How Many Lawyers Are There in the UK? A Breakdown of Legal Professionals Across Jurisdictions

Written by Louise Donnery

When asking, “How many lawyers are in the UK?” it’s tempting to focus on a single number. But arriving at an exact figure is more complex. The UK legal profession is divided across three jurisdictions—England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland—each with its own branches of law: solicitors, barristers, and advocates. To complicate matters, not all qualified lawyers are actively practising. As of mid-2024, Statista puts the total number of lawyers in the UK at **301,900.**

How many lawyers are in the UK?

There are approximately 301,900 lawyers in the UK. This includes 206,116 solicitors, 17,656 barristers in England and Wales, 12,000 solicitors in Scotland, and 2,500 solicitors in Northern Ireland. These numbers reflect the diverse and evolving legal profession across the UK’s three main jurisdictions.

Overview of the UK Legal Profession

The UK legal profession is a diverse and dynamic sector comprising various types of law firms, solicitors, and barristers. According to the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), over 206,116 people are working as solicitors or lawyers in the United Kingdom as of September 2024.

The legal profession in the UK is known for its high standards, expertise, and commitment to justice. This vibrant sector is continually evolving, driven by changes in regulation, technology, and societal needs. Whether working in large international law firms or as sole practitioners, legal professionals in the UK play a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and delivering justice.

How many solicitors and barristers are there in each jurisdiction?

Now, let’s break down the numbers to get an idea of the distribution of the legal profession in the UK.

How many solicitors and barristers are there in England and Wales?

As of September 2024, thereare 206,116 solicitors on the roll, of whom 158,295 hold a practising certificate. Solicitors who hold a practising certificate are in practice.

As for barristers, the Bar Standards Board says there are around 17,656 in England and Wales.

How many solicitors and advocates are there in Scotland?

The Law Society of Scotland says there are around 12,000 solicitors in Scotland, of which around 10,000 are in practice.

Advocates are the Scottish equivalent of barristers in England and Wales. There are around 460 in Scotland, most of whom practice at the civil or criminal bar.

How many solicitors and barristers are there in Northern Ireland?

Northern Ireland has around 2,500 solicitors, most in small firms or sole practices.

There are around 600 barristers in Northern Ireland, and a large proportion of them practice in the courts.

What are the latest growth trends in the legal profession in the UK?

The number of **solicitors in England and Wales** has grown between 2019 and 2024. In 2019, there were 146,953 practising solicitors, which increased to 158,295 by 2024 – a 7.7% increase. The growth rate for barristers has seen a slight increase of 2.5% over the last five years.

Solicitors in Scotland have grown modestly from 11,500 in 2019 to 12,000 in 2024, a growth of 4.3%. The number of advocates in Scotland has remained flat, remaining between 450 and 460 over the same period.

In Northern Ireland, the number of solicitors has grown from 2,350 in 2019 to 2,500 in 2024 – a 6.4% increase. Barristers in Northern Ireland have seen minimal growth, and numbers have stabilised at around 600.

What are the drivers of growth?

Several factors are driving the growth in the legal profession, including the demand for lawyers in:

Corporate and commercial law: The UK is a global centre for financial services, mergers, acquisitions and corporate legal work, particularly in London.

More regulation: Increased regulatory frameworks, including post-Brexit requirements, have increased the need for legal advice.

Legal Tech: Legal tech, like legal practice management software, is used to deliver productivity and AI-driven growth.

In-house counsel: More businesses are hiring lawyers as in-house legal teams to manage their ongoing legal requirements.

Specialist areas of law: Employment and family law are growth areas that require more lawyers to handle the increased workload.

Private equity and law firm consolidation: More external capital is entering the profession and consolidating smaller firms into larger, more efficient ones.

Are you interested in the growing opportunities for legal professionals? Read our guide to the emerging areas of UK law.

What to look out for in the future?

There are three things to watch:

- **More female lawyers:** There has been a significant increase in the number of female lawyers taking up the profession, and they now make up over 50% of the workforce in England and Wales. That is set to continue to rise.
- **Technology and AI:** Both are growth drivers and efficiency enablers as lawyers get more skilled in using them.
- **Regional disparities:** Growth in London and major UK cities is outpacing the regions, especially Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Types of Law Firms in the UK

The UK has many law firms with unique characteristics, strengths, and specialisations. These firms cater to different market segments, from high-street firms serving local communities to large international firms handling complex global transactions.

Magic Circle Law Firms

The Magic Circle is an informal term for the five most prestigious law firms headquartered in the UK. These firms are known for their exceptional reputation, high earnings per partner, and rigorous recruitment processes. Magic Circle firms are

typically based in London and offer a narrow remit, making them suitable for those certain of their preferred specialism. Examples of Magic Circle law firms include Linklaters, Clifford Chance, and Allen & Overy. These firms are often involved in high-stakes corporate and financial work, making them a top choice for ambitious lawyers looking to make a mark in the legal profession.

City Law Firms

City law firms are headquartered in London but have offices across the UK and overseas. These firms work with high-profile clients, such as large commercial companies and financial institutions. City law firms are known for their fast-paced and demanding work environment, long solicitor working hours, andunsocial hours. Examples of city law firms include Herbert Smith Freehills, Norton Rose Fulbright, and Hogan Lovells. These firms offer a dynamic and challenging environment, ideal for those who thrive under pressure and are looking to work on high-profile cases.

National Law Firms

National law firms have a network of offices in various regions and cities across the UK. These firms operate in Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and more. National law firms undertake commercial and general practice work, with clients ranging from public and private companies to local authorities. Salaries at national law firms are reasonable, but they often offer a better work-life balance than city firms. Examples of national law firms include Eversheds Sutherland, Pinsent Masons, and Addleshaw Goddard. These firms provide a broad range of legal services, making them a versatile choice for lawyers seeking a balanced career with opportunities for growth and development.

The legal services sector

The legal services industry in the UK continues to grow and thrive, offering a wide range of services to individuals and businesses. These can be broadly categorised into different areas, usually dealt with by different law firms.

High-street law firms are smaller firms that deal directly with the public. These firms handle everything from house purchases and sales to wills, power of attorney and estates, civil and criminal court cases, and employment and family law cases.

Specialist firms: Some law firms focus on one area of law and become experts in that field. For example, some firms focus on employment law, others on family law. Some firms deal only with estate planning and private client law, others that focus on immigration, and others, again, on crime.

Mid-tier firms: These firms tend to be in the cities and do more corporate and commercial work, but they also provide the types of services provided by high-street law firms.

Full-service law firms provide services across all areas of law and don't have to refer work to specialists.

Large national and international firms: These firms deal with national and international work and operate in the financial sectors. They also do regulatory, corporate and government contract work.

What is the market size and economic impact of law firms in the UK?

The legal sector in the UK makes a significant contribution to the economy. The latest figures show that the UK's market size for legal services was £47.5 billion in 2024, up 8.3% fromthe previous year.

The breakdown across the UK was as follows: Scotland was £2.6 billion, Northern Ireland was £1.1 billion, and England and Wales made up the remainder.

Who are the top law firms in each jurisdiction in the UK?

There will always be arguments over who should be on such a list and how many firms should be included. Restricting this to three firms in each jurisdiction gives an idea of the size of the firms and their specialisms.

Top firms in England and Wales:

1. **Clifford Chance LLP**
   - Main Services: Corporate, banking & finance, litigation.
   - Offices: Clifford Chance is a "Magic Circle" law firm with international offices but not in Northern Ireland. Their focus on high-value corporate and finance work makes them one of the top firms in the UK and globally.
2. **Slaughter and May**
   - Main Services: Corporate, mergers & acquisitions, regulatory.
   - Offices: Slaughter and May is based in England and doesn't have offices in Scotland or Northern Ireland. They focus on big-ticket transactions and corporate work, particularly for FTSE 100 companies.

3. **Burges Salmon LLP**
    - Main Services: Energy, infrastructure, public sector.
    - Offices: Based in Bristol, Burges Salmon has offices in London and Edinburgh. It doesn't have an office in Northern Ireland but works with firms in that region. Burges Salmon focuses on the energy and transport sectors.

Top law firms in Scotland:

1. **Brodies LLP**
    - Main Services: Corporate, real estate, dispute resolution.
    - Offices: Brodies LLP is one of Scotland's largest independent law firms with offices in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness. They don't operate in England or Northern Ireland but work with UK firms for cross-border work.
2. **Shepherd and Wedderburn LLP**
    - Main Services: Corporate, banking & finance, real estate.
    - Offices: This firm has offices in Scotland and London but not in Northern Ireland. It does UK-wide corporate work, particularly in the real estate and energy sectors.
3. **Burness Paull LLP**
    - Main Services: Corporate, energy, infrastructure.
    - Offices: Burness Paull has offices in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen but not in England or Northern Ireland. They specialise in corporate and energy sector work, particularly for international clients.

Top law firms in Northern Ireland:

1. **Carson McDowell LLP**
    - Main Services: Corporate, real estate, litigation.
    - Offices: Based in Belfast, Carson McDowell is one of the largest independent law firms in Northern Ireland. It doesn't have offices in England or Scotland but works with firms in those regions for cross-border work.
2. **Arthur Cox Northern Ireland LLP**
    - Main Services: Corporate, finance, employment law.
    - Offices: Arthur Cox is a top firm in Northern Ireland with a Dublin-based parent firm. While they operate extensively in Northern Ireland, they don't have offices in England or Scotland but work with firms across the UK.
3. **Tughans Solicitors**
    - Main Services: Dispute resolution, corporate, real estate.
    - Offices: Based in Belfast, Tughans focuses on local business and property law. They don't have offices in Scotland or England but work with other firms on bigger UK-wide projects.

These are top firms in their areas and often specialise in corporate, energy, infrastructure and real estate. Some of the more prominent firms, like Clifford Chance, are global players, while others, like Brodies and Carson McDowell, have a regional focus.

For the latest law firm statistics, be sure to download the latest *Legal Trends Report*, so your firm can be set up for success long-term.

Frequently asked questions

How many lawyers does the UK have?

As of mid-2024, the UK has approximately **301,900 lawyers**. This includes solicitors, barristers, advocates, and non-practising legal professionals across three jurisdictions: England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

How many solicitors and barristers are there in the UK?

England and Wales: There are **206,116 solicitors** (with **158,295** in practice) and around **17,656 barristers**.

Scotland: There are approximately **12,000 solicitors** (with **10,000** in practice) and around **460 advocates**.

Is there a shortage of lawyers UK?

There isn't a widespread shortage of lawyers in the UK, but certain regions and practice areas, such as legal aid and family law, face challenges. Smaller law firms in rural areas and Northern Ireland, in particular, have seen slower growth due to funding pressures and consolidation.

About Clio

Clio is the global leader in legal AI, powering legal work across the profession, from law firms of every size to corporate legal teams, government agencies, and courts. Its Intelligent Legal Work Platform unites the business and practice of law, connecting the people, information, and processes behind legal work. Clio's AI brings the context

together with legal sources drawn from Clio Library, a growing collection of more than one billion legal documents. Over 400,000 legal professionals in more than 130 countries rely on Clio to run their legal world. Learn more at www.clio.com.