

King's Counsel Appointments Reach 105 in Largest Group for Four Years

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A total of 105 advocates in England and Wales have been appointed to the prestigious position of King's Counsel (KC), marking the largest cohort in four years. However, the Bar Council has expressed concern over the absence of successful Black applicants in this year's appointments.

This year's selections are also notable for the fact that just one solicitor, Sheila Ahuja, has been appointed as a KC. Ahuja, a partner at A&O Shearman in Singapore, was one of five solicitors who applied, and one of two solicitor candidates invited for an interview.

The 2024 competition, which saw its selection process overseen by Labour Lord Chancellor Shabana Mahmood, was conducted by the independent KC Selection Panel. This year, 18 applicants declared an ethnic origin other than white, resulting in a 30% success rate for ethnic minorities—comparable to the previous two years, which saw success rates of 27% and 33%. However, no Black applicants were successful out of the 10 who applied. Barbara Mills KC, chair of the Bar Council, expressed her concern, stating: "There is a need to understand better the factors that impact the success of Black applicants, as well as ensuring the right support is available for those wishing to apply to demonstrate their excellence in advocacy." Mills further committed the Bar's Race Panel to create a programme that would support Black barristers, particularly those considering or applying for silk.

Shah, chair of the KC Selection Panel, also shared his concerns, acknowledging the challenges Black applicants face in demonstrating their excellence in higher courts, but stressed the panel's ongoing outreach efforts to improve representation.

In terms of disability representation, eight successful applicants declared a disability, representing a 42% success rate. While this is still a strong figure, it has decreased from 47% the previous year.

This year's cohort was chosen from 326 applicants, which represents a 32% success rate. While the number of applications was the highest in over a decade, the success rate continues to show a gradual decline from 45% in 2018.

The total number of appointments this year is the highest in four years, with 95 appointments in 2023, 101 in 2021, and 105 in 2024. Notably, men outnumbered women in the appointments, with 72 male KCs compared to 33 female KCs. However, female applicants had a higher success rate, with 39% of female applicants succeeding, compared to 30% of male applicants. Shah congratulated all those appointed, saying: "I would like to offer my congratulations to all the new silks announced today. The selection process is rigorous and demanding, and I believe that every one of these new silks will be a credit to their profession."

There was no appointment from the five employed barristers who applied this year, following a similar result in 2023, when only one employed barrister was successful.

Mills also commented on the ongoing challenges faced by employed barristers, stating: "For employed barristers, taking silk as a sign of career progression remains a key challenge given that the KC scheme is so heavily focused on advocacy."

On a personal note, Sheila Ahuja expressed her gratitude for the honour, saying: "I am truly honoured to receive this recognition and am deeply grateful to my family, friends, colleagues and clients for their unwavering support."

Marie Stoyanov, global co-head of arbitration at A&O Shearman, added: "I am so pleased that Sheila has been awarded silk. She is an exceptionally gifted lawyer, a very talented advocate, and a star of arbitration. If anyone deserves this mark of recognition, it is Sheila."

Ahuja's appointment follows the trend of just one solicitor-advocate being appointed in the previous two years, with Hussein Haeiri KC of Withers and Mike McClure KC of Herbert Smith Freehills both appointed in 2023 and 2022, respectively. The number of solicitor advocates appointed has now reached its lowest point since 2010 for the third consecutive year, a trend that the Law Society, contacted for comment, may find concerning.