



Diversity and Equality Study

of the
Northern Ireland
Solicitor Profession

THE LAW SOCIETY
OF NORTHERN IRELAND



100
YEARS

Foreword



As the tenth female President of the Law Society of Northern Ireland, ensuring the Society continues to make progress on diversity, equality and inclusion is one of my top priorities. The Society's Centenary year is a particularly apt juncture to reflect on the great changes in the makeup of in the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland over the last hundred years. It is also vital that, in laying the foundations for the next one hundred years, we work to build a diverse and inclusive solicitor profession that is open to all.

This report builds on the Society's first ever Diversity & Equality Survey which took place at the end of 2021. I am indebted to the Society's Human Rights and Equality Group for leading this vital piece of work and in particular the group's Chair, Maria McCloskey and the Society's Deputy Chief Executive Peter O'Brien. I am also grateful to the more than 1,200 solicitors who took the time to complete the survey and provide their views.

The results of the survey, as well as other information sources drawn upon here show the changing nature of the solicitor profession in NI. For instance, the profession is now majority female, with significantly more women joining the profession every year than men. And in many respects, the solicitor profession can be seen to be representative of the wider society we serve.

However, the work has also shown where there is much work still to be done. While the profession now has more women, this is not the case in leadership roles. Likewise, there is much to be done to ensure the profession is an open and viable career choice for those groups that are currently under represented. Therefore, I am very pleased that the report concludes with our first Diversity and Equality Action Plan.

This targets the core issues the profession has raised – gender equality and increasing access to the profession. I am confident these actions will begin to address the challenges identified but I am also clear that this is only the beginning of the Society's journey in ensuring a truly diverse and equal solicitor profession. I look forward to championing this work over the next year and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brigid Napier', with a horizontal line underneath.

Brigid Napier
President
Law Society of Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The Law Society of Northern Ireland is the professional body for the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. The Society regulates the solicitor profession, exercising its statutory functions under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976. As a member organisation, the Law Society represents and supports circa 3,000 practising solicitors working in approximately 470 solicitor practices and in public, private and third sector organisations.

In late 2021 the Law Society carried out its first Diversity & Equality Survey, inviting all solicitors, trainees, legal executives, and paralegals in Northern Ireland to participate. The survey sought information on issues such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity and more. Barristers were not included in the sample, as they are regulated by the Bar of Northern Ireland.

The survey was commissioned by the Society and conducted by Cognisense. All responses were anonymous.

Of the 3,134 people eligible to complete the survey, 1,226 individuals responded, which represents a response rate of 39%.

The results of the survey have been analysed and the key findings are summarised within this report. Where relevant, the findings of the survey are compared and contrasted against other sources such as the Law Society's own information and research and official statistics.

Representativeness of survey responses

The responses to the survey were broadly representative, based on information held by the Law Society in respect of area of practice, gender and age. This is summarised in the table below:

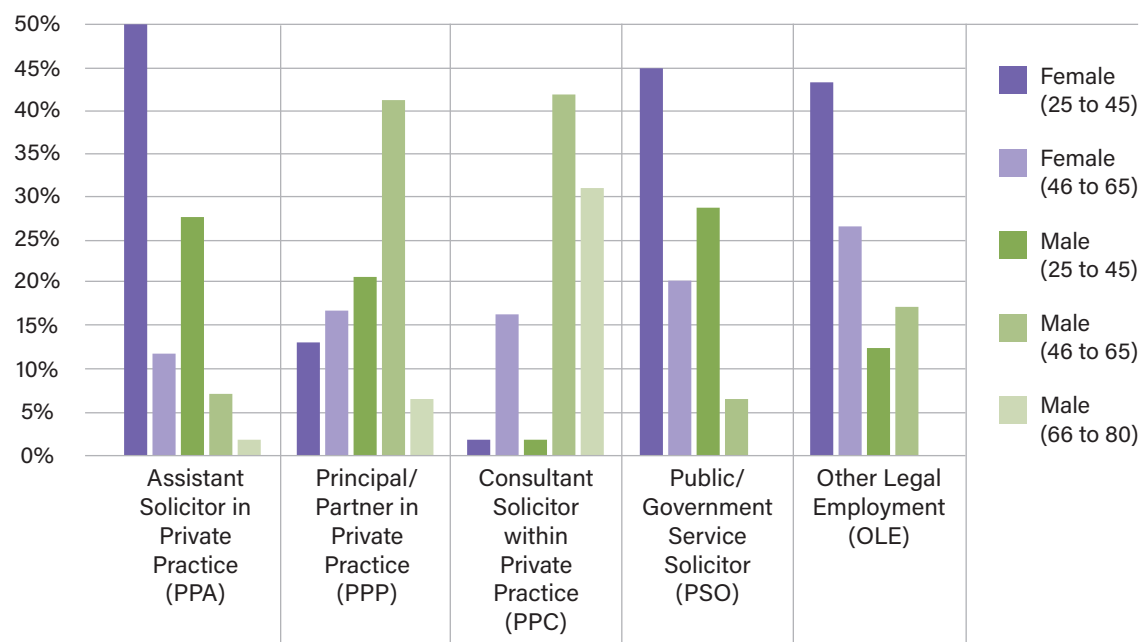
Characteristic	Survey (%)	Profession ¹ (%)
Private sector solicitors	73	78
Partners / Directors	25	33
Sole Practitioners	5	4
Belfast / non-Belfast	68 / 32	63 / 37
Male / Female	40 / 60	48 / 52
Aged 24 and under	7	0
Aged 25-44	52	54
Aged 45-64	36	39
Aged 65 and over	4	7

¹ Figures based on the number of working solicitors in Northern Ireland. This does not include trainees, legal executives etc. Figures are provided to provide an indication rather than for direct comparison purposes.

Summary of Diversity Survey Findings

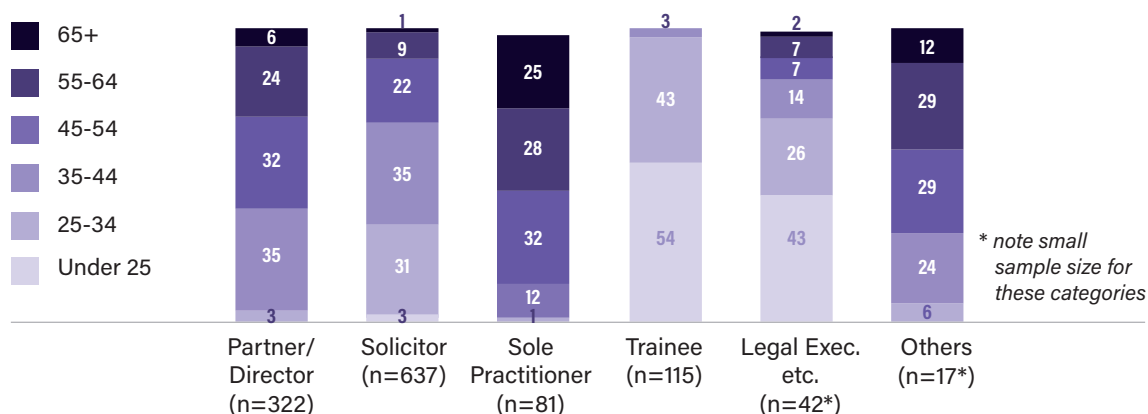
Age

Age and Gender composition of practising solicitors in different categories of practice



The above chart shows the age profile of the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. Nearly 40% of those on the Roll in 2022 were first admitted to practice after 2000. However, younger members and those working outside the private sector are more likely to be working in Belfast. More than half of solicitors practising outside Belfast are over the age of 45 (52%), whilst nearly two thirds (62%) of those practising in Belfast are under 45.

Furthermore, the age profile of those working as sole practitioners is substantially older than those in other roles.



An ageing working population of solicitors may pose difficulties for law firms, particularly sole practitioner firms, for example, in terms of succession planning. It may also have implications on access to justice for local communities if the network of local solicitor firms across Northern Ireland shrinks.

Gender and associated issues

Representation of women within the profession

Key Demographics of the Solicitor Profession in Northern Ireland in 2022

Admission Period	Number of solicitors admitted to the roll	Female solicitors	Female % of non-retired solicitors on the roll
2020-2022	364	217	60%
2010-2019	1,895	1,123	59%
2000-2009	1,398	837	60%
1990-1999	942	480	51%
1980-1989	571	246	43%
pre-1980	202	35	17%
Retired or not known	624	117	-
Total	5,996	3,055	51%

Source: LSNI Roll of Solicitors, 2022

The profession as a whole is relatively balanced in terms of gender with 52% to 48% in favour of women², mirroring preliminary 2021 census figures which show 51% of the general population in Northern Ireland are women and 49% are male.³

While progress has been made in attracting females to the solicitor profession, the survey highlighted a number of concerns on gender disparity which are considered in more detail throughout the remainder of this section. It should also be noted that the response rate from females was higher, which could be reflective of the issues women face within the profession.

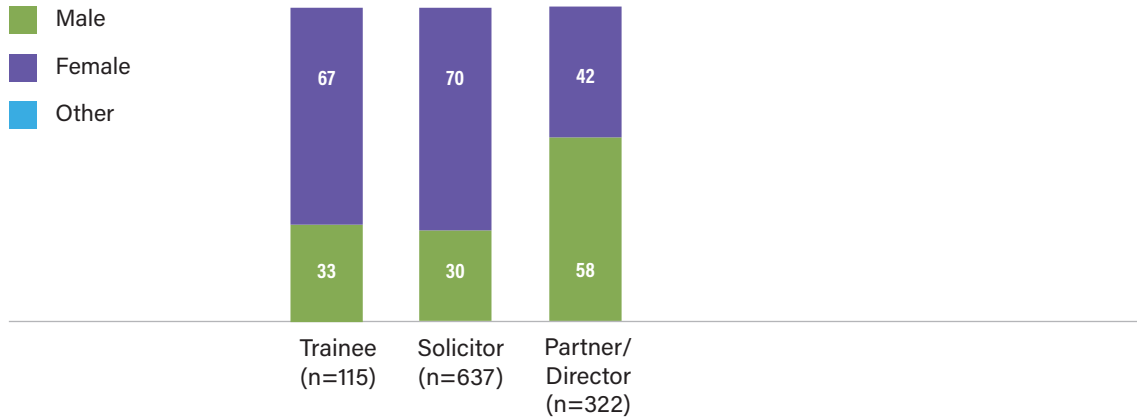
Lack of advancement of women

Despite women making up the majority of working solicitors, men account for the majority of senior roles in law firms. This was borne out in the responses to the survey with 58% of Partners and Directors being male. Examination of the Roll of Solicitors indicates that in reality men make up an even greater proportion of partners and senior consultants in private practice while public sector and in-house legal roles are significantly majority female.

² Law Society Roll

³ <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/census/census-2021-population-and-household-estimates-for-northern-ireland-statistical-bulletin-24-may-2022.html>

There is evidence of a mid-career migration of females out of private practice into other areas of legal employment and out of the legal sector entirely, which requires further exploration and research.



This is clear evidence that circumstances exist within the private sector which do not support women advancing in the same way as men. Commentary from the survey indicated this may be linked to a number of issues, including:

- Lack of maternity and return-to-work support
- Lack of flexible working and other support for those with young children
- Lack of reward compared to male counterparts
- Preferential treatment of male counterparts, including promotion opportunities

Comments include:

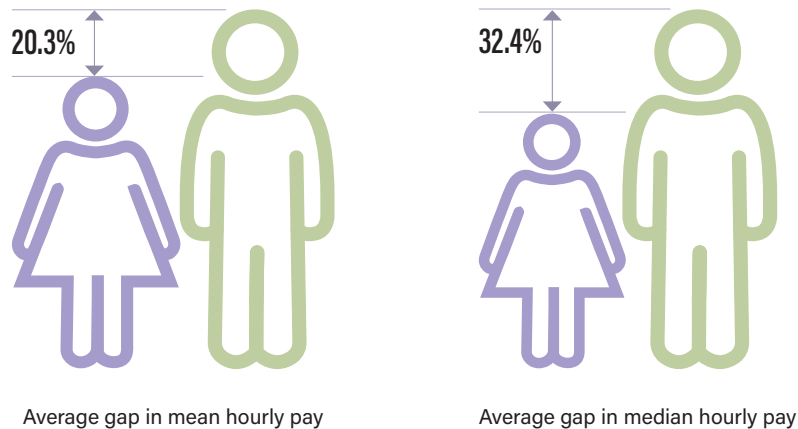
There is a striking decrease in the amount of women, the higher you go and the more years PQE you get ... the profession is misogynistic and places too much emphasis on who can work the most/ longest hours or sacrifice the most...

As a mother of daughters I would not encourage my daughters to enter the profession. There are no benefits at all for women in private practice. Maternity pay and sick pay are lacking.

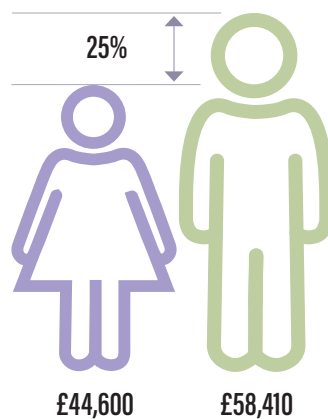
I believe a major issue is the proportion of women who leave the private sector to work in the public sector as the private sector fail to support them. This results in segregation and lower career expectations for women.

Gender Pay Gap

A recent report from the Law Society of England and Wales noted that 42 of the largest law firms in the UK had submitted a gender pay gap report for April 2020.⁴ Among these 42 firms, the average gap in mean hourly pay was 20.3%, and for median hourly pay it was 32.4%. For most firms, this does not include partner pay.



While the Society's survey did not explore the issue of the gender pay gap in detail, it did ask respondents to provide their full-time equivalent salary. Female respondents to the survey earned £44,600 on average versus an average for male respondents of £58,410.



A significant number of respondents, and in particular those in senior positions, chose not to answer this question, making the findings difficult to validate. It should be noted that there was a reluctance to answer this question even though all responses were anonymous.

⁴ From 2017, in England and Wales, Gender Pay Gap Reporting is required annually. Employers with a headcount of 250 employees, must comply with regulations on gender pay gap reporting. Gender pay gap calculations are based on employer payroll data drawn from a specific date each year. There is no comparative requirement for employers in NI.

Socio-economic background

As signified by qualifying for free school meals, almost 1 in 5 respondents came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over 4 in 5 respondents came to the profession via the grammar school education system. 2 in 5 respondents had parents who were university educated.

1 in 3 respondents had a parent from a professional occupation. Based on the occupation of the first parent, 70% of respondents' parents would be categorised as white-collar occupations (compared to 45% of the population).

Based on findings from the survey, parents of solicitors are over 4 times more likely to have a professional background and are 3 times less likely to come from routine and semi-routine manual and service occupations. They are 7 times less likely to come from backgrounds of long-term unemployment. This suggests that the profession comes from backgrounds that are considerably more "white collar" than the general population.

Education

	%	
Grammar	82	
Secondary	13	
Integrated	0	
Special Educational Needs		
Irish Medium	0	
Independent/ Fee Paying	2	
Other	1	
Unstated	1	

Parental University Education

	%	
Neither	55	
One or both	43	
Don't know	0	
Prefer not to say	1	

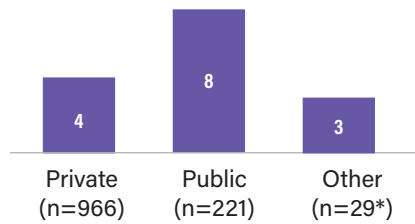
Received Free School Meals

	%	
Yes	18	
No	81	
Prefer not to say	1	

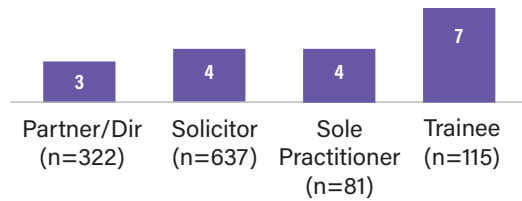
Disability and long-term health conditions

Under 1 in 20 (4%) of respondents to the survey considered themselves to have a disability according to the definition in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 while almost 1 in 5 respondents had some form of long-term health condition, with mental health and respiratory conditions being the most prevalent.

Of those respondents who stated they consider themselves to have a disability, 4% worked within the private sector, 8% within the public sector and 3% in other sectors.



Only 3% of respondents who considered themselves to have a disability were partners or directors.



In relation to the NI population in 2011, 1 in 5 people had a disability (according to 2011 census figures).⁵ The survey findings therefore suggest that those with disabilities may be under-represented within the solicitor profession in NI.

⁵ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/2011-census-results-key-statistics-statistics-bulletin-11-december-2012.pdf>

Ethnicity

98% of respondents to the survey recorded their ethnic group as 'white.'

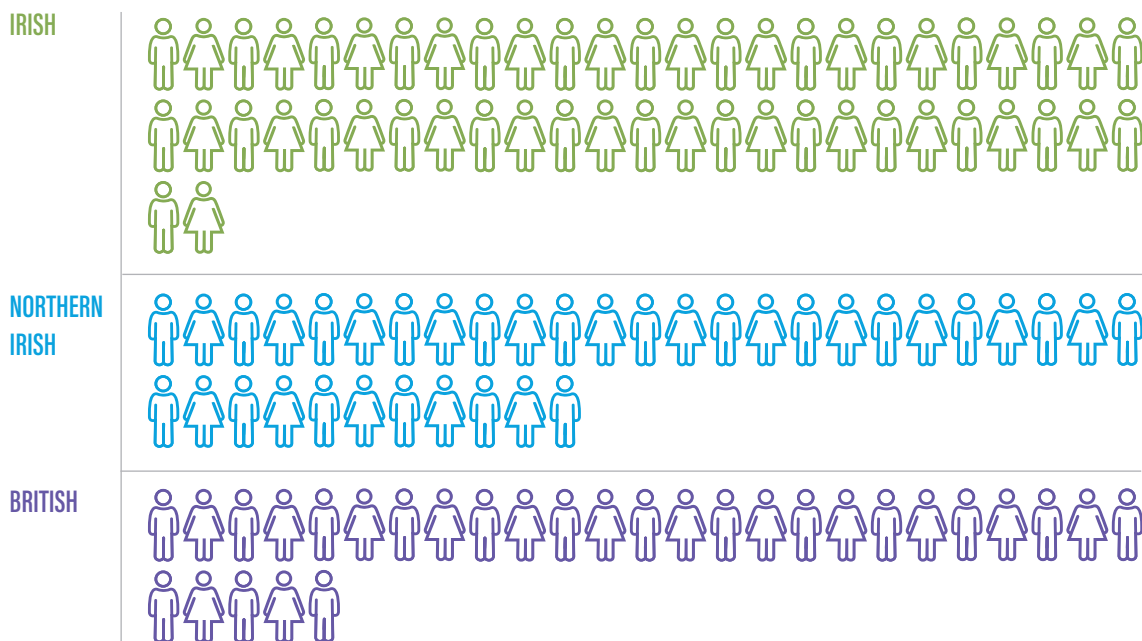
While the results of the 2021 census are not yet available, 98.2% of the population in Northern Ireland were white according to the 2011 census, suggesting the profession is in line with the wider population in Northern Ireland.

However, the under-representation of those from different ethnic minorities attracted some comment from survey respondents, for instance, one respondent stated:

Our profession has a witheringly small number of people from the BAME group. Whilst all ethnic groups are clearly under represented...black people are utterly invisible.

National Identity and Religious background

52% of survey respondents identified as Irish, 36% as Northern Irish and 30% as British.



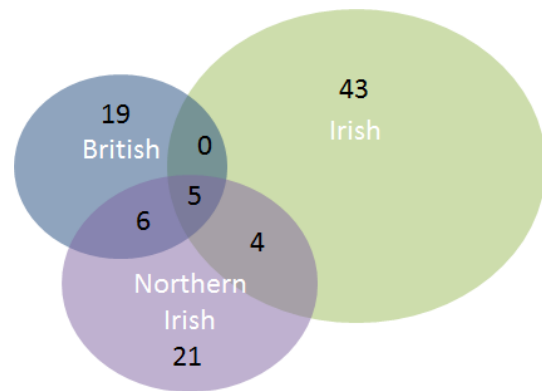
Within the 2011 Census, 40% of the NI population identified as British only, 25% identified as Irish only, 21% as Northern Irish only and 14% as other identities, including combinations of the above.⁶

It should be noted that the Law Society survey respondents were given the opportunity to choose multiple options for their national identity, while Census respondents can choose only one option.

⁶ <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/census2011analysis/nationalidentity/National%20Identity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf#:~:text=National%20Identity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Of%20the%20usually,as%20other%20identities%2C%20including%20combinations%20of%20the%20above.>

Identity

	%
Irish	52
Northern Irish	36
British	30
English	0
Scottish	0
Welsh	0
Other	1
Prefer not to say	1



Results of the survey indicate that 1 in 20 solicitors identify with all three identities.

The charts below show the responses to the Society's survey question on religion, compared to the Northern Ireland population, as at the time of the 2011 Census.

Religion

	%
Roman Catholic	49
Presbyterian	16
Church of Ireland	9
Methodist	1
Islam	0
Judaism	0
Buddhism	
Hinduism	0
Sikhism	
Agnostic	2
Other	4
No religious belief	15
Prefer not to say	4

Religion of NI Population

	%
Roman Catholic	41
Presbyterian	19
Church of Ireland	14
Methodist	3
Other Christian	6
Other	1
No religion	10
Not stated	7

Sexual Orientation

Most respondents to the survey described their sexual orientation as 'heterosexual' (95%).

4% of respondents described their sexual orientation as 'LGBTQ' and fewer than 10 individuals identified as transgender.

One respondent highlighted how "NI society is still very reserved / conservative about such issues and many people would still fear openly declaring their orientation".

Sexual Orientation

	%
Straight/Heterosexual	95
Gay or Lesbian	2
Bisexual	1
Queer	0
Other - please specify	0
Prefer not to say	1

My university experience at QUB was highly diverse, but my experience of professional practice has been distinctly lacking in diversity. The practice here in NI is largely occupied by cisgender heterosexual white people, and I think we need to do more to diversify our legal population and to make it more welcoming for minorities, who are often instead taking up opportunities in the likes of London.

The survey respondents who identified as LGBTQ members were more likely to be male and working in support roles or as sole practitioners.



Caring responsibilities

3 in 5 respondents to the survey had dependants, predominantly children (45%). There was a much higher incidence of dependants amongst the 35–54-year-olds, indicating many in the profession are starting families in their early thirties, as might be expected.

2 in 5 respondents to the survey were the primary carer for children and these respondents were much more likely to be working in the public sector, working part-time and female.

22% of respondents stated that they give care to others with long term health conditions. These care givers were much more likely to be working in the public sector, considerably more likely to be female and are largely aged 45 and over. This is not dissimilar to the 2011 census, which found 1 in every 8 adults in NI are carers and 64% of carers are women.⁷

Dependants

	%	
Child/children under 18	45	
Disabled adult(s)	2	
Elderly parent(s)/relative(s)	14	
Other	3	
Prefer not to say	1	
No dependants	42	

Weekly Hours of Care Giving

	%	
None	77	
1-19 hours	19	
20-34 hours	1	
35-49 hours	0	
50+ hours	1	
Unstated	1	

Primary Carer of Children

	%	
Yes	41	
No	59	
Prefer not to say	1	

Weekly Hours of Care Giving

	%	
None	88	
1-19 hours	7	
20-49 hours	2	
50+ hours	3	

According to Carers NI, 15% of the Northern Ireland workforce are balancing work and care, and approximately 69,000 people will move into a caring role every year.⁸ It is also estimated that the number of carers in NI could increase to 400,000 by 2037 (almost double the number in 2011 – 220,000) due to increased life expectancy and an ageing population.⁹ Considering the needs of solicitors who are also carers is therefore vitally important for the Law Society and solicitor firms across NI.

⁷ <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/facts-and-figures#:~:text=1%20in%20every%208%20adults%20is%20a%20carer,chance%20of%20becoming%20a%20carer%20in%20any%20year>

⁸ <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/facts-and-figures>

⁹ <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/facts-and-figures#:~:text=1%20in%20every%208%20adults%20is%20a%20carer,chance%20of%20becoming%20a%20carer%20in%20any%20year>

Contracted hours and earnings

9 in 10 respondents to the survey indicated that they work more than 30 hours per week, with 58% stating that they work an additional 5+ hours and 27% stating that they work 10+ hours in addition to their contracts on average.

Based on findings from the survey, it seems that partners and sole practitioners work the longest hours. Working additional hours was also a stronger feature of those working within the private sector and increased with age. Those working within the public sector worked fewer additional hours on average.

1 in 10 respondents to the survey indicated that they work part-time. This is much lower than the level of part-time working in Northern Ireland society, which is three times higher.

Based on responses to the survey, it appeared that women are four times more likely to be working part-time, meaning that part-time contracts seem to be dominated by women.

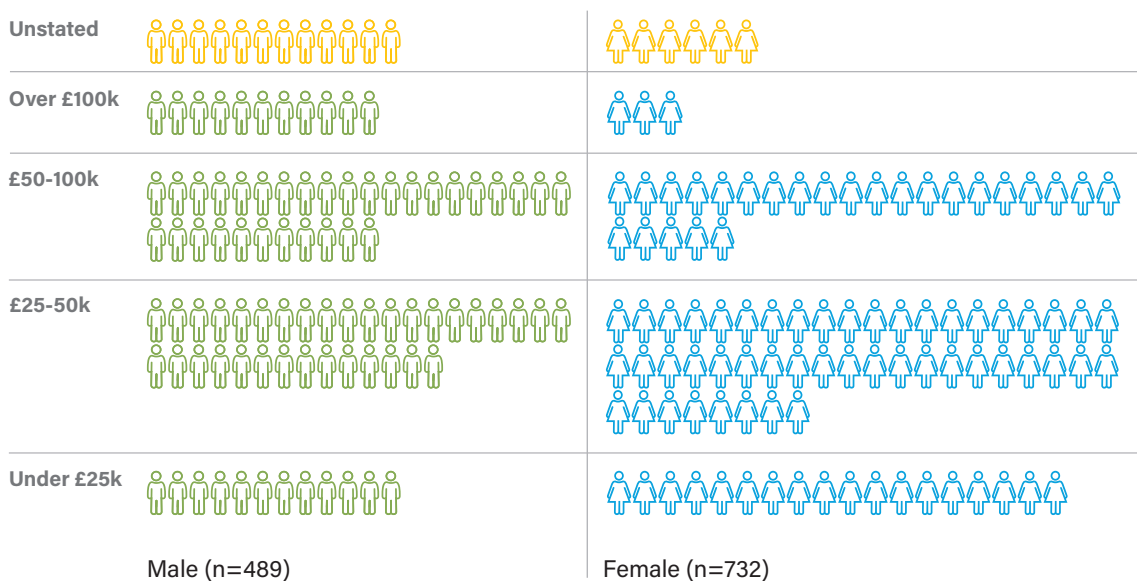
Average earnings (full-time), based on responses to the survey, were £50,000. At least a third of respondents earned above this average, and almost 1 in 6 earned less than £25,000.

It should be noted that there was a high incidence of senior professionals and sole practitioners who did not respond to this question in the survey regarding gross earnings, meaning that the average gross income is likely to be an underestimate. In addition, the increased cost of living and wage inflation are also likely to have had an impact on figures since the survey was carried out.

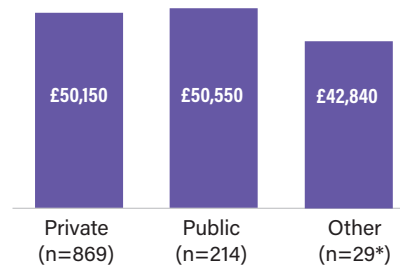
Female respondents to the survey earned £44,600 on average whereas male respondents earned £58,410 on average, equating to women earning 25% less than men.



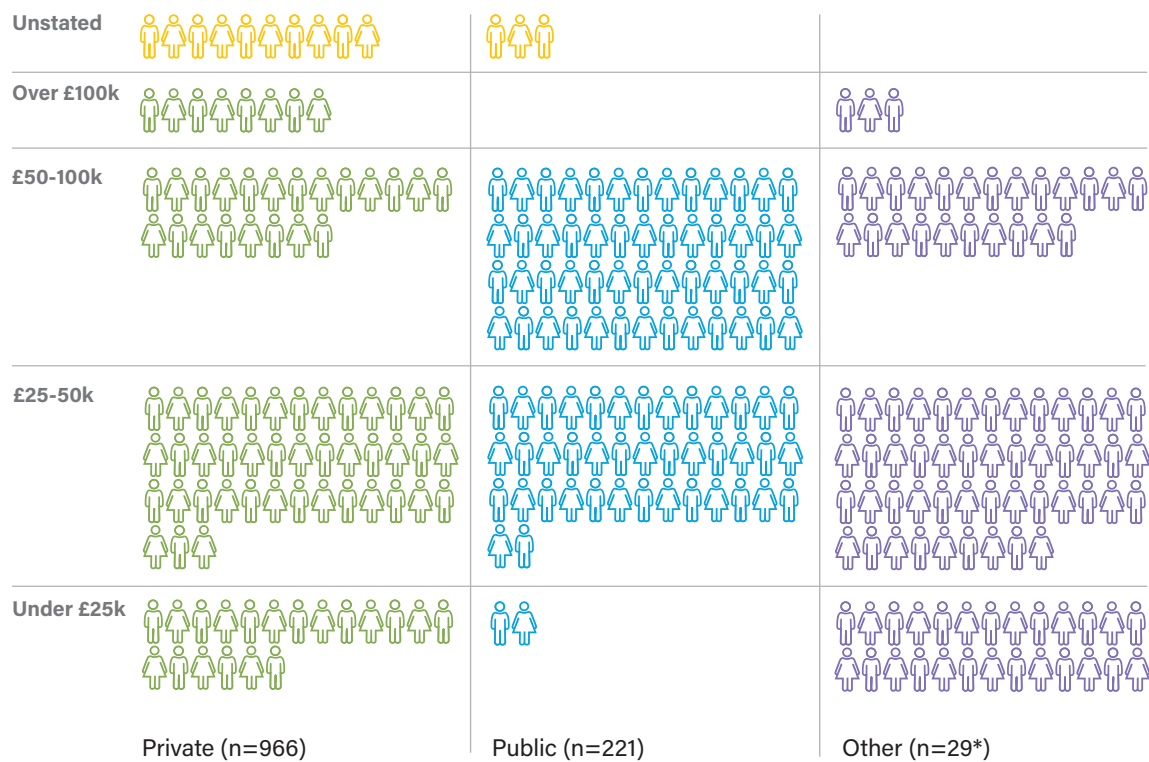
Gross Income by Gender



The average gross income of respondents working in the private and public sectors were largely similar (£50,150 in the private sector and £50,550 in the public sector). However, as demonstrated by the chart below, there was a higher percentage within the public sector (52%) falling within the £50k-100k band in comparison to the private sector (21%). In addition, there was a higher percentage within the private sector (19%) falling within the 'Under £25k' band in comparison to the public sector (2%).



Gross Income by Sector



Admission to the profession

The Law Society of Northern Ireland as the governing body of the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland has in exercise of its statutory powers, prescribed the legal education and training necessary to qualify as a solicitor in Northern Ireland. The organisation in Northern Ireland which offers the vocational training route to become a solicitor is the Institute of Professional Legal Studies, part of Queen's University Belfast. It provides an internationally recognised and unique one-year postgraduate course for trainee barristers and trainee solicitors who study together.

There is a single route into the profession. All applicants to the Institute must sit an admission test in the December prior to the year they wish to take up a place at the Institute. The underlying principle of the vocational education of a solicitor is that it involves a combination of practical in-office training and formal academic instruction. Therefore applicants to the Institute must have secured a Master prior to commencement of their course. A Master is a solicitor with whom the applicant proposes to serve his/her apprenticeship.

The principal route to training as a solicitor in Northern Ireland requires an individual to:

- apply to the Institute of Professional Legal Studies
- sit an Admission Test
- find a Master in an office in which to complete a two year apprenticeship
- register and be accepted as a student with the Law Society
- be offered and be able to take up a place at the Institute.

Familial involvement in the legal profession*

Just short of a fifth of respondents to the survey had familial connections within the legal profession. This was stronger in the older age group and amongst men.



Having family contacts within the profession attracted considerable commentary at the end of the survey and there was criticism that the current model of finding Masters affords those from legal families an unfair advantage.

* This was defined in the survey as a parents, carers, siblings, uncles, aunts or grandparents.

Issues securing a Master and the IPLS entrance exam

One respondent to the diversity survey stated that the current system for prospective trainees to obtain a Master is flawed and is perpetuating inequality and a lack of diversity within the profession.

Concerns were also raised that those who cannot obtain a training contract are at risk of exploitation to earn their way up the ladder. The Law Society has published standard minimum pay levels for trainees within the profession. Masters must agree to pay no less than the Society's minimum salary which will be the relevant UK national minimum hourly rate

Concerns were highlighted that those from less privileged backgrounds and low-income families may find it difficult to enter the legal profession due to the way in which a Master is secured and issues around the apprentice enrolment system.

One respondent noted,



Issues were raised in respect of several exceptional students being lost to the profession due to the current admission process which is perceived as benefitting prospective solicitors who have connections in the profession.

Losing talent to other jurisdictions

Many young people move to other jurisdictions to secure a training contract, enabling other jurisdictions to benefit from local talent.

Some respondents highlighted how they felt they needed to move to England after graduating to access the profession as they did not have the necessary contacts to secure a Master in NI.

According to Law Society data, the number of law graduates in Northern Ireland subsequently qualifying as solicitors has fallen from the peak of around 58% of all law graduates in an annual cohort, to less than 40% in recent years.¹⁰ This may have an impact on the ability to recruit newly qualified solicitors in the future, particularly if this trend continues and numbers continue to fall.

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Female law graduates	240	175	225	240	290	250	310	240
Male law graduates	160	145	130	130	160	140	170	125
All law graduates	395	320	355	370	455	390	480	365
NI new qualifiers	182	185	191	168	165	153	188	164
Solicitors qualifying in this year still in private practice	69	68	78	82	78	64	106	100

Source: HESA, LSNI Roll of Solicitors

¹⁰ Hook Tangaza report – p.63

Law Society Action Plan

The findings of the survey have been presented to, and considered by, the Council of the Law Society of Northern Ireland. There is an acknowledgement that all areas of concern, highlighted in each of the equality and diversity sections above, require action and the Society is committed to addressing gaps in representation and tackling all barriers to access to the profession.

The Council determined that two clear priorities emerged from the survey –

1. improving the experience of women in the solicitor profession

and

2. improving access to the profession for minorities.

Two working groups were formed – comprising members of the Council, the Society's Human Rights and Equality Group, the Society's Future of the Profession and Education Committees, Society staff and external bodies – to consider these issues and to develop actions to address them. The groups met over several months, considering the findings of the survey and other sources of information including relevant initiatives in other jurisdictions. The groups also took advice from relevant experts including the Equality Commission, Diversity Mark and the NI Judicial Appointments Commission and wish to record their thanks to these bodies for the assistance provided.

Through this process the groups identified key themes and problem areas to target, and actions to address these. Further meetings generated the identification of thematic priorities which have formed the Diversity and Equality Action Plan, outlined below. The working group members and the Law Society recognise that these actions do not tackle all issues related to diversity and equality in the solicitor profession, rather, they are a starting point in the journey to building a profession which is open and welcoming to all.

The implementation of the plan will be overseen by the Society's Future of the Profession Committee and progress will be reviewed regularly, including a formal review with the Law Society's Council, not more than a year after the work commences. Progress will be regularly reported to members of the Law Society and the plan will be developed or adapted as required.

Key Theme	Priority Area of Focus	Key Stakeholders	Timeframes
Outreach/ Engagement	We will work to build better awareness of the solicitor profession as a desirable career choice within schools, targeting young people from diverse backgrounds.	LSNI Education Committee; Local secondary schools (grammar and non-grammar).	To commence 2023.
	We will develop, in partnership with NI schools and universities, new work experience programmes and other engagement initiatives designed to increase awareness of the solicitor profession as a career choice open to all.	LSNI Education Committee; Regional Solicitor Associations; Institute of Professional Legal Studies; Universities; Local secondary schools (grammar and non-grammar).	To commence 2023.
	We will identify and promote role models and mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences.	LSNI Education Committee; Regional Solicitor Associations; Solicitor profession	To commence 2023.
	We will launch a new Female Leaders Programme, which will include mentoring opportunities, targeted CPD and networking events for women in the profession to come together, share learning and develop their skills to benefit career progression.	LSNI Education Committee; Regional Solicitor Associations; Solicitor profession.	Mentor scheme to launch Autumn 2022. Events programme to commence 2023.
	We will carry out a further in depth qualitative research project with female leavers from private legal practice to gain a better understanding of why they have left private practice and to ascertain what might have encouraged them to stay or to re-enter in future.	LSNI Future of the Profession Committee; Female solicitors who have left private practice and moved into the public sector/other legal sector/left the profession.	To begin Autumn 2022 and complete within a 12-month timeframe.
	We will conduct a series of roundtable events to discuss engagement with the equality and diversity agenda, building buy in and expanding the evidence base.	LSNI Future of the Profession Committee; Regional Solicitor Associations.	To commence Autumn 2022.

Key Theme	Priority Area of Focus	Key Stakeholders	Timeframes
Overcoming Financial Barriers	We will develop a Centenary Bursary / Access scheme designed to address financial barriers to entering the profession for those from under-represented groups.	LSNI Education Committee; Institute for Professional Legal Studies; Solicitor profession.	To commence 2023.
	We will explore the potential for traineeship grants and funding for small and/or rural practices.	LSNI Education Committee; Government Departments; Solicitor profession.	To commence 2023.
	We will carry out an in depth study of Gender Pay Gap issues relating to the profession in Northern Ireland.	LSNI Future of the Profession Committee; Solicitor profession.	To commence 2023.
Equality and Diversity Resources	On-line resource Equality and Diversity Toolkit for members. To include best practice employment policies/guidance. Delivered in partnership with the Equality Commission.	LSNI Future of the Profession Committee; Equality Commission; Diversity Mark; Solicitor profession.	To launch Autumn 2022.
External Equality Accreditation	We will become signatories to the Diversity Mark charter and apply for Accreditation.	LSNI Future of the Profession Committee; Diversity Mark; Solicitor profession.	To commence Autumn 2022.



THE
LAW SOCIETY
OF NORTHERN IRELAND



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