



Law Society
of Northern Ireland



Enhancing Access to the Profession

A Consultation on Training and Entry Pathways in Northern Ireland

Consultation Report

August 2025

Foreword

The solicitor profession in Northern Ireland is built on strong foundations of public trust, professional integrity and a commitment to safeguarding the rule of law. Yet, like many professions, it must evolve in response to changing societal needs, shifting career expectations, and growing demands for diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

This consultation report represents a significant step in the Law Society of Northern Ireland's work to ensure that our qualification and training pathways remain fit for purpose, supporting both the current and future needs of the profession and the communities we serve. It is the product of extensive engagement with members, trainees, legal educators, other regulators, government departments, and the wider legal community.

The consultation findings reveal a desire for reform, with support for flexible entry routes, such as solicitor apprenticeships, part-time and hybrid pathways, and returner programmes. These new models reflect the realities facing many aspiring solicitors, including financial pressures, geographic barriers, and non-traditional life circumstances. At the same time, respondents rightly emphasised the need to protect the quality and consistency of solicitor training with the clear message that any change must be carefully implemented and preserve professional standards and educational integrity.

This report sets out clear recommendations and an ambitious action plan. We are committed to working in close partnership with stakeholders to take these proposals forward, ensuring that future pathways into the profession continue to attract, support, and develop the highest calibre of solicitors.

On behalf of the Law Society of Northern Ireland, I wish to thank all who participated in this process. Your contributions are helping to shape a more modern, inclusive, and resilient solicitor profession for Northern Ireland.



Darren Toombs

Chair, Education Committee
Law Society of Northern Ireland

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Glossary of Terms

Apprentice (trainee solicitor)	A student of the Society undertaking a solicitor's traineeship (apprenticeship) by attending at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies and at their training firm.
Armitage Report	The report of the Committee under the Chairmanship of Professor Armitage published in 1973.
Bar of Northern Ireland	A profession of over 600 self employed barristers in independent practice.
Bromley Report	The report of the Bromley Committee reviewing vocational legal training published in April 1985.
Council of Legal Education (CLE)	The governing body of the Institute of Professional Legal Studies.
Education Committee	The Education Committee of the Law Society of Northern Ireland that deals with policy and practical matters arising out of the education, training and admission of solicitors in Northern Ireland.
Government Legal Services (GLSNI)	Government Legal Services for Northern Ireland The membership includes all NI government lawyers employed in organisations belonging to GLSNI. Participating organisations include: Public Prosecution Service, Departmental Solicitor's Office, Crown Solicitor's Office, Office of Legislative Counsel, Coroner's Service for Northern Ireland, National Crime Agency and Land Registry.

Institute of Professional Legal Studies (IPLS)	The provider of vocational solicitor training in Northern Ireland, based at Queen's University Belfast.
Indentures of Apprenticeship	The current training arrangement where a trainee (apprentice) is contracted to a solicitor (Master) for training.
LawCare	An independent charity supporting mental health and wellbeing in the legal community across the UK.
Law Society of Ireland	The educational, representative and regulatory body of the solicitors' profession in the Republic of Ireland.
Law Society of Northern Ireland (LSNI)	The Law Society of Northern Ireland is the professional body for the solicitors' profession in Northern Ireland.
Law Society of Scotland	The Law Society of Scotland is the professional body for Scottish solicitors.
Office of the Attorney General	Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland.
Office of the Lady Chief Justice	The Office of the Lady Chief Justice in Northern Ireland.
Regulations	The Solicitors Admission and Training Regulations 1988 (as amended); the Solicitors Admission and Training (Qualification of Masters) Regulations 1988 (as amended).

**Solicitor Modern
Apprenticeship**

A training pathway enabling qualification through a longer-term, funded apprenticeship model that integrates academic study and work-based training.

SRA

The Solicitors Regulation Authority.

QUB

Queen's University Belfast.

Executive Summary

- 1 The Law Society of Northern Ireland undertook a consultation between December 2024 and March 2025 on the future of solicitor training and qualification pathways in Northern Ireland. The consultation sought responses on nine options and aimed to explore how the current vocational training model could be enhanced to promote greater access, inclusion, and professional readiness.
- 2 A total of 125 responses were received (including 113 responses to the consultation survey) representing a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, including law firms, trainees, public sector organisations, regulators, and academic institutions. Quantitative and qualitative responses were gathered through surveys and written submissions.
- 3 There is support for reform, with over 80% of respondents to the consultation survey opposing the status quo. Strong support emerged for introducing part-time/hybrid pathways, a solicitor modern apprenticeship scheme, experience-based and returner routes. These were viewed as critical to improving access for underrepresented groups, supporting social mobility, and modernising legal education.
- 4 More mixed views were expressed in relation to proposals such as replacing indentures with training contracts at approved training firms, extending or re-sequencing in-office training, and removing the formal training contract altogether. Respondents raised concerns about implementation, potential burdens on smaller firms, and risks to training quality and supervision.
- 5 The report concludes that while there is appetite for reform, any changes must be incremental, evidence-based, and carefully balanced to protect professional standards, avoid unintended consequences, and ensure the training system remains inclusive, sustainable, and fit for the future.

1. Introduction

Background

- 1.1 On 3 December 2024, the Society launched a consultation seeking input from members and other interested parties on the current vocational training and entry routes into the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. This initiative draws on and further develops recent engagement activities, recognising the need to reassess, and potentially reform, the pathways to qualification in response to evolving professional demands. The consultation remained open until 14 March 2025.

Purpose and Objectives

- 1.2 The overarching objectives of the consultation were to:

- Gather views of members and other stakeholders on the current vocational training system
- Explore how vocational training and qualification pathways can be enhanced to align with evolving professional needs
- Identify barriers and challenges for aspiring solicitors

By engaging with members and stakeholders, the Society sought to develop an informed and collaborative approach to refining solicitor qualification pathways.

Methodology

- 1.3 The consultation aimed to engage a wide range of stakeholders and the approach taken is set out below.

Consultation Document

- 1.4 Following a preliminary stakeholder engagement exercise in 2024, a consultation paper was published (Annex A). This outlined:

- The background and context of the current vocational training system.
- The existing routes to qualification and entry into the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland.
- The rationale for change – the shifting legal landscape.
- Nine reform options for consideration (Options A-I).
- Clear instructions for how to respond.

Submission Channels

- 1.5 Respondents were invited to share their views via:

- An online survey response form
- Email submissions to a designated consultation mailbox
- Printed responses posted to the Society's Professional Development Department

This multi-format approach was designed to maximise accessibility and participation.

Target Audience and Promotion

1.6 The consultation was shared widely across:

- Solicitors (across private practice, in-house, and public sector)
- Trainees and early-career legal professionals
- Regulatory, academic, and government stakeholders (including CLE, IPLS, QUB, Ulster University, Bar of Northern Ireland, and Department of Finance)
- Local careers and support organisations (e.g., Northern Ireland Schools & Colleges Careers Association, LawCare)

Data Collection and Analysis

1.7 Responses included both quantitative data (via structured survey questions) and qualitative insights (via open-text responses and written submissions). Analysis focused on:

- Levels of agreement/disagreement with each proposed option
- Thematic analysis of narrative responses
- Stakeholder-specific insights

This analysis enabled a balanced understanding of both statistical trends and nuanced professional perspectives.

Response

1.8 In total, 125 responses were received, with the majority (113) submitted via the survey response form.

1.9 Respondents represented a cross-section of the profession, including solicitors from both small and large firms, in-house legal professionals, and those working in the public sector. Other key stakeholders contributing views included the Council of Legal Education, Institute of Professional Legal Studies, the Bar of Northern Ireland, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Lady Chief Justice, the Department of Finance, Government Legal Services. Responses were also received from Queen's University, Ulster University, the Open University, Solicitors Regulation Authority, Law Society of Scotland and Law Society Ireland. A number of responses were also received from trainees.

- 1.10 The response demonstrates broad engagement, not only from across the profession, but also key stakeholders within government, education, and regulatory and support organisations.

Respondent Profile

1.11 Respondent Type

Individuals	102
Organisations ¹	23

Gender Breakdown

Female	67
Male	40
Prefer not to say	2

Sector Representation

Private Practice	79
Public Sector	14
Other	19
Academic	8
In-house	5

Geographic Distribution

Based in Belfast	87
Located outside Belfast	38

¹ Note: Organisations include other Law Societies, regulators, academic institutions, government departments, and LawCare.

2. Overview of Key Findings

- 2.1 The response has generally been supportive, with many welcoming the proposals and some expressing the view that changes are long overdue.
- 2.2 At the same time, we have heard from stakeholders who believe the proposals should go further, as well as those who have raised concerns. These include potential impacts on firms, aspiring solicitors, and the training provider - particularly regarding increased administrative burden and the risk of creating unintended barriers.
- 2.3 We take all views seriously. The responses we have received will play a key role in shaping our thinking on future pathways.
- 2.4 A general observation, reflected in the experiences of the Law Society of Ireland and the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), is that when reforming qualification and entry routes to the solicitor profession, incremental change is often preferable to radical, one-off structural reform.

High-Level Summary of Response Themes

- 2.5 There is support to modernise solicitor training in Northern Ireland, by introducing flexible and accessible routes into the profession.
- 2.6 However, respondents also emphasise that any change must protect educational integrity, public confidence, and standards of practice.

There is a desire for reform, but views vary widely on how this can be achieved

- 2.7
 - A majority of survey respondents disagree with Option A: Do nothing.
 - Other responses provided strong support for the current vocational training system and alternative options/proposals provided that standards are maintained.

- A marginal majority of the survey respondents agreed with extending the length of in-office training and/or re-sequencing the existing model.
- A more significant majority disagreed with Option E (Probationary Solicitor model) citing reasons such as:
 - o Risk of creating “part-qualified” solicitors
 - o Financial pressures for students
 - o Reduced firm accountability
 - o Potential regulatory issues

There is demand for increased flexibility and inclusion

- 2.8
- A majority of respondents support the introduction of:
 - o A Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme (Option F)
 - o Part-time/Hybrid routes (Option G)
 - o Alternative work-based routes (Option H)
 - o A Returners Programmes (Option I)

Respondents regarded the introduction of such routes into the profession as important steps in enhancing diversity, retention, and access.

There were mixed reactions to “Approved Training Firms” Model (Option B)

- 2.9
- Opinion was divided towards the proposal to revise Regulations to introduce training contracts with Approved Training Firms to replace the existing Indentures of Apprenticeship.
 - Concerns were voiced that this could disproportionately affect smaller, rural practices and create barriers to accessing the profession.

Emphasis on Wellbeing, Supervision and Mentoring emerged as a common response theme.

- 2.10
- Several respondents highlighted the importance of enhancing support for trainees and newly qualified solicitors, for example through mentoring, to minimise wellbeing risks, supervision gaps, and mental health pressures on junior solicitors.
 - Suggestions were also made for more formalised people management training for Masters/training supervisors. In addition, the need to embed wellbeing and resilience-building skills into training was emphasised.

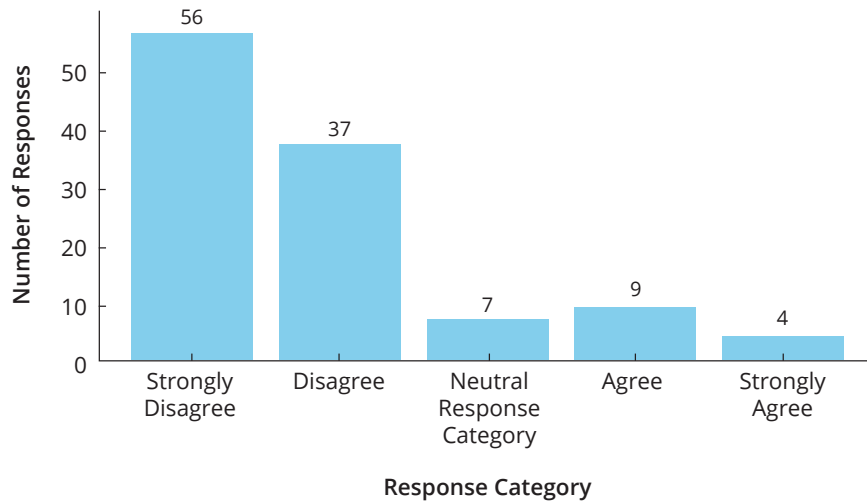
3. Analysis

- 3.1
- A full description of all options is provided within the consultation paper in Annex A. What follows is a detailed analysis of stakeholder responses to each of the nine proposed options. This analysis draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to capture views from across the profession and wider stakeholder groups. For each option, the report presents an overview of the prevailing sentiment, supported by illustrative comments that reflect a balanced range of perspectives, both for and against.

Option A: Do Nothing – Maintain the Current System

- 3.2
- Over 80% of respondents to the consultation survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with doing nothing and maintaining the status quo.

Figure 3(a): Stakeholder Responses to Option A



- 3.3 Qualitative feedback reinforces this, with some responses citing the system as outdated, inaccessible, fragmented, and financially prohibitive.

Access & Fairness Concerns

“The current system is outdated and unfair. It relies on securing a Master, which limits access based on personal connections and financial means. It deters talented individuals from lower-income or non-traditional backgrounds.”

Practical Deficiencies

“The split between office and IPLS no longer works. It creates a disconnect that prevents proper case progression and practical skill development. Small firms cannot afford to subsidise the training under the new minimum wage requirements.”

Systemic Barriers to Entry

“The current training route is overly long, fragmented, and expensive. It’s inaccessible to those with families, financial obligations, or those living outside Belfast. A full overhaul is needed.”

- 3.4 However, other respondents strongly commended the current system, highlighting its integration of academic and in-office learning, quality assurance, and safeguards against over-qualification without job prospects.

Integrated Learning & High Success Rates

"The current model enshrines the principle of integration between academic learning and in-office experience... ensuring trainees build a direct connection with the profession and contextualise their learning. Statistics show that almost all trainees successfully qualify."

Preservation of Training Quality

"The current Diploma course is fundamentally sound. It ensures all trainees acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to practise competently. Changes must not come at the expense of the quality of professional training."

Caution Against Disruption & Unintended Consequences

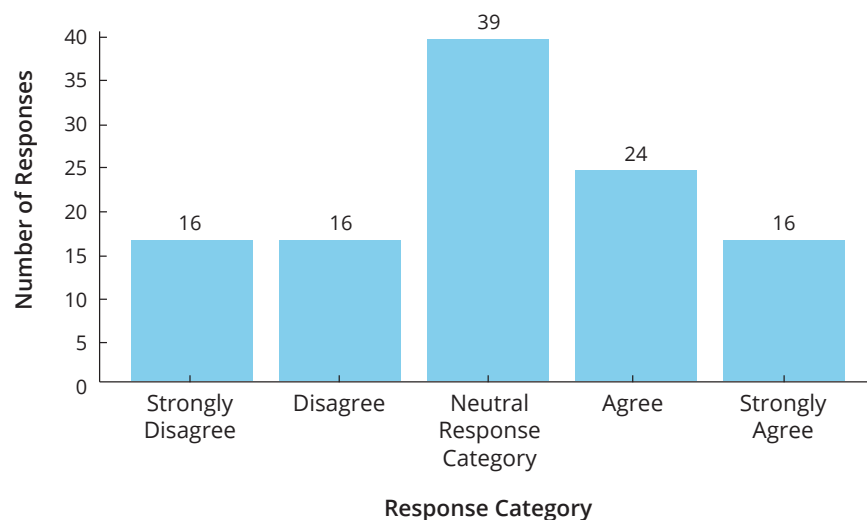
"The current system has a good mix of practical and theoretical learning. If it's not broke, don't fix it. We risk replicating England's system where many complete training but cannot get contracts."

- 3.5 In summary, the prevailing sentiment is that while the system has strengths, there is an opportunity to broaden access and improve sustainability in solicitor training and recruitment.

Option B: Replace Indentures with Training Contracts with Approved Training Firms

3.6 Responses to Option B were cautiously optimistic but divided.

Figure 3(b): Stakeholder Responses to Option B



3.7 Many stakeholders support reforming the current use of indentures to introduce more structure, consistency, and oversight through training contracts with approved training firms. They see this as a means of professionalising the training process and addressing disparities in trainee experiences.

Improved Standards and Oversight

"The introduction of approved training firms, the establishment of minimum standards for training and the development of Law Society-approved learning programmes has the clear potential to support consistent high standards in the training of aspiring solicitors."

Greater Fairness and Transparency

"Yes – this would go some way to ensuring fairness and ending the nepotism that currently exists within the profession. Any option which opens up further pathways and makes the route to qualification much less about chance and more of a guarantee for those who are willing to simply work hard to pursue it should be explored."

Structured Learning and Career Development

"We feel that the Law Society ought to consider accrediting training firms and their training plans to ensure adequacy of in-firm training across the board... regular monitoring and appraisals ensure the trainee's progress is structured and meaningful."

- 3.8 However, there is concern that such a shift may disproportionately disadvantage smaller or rural firms, potentially reduce training opportunities overall, and increase bureaucracy. The proposal is widely acknowledged to need further detail and careful implementation to ensure fairness, access, and sustainability.

Exclusion of Small Firms

"This seems to cater more for bigger commercial firms. Difficult to see how it would work practically in smaller rural firms... potentially limits their ability to attract talent."

Risk of Increased Bureaucracy

"The amount of paperwork involved may discourage smaller firms from applying to become Approved Training Firms... selecting approved training firms is a good idea only if the system is fair, clear and practical."

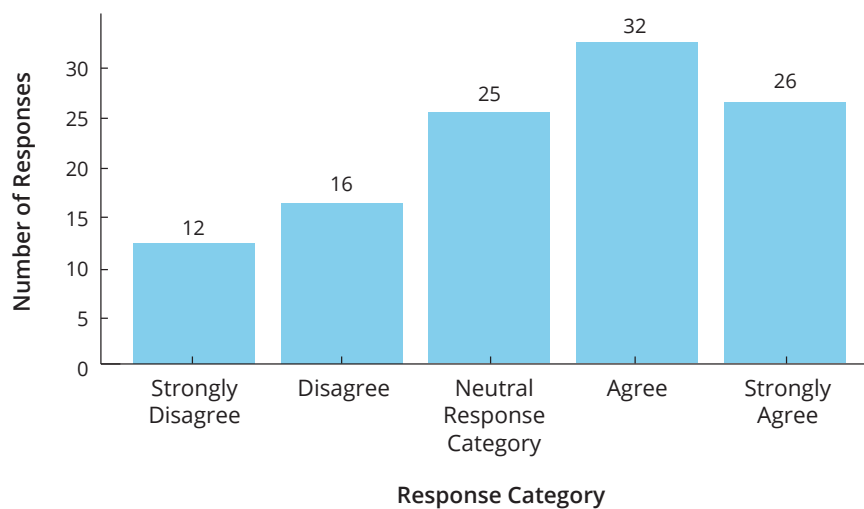
Unclear Implementation and Potential for Inequity

"I see the appeal here but I'm not sure it will do much for access to the profession... What happens, for example, if the only firms that come forward are larger multinationals? You could end up with odd legal deserts."

Option C: Extend In-Office Component of Training Contract

- 3.9 Whilst more than half of survey respondents were in agreement with Option C, qualitative feedback was mixed.

Figure 3(c): Stakeholder Responses to Option C



- 3.10 A notable number of respondents acknowledged the value of extended in-office training for developing practical legal skills and professional confidence. Many view additional in-office time as beneficial for workplace readiness, especially in comparison to the current model.

Improved Workplace Readiness

"The most valuable training is experienced in office and there should be greater opportunity for this. A longer period in office would hopefully increase potential for retaining apprentices after the considerable investment."

Enhanced Skill Development

"Personally, I learned a lot more in the office than at IPLS during my training contract, and more time in the office is more valuable training."

Greater Continuity and Confidence

"Good experience on how to run files from start to finish as well as day to day. Trainees would feel more confident qualifying and knowing how to run files in a firm."

- 3.11 However, concerns were raised about the financial burden, particularly in light of minimum wage requirements, and the potential impact on accessibility and diversity. Smaller and rural firms may struggle to accommodate a longer training period, and some respondents feel that structural reform of the current system is more important than simply extending time in the office.

Disincentive for Smaller Firms

"Given that for the past 4 years 44% of training contracts were provided by firms with fewer than 5 partners – any extension of the office component post-completion of the PG Dip at IPLS would act as a disincentive to firms to offer training contracts."

Increased Financial Burden and Reduced Accessibility

"In my view, this option would only create more financial difficulties for trainees and aspiring solicitors... it simply extends the length of time that aspiring solicitors will earn a lower wage. It would not have the intended benefit of enhancing access to the profession."

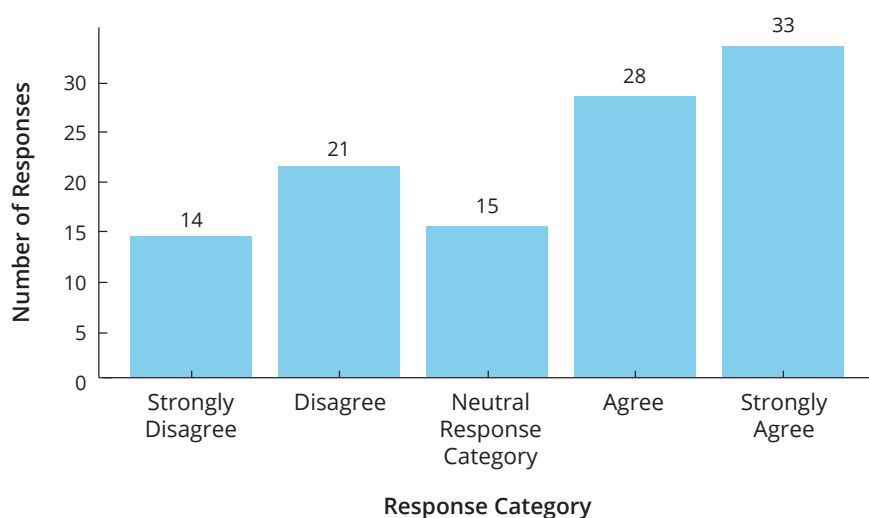
Structural Reform More Important than Time Extension

"Adding a year on to the end of the training regime while maintaining the existing IPLS sandwich course regime does not deal with the fundamental flaws.... Any proposition founded on minimal changes will not serve the profession well."

Option D: Postgraduate Diploma First, Then Two-Year In-Office Training

- 3.12 While Option D attracted a notable level of support (55% of survey respondents in agreement), a further 45% of respondents either disagreed or were neutral indicating a division of opinion around this option.

Figure 3(d): Stakeholder Responses to Option D



- 3.13 Those in favour note the potential benefits of uninterrupted academic focus, clearer sequencing of learning, and improved office continuity post-study.

Clearer Sequencing and Office Continuity

"Oftentimes it feels as though the first 4 months in the office is a steep learning curve... just as you may be settling in, you then have to leave for the Institute. This disrupts any progress you could be making in the office."

Consistency with Other Jurisdictions

"Having completed the LPC, this is the format my training took – one full year of Postgraduate Diploma followed by two years in-office training. It worked well."

Improved Continuity

"Allows continuity where trainees can actually take on a caseload. There is no benefit in having a trainee come in for months on end to leave again for IPLS."

- 3.14 However, responses were also received citing concerns on the loss of integration between academic and in-office training, which is viewed as vital for developing professional competence and contextualised learning. Additionally, responses also highlighted risks about increased financial burden, reduced access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and potential issues arising from trainees completing the Diploma without practical office experience.

Loss of Integrated Learning Model

"IPLS is the transition from student trainee to qualified professional. If students enter IPLS with no experience and no formal link to an office, they will be viewed as postgraduate students, not trainee professionals."

Access, Diversity and Financial Concerns

"Under Option D, banks may not be prepared to lend without a training contract in place... it removes the certainty of qualification and disproportionately affects students from disadvantaged backgrounds."

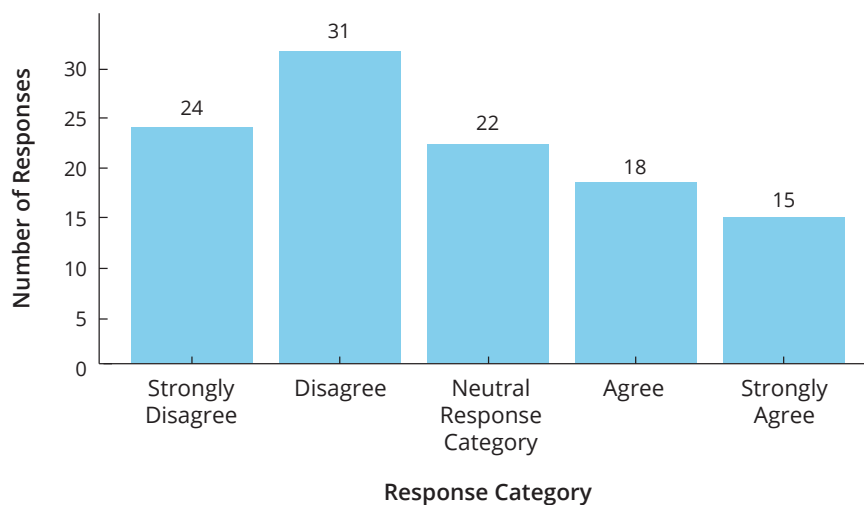
Reduced Practical Context for Learning

"To remove the in-office element would lose the context and lived experience... it's unrealistic to expect a classroom-only experience, no matter how good, to replace this."

Option E: Replace Training Contract with Probationary Solicitor Experience

- 3.15 The overall sentiment towards Option E was mixed with a minority of 30% of survey respondents in agreement with this proposal.

Figure 3(e): Stakeholder Responses to Option E



- 3.16 Some respondents view this as a progressive, inclusive step that could broaden access to the profession, particularly for those with existing legal experience or without established connections.

Unlocks Potential for Experienced Legal Workers

"Yes, many trainees have several years of relevant experience as paralegals which goes far beyond what some trainees are ever required to do in office. Many of these experienced people cannot obtain a training contract owing to high levels of competition. This would redress the balance."

Wider Talent Pool and Greater Flexibility

"Agree – reduces costs of a Trainee and allows the individual to gain QWE with their employment and widens the talent pool from varying backgrounds."

A Fairer Route for Those Without Connections

"I am in full support of removing the requirement for a training contract. My proposal is the one-year PGDip at the IPLS followed by 12–18 months of in-office training as a probationary solicitor. I believe this is the most fair and appropriate way to deal with this catastrophic problem."

- 3.17 However, a majority of respondents express concerns about the loss of structure, quality, and regulation. Many believe the current training contract provides essential oversight, supervision, and professional identity, while others warn this proposal could result in inconsistent training quality, reduced professional standards, and increased financial risk for aspiring solicitors.

Loss of Structure and Inconsistent Training Quality

"Without the structure of a training contract, the trainee will not be in a position to learn how to work in an office, court environment and engage with clients... uniformity of standards would need to be regulated."

Increased Financial Burden and Risk of Exploitation

"This increases the financial burden for aspiring solicitors without any guarantee of obtaining employment... likely to lead to more firms utilising unqualified resources which may diminish the public understanding of what it means to be a solicitor."

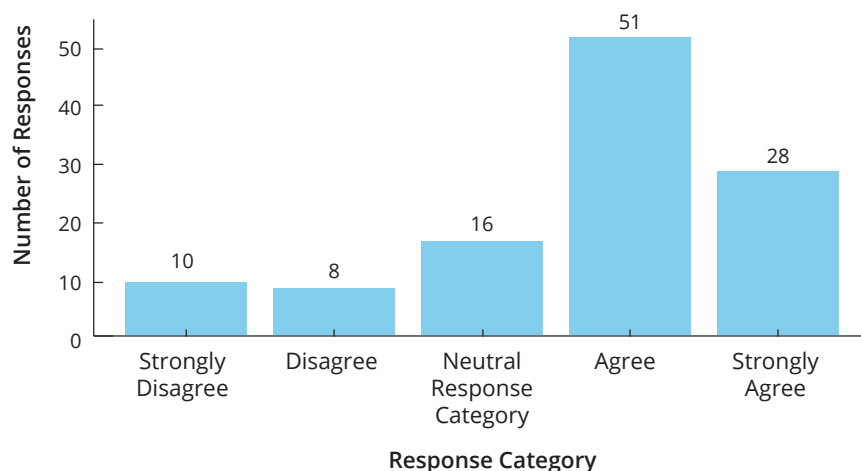
No Guarantee of Qualification or Career Progression

"Really bad idea. Will further remove access for those less privileged who are unable to take such a gamble without a guaranteed wage throughout training, or indeed, paying fees for a training course and then being unable to secure qualifying work."

Option F: Introduce a Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme

- 3.18 Option F received strong support from many respondents for its potential to enhance access, social mobility, and diversity within the solicitor profession.

Figure 3(f): Stakeholder Responses to Option F



- 3.19 Supporters of this initiative see it as a more inclusive route to qualification into legal practice, particularly for individuals from less advantaged backgrounds, working parents, and those unable to finance traditional university and postgraduate pathways. The “earn while you learn” model is widely praised as more sustainable and adaptable.

Increased Access and Social Mobility

“I strongly agree that providing a funded or subsidised learning pathway reduces entry barriers and supports socio-economic diversity in the profession.”

Earn While You Learn Model

“Best of both worlds – you get hands-on training, the trainee gets paid (keeping them motivated), and comes out a better qualified solicitor.”

Proven in Other Sectors

"I have seen this work in practice within other professional service industries, namely accounting. It enables learners to earn while gaining experience, which is increasingly important."

- 3.20 However, some reservations were expressed about the practicality, cost, and implementation of such a scheme. Concerns include whether firms – especially smaller or rural ones – could sustain the time and cost demands of longer apprenticeships, and whether this route might inadvertently create a two-tier system. Many respondents also stressed the need for clear guidance, regulatory oversight, and a well-structured academic framework.

Concerns About Duration and Costs

"Personally, it would take too long. Leaves trainees indentured to a firm for years and inhibits agency in the job market."

Risk of a Two-Tier System

"This proposal may also produce a two-tier system for legal training..."

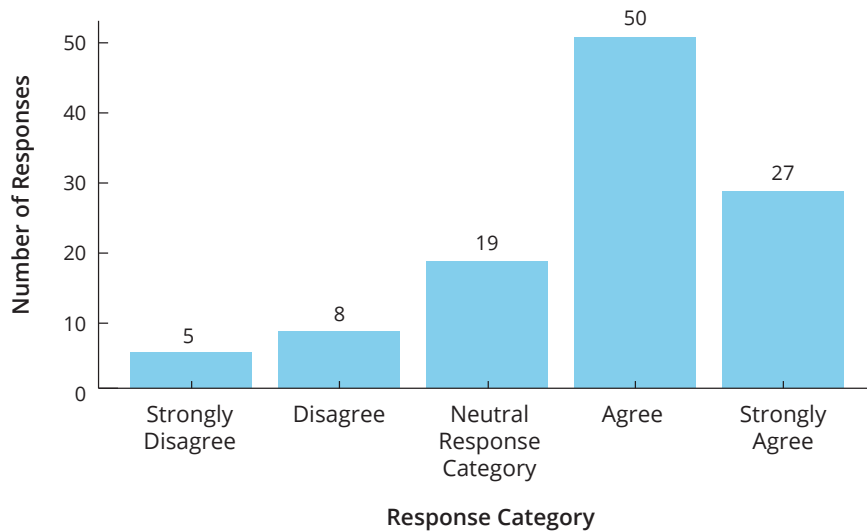
Viability for Smaller Firms and Public Sector

"This would require financial support for a longer period than the one-year training. Without public funding, it's a non-starter for many."

Option G: Introduce Part-Time/Hybrid Qualification Route

- 3.21 The overall sentiment towards Option G is strongly positive, with the majority of respondents welcoming the proposal as a progressive and much-needed step to broaden access to the solicitor profession.

Figure 3(g): Stakeholder Responses to Option G



- 3.22 The hybrid or part-time route is seen as a vital enabler for working parents, carers, mature students, and those outside the Greater Belfast area. Many feel that the current full-time, Belfast-centric model is rigid and exclusionary, and that flexible options would improve diversity, inclusion, and retention.

Supports Inclusivity and Flexibility

"This would open the qualification route for those with children or other caring responsibilities and those who may not be able to participate in a full-time qualification route."

Direct Personal Impact

"Why has this taken you so long to come up with? I had to leave the IPLS... because you wouldn't let me reduce one day a week...."

Enhances Diversity and Social Mobility

"Hybrid and flexible working is crucial... the legal profession should embrace this transition like other industries."

- 3.23 However, some reservations were noted, particularly around the potential for inconsistent learning, a lack of structured supervision, and concerns from firms regarding qualification planning and management. A small minority expressed a preference for in-office, full-time training for maintaining standards and consistency.

Concerns About Learning Quality

"Leaves room for large gaps in learning and experience...."

Practical Implementation Challenges

"This may be difficult to enforce... could result in a logistical impossibility."

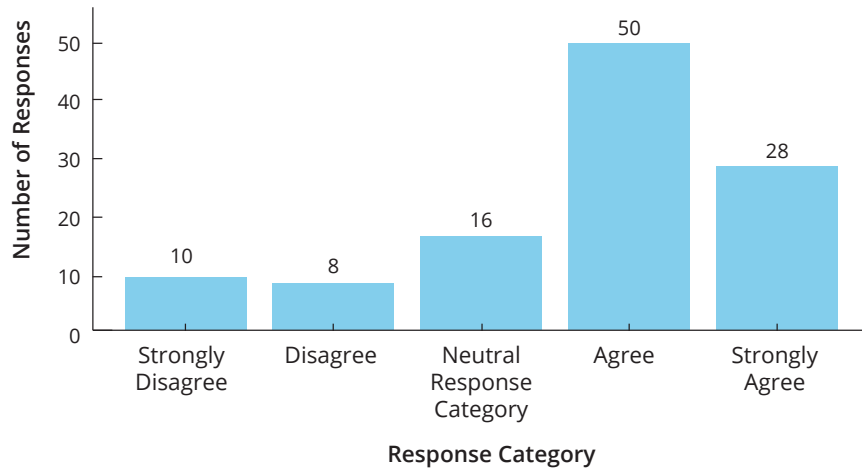
Uncertainty for Firms

"From a firm management perspective, we require certainty on timing of qualification. This option could lead to uncertainty for planning and lack of resources."

Option H: Reintroduce Alternative Routes Based on Work Experience

- 3.24 Responses towards Option H were also favourable, particularly among those who have positive experience with talented paralegals, legal secretaries, or legal executives.

Figure 3(h): Stakeholder Responses to Option H



- 3.25 Many respondents welcome the reintroduction of a pathway that recognises practical, on-the-job legal experience as a valid route into the profession. This is seen as a step towards greater diversity, flexibility, and fairness, particularly for mature students, working parents, or those who cannot afford the traditional pathway from university to the Institute.

Recognition for Experienced Legal Support Staff

"Experienced paralegals and other legal support staff often have greater knowledge than recent law graduates with no work experience. In many cases, they would make excellent solicitors."

Improves Access and Retains Talent

"I strongly advocate for this. My secretary has worked five years full time with me and completed her Law Degree part time... She will not apply to the current scheme as it does not suit her work-life and financial balance."

Effective Precedent from past experience

"This system previously worked well. It allows entry to people with practical experience and is once again more equitable."

- 3.26 However, a significant number of stakeholders raised concerns about the subjectivity, inconsistency, and potential lowering of standards. Critics stress the need for robust governance, clear criteria, and academic parity, warning that relying solely on workplace learning could produce narrow or underprepared practitioners.

Lack of Consistent Standards

"There is no minimum standard set of what amounts to good quality work experience. Masters train differently from firm to firm. Not all masters should be masters."

Concerns About Subjectivity and Narrow Experience

"Some solicitors qualified this way have a very narrow area of expertise and an aversion to further learning."

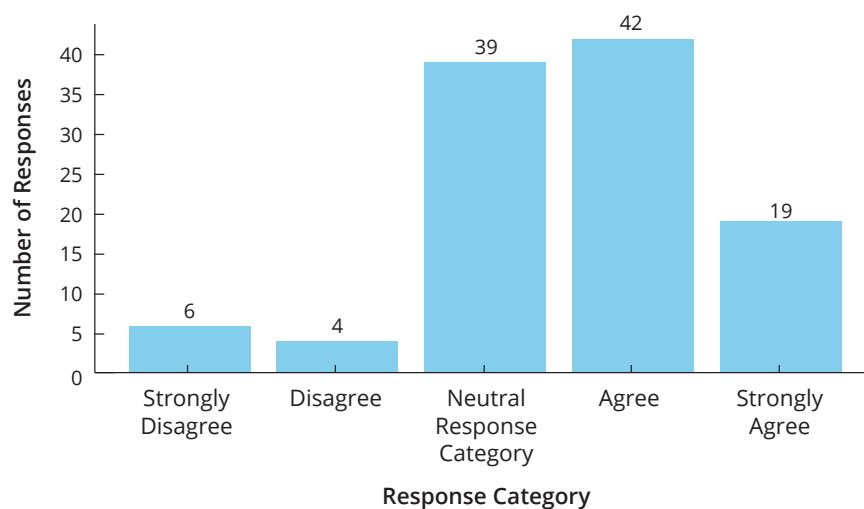
Need for Structured Validation

"I think this needs to be accompanied by a structured and regulated assessment process... Otherwise, how would LSNI ensure these entrants were at the same standard?"

Option I: Returners Programme for Solicitors

- 3.27 The responses to Option I were generally supportive, with many respondents recognising the importance of enabling qualified solicitors to return to the profession after a career break.

Figure 3(i): Stakeholder Responses to Option I



- 3.28 This option is especially welcomed for supporting individuals who have stepped away from practice due to family or other responsibilities. There is a strong view that a returners programme would contribute to greater inclusion, diversity, and retention of talent in the profession.

Removes Barriers for Experienced Professionals

"This is a simple and effective proposal which would provide a route back into the profession for a wide range of people... I personally know solicitors who left the profession and regret it because they feel they are 'too rusty' to return."

Supports Diversity and Inclusion

"This would encourage those who have had to take a career break, particularly those with caring responsibilities, to return to the profession and build confidence to do so."

Aids Talent Retention

"Securing routes to re-entry for people who have had a period out of employment is a key mechanism for expanding opportunity... and contributes to the diversity and competence of the profession."

- 3.29 However, there is some uncertainty about the operational details, purpose, and scope of the programme. Several respondents questioned whether a formal returners programme is necessary if solicitors have already qualified, suggesting instead that enhanced CPD or informal support would be sufficient and more proportionate.

Unclear Rationale and Scope

"Not sure what this means. I don't know what this is..."

May Be Unnecessary for Already Qualified Solicitors

"Any solicitor who has attained a law degree and completed training is sufficiently qualified to leave and re-enter the profession as they please... Why would a qualified solicitor pay more money to get re-qualified?"

Better Managed via CPD

"This should be a condensed refresh programme supported by the Law Society and training providers if returning solicitors are experienced professionals whose practising certificates have lapsed."

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The consultation exercise on enhancing access to the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland engaged a diverse cross-section of stakeholders and generated a comprehensive response. It revealed general consensus around the need for reform, particularly to improve accessibility and inclusion.

Recognition of the Need for Change

- 4.2 Over 80% of survey respondents opposed maintaining the status quo. Concerns included financial and geographical barriers to entering the profession and a narrow range of entry routes.

Support for Increased Flexibility

- 4.3 There was consistent endorsement for the introduction of part-time/hybrid and apprenticeship routes (Options F and G), offering more accessible pathways for those balancing work, caregiving, or financial constraints.

Caution Towards Introducing Training Contracts with Approved Training Firms

- 4.4 The proposed shift to training contracts with Approved Training Firms, moving away from the current Indentures model (Option B) generated mixed responses. While many valued improved consistency and transparency, concerns were raised about potential exclusion of small firms and increased bureaucracy.

Mixed Views on Resequencing and Extension of In-office Training Period

- 4.5 While there was some support for Options C and D (extending or resequencing training), concerns centred on practical implementation, trainee affordability, and the potential disruption of the integration between academic and practical learning.

Limited Backing for Removing Training Contract/Probationary Solicitor Model

- 4.6 Option E was less favoured due to fears of diminished oversight, increased financial risk, and the creation of a “part-qualified” tier.

Endorsement for Returner and Experience-Based Routes

- 4.7 Options H and I were widely endorsed as inclusive measures to retain experienced legal talent and re-engage solicitors seeking to return to practice.

Wellbeing and Supervision Gaps Identified

- 4.8 Several responses highlighted the need for improved pastoral support, structured mentoring, and formalised training for supervisors and Masters.

Implications

- 4.9 The findings suggest that, while there is a desire for modernisation, reform must be incremental, evidence-based, and carefully balanced to preserve professional standards, safeguard educational integrity, and avoid unintended barriers - especially for smaller firms and underrepresented groups. It is envisaged that, as an output of this consultation, there will be a requirement to develop new Society Regulations to create a modern, transparent, and robust regulatory framework governing the future admission and training of solicitors that will continue to ensure high professional standards and public confidence in the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland.

5. Recommendations

Modifications to the Present Training System

- 5.1 **Introduce a Part-Time/Hybrid Qualification Route:** Develop and pilot a flexible qualification route that allows for blended online and in-person training, with part-time study options.

Introduction of Alternative Pathways

- 5.2 **Progress a Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme:** Work with educational providers and government partners to establish a structured apprenticeship pathway for post A-Level entrants as set out in Option F of the consultation paper (Annex A).
- 5.3 **Reintroduce a Route Based on Relevant Legal Experience:** Explore the re-establishment of a structured route to qualification for experienced paralegals and legal executives with robust assessment criteria.
- 5.4 **Develop a Returners Programme:** Design a pathway for qualified solicitors who have left practice to return, supported by tailored training and mentoring.
- 5.5 **Introduce a Qualified Lawyers Assessment route to enable requalification from other jurisdictions:** Explore introducing a formal assessment-based requalification route for qualified legal professionals trained in other jurisdictions, particularly those with comparable legal education and experience. Such a pathway would support cross-jurisdictional mobility, increase diversity of experience in the local profession, and ensure all entrants meet consistent standards of competence.
- 5.6 **Further Explore the Feasibility of Replacing the Indentures of Apprenticeship with Training Contracts in Approved Training Organisations:** Undertake a pilot and further engagement to assess the benefits and implementation challenges of replacing indentures with structured training contracts.

6. High Level Action Plan

Recommendation	Action	Target Timeline
5.1 Introduce a Part-Time/Hybrid Qualification Route	Engage with IPLS to explore the feasibility for the design and pilot of a flexible route allowing blended online and in-person training with part-time study options.	Establish working group 2026
5.2 Progress a Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme	Task A: Engage with Ulster University and Department for the Economy to explore feasibility of building on their Law Degree Apprenticeship to establish a solicitor qualification pathway under the Apprenticeship NI framework.	Q1 2026
	Task B: Issue a call for Expressions of Interest from higher education institutions and professional training providers to co-design and deliver the apprenticeship programme.	Call for EOIs issued by Q2 2026
5.3 Reintroduce a Route Based on Relevant Legal Experience	Define eligibility and assessment criteria for experienced paralegals/legal executives; update regulations accordingly.	Criteria agreed and regulations updated by Q4 2026
5.4 Develop a Returners Programme	Design a re-entry route for qualified solicitors; engage firms to support placements and mentoring.	Commence Pilot 2026
5.5 Introduce a Qualified Lawyers Assessment Route	Develop assessment framework and eligibility criteria for requalification of overseas/other jurisdiction lawyers.	Framework agreed by Q2 2026
5.6 Further Explore Approved Training Organisations	Run a structured pilot with volunteer firms; evaluate outcomes and implementation challenges.	Commence Pilot 2026



Law Society
of Northern Ireland



Annex A

Enhancing Access to the Profession

A Consultation on Training and Entry Pathways in Northern Ireland

November 2024

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Foreword

As President of the Law Society of Northern Ireland, I am pleased to present this consultation paper on the future of solicitor qualification and admission to the profession. This marks a crucial milestone in our ongoing commitment to fostering an accessible, inclusive, and dynamic solicitor profession that meets the needs of the public and our members.

In 2022, during its centenary year, the Society commissioned a study by Hook Tangaza Consultancy, which underscored the need to modernise the qualification and admission routes to the profession. The study highlighted the importance of adapting to a shifting legal landscape in Northern Ireland, addressing high attrition rates and alleviating the shortage of early-career solicitors. In response, the Society's Education Committee has undertaken a series of preliminary initiatives to gather data, assess the need for change, and lay the groundwork for this consultation.

This work has highlighted the economic challenges many aspiring solicitors face, particularly financial barriers and geographical constraints that limit access for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, high attrition rates and a competitive recruitment landscape, is placing additional pressures on our smaller, rural and provincial firms, as well as legal aid practices, which often struggle to attract and retain talent.

Reviewing our current entry routes and exploring alternative and additional pathways such as flexible study options and modern apprenticeship schemes - as successfully implemented in other jurisdictions - presents an opportunity to address these challenges. Such routes provide prospective solicitors, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with the chance to earn while they learn. Additionally, they allow employers to access a more diverse talent pool, ultimately strengthening the profession.

It is now time to have your say. This consultation paper outlines the background, key issues, and potential options for reforming entry routes into the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. The Society invites you to share your insights, feedback, and suggestions to help us shape the future of solicitor qualification and admission, ensuring it remains both relevant and robust.

I strongly encourage your participation in this process, confident that this consultation will act as a catalyst for broadening our profession, welcoming new talent from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and reaffirming the Law Society's commitment to supporting our members and upholding the highest standards of legal practice in Northern Ireland.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Toombs', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Darren Toombs

President, Law Society of Northern Ireland

About The Consultation

Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this consultation is to seek input from our members and other interested parties on the current vocational training and entry routes into the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. This initiative builds on previous consultations and recent engagement initiatives, recognising the need to reassess and potentially reform the pathways to solicitor qualification in response to evolving professional demands.

Objectives

- 1.2 The consultation aims to:
 - **Gather Views of Members and other stakeholders on Vocational Training Requirements:** We seek to understand the full range of perspectives on the effectiveness and relevance of the current vocational training framework, particularly regarding its strengths and weaknesses as the primary entry route into the profession.
 - **Explore Additional, Alternative and Innovative Entry Routes:** Recognising the changing needs of the profession, this consultation will explore potential additional and alternative entry pathways, which may include apprenticeships, part-time/hybrid options, or expanded recognition for relevant work experience. The objective is to ensure that qualification routes are inclusive, accessible, and aligned with contemporary legal practice demands.
 - **Ensure Training Aligns with Evolving Professional Needs:** As the Northern Ireland legal landscape continues to change, it is essential that solicitor training continues to keep pace with new challenges and expectations. We are therefore keen to gather insights on how vocational training can be enhanced to meet the future needs of the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland.

- **Identify Barriers and Challenges for Aspiring Solicitors:** The consultation also seeks to address potential barriers faced by individuals pursuing a career in law. Understanding these obstacles - whether financial, geographic, or structural - will help us identify ways to make the profession more accessible to talented individuals from diverse backgrounds.

1.3 By engaging members and key stakeholders in this consultation process, the Society aims to foster an informed, collaborative approach to refining solicitor qualification pathways, ensuring that future solicitors are well-equipped to meet the demands of the profession and the communities they serve.

Timeframe

1.4 This consultation will run from 2 December 2024 until 28 February 2025. There are a number of options set out in this document that we are seeking your views on (these are outlined in detail in section 7). We want to make the process of consultation on qualification and entry pathways as accessible as possible, so there are a number of ways in which your views can be submitted. These are outlined in section 8.

Evolution of the Present System

- 2.1 The Institute of Professional Legal Studies (IPLS) was established in 1977 following the publication of the Armitage Report . The current training regime for solicitors dates back to 1988, following a comprehensive review led by Professor Peter Bromley - see Bromley Report.
- 2.2 The Bromley Committee considered it to be “of the utmost importance that training at an institute and training in practice should be more closely integrated.” Accordingly, it recommended that each student seeking admission to the Institute should first register with the Society and that all intending solicitors should be apprenticed for two years. Their time should be divided as to the first three months in their offices, the next year full time at the Institute and the remaining nine months back in their offices. The Committee also recommended that, throughout the period of the Institute course, students should maintain a close link with their offices and work there during university vacations.
- 2.3 Although subject to some minor revisions over the years, most notably following a review led by the Education Review Working Group (ERWG) in 2007 this model - which was designed to prepare the newly qualified solicitor for their first three years in general practice - remains the primary entry route into the Solicitor profession for legal graduates in Northern Ireland.
- 2.4 The establishment of a second vocational training provider at the University of Ulster, Magee Campus was accredited by the Law Society in 2008. The Graduate School offered a broadly equivalent course to IPLS, before closing in December 2015.

Existing Routes for Qualification & Entry to the Solicitor Profession in Northern Ireland

- 3.1 As of today, there are currently two routes to qualification for graduates to enter the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. There are four routes for transferring lawyers to apply for admission to the Roll of Solicitors ('the Roll') in Northern Ireland as a Solicitor of the Court of Judicature of Northern Ireland.
- 3.2 The primary regulations which underpin this process are the Solicitors Admission and Training Regulations 1988 (as amended).

Qualification Routes

a) Trainee Solicitor

- 3.3 The trainee solicitor route is the primary pathway for those seeking to join the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland.
- 3.4 The means by which individuals are eligible to register as a trainee solicitor are:
- those holding a degree in law – Reg. 8(1)
 - those holding a degree in another discipline – Reg. 8(2)
- 3.5 In the case of Reg. 8(2), most applicants will have completed a non-law undergraduate degree but have completed a conversion course, such as the MLaw offered by Queen's University Belfast (QUB). In each instance applicants are required to have completed a number of core subjects as outlined in the regulations.
- 3.6 To be eligible to apply for admission to the Roll, all trainee solicitors are asked to complete/supply the following:
- A one-year course at the IPLS resulting in successful completion of the Postgraduate Diploma (PgDip) in Professional Legal Studies.

- A one-year period of in-office training with a Master under Indentures and evidenced by means of an affidavit from both parties.
- Successful completion of the Law Society series of modules.

b) Special Qualifications/Experience

3.7 Those individuals with special qualifications and/or experience may apply for registration with the Society as a student under Regulation 8(5) of the Solicitors Admission and Training Regulations 1988 (as amended). Regulation 8(5) requires an applicant to satisfy the Education Committee that the applicant has acquired such special qualifications and/or experience so as to render him suitable to be accepted as a registered student. Following judgement in the case of *Burns*, it will “require a truly exceptional case to be established before [the Society] should allow registration under Regulation 8(5).” This route has provided for four successful applications since 1988.

3.8 Those accepted for registration under this route must successfully complete the following in order to avail of admission to the Roll:

- Any outstanding core subjects (these are completed before they may formally register with the Society).
- A one-year course at the IPLS resulting in successful completion of the Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies.
- A one-year period of in-office training with a Master under Indentures and evidenced by means of an affidavit from both parties.
- Successful completion of the Law Society series of modules.

Admission Routes

c) Solicitor from Reciprocal Jurisdiction

3.9 Those individuals who have been admitted as a solicitor in England and Wales and/or Ireland may apply for direct admission to the Roll. There is no specific regulatory framework or instrument to cover reciprocal admission.

d) Solicitor from Scotland

3.10 Those individuals who have been admitted as a solicitor in Scotland seeking to join the Roll are required to register with the Society as a student and complete/supply the following:

- The following courses at the IPLS:
 - Private Client: Wills Course
 - Property Law and Practice: Part 1 & 2
- A six-month period of in-office training with a Master under Indentures and evidenced by means of an affidavit from both parties.
- Successful completion of the Law Society series of modules.

3.11 There is no specific regulatory framework or instrument to cover Scottish solicitor admission and training.

e) Transferring Barrister

3.12 Northern Ireland barristers seeking admission to the Roll are required to register as a student of the Society and in order to be eligible to apply for admission to the Roll are asked to complete/supply the following:

- The following courses at IPLS:
 - Administration of Estates
 - Property Law and Practice: Part 1 & 2
- A one-year period of pre-admission employment in a solicitor's office (if the applicant has less than three years' experience of active practice at the Bar).
- Evidence of disbarment.
- Successful completion of the Law Society series of modules.

3.13 The Solicitors Admission and Training (Requirements for NI Barristers) Regulations 1990 underpin this route. These Regulations also apply to Transferring Barristers from England & Wales and Republic of Ireland.

f) Foreign Qualified Lawyer

3.14 Those individuals who have been admitted as a legal professional in a non-reciprocal jurisdiction, not including Scotland, seeking to join the Roll are required to register as a student and successfully complete/supply the following:

- Any outstanding core subjects (these are completed before they may formally register with the Society).
- A one-year course at the IPLS resulting in successful completion of the Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies.
- A one-year period of in-office training with a Master under Indentures and evidenced by means of an affidavit from both parties.
- Successful completion of the Law Society series of modules.

3.15 Each application is considered by the Education Committee. Outside Reg 8(4) there is no specific regulatory framework or instrument to cover the admission and training of foreign qualified lawyers.

The Changing Landscape of the Solicitor Profession in Northern Ireland

- 4.1 When the current system was first introduced, the solicitor profession was much more self-contained, with fewer employers of solicitors from outside of private practice and the largest firms were unlikely to grow exponentially.
- 4.2 Research conducted by the Hook Tangaza Consultancy on behalf of the Society in 2022 demonstrated that the legal landscape has changed in recent years with new and growing demands from England and Wales and Ireland for Northern Ireland qualified solicitors and law graduates. Additionally, large international firms are now based in Belfast and we have an expanding public and corporate sector. These changes, coupled with high attrition rates of early-career solicitors from private practice pointed to a gap in the supply of solicitors entering the profession. The research highlighted the need to reassess the current qualification model to ensure it meets the future workforce demands of the profession

Evidence Gathering & Analysis

- 5.1 Since the publication of the Hook Tangaza report, the Society's Education Committee has sought to gather empirical evidence and assess the need for change.
- 5.2 To begin with, the Committee benchmarked qualification pathways and alternative entry routes in other jurisdictions and professions. Also, a large-scale survey of both trainees and early-career solicitors as well as Masters/training firms provided valuable data and insight into the vocational training experience.
- 5.3 Additionally, between July and September 2024, an engagement exercise was undertaken to gather qualitative feedback to inform future dialogue across the profession. The key themes identified were:
- Concerns about diversity and access.
 - Evaluation of the current vocational training model.
 - Issues related to supply and sustainability.
 - Need for alternative training routes.
 - Oversight and quality of office-based training.
 - Maximizing the contributions of paralegals and legal executives.

Conclusion

- 6.1 Given the evidence of the evolving legal landscape and key issues identified, it is timely to review the current qualification and admission pathways to determine if change is needed for future entry into the profession. This consultation focuses on the structure and process of qualifying as a solicitor, not the vocational course delivery or content. Additionally, thoughtful consideration must be given to addressing access and diversity issues and developing varied qualification pathways, with any potential new entry routes needing to be rigorous and able to produce competent solicitors who uphold the highest ethical standards.
- 6.2 Following a comprehensive scoping exercise, several options relating to the existing qualification route and potential additional and alternative qualification pathways are outlined below. Feedback on each option and general input on the current qualification and admission arrangements, including potential amendments, is welcomed.

Proposed Options for Consideration

- 7.1 In this section we set out a range of options for consideration. These relate to the existing vocational training pathway and the introduction of new alternative qualification routes. These options are provided, not as definitive outcomes, but to stimulate thinking, encourage discussion and gather feedback from consultees on the current qualification route and potential alternative pathways to the profession.
- 7.2 In appraising each option, consultees may find it helpful to consider the following factors (presented in no particular order):
- Impact on Quality of Educational/Training Provision.
 - Cost.
 - Public/Consumer Interest.
 - Diversity and Access issues.
 - Diverse needs of different stakeholder groups, e.g. trainees, training organisations, education providers, professional bodies.
 - The shifting legal landscape and future workforce needs of the profession.
 - Impact on reciprocal qualification arrangements with other jurisdictions.

Options Relating to the Current Vocational Training and Admission System

Option A:

Do Nothing – Maintain the Current Vocational Training System

- 7.3 **Objective:** To preserve the current vocational training system for solicitors, which combines academic learning with supervised practical experience, without introducing any modifications or structural changes.
- 7.4 **Background & Rationale:** The existing vocational training pathway provides a structured, integrated approach, combining a one-year postgraduate course at the Institute with practical experience under the supervision of a Master in a solicitors' office, an in-house, or public sector legal department. This system is designed to give trainee solicitors exposure to essential areas of law they are likely to practise in their initial years, offering a consistent and well-recognised route into the profession.
- 7.5 Maintaining the current system would preserve the benefits of this established model, providing continuity and stability. The rationale for this 'do nothing' approach stems from the belief that the existing structure adequately prepares trainees for entry into the profession, meets current competency expectations, and supports the evolving workforce needs of the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland.
- 7.6 **Key Benefits:**
- Preserves the close integration of practice with vocational legal training including four-months office experience pre-IPLS.
 - Provides a stable and reliable pathway to qualification.
 - Ensures that trainees are required to meet minimum professional standards and expectations upon entering the profession through the attainment of the Post graduate Diploma in Legal Studies.
 - Trainees achieve qualification within two years.
 - Trainee solicitors currently benefit from part of their IPLS training being jointly held with Bar trainees and from input provided from practising solicitors, barristers and the judiciary.

Option B:

Revision of Regulations to introduce training contracts with Approved Training Firms, Replacing the existing Indentures of Apprenticeship

7.7 Objective: To replace the current Indentures of Apprenticeship between Master and Apprentice with a framework of approved Training Organisations. This shift aims to improve the consistency, oversight, and quality of in-office training by transitioning responsibility from individual Masters to dedicated Training Organisations with structured support and supervision.

7.8 Background & Rationale: The current Master/Apprentice model places the responsibility for training on individual solicitors (Indentures), resulting in variable quality and support levels in trainees' in-office experiences. Supervision and training quality can differ significantly, with some trainees receiving limited oversight and structured development while attending their Master's office. Transitioning to an approved Training Organisation model, in which firms take structured responsibility for training, could improve the consistency of in-office training. Approved Training Organisations would need to meet specific training standards, evidenced by a Law Society-approved training plan. Additionally, these organisations would be required to appoint a Training Officer responsible for maintaining training quality, monitoring trainee progress, and providing structured guidance and support within the firm. This Training Officer may differ from the solicitor(s) who supervises a trainee's day-to-day work.

7.9 Key Benefits:

- Clear standards established for in-office training to ensure all trainees receive high-quality, consistent development.
- Provision of structured support by Training Officers (and supervisory solicitors).
- Reduced Variability in Trainee Experience.
- Minimal disruption to the current model

Option C:

Extension of the In-Office Component of Training Contract

7.10 Objective: To extend the in-office training period, post completion of the Diploma course at IPLS. This would provide trainees with additional practical experience, and firms with more time to assess trainees' suitability for permanent positions upon qualification.

7.11 Background & Rationale: The limited contact time that training organisations have with trainees during their IPLS period often means firms have not gained sufficient and timely insight into the trainees' capabilities and suitability ahead of making hiring decisions for newly qualified positions. An extended in-office component would allow for a more comprehensive evaluation period and increased skills application.

7.12 Key Benefits:

- **Enhanced Trainee Readiness:** A longer in-office period equips trainees with a wider skill set and practical knowledge base.
- **Informed Hiring Decisions:** Firms can make offers of employment based on a more thorough understanding of the trainee's performance and potential.
- **Flexible Workforce Development:** Firms can tailor training to emerging practice areas or specific firm needs.

Option D:

Resequencing and Extension of Training Contract –

Postgraduate Diploma First, Followed by Two Years of In-Office Training

7.13 Objective: To restructure the solicitor qualification pathway by placing the Postgraduate diploma first, followed by a consecutive two-year in-office training period. This approach aims to align with vocational training models used in other jurisdictions such as Scotland and Republic of Ireland which both have a three-year qualifying period.

7.14 Background & Rationale: An underlying principle of the current model of professional education of solicitors in Northern Ireland is that it involves a combination of practical in-office training and formal academic instruction. The present system runs for two-years as follows:

- September - December: Trainee in-office with their Master
- January - December: Trainee completes a Postgraduate Diploma in Legal Studies at IPLS (with Easter, Summer and Christmas periods spent in-office)
- January - September: Trainee in-office with their Master

7.15 Resequencing and extending the current two year training contract whereby vocational study is completed in full before Trainees transition to a continuous, in-office training phase of two years. This would enable Trainees to build a solid foundation in core legal knowledge and practical skills prior to engaging in an uninterrupted two-year training contract, providing extended, hands-on experience and deepening practical competency. This continuous in-office period could allow firms to better develop and assess trainees, fostering long-term professional relationships and improving career alignment.

7.16 Key Benefits:

- Reduced Training Fragmentation and more seamless transition into practice.
- A consolidated in-office experience provides continuity, allowing trainees to handle cases end-to-end, improving workflow and enhancing practical understanding and responsibility.

7.17 **Other Considerations:**

- The well-established educational benefit, attained from the current integration of vocational study and practice, may be diminished.

Option E:

Removal of Requirement for Training Contract, Replacing with Pre-Qualification Work Experience as a 'Probationary Solicitor':

- 7.18 **Objective:** To modify the existing qualification pathway by allowing trainees to complete the Postgraduate diploma followed by a supervised 12-month period of pre-qualification work experience as a 'Probationary Solicitor.' This approach aims to remove barriers related to securing training contracts, making the qualification route more accessible while ensuring rigorous professional standards.
- 7.19 **Background & Rationale:** Whilst the number of training contracts has increased by around 30% since 2022, challenges remain for aspiring solicitors in securing training contracts due to limited availability or high competition. By allowing trainees to complete the Postgraduate diploma and then undertake a period of supervised pre-qualification work experience, this offers a pathway which could open up the existing entry route and further increase numbers which is currently limited in practice by the number of training contracts offered by firms each year.
- 7.20 Aspiring solicitors seeking to qualify would be required to complete a minimum of one years' full-time (or equivalent) pre-qualification work experience in which they can evidence relevant, practical legal work - aligned to a clearly defined set of competencies - undertaken in a law firm, in-house legal team or other relevant organisation that provides legal services.
- 7.21 **Key Benefits:**
- Eliminating the requirement for a training contract creates opportunities for individuals who might otherwise face challenges in obtaining one.
 - This model may allow for more trainees to enter the profession annually, supporting workforce demands and addressing shortages in legal aid and rural practices.
 - The 'Probationary Solicitor' phase provides flexibility for candidates and firms, adapting to a range of legal environments and offering experience across multiple practice areas.

7.22 Other Considerations:

- As with the previous option, the long established educational benefit, attained from the current integration of vocational study and practice, may be diminished.
- Risks apply to this option in relation to the potential diversity and access issues created by increased financial barriers attributed to trainees no longer being employed during their study period at IPLS.
- Presently, once registered, trainees have certainty as to their qualification pathway. With this option the qualification of aspiring solicitors who have invested in training fees to attain their Postgraduate diploma will be dependent upon securing employment as a probationary solicitor to complete their period of pre-qualification work experience.
- The potential implications that removing the training contract could have on current reciprocal admission arrangements with England & Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

Options Relating to the Introduction of Alternative Qualification Routes

Option F:

Introduction of a Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme

- 7.23 **Objective:** To create a robust, inclusive, and practical pathway that diversifies the entry routes into the profession. The introduction of a modern apprenticeship scheme aims to enhance the accessibility and diversity of aspiring solicitors, who are skilled, adaptable, and aligned with the evolving needs of the solicitor profession.
- 7.24 **Background & Rationale:** The current qualification route for solicitors in Northern Ireland typically follows a traditional academic path, primarily through university study and subsequent vocational training. However, as the solicitor profession evolves, there is an increasing demand for alternative entry routes that balance academic learning with practical, hands-on experience. A modern apprenticeship scheme for school leavers (post-A-Level) and/or graduates could provide an accessible pathway, allowing individuals to enter the profession through a structured programme that combines in-office experience with academic and professional development.
- 7.25 In England and Wales, modern apprenticeship schemes such as the Solicitor Apprenticeship provide a structured, six-year route for qualifying as a solicitor, blending formal academic study with practical training in a legal environment. The model has been successful in diversifying entry routes, broadening the talent pool, and addressing the financial barriers associated with traditional law school routes. It is noted that Ulster University have established the first fully funded Law Degree Apprenticeship in Northern Ireland and a small number of firms and organisations have recruited these apprentices for the inaugural programme which commenced in September 2024.
- 7.26 Developing a modern apprenticeship scheme to qualify as a solicitor in Northern Ireland has the potential to provide a flexible and inclusive qualification route, helping to meet the needs of both the profession and aspiring solicitors.

7.27 **Key Benefits:**

- By providing a funded or subsidised learning pathway, the apprenticeship programme reduces entry barriers and supports socio-economic diversity in the profession.
- Apprentices gain extensive on-the-job experience, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.
- Firms benefit from a steady talent pipeline, with apprentices who are already integrated into the workplace culture and familiar with firm-specific practices.
- The model adapts to apprentices' pace, enabling those balancing other commitments to pursue their legal qualification.

7.28 **Other Considerations:**

- The establishment of such an alternative entry route would require partnership with an education/training provider to develop a curriculum that meets academic standards and aligns with apprenticeship requirements.
- Funding mechanisms to cover educational costs for apprentices would need to be secured, potentially through government grants or firm sponsorships.

Option G:

Introduction of a Part-Time/Hybrid Qualification Route for Solicitors

- 7.29 **Objective:** To offer a flexible, part-time or hybrid qualification route for aspiring solicitors, combining online and in-person learning. This pathway aims to increase accessibility for individuals with family, financial, or geographic constraints, allowing them to pursue legal qualification without the need for full-time attendance.
- 7.30 **Background & Rationale:** The present qualification route requires full-time commitment, which can be challenging for those with family obligations, financial constraints, or who reside outside Belfast. The rationale for this option is to provide a flexible qualification path that accommodates individuals balancing multiple responsibilities.
- 7.31 A part-time/hybrid route could enable trainees to integrate study and work in a way that supports broader access to the profession and fosters greater diversity through a blend of online and periodic in-person classes, the ability to progress at a pace suited to their availability and extending the study period if needed to make the qualification process more manageable.
- 7.32 This could be further complemented by trainees being able to work part-time in a training organisation while studying.
- 7.33 **Key Benefits:**
- Allows a diverse range of trainees, including working parents, caregivers, and individuals in remote areas, to access solicitor training without the need for full-time attendance.
 - Provides for a flexible, comprehensive pathway into the profession.
- 7.34 **Other Considerations:**
- Developing a hybrid model would require initial investment in digital learning platforms and teaching resources to ensure quality and capacity.

- For optimal impact, training firms may need to accommodate part-time or flexible work arrangements for trainees on this path.
- Clear regulatory standards for part-time or hybrid routes would need to be developed to ensure trainees meet the necessary standards for qualification

Option H:

Reintroduction of Alternative Routes to Register as a Student Solicitor based on relevant work experience

7.35 Objective: This pathway aims to provide an alternative route for individuals with extensive relevant work experience - such as paralegals or legal executives - to register with the Society to undertake their vocational training

7.36 Background & Rationale: Previously, Regulation 8(3) allowed experienced legal professionals, such as long-serving law clerks, to register as a trainee solicitor based on their practical knowledge and relevant work experience. This route was revoked in 2015, limiting qualification options for professionals with non-traditional backgrounds. This option considers reintroducing a pathway for individuals with significant practical experience that could diversify the profession, allowing talented individuals from various backgrounds to register as students.

7.37 Key Benefits:

- Provides a formal entry route for experienced legal professionals to register as student solicitors, recognising and building upon their existing skills.
- Expands access to the profession, enabling experienced individuals working in the profession – such as paralegals/legal executives - to access the vocational training programme.
- Offers a viable progression route for experienced professionals, supporting retention and professional development.

7.38 Other Considerations:

- The development of robust criteria will be required to evaluate relevant work experience, ensuring applicants meet professional standards and have a strong foundation in legal principles.

Option I:

Introduction of a Returners Programme for Solicitors

- 7.39 **Objective:** To create a structured Returners Programme that supports qualified solicitors who have left the profession – for example, due to caregiving, health issues, or career changes - in re-entering legal practice. This option aims to address skills shortages, promote diversity, and reestablish experienced professionals, leveraging their valuable knowledge and skills to benefit the solicitor profession.
- 7.40 **Background & Rationale:** Many experienced solicitors leave the profession for various reasons and find it challenging to return, especially after extended absences. These individuals often possess essential skills and experience that could greatly benefit the profession. A Returners Programme could facilitate re-entry, helping to meet workforce demands while providing a supportive, structured route back into practice for those seeking to resume their legal careers.
- 7.41 Such a programme could potentially include tailored training sessions on current legal practices, technology, and regulatory updates to help returners regain confidence and technical competency. In addition, participants could be paired with a mentor within a firm, providing guidance and support as they transition back into practice.
- 7.42 **Key Benefits:**
- The programme could contribute to addressing skills shortages by bringing skilled solicitors back into the profession, helping to fill gaps in workforce needs, particularly in underserved areas such as legal aid and rural practices.
 - Returning solicitors with diverse life experiences enhances the profession's inclusivity, creating a more representative and understanding workforce.
 - Retaining experienced professionals prevents knowledge loss within the profession and reduces turnover, providing firms with additional capacity.

Responding to the Consultation

- 8.1 We invite you to help shape our thinking on the future requirements of vocational training and admission and ensure our priorities are aligned. Please complete the online consultation response form, accessible [here](#) or scan QR code



Alternatively, you can email your response to consultation@lawsoc-ni.org or print and mail the form to:

**Professional Development Department
Law Society of Northern Ireland
96 Victoria Street
Belfast
BT1 3GN**

Responses must be received by **28 February 2025**.

What Happens When the Consultation Closes?

- 8.2 All responses will be analysed and considered along with other available information to help finalise our action plan. Our intention is to publish an analysis report of the consultation and our draft action plan in 2025.



Law Society of Northern Ireland

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