Department with some 250 fee earners, who deal with all aspects of legal work; such as commercial contracts, civil and criminal litigation, child care, education; employment; health & safety; personal injury; property and planning matters.

Patrick said:

"I was fortunate in being able to gain experience across the breadth of the legal work, which included legal research, drafting pleadings and conducting hearings in court. I was keen to do some marshalling, so contacted my Inn and was allocated an Old Bailey judge. I spent two weeks watching a murder trial from start to finish, and was able to accompany the judge back to his chambers at the end of each session to discuss the case as it progressed. It was an excellent experience, and one which I recommend to anyone. "

Patrick's pupil supervisor was Dr Mirza Ahmad, Barrister & Corporate Director of Governance at BCC. Day to day supervision was provided by the relevant Heads of Law. Patrick accompanied his supervisor to Council and Cabinet meetings, as well as discussing the main aspects of being an in-house lawyer to BCC. He also helped to produce, for example, Briefing Notes for Members on the effect of new legislation and BCC's duties & responsibilities surrounding politically restricted posts.

To complement Patrick's pupillage with some practical experience of life in chambers, Dr Mirza Ahmad organised a 3 months secondment opportunity during my second 6 months with a progressive set of Chambers in Birmingham: St Philips. For 4 weeks, Patrick observed hearings and did advice work, receiving a thorough grounding across all the areas he would cover. He was then put in at the deep end by conducting a two-day Employment Tribunal hearing for constructive unfair dismissal (and won!). Over the remainder of his time in Chambers, Patrick

covered courtrooms from Oxford to Stoke-on-Trent, in private and public family work, civil, employment, commercial and crime.

Patrick said:

“I learnt a lot during my pupillage, from improved advocacy and written skills to managing my own practice, both in the public and private sectors. Perhaps most importantly however, I learnt the value of spending time with experienced counsel, asking questions and preparing each case thoroughly. At the beginning of my pupillage, I was told that cases are won or lost in Chambers, not in court. This was valuable advice and I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to put it into practice, both in barristers’ chambers and in BCC. “

Dr Mirza Ahmad said:

“Patrick has worked exceptionally hard to make his pupillage a success for Birmingham. We have shown that Pupillages in Local Government can and do work, as they provide a refreshing opportunity for pupils to learn all aspects of what a busy in-house Legal Department does and, in the process, we have produced a well rounded lawyer who will prove to be a credit to the legal profession, as a whole. I thank St Phillips Chambers, in particular, for their valuable support and for their progressive in-sight in making this a success.

“Despite the current squeeze on public sector finances, I encourage all local authorities to think beyond the transient constraints and follow Birmingham’s example by investing in the future. I commend Pupillages in Local Government.”

James Burbidge QC, Head of St Phillips Chambers, said:

“We are delighted to have worked with Mirza Ahmad and Birmingham City Council’s Legal Department to ensure Patrick Keith’s secondment opportunity with St Phillips Chambers was a successful model for Pupillages in Local Government. We wish Patrick success as a Barrister”.

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. Patrick Keith was the first person to complete a Pupillage with Birmingham City Council and he could well be the only person, currently, or in living memory to have completed a Pupillage in Local Government.
2. Such an achievement is very rare and Dr Mirza Ahmad has been instrumental, over the past few years, in pushing the boundaries of this initiative for the benefit of Birmingham City Council and the legal profession, as a whole, as there remains a colossal demand for pupillages.

For further information contact Mirza Ahmad on 0121 303 9991