



Law Society
of Northern Ireland



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