

Recruitment and retention in the profession: analysis and solutions

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THE **LAW SOCIETY**
OF NORTHERN IRELAND



100
YEARS



Introduction

Background report on “State of the Solicitor Profession”
prepared for 100th anniversary

This report:

- Showcased role of solicitors across NI economy and society
- Highlighted the challenges in the retention of solicitors in private practice

Portrait of a Changing Profession

Background – what the solicitor profession looks like in NI



There are **3,296** NI qualified solicitors working in Northern Ireland, of whom **2,827** hold practising certificates



63% of solicitors work in Belfast



Women account for **53%** of all solicitors working in Northern Ireland



56% of solicitors with PCs in Belfast are under 35. Only **18%** in other counties are under 35

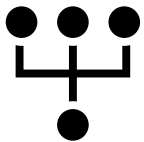
Key Takeaway:
The profession is concentrated in Belfast. Increasingly female and young.

Private Practice – Size Matters

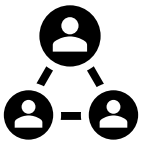
Fewer but bigger law firms



Consolidation: 459 solicitors' firms in practice today, 20% fewer firms than in 2011. Over 25% considering merger.

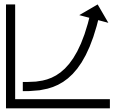


Branches: Over 100 branch offices - 459 law firms practising at 584 locations.



More employees: Average firm size now 6 solicitors (cf. 4 in 2011). More than 6 non-fee earners on average per firm. Biggest firm > 30 partners and 150 employees

Public Sector Practice



Public sector growth in NI - Nearly 1 in 5 solicitors are working in the public sector



A mid-career alternative? - 75% of public sector solicitors are over 40 and 55% are women over 40



Wide range of careers – Health, utilities, transport sectors etc. But over 50% of public sector solicitors work in the Government Legal Service or the Prosecution service



Low engagement - 1 in 4 public sector solicitors does not hold a practising certificate – low percentage take-up of PCs in Government departments and none in Land Registry

Key findings:

Public sector a popular mid-career choice, especially for female solicitors.

Low take-up in public sector of PCs

In-House Practice



Commerce and Industry - Small but Significant? - 4% of NI solicitors with PCs are working in the corporate or third sector (cf. 14% in England & Wales)



Growing diversity of jobs - Third sector is biggest in-house employer, but number of company lawyers growing - in financial services, telecoms and civil engineering



Women attracted to in-house roles - Nearly 2/3rds in-house solicitors are women

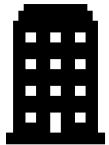


Evidence of needs NI can't fulfil? - 8% of all in-house solicitors are not qualified in NI (mostly E&W qualified)

Key findings:
Growing diversity of job opportunities for solicitors.
Room for more growth?

Strategic Issues

The Arrival of Large firm Practice in NI



Disproportionate influence of large firms – Only 10 law firms in NI with more than 10 partners but they account for nearly 500 solicitor jobs and around 25% of all firms' turnover.



Preferred location – Belfast now hosts more top English law firms than anywhere in the UK outside London - 16 offices of the biggest international English and Irish firms (13 since 2012 either through merger or new office opening).



Big firms, big employers - More than a third of all NI associates are now employed in either English/Irish international law firms or the biggest 4 independent local firms



New skills needed – Big firms demand new roles and new types of practice experience (e.g. specialist financial regulation and trade practice lawyers etc)

Key Finding:

Changing firm size and structure means changing mindset of solicitors in them... and changing demand for talent

The Internationalisation of NI Solicitors

There are around **750** NI qualified solicitors working outside NI

> 30% of all solicitors in private practice



Not just neighbours – Ireland (37%) and England and Wales (34%), but NI qualified solicitors now working in at least 14 other jurisdictions (incl. various EU members, Australia, Scotland, Hong Kong and offshore jurisdictions)



Increasingly attractive? - 60% of those working abroad have less than 10 years' experience. 38 individuals from 2020 intake now outside Ireland.



Growth in Training outside NI - Around 100 NI law graduates going to train in England and Wales every year (cf. 120 places at IPLS)

Key Point:

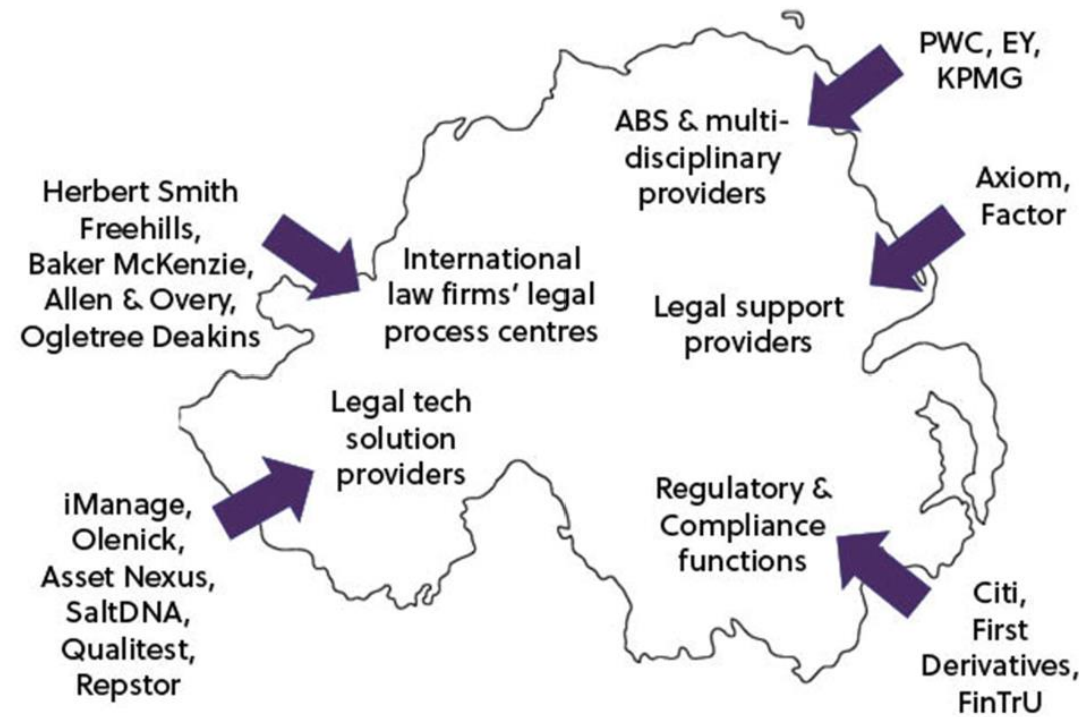
Practice in other jurisdictions now significant for NI profession.
Young solicitors gaining invaluable experience

The Alternative Legal Service Provider Sector

Belfast plays host to the world's largest concentration of Alternative Legal Service Providers (ALSPs)

Serving UK and global markets – not doing NI law but influencing market

Pioneers in legal tech:
Machine learning, AI, Regtech, blockchain, cloud technologies

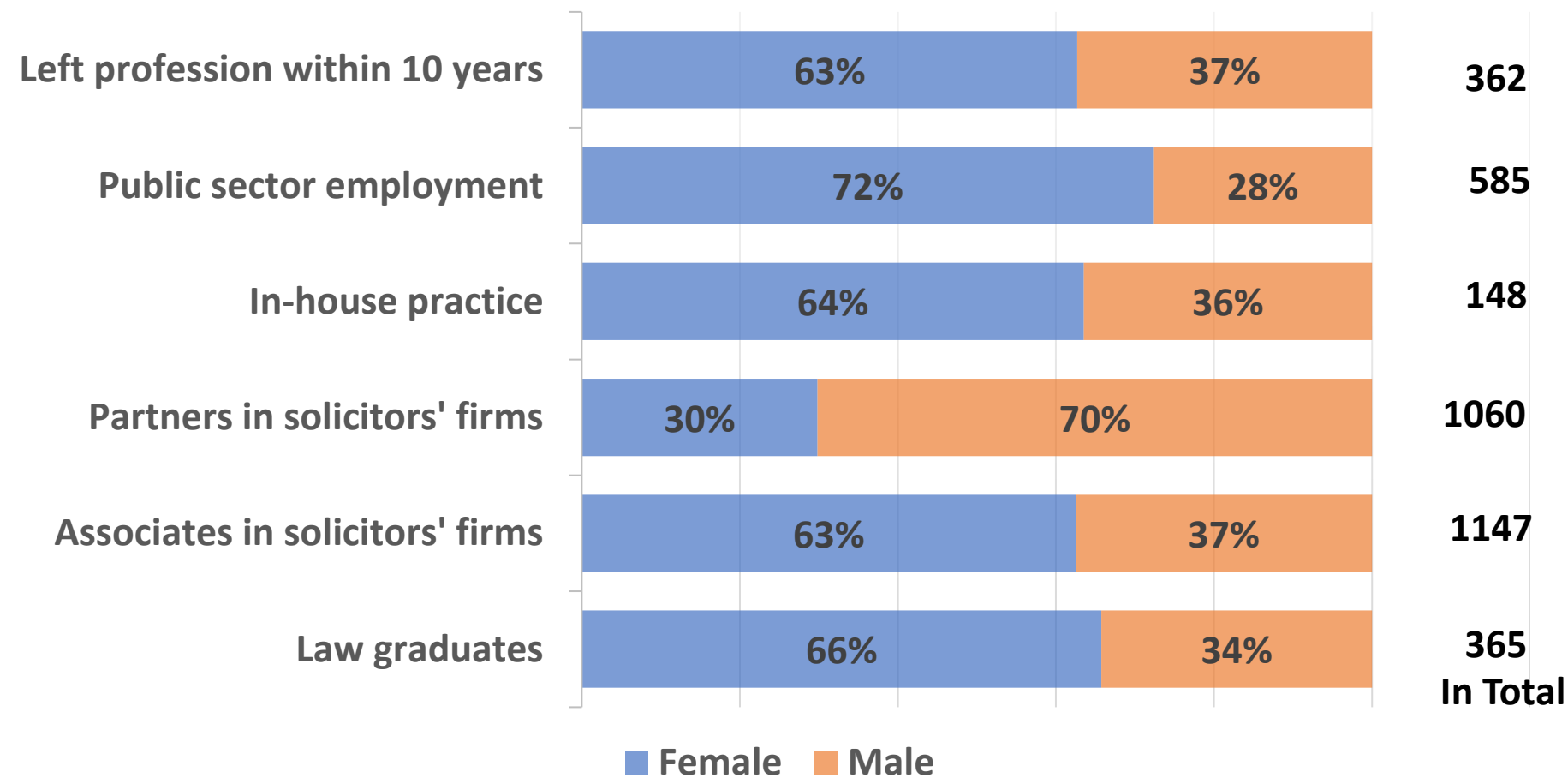


Significant employers -
Nearly 2000 NI jobs.
University relationships
- Recruiting law and technology graduates

Even for solicitors -
Around 5% of working solicitors are known to be in ALSPs

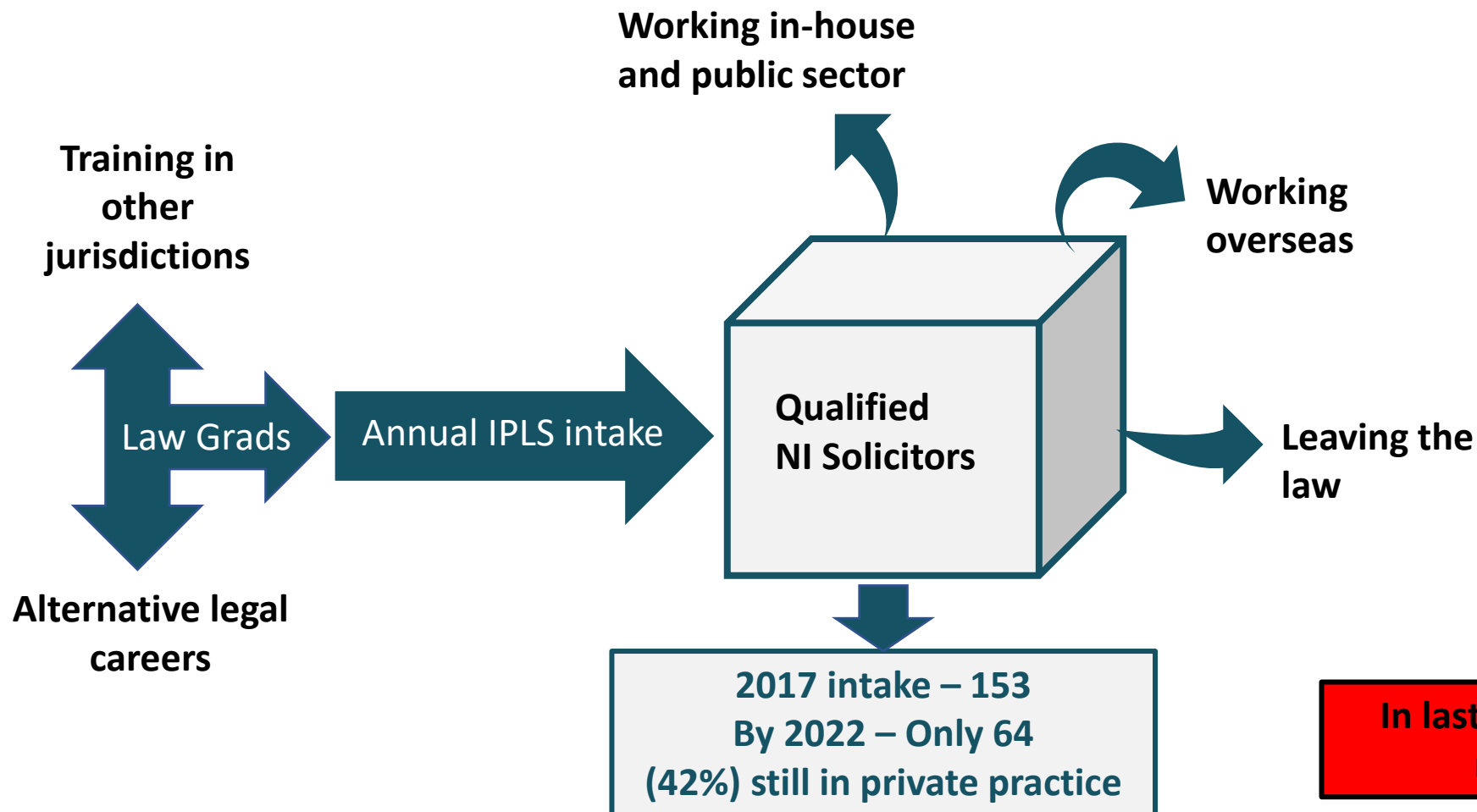
Policy Challenges

Feminisation and retention of the profession



Key Challenge: Female solicitors are vital to future of profession – how to retain them?

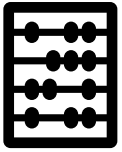
The Pipeline of Talent and Growing Demands



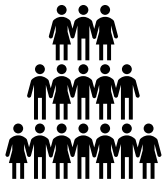
Key Challenge: More solicitors are needed in Northern Ireland – is the education and training system fit for the future?

In last 10 years – 50-60% attrition rates of new qualifiers

Summary - A Changing Legal Market



Private Practice by solicitors now only accounts **for just over half of the value added** in the NI legal sector



All employment in private practice accounts for **60% of the legal sector workforce**

