



Cymdeithas y
Cyfreithwyr
The Law Society

The case and demand for: **Level 7 Legal Apprenticeships in Wales**



The case and demand for:
Level 7 Legal Apprenticeships
Dr Bronwen Williams
February 2025

The Law Society
Floor 5, Capital Tower
9 Greyfriars Road,
Cardiff
CF10 3AD

Design: The Law Society

Any enquires regarding this publication should be sent to

wales.office@lawsociety.org.uk

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Apprenticeships in England</u>	5
<u>Figures for the 2023/24 academic year (UK Gov 2025):</u>	7
<u>Figures for the 2024/25 academic year so far (August 2024 to October 2024) show (UK Parliament 2025):</u>	7
<u>Legal Apprenticeships in England</u>	8
<u>Social Mobility in the law</u>	11
<u>Legal Apprenticeships in Wales</u>	14
<u>The Case for Implementing a Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme in Wales</u>	16
<u>Promoting Social Mobility</u>	17
<u>Growing Demand for Legal Services</u>	18
<u>Why the Welsh Government Should Fully Fund Level 7 Solicitor Apprenticeships</u>	21
<u>Apprenticeships: Our research</u>	25
<u>Methods</u>	26
<u>Limitations of the study</u>	26
<u>Findings</u>	27
<u>Newly qualified solicitor (0-4 years)</u>	27
<u>Students currently studying law at university</u>	31
<u>Pupils currently studying at school or college</u>	34
<u>Managers or Partners in a law firm</u>	39
<u>Conclusions</u>	42
<u>A Strong Case for Wales</u>	44
<u>Bibliography</u>	46

Introduction

The legal profession in Wales faces significant challenges, including recruitment and retention difficulties, a lack of diversity, and barriers to entry for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. At the same time, there is a growing demand for legal services in areas such as family law, employment law, and immigration law, particularly in rural communities.

One of the most significant barriers to entering the legal profession is the high cost of traditional legal education. A law degree in the UK can cost up to £27,750 in tuition fees alone, with additional costs for the Legal Practice Course (LPC) or Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) preparation. This financial burden disproportionately affects individuals from lower-income backgrounds, limiting the diversity of the legal profession. According to the SRA's 2021 Annual Report, only 1/5 of solicitors come from working-class backgrounds, highlighting the need for alternative pathways into the profession.

To address these challenges and ensure that the legal profession in Wales is equipped to meet the needs of its citizens, the implementation of a Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme (often called a solicitor apprenticeship) is essential. This paper argues that such a programme would not only improve access to the legal profession but also enhance diversity, address skills gaps, and provide a sustainable pipeline of talent for law firms in Wales. Evidence from the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), the evidence from England and the participation of its level 7 legal apprentices strongly supports the case for this initiative.

Apprenticeships in England

Under the UK government's 2016 'New Apprenticeships Funding Policy' there was a commitment to provide long term funding for apprenticeships. Launched by the then Business Secretary Sajid Javid the governments' campaign was to encourage young people to learn and earn through apprenticeships, with the aim of giving apprenticeships the same legal treatment as degrees, a target for public sector bodies to help reach 3 million apprenticeships by 2020 and included a multi-million-pound boost to degree apprenticeship opportunities.

The UK Government's apprenticeship policies were intended to upskill the nation, provide opportunities for high-quality jobs, and provide skills for employers.

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 required all employers in the UK with an annual wage bill of over £3 million to pay 0.5% of it towards funding apprenticeships, with the intention of the money being invested back into apprenticeship training. The funding aimed to support people of all ages to gain high-quality skills and experience and help employers to offer more training opportunities and build a skilled workforce.

The then Skills Minister Robert Halfon (Dept. Of Education) stated in 2017:

"Building an apprenticeship and skills nation is essential in ensuring that we have the home-grown workforce we need in post-Brexit Britain to address the skills shortages facing industry and give everyone the chance to succeed".

Employers that were too small to pay the levy - around 98% of employers in England at the time - would have 90% of the costs of training paid for by the government.

The motivation behind the new policies was to increase social mobility and provide opportunities for those from the most disadvantaged areas.

Figures for the 2023/24 academic year (UK Gov 2025):

- 736,500 people participating in an apprenticeship in England, with 339,600 apprenticeship starts and 178,200 apprenticeship achievements.
- Starts slightly increased from 2022/23, when there were 337,000 starts. Participation decreased from 752,000, and achievements increased from 162,000.
- The number of starts fell in 2017/18 in response to the introduction of a new apprenticeship funding system in May 2017.
- The number of starts fell again in 2019/20 due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic
- The proportion of learners who are BAME has also increased, from 12.3% to 17.3%.
- The proportion of apprenticeships at intermediate level has declined over the last five years. The proportion of apprenticeship starts at higher level has increased, and the proportion of advanced apprenticeships is similar to 2018/19.
- 78% of starts were in one of four subject areas: Business, Administration and Law; Health, Public Services and Care; Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies; and Retail and Commercial Enterprise.

Figures for the 2024/25 academic year so far (August 2024 to October 2024) show (UK Parliament 2025):

- Apprenticeship starts were up by 1.3% to 132,560 compared to 130,830 reported for the previous year.
- Under 19s accounted for 31.5% of starts (41,810).
- Higher apprenticeships continue to grow in 2024/25. Higher apprenticeship starts increased by 8.1% to 50,000 compared to 46,230 in the same period last year.
- Starts at Level 6 and 7 increased by 10.9% to 25,490 compared to the same period last year. This represents 19.2% of all starts for 2024/25. There were 22,980 Level 6 and 7 starts last year (17.6% of starts in the same period).

- Learners recorded from ethnic minorities (excluding white minorities) backgrounds increased by 7.7% to 20,700 from 19,220 in the same period last year. This accounts for 15.8% of the cohort, compared to 15.0%.

However, according to the Sutton Trust (2023) individuals from more advantaged backgrounds were twice as likely to enter a Higher or Degree Apprenticeship compared to the more disadvantaged learners, which was contrary to the intentions of the government when implementing their apprenticeship policies, to increase social mobility.

Legal Apprenticeships in England

For nearly a decade, level 7 Legal Apprenticeships have been available in England. This route into law, which has seen learners from all backgrounds gain a degree in law and a professional qualification whilst working in a law firm has been growing in popularity since its inception in 2016. There were several new 'Trailblazer apprenticeships' offered as alternative routes into law which include qualifying as a solicitor, paralegal, probate technician or chartered legal executive which were designed by employers in 2016.

In 2016 the Chief Executive of The Law Society, Paul Tennant (Law Society, 2019, p3) wrote:

"The Law Society supports alternative routes into the solicitor profession, as long as these meet the equivalent standards of the current routes to qualification. We also see apprenticeships as a way of increasing the diversity of the profession, helping meet the varying needs of our members' clients through improved productivity and supporting wider professional development".

For those choosing a level 7 Legal Apprenticeship, it will take 5 to 6 years to complete. The level 7 Legal Apprenticeship standard is based on the Statement of Solicitor Competence

and to complete the apprenticeship, an apprentice must pass the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) Part 1 and 2.

To be eligible for this route apprentices must be employed, for firms that pay the apprenticeship levy, they can draw down funding for the training and assessments. For those firms that don't pay the levy they will get 95% of the cost funded by the government and they will need to pay the remaining 5%. **Apprentices will be given 20% of their time to study and 70% on the job training within the firm**, ideally working in different practice areas. Level 7 legal apprentices will gain a law degree and completion of the SQE Part 1 and 2 gives them the level 7 professional qualification over a 6-year programme.

The SRA reports that legal apprenticeships have seen a steady increase in uptake, with over 1,000 apprentices enrolled in 2022. Burges Salmon (2025) was one of the firms involved in the Trailblazer development of the level 7 legal apprenticeship and has offered apprenticeships since 2016 and currently have 28 apprentices. The first cohort to qualify was in 2023, therefore with only 2 years of qualification it may be too early to say how successful solicitor apprentices will be, and there is little data on their progression within a firm compared to those taking a traditional route.

According to Joanna Goodman writing in the Law Gazette (2024 p20)

"Solicitor apprenticeships are still evolving, and while their impact on the legal profession is not fully realised, bringing youth, enthusiasm and diversity into a traditional profession is already making a positive difference".

Patrick McCann recently retired as the global head of learning at Linklaters, a founder of the Social Welfare Solicitors' Qualification Fund (SWSQF) and co-chief executive of

apprenticeship initiative City Century is an ardent supporter of the level 7 apprenticeship route. Speaking as a panel member at last year's LegalTechTalk (2023, p38) event on the changing nature of legal education McCann stated that:

"The numbers of people coming through solicitor apprenticeships and the impact they're having within their organisations is really disruptive to the entry routes into the profession, in a really positive way."

He also commented on how in-house teams were relying on apprenticeship routes:

"In-house teams often have more pressure on budgets and headcount, but they can utilise the apprenticeship levy, and nurture home-grown talent to upskill and retain paralegals. There is now a wealth of opportunities to train in-house."

Whilst there seems to be a lot of support for the solicitor apprenticeship route within law firms in England, it is not taking away from the traditional route, and there are still more training contracts awarded than apprenticeships. Weightmans takes on 10 solicitor apprentices a year and offers 20 training contract and according to early careers lead Denise Wright one reason for its small apprenticeship numbers is the time taken for an apprentice to qualify, 6 years instead of a 2-year training contract, and the resource commitment involved during that time. (Law Gazette 2024). However, for aspiring solicitor's, the increase in student fees, the cost of living and the competitive job market, means the demand for a fully funded employed route is increasing significantly.

Social Mobility in the law

While solicitor apprenticeships are good for the legal profession in helping to widen access to law there is a very real challenge to its longevity (Goodman 2016) and to making sure that it achieves the social mobility agenda first envisaged by the UK government in 2016.

A 2020 study by the Bridge Group of a group of leading law firms in England found that they were deeply lacking in diversity, and most acutely by socio-economic background at partner level. It reported that more than half of partners employed across the participating firms attended an independent school (53%), when you take into consideration that only 7.2% of school children in the UK attend independent schools this is a very interesting finding.

The data from the SRA show that 57% of individuals in the legal profession come from higher socio-economic backgrounds compared with the 37% across all UK workforces (SRA 2025). Slaughter and May (2023) published a Social Mobility Report which presented an action plan that specifically focuses on increasing the number of individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds joining the firm with an increase of 18.8% in 2022 to 25% by 2033. They see this as addressing social inequalities in the legal profession, improve diversity and retain talent within the firm. Slaughter and May take on 6 solicitor apprentices as opposed to the 95 training contracts they offer each year (Legal Cheek 2025).

The Law Gazette reported (Goodman, 2024) that lower social mobility among solicitor apprenticeships was partly caused by lack of information, this is supported by a UCAS report in 2024 that indicated that:

"1 in 3 students feel they don't receive information about apprenticeships and that Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and women are less able to access careers information, advice, and guidance regarding apprenticeships".

Weightmans have sought to address this issue with several outreach projects, speaking in the Law Gazette (Goodman, 2024, p21) Denise Weight explains what measure they have put in place.

"We created a transparent recruitment process that includes outreach work in primary schools, where we run sessions for 11-year-olds explaining how law works and what lawyers do. Our lawyers give careers talks in secondary schools and attend apprenticeship shows. It's about planting the seeds early and getting people to think about law before they choose their A-levels. For sixth formers we provide an online Legal Insights programme and work experience opportunities. We give them what they need to make an informed decision."

The UCAS (2024) report highlighted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a greater interest in apprenticeships, however they do not feel supported through this process. The report further stated that a third (31%) of students said it was far easier to find information about higher education, while only 6% said the same about information regarding apprenticeships. The implementation of the 'Baker Clause' in January 2018 (now known as the Provider Access Legislation (PAL) since January 2023), was intended to address this issue by requiring secondary schools and colleges in England, by law, to allow other education and training providers the opportunity to inform pupils of the various other technical and vocational qualifications or apprenticeships available. This obligation was further emphasised with the Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance that schools

and colleges use to increase opportunities for students, in terms of work- placements, university and other vocational placement opportunities. However, it seems that this is not being done consistently across all schools and colleges (Department of Education, 2023) and the UCAS data supports this.

However, despite this challenge it is still clear that the level 7 legal apprenticeship has significantly impacted the landscape of legal education in England.

Legal Apprenticeships in Wales

There is currently no funding in Wales for a level 7 Legal apprenticeship, however this is not due to lack of trying. In 2012 several Welsh law firms, three Welsh universities, the Law Society, the SRA and Skills for Justice, through combined consultation developed the content and structure of the Level 7 Legal Service (Wales) framework. This framework embedded a Law degree and professional competences. The competence and knowledge qualifications in the framework were underpinned by National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the SRA regulations. This framework was published in 2013 (see appendix 1). However, at the time a legal services apprenticeship at this level was not a priority for Welsh Government funding and therefore did not take off, as it did in England.

The need for a legal services apprenticeship was revisited in 2022, this time at level 3 and level 5, currently apprentices can enrol with training providers in Wales to take the relevant stage of the CILEX Professional Qualification (CPQ) for foundation and advanced paralegals. These two levels are fully funded in Wales and would take a student studying part time whilst in employment, 4 years to complete. There are three providers of this route in Wales, The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), the only university in Wales to offer this route and working in conjunction with their college partners Coleg Sir Gar, Neath Port Talbot College Group and Cardiff and Vale College, Brightlink, an independent deliverer working with ITEC to draw down apprenticeship funding and Gower College. Whilst these levels are funded, each apprenticeship funding provider only has a finite amount of funding to apportion to legal apprentices. Learners then can develop further with the CILEx Professional qualification to become a CILEx Lawyer or apply to do a LLB top-up degree to complete the SQE 1&2 and become a solicitor. However, there is no funding available for the CILEx professional stage but there is Student Loan funding for the LLB top-up but not the SQE 1&2. While this a great opportunity for Welsh students it is not

in line with the offer in England, thus putting Wales at a disadvantage and negatively impacts the ability to retain talent in Wales.

The Case for Implementing a Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme in Wales

The legal profession in Wales faces serious challenges in recruiting and retaining talent, especially in rural areas. Many law firms in these regions struggle to attract qualified solicitors, leading to a shortage of legal services for local communities. A level 7 Legal Apprenticeship programme would address this issue by providing a pathway for local talent to enter the profession without needing to relocate to urban centres. By nurturing local talent, law firms in rural Wales could build a sustainable pipeline of solicitors who are committed to serving their communities.

According to a 2022 study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), apprentices are more likely to stay with their employer long-term compared to graduates. The study found that 85% of apprentices remain with their employer after completing their apprenticeship, compared to 60% of graduates. This suggests that legal apprenticeships could help law firms in rural Wales retain talent, reducing turnover and ensuring continuity of service.

The SRA's data on the geographic distribution of solicitors in Wales supports this argument. In 2022, only 12% of solicitors in Wales were based in rural areas, despite these regions accounting for a significant proportion of the population. By offering apprenticeships, law firms in rural Wales could attract and retain talent, ensuring that legal services remain accessible to all citizens.

A 2019 report by the Legal Education Foundation highlighted the growing issue of "legal deserts" in rural areas across the UK, where access to legal services is severely limited due to a lack of qualified solicitors. The report found that rural areas in Wales are particularly affected, with some regions having fewer than one solicitor per 10,000 residents.

Currently the level 3 and level 5 paralegal apprenticeships are supported by several firms across West Wales, however it is a much harder 'sell' to young people as it is not a guaranteed route to qualify as a solicitor. A level 7 Legal Apprenticeship programme could help address this issue and develop local talent who are more likely to remain in their communities, thus improving access to legal services in rural Wales.

Promoting Social Mobility

As discussed above the legal profession has historically been dominated by individuals from privileged backgrounds, with limited opportunities for those from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups and Wales is no different to England. According to the SRA's 2023 Diversity Data, only 5% of solicitors in Wales identify as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME), and just 23% come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, unlike England, only 12 % of partners attended an independent school and overall, 83% cent of lawyers in Wales went to a state school.

However, the lack of diversity undermines the profession's ability to reflect the communities it serves and limits the range of perspectives within the legal system. By offering apprenticeships, law firms in Wales could attract a more diverse pool of talent, ensuring that the legal profession better reflects the diversity of Welsh society.

Growing Demand for Legal Services

There is a growing demand for legal services in Wales, particularly in areas such as family law, criminal defence, employment law, and immigration law. This demand is driven by factors such as changes in legislation, economic challenges, and the impact of Brexit. However, many law firms in Wales struggle to meet this demand due to a shortage of qualified solicitors. A Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme would address this issue by providing a pipeline of skilled practitioners who are trained to meet the specific needs of Welsh clients.

A 2023 report by the Law Society of England and Wales highlighted a growing skills gap in the legal profession, particularly in areas such as family law, employment law, and immigration law. The report found that 40% of law firms in the UK struggle to recruit solicitors with the necessary skills to meet client demand. A Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme could help bridge this gap by providing practical, on-the-job training that equips apprentices with the skills needed to address these high-demand areas.

The SRA's data on the demand for legal services in Wales supports this argument. In 2022, there was a 15% increase in the number of legal cases related to family law and a 10% increase in employment law cases, highlighting the need for more solicitors in these areas. By offering apprenticeships, law firms could ensure that they have the capacity to meet this demand, while also providing apprentices with valuable experience in high-demand areas of law.

The support from the profession in Wales is overwhelming, most are already supporting learners through the paralegal apprenticeship but recognise that there is a point where funding for the final level will need to be considered, either through employer support or self-funding by the learner. This is less than ideal and is a barrier for learners who may take their funded qualification and go to England to continue their studies.

Eve Piffaretti, a member of the National Board for Wales and the Partner & Head of Office (Wales) for Blake Morgan LLP recognised that:

"For some time, it has been a frustration that we cannot offer the opportunity to complete a Solicitor Apprenticeship in Wales in the same way that we can in England. This does not enable us to operate consistently as a business, to build strong talent pathways in each of our regions or support those aspiring to a legal career for whom graduate study, and its associated financial implications is simply not an option. Our wish is to be able to build resilience for our business, and we see apprenticeships offering an opportunity to provide that resilience and growth – they are a critical part of our Early Careers strategy."

Mark Davies Chair of the National Board for Wales similarly stated that:

"There is a desperate shortage of lawyers in Wales. The Law Society of England and Wales has publicly acknowledged the 'vanishing availability' of legal aid across housing, welfare, education, community care and immigration. With the prospect of initiating the Level 7 legal apprenticeship in Wales, we have the opportunity to ensure that millions of people who currently live in areas where legal aid has vanished, are given the help and advice which they deserve."

Jacqui Gower, Director and COO at JCP Solicitors, said in support of the paralegal apprenticeship:

"We have always seen apprenticeships as a vital part of our recruitment strategy in the business. We have been appointing business administration apprenticeships for years, and we are delighted that the legal apprenticeship scheme continues to be made available in Wales. We see more diverse applicants coming into the business through legal apprenticeships compared with graduate law training schemes, and we believe that a successful business needs diversity to be stronger and more resilient. For us, apprenticeships are a respected way of finding new talent and training up our solicitors of the future."

Jacqui explained the firm views its legal apprentices 'on par with our graduate trainees' and encourages those considering a legal apprenticeship to research the options available. She added:

"It is a fantastic way to qualify without having university debt or moving away from home. As an Apprentice you can earn a wage while you qualify, gaining on-the-job training and giving you valuable work experience from day one."

Why the Welsh Government Should Fully Fund Level 7 Solicitor Apprenticeships

The legal profession in Wales faces significant challenges in ensuring accessibility, diversity, and sustainability. One key issue is the financial burden of qualifying as a solicitor, particularly through the Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship route. Currently, many law firms—especially smaller and high-street practices—struggle to fund these apprenticeships, limiting opportunities for aspiring solicitors. To address this, Welsh Government should fully fund Level 7 apprenticeships rather than relying on law firms to bear the cost. This approach would enhance social mobility, support the Welsh legal sector, and ensure a steady pipeline of qualified solicitors to meet the country's legal needs.

1. Reducing Financial Barriers and Improving Social Mobility

The traditional route to becoming a solicitor—through a law degree, the Legal Practice Course (LPC), or the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)—is prohibitively expensive costing at least £70,000 from start to finish. Many students graduate with substantial debt, deterring those from lower-income backgrounds from pursuing a legal career. The Level 7 apprenticeship offers an alternative, allowing individuals to earn while they learn. However, if law firms must cover the costs (which can exceed £20,000 per apprentice), many will be reluctant to take on apprentices, particularly smaller firms with limited budgets.

By fully funding these apprenticeships, the Welsh government would remove a major financial obstacle, enabling more individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to enter the profession. This aligns with broader goals of improving social mobility and ensuring that the legal profession reflects the society it serves.

2. Supporting Small and High-Street Law Firms

Wales has a high proportion of small and medium-sized law firms, particularly in rural and underserved areas. These firms play a crucial role in providing legal services to local communities but often lack the financial resources to fund apprenticeships. Larger commercial firms may be able to absorb these costs, but smaller practices—which are vital for access to justice in Wales—may be priced out.

If Welsh Government fully funds Level 7 apprenticeships, more firms, including high-street practices, could participate without financial strain. This would help sustain the Welsh legal sector, ensuring that communities across Wales have access to qualified solicitors. Without intervention, there is a risk that legal services could become increasingly concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations as legal deserts.

3. Addressing the Skills Shortage in Wales

Wales faces a growing demand for legal professionals, particularly in areas such as family law, housing, and welfare, where legal aid cuts have exacerbated shortages. By fully funding solicitor apprenticeships, Welsh Government could incentivise more firms to train new solicitors, helping to fill critical gaps in the legal workforce.

Additionally, many law graduates leave Wales to seek training contracts in England, where opportunities are perceived to be more plentiful. A fully funded apprenticeship scheme would encourage aspiring solicitors to stay in Wales, strengthening the domestic legal sector and retaining talent within the country.

4. Improving Recruitment and Retention in Rural and Small-Town Firms

One of the biggest challenges for law firms in small towns and rural Wales is attracting and retaining talent. Young lawyers often gravitate towards larger cities like Cardiff or Swansea—

or even move to England—for better career prospects. This leaves smaller firms struggling to recruit and retain solicitors, leading to gaps in legal services for local communities.

A Welsh Government funded Level 7 apprenticeship scheme could directly address this issue by:

- **Encouraging local recruitment** – Firms in rural areas could train apprentices from their own communities, who are more likely to stay long-term.
- **Reducing reliance on external hires** – Instead of competing with city firms for qualified solicitors, rural practices could grow their own talent.
- **Building loyalty** – Apprentices who train with a firm are more likely to remain there after qualification, reducing turnover.
- **Strengthening community ties** – Local apprentices understand regional legal needs (e.g., agricultural law, Welsh language services) better than outsiders.

This approach has been successful in other sectors, such as healthcare, where apprenticeship schemes have helped retain professionals in underserved areas. Applying the same model to legal apprenticeships would ensure that rural firms have a sustainable workforce.

5. Aligning with Welsh Government Priorities

Welsh Government has already demonstrated a commitment to vocational education and apprenticeships through initiatives such as *Apprenticeships in Wales* and *Young Person's Guarantee*. Expanding full funding to Level 7 solicitor apprenticeships would be a natural extension of these policies, reinforcing Wales's investment in skills and professional development.

Moreover, Welsh Government has set ambitious targets for increasing apprenticeship participation across all sectors. By removing financial barriers for law firms, more employers would be encouraged to take on solicitor apprentices, helping to meet these targets while also boosting the legal profession.

6. Long-Term Economic Benefits

Investing in solicitor apprenticeships would yield long-term economic benefits for Wales. A well-trained legal workforce supports businesses, upholds the rule of law, and ensures that individuals can access justice. By reducing the financial burden on firms, the government would enable more solicitors to qualify and remain in Wales, contributing to the economy through employment and legal services.

Furthermore, a more diverse and accessible legal profession can improve public trust in the justice system, ensuring that legal services are available to all, not just those who can afford them.

Conclusion

The Welsh government should take responsibility for fully funding Level 7 solicitor apprenticeships to ensure a fair, sustainable, and accessible route into the legal profession. Relying on law firms to fund these apprenticeships risks excluding talented individuals on the basis of income and disadvantaging smaller practices. A government-funded approach would create a more equitable and resilient legal sector, ensuring that Wales has the solicitors it needs for the future.

Apprenticeships: Our research

Methods

Research was commissioned to better understand the need and support for the level 7 Legal Apprenticeship programme in Wales. Five stakeholder groups were identified where were:

- Newly qualified solicitor (0-4 years)
- Students currently studying law at university
- Pupils currently studying at school or college
- Learners currently on the Welsh paralegal apprenticeship
- Managers or Partners in a law firm

An online questionnaire was devised to collect data from the identified stakeholders and was promoted through social media campaigns, direct email drop to members of the Law Society and promotion at meetings and webinars. The questionnaire was available in both Welsh and English.

Limitations of the study

This study did not focus on socio-demographics of the stakeholders, and this is a limitation as it would have been advantageous to see if there was any disparity of responses from different socio-economic groups. Potential further study would be to look more closely at the students who wished to pursue the apprenticeship routes and those already studying the paralegal apprenticeship route regarding their socio-economic background.

Whilst the literature available highlights the benefit in England, these did only start in 2016, therefore the first cohort of the trailblazers will have qualified in 2022 at the earliest, meaning data on their career success is limited.

Findings

The questionnaire was open for 3 months between November 2024 and January 2025 and achieved 145 responses across the 5 stakeholder groups identified. The breakdown of stakeholder and response rate are:

Newly qualified solicitor (0-4 years)

All 32 responses were from solicitors that currently work in Wales across a number of firms, local authorities and in-house private organisations. 91% of the respondents were over the age of 27 and therefore would have qualified on the traditional route of LLB/GDL, LPC and training contract and not the new route through the SQE.

63% of the solicitors who responded studied their undergraduate Law degree in Wales. Of those that studied law at Swansea University, University of South Wales and Cardiff University they all stayed on to study their LPC at the same university, those who studied at Aberystwyth University and Bangor University predominately studied at the University of Law for their LPC.

All but one student used student finance to fund their degree, the one student who did not, studied at a non-UK university for their undergraduate degree and did not get student funding for the LPC as they would have been classed as a non-UK student and therefore not eligible for student finance. Therefore, all but one of the respondents would be carrying student loan debt.

78% worked as a paralegal before moving onto their training contract with 25% waiting over 3 years before becoming a trainee. 69% undertook work experience whilst at university, however only 10% gained employment from the firm they did work experience at.

2 (6%) respondents did not undertake work experience or work as a paralegal but started a training contract within less than 2 years after graduation, with one becoming a trainee immediately after graduation.

60% stated that if an apprenticeship was available to them before they started at university, they would have taken that option as the opportunity to 'earn and learn' was very attractive, some comments on this route are:

"When I was completing my degree, I did not know other avenues into law existed e.g. apprenticeships, CILEx. Had I known this I would have definitely given more thought into my decision to take the traditional route into law".

"Potentially - it took me at least 8 years to qualify anyway, so being able to earn money immediately and gain valuable experience would have been an appealing option".

"I am from a lower socioeconomic background; I worked part-time from the age of 15 and actually left school (without the intention to go to university later) to work full-time to earn money and support my family. If there had been the option to continue learning and working towards a career whilst also earning money, that would have benefitted me greatly".

However, 40% of the respondents would not have chosen this route and give a number of reasons why they wouldn't have chosen it. The majority stated they wanted the university experience and how that experience is about more than just academic:

"At the time, University was an absolute necessity. Uni is about much more than the degree at the end of it. It is crucial for young lawyers to gain life experience as well as legal experience if they are to be any good at the job".

"Wouldn't have had the university experience, wanted to move to a city and my family are from a smaller town so the options for firms in that town are much more limited. I doubt I would have been able to afford to undertake an apprenticeship and rent in a city".

However, knowledge of the routes and how they are perceived also came up:

"Lack of information about it. Also, the stigma attached to the non-training contract routes until recently".

Of all the respondents 84% planned to live and work in Wales, of the 16% (5) who said they didn't plan to work in Wales 40% (2) said this was due to a lack of opportunities in Wales to progress in their careers.

Overall, 38% expressed that they felt that there were not enough opportunities to progress in their careers in Wales. Of the 38% who said there were a lack of opportunities 50% had studied outside of Wales for both their LLB and LPC.

Reasons given were:

"The pay in Wales seems to be considerably lower than in cities like Bristol. I therefore see a lot of colleagues deciding to commute to Bristol rather than get roles in Cardiff".

"Nowhere near enough well-paid roles taking into account housing costs and the rising cost of living. The Welsh legal sector is not competitive enough or respected by English firms. Paralegals are criminally underpaid and frankly abused by the current system".

"For residential property there is a limit of jobs and particularly for progression. Most firms are small high street and cannot pay the same as England".

"There are very few jobs in the area I want to work in, and progression depends on opportunities at a select number of firms and what their needs are. I feel there is a risk of being pigeon-holed into an area where there is a need, rather than something that is of genuine interest".

However, 62% of the respondents stated that there were opportunities in Wales and not just in private practice:

"There are a number of big, full-service firms in Wales".

"Plenty of jobs and career progress available anywhere as a Solicitor".

"Within the right firm, there are always opportunities to progress - assistant solicitor, associate, partner, etc. There are also other options if one does not want to continue in private practice e.g. local authority, civil service, etc".

"I've recently moved from private practice to working for the local authority. There are multiple grades above my current grade and many senior lawyers above me to learn from / work alongside".

Of the respondents who were positive about career opportunities in Wales 64% had studied both the LLB and LPC in Welsh universities.

Students currently studying law at university

There were 47 responses from students currently studying law at university, with 87% studying at a Welsh university, those students studying at Aberystwyth, Cardiff Met, UWTSD and Wexham also studied at a Welsh School or College, whereas as those studying in Cardiff only 35% came from a Welsh school or College. Of the 47 respondents, 45 aspired to be a solicitor and 2 wanted to become barristers.

When asked if they would have considered a level 7 solicitor apprenticeship route 91% said they would have taken that opportunity.

"It's another route into law. It could provide more 'on the job' experience and also the opportunity to earn whilst you're learning"

"I like the option of earning money whilst i study - it is very expensive to pay for the SQE prep courses and fund rent and living expenses alongside this. I feel bored of straight education so it would be a great way to learn on the job. I would have definitely considered doing it instead of university had I realised that it was an option sooner".

"Getting training contracts/ graduate roles that would allow me to become a solicitor after university is extremely competitive and difficult to obtain. An apprenticeship would open more avenues to secure a pathway into becoming a solicitor earlier on (which a traditional law degree at university does not as much because it is not necessarily designed for aspiring solicitors/ legal practitioners in general, a lot of people who study law do not go on to do a career in law so those who do want a career in law are left to carve their own pathway into a very competitive field). Having a pathway into becoming a solicitor with no student loans also would make it much more appealing especially for those who have to bear the weight of breaking religious rules (by paying interest) to study law and become a solicitor".

"I should never have gone to university - university is about legal research not the practical application of skills and knowledge. The options should be readily available and is the option I wish I'd have taken if it was available. It is in England".

It is clear from the comments that on-the-job training, lack of student debt and career progression are reasons students gave for wanting to take up the opportunity of a legal apprenticeship. It is also clear that they were not aware of pathways in Wales available to them.

The reasons given by the 9% who wouldn't have taken the apprenticeship option all said they wanted to take the traditional route and have the university experience.

"The more traditional routes, i.e. the LPC are better recognised and understood by law firms".

"There would appear to be more certainty and security going through the traditional route".

"Preference for traditional route, the university environment, ability to study abroad as part of my degree"

63% of the respondents said they wanted to stay in Wales to work after qualification, however of those wanting to stay in Wales to work, 63% said they did not feel there were enough opportunities in Wales and for all respondents 60% felt there were not enough opportunities for progression in Wales. Comments mainly focused on limited opportunities outside of Cardiff and how many more opportunities there were in England:

"If you want to work in a 'bread and butter' area like family law or conveyancing, the jobs are a dime a dozen in Wales. But if you want to do anything a little more niche you may have limited opportunities in Cardiff or you have to go to London to access them".

"There's absolutely nothing available in West Wales and extremely limited in Cardiff. How are we meant to stay?".

"The few roles that are available are very sought after and highly competitive, it means that the chances of one acquiring such a position are low".

"We are actively encouraging our talent to move across the border due to lack of opportunities".

"Way behind England in opportunities. There are less jobs in all sectors, less options for young people and less funding"

Even the 40% who said they thought there were opportunities in Wales conceded that opportunities were limited to working in Cardiff and that for more specialist roles they would need to work in England.

"To a degree, there are some great firms, especially for Family Law (which is my chosen area). That said, there are more corporate style firms in cities like Bristol and London, which is where I would ideally like to work in the future".

"In regard to being a commercial solicitor, Wales—especially Cardiff—benefits from several law firms with a wide range of practice areas. However, international and secondment opportunities are lacking".

Pupils currently studying at school or college

There were 35 responses from this stakeholder group, all from Welsh schools and colleges, the majority were aged between 14 and 18 with one respondent being 19+.

80% of the respondents said they were planning on going to university, with 57% saying they would not apply to a Welsh University, with many planning on applying to Oxford, Cambridge and other Russell Group universities. 63% aspired to becoming a solicitor.

Of all the respondents 63% said that they wanted to work in Wales once they qualified with half of them also saying they wanted to study in a Welsh university.

Of the 35 only 20% (7) stated they didn't plan on going to university and citing that the cost of university was putting them off applying and that they planned to apply for an apprenticeship route into law. Of all the respondents 69% had heard about apprenticeship routes and 100% of them said if there was a level 7 apprenticeship in Wales, they would take that route.

Learners currently on the Welsh paralegal apprenticeship

As discussed above there is a level 3 and level 5 level apprenticeship available in Wales for paralegals and advanced paralegals, aligned with CILEX Professional Qualifications (CPQ). This has been running since May 2022 with the first cohorts starting in September 2022. Of the 15 respondents currently studying on the paralegal apprenticeship 53% are over 27 years old and 20% were between 16-18 years old.

For those respondents over 27 years old their reasons for choosing the apprenticeship were mainly to upskill and gain a qualification for the work they were already doing.

"To professionalise my current role and gain a better understanding of civil law"

"Because I felt I could do more than just being a Legal Secretary".

"To progress within my job role".

While those respondents that were between 16-18, their reasons for choosing the apprenticeship route were to be able to learn and earn and a route into law.

"Wanted to earn a qualification whilst also gaining invaluable work experience".

"It's an amazing opportunity to get hands on experience whilst studying and being able to put what you learn immediately and into practice. You get access to amazing benefits; no Student debt and you're working alongside amazing professionals".

The one respondent that was aged 18-21 who chose the route over going to university stated:

"I also chose this because working in a law firm full-time will give you a wide range of skills of all areas of law. You meet important people that will help you seek your full potential. This is a way that I can prove my worth and knowledge to increase my chances of getting a training contract in the law firm".

"Another reason why I chose the apprenticeship was to help me decide what area of law I would most like to practice/qualify in the future. Working in a law firm you surround yourself with different teams and you can see what the reality of that area of law is really like."

"One of the biggest reasons for this choice was that I would have no student Debt from full-time university. I always thought of the huge impact this would give students that have just finished university but want to buy a house or a car, how do they do it? The way the apprenticeship is set out is that I can study, work and get paid all at the same time. With the salary I get now I can be independent and never rely on any student finance!"

80% of the respondents want to continue their training after completing the level 3 and level 5 apprenticeship and qualify either as a CILEx Lawyer or as a solicitor. The 20% that don't want to go any further were all over 27 years old and worked either in the Police Service's Legal Department or for an in-house legal department and not a private practice law firm. They also said no to taking up a level 7 apprenticeship themselves. However, one stated that:

"I think it would be an amazing opportunity for students in Wales to move on to the next level but at this stage I do not intend to go further than the advanced paralegal qualification but in the future if available I may continue with the Level 7 apprenticeship."

"Of the 80% that wanted to further their training to professional level, all but one stated they wanted to work in Wales. The one respondent who didn't want to work in Wales, stated that "I think London may have more opportunities available to me".

For those wishing to stay in Wales, family ties, work and heritage were the main reasons for wanting to stay in Wales.

"I have lived in Wales my whole life and have purchased a property here. I also wish to continue working in Local Authority".

"This is because Wales has a very welcoming community, and I find people tend to be way more understandable".

"I like where I live".

"Born in Wales and speak the language".

All of the 80% also stated that if there was a level 7 apprenticeship offer in Wales, they would take that route.

"There is no doubt to this question, as I previously mentioned it's a smarter way forward concluding your studies, work experience and your own salary to achieve your goal".

"Yes, definitely, the apprenticeship route is more flexible and allows me to work whilst also studying".

40% of the total respondents stated that they felt there were not enough opportunities in Wales for them to progress in their careers, due to lack of funding for further study unlike in England.

"Once I complete Level 5 there is no option in Wales to continue so it will be reliant on personal finances".

"Funding. There are more courses available in England".

However, 60% of the respondents thought there were enough opportunities but concentrated on the opportunities for paralegals rather than for solicitors.

"As a paralegal there are plenty of opportunities for jobs in South Wales".

"The paralegal is an excellent option for me in my current situation".

Others cited that were opportunities due to the progressive nature of the firms they worked in, which were all large legal firms in Wales.

Managers or Partners in a law firm

17 managers or partners responded to the questionnaire all from 17 different firms and organisations across Wales. 29% (5) of the firms had offices in England and had over 100 staff, with one being a global firm with over 5000 staff. 65% (11) of the firms were local high street law firms with one being a County Borough Council.

Of the Welsh only firms 71% were employing paralegal apprentices through the new legal service apprenticeship in Wales introduced in 2022. The firms were very supportive of this route, which most felt attracted a different pool of talent and to create sustainability within their firm.

"Having qualified through the CILEX route over 30 years ago, I felt it was the way forward and enabled inclusivity and opportunities for those who either didn't wish to go to University or were unable to".

"Give people opportunities and to have them grow in the firm as long-term employees is good for us".

"Succession planning. To attract new entries into both the legal profession and local government as recruitment is difficult".

Therefore 29% of Welsh firms were not employing apprentice, all these firms were small high street firms, with less than 60 staff. One firm stated they didn't employ apprentices

because there was not the opportunity in Wales but would do so if “funding support becomes available”. Highlighting a lack of awareness of the introduction of the Legal services apprenticeship in Wales.

All firms said that if a level 7 apprenticeship option was available in Wales then they would take apprentices through this route. For the smaller firms the focus was on succession planning and recruitment:

“Small rural practices have recruitment issues and of course don't have the resources to have many apprentices”.

“Succession planning, enhanced ability to recruit staff, growing the local pool of solicitors specialising in local government work”.

“Good career progression for the apprentice and value for money for the firm”.

For the firms that have offices in England they saw it as a way to bring Wales in line with England so that opportunities were shared across the border.

“It would put in line with our offer in England plus it would improve access and social mobility”.

“We already recruit solicitor apprentices in our English offices (and were the first large law firm to do so since 2016) so it makes sense to have a consistent approach across our UK offices. It is great to have an alternative route and to broaden access to the profession”.

Other firms commented that the level 7 apprenticeship creates inclusive routes to the profession.

"Another path to secure good talent and supports social mobility commitment".

Other comments focussed on the need to grow talent from within as they were struggling to attract qualified solicitors to their firms.

"Great opportunity for them to qualify and for us to "grow our own" in a competitive recruitment market".

"We are struggling to recruit qualified Solicitors".

"Provide better access for trainees financially, allowing for an even greater talent pool. But also, will provide a structured training programme as with the level 3 & 5".

3 out of the 5 firms with English offices employed level 7 apprentices. One firm stated it took on 10+ apprentices a year but only 8-10 trainees, with the numbers of apprentices "notably increasing". The firms were very positive about this pathway and stated that home-growing talent seemed to pay off as "90% - as a % of those who reach qualification stage" stayed with the firm post qualification.

Conclusions

From the findings, there is overwhelming support for a level 7 Legal Apprenticeship in Wales. Firms with offices in England are already taking advantage of the offer on the other side of the boarder, but this only highlights how Wales is one step behind and from the comments from the students and young lawyers this is making staying in Wales harder to do. The firms highlighted a need for succession planning and keeping talent in Wales and see the apprenticeship as a way of achieving this.

Welsh students with aspirations of joining the legal profession want to study and work in Wales but do not feel there are the opportunities for them to progress, if they feel that moving to England is the only way they can develop professionally then the 'legal services' deserts already identified in Wales will only grow.

There was a strong feeling that career progression in Wales was mainly situated in Cardiff, and that the further West and North you went in Wales the fewer opportunities there were. However the stakeholders that were working in practice were more positive about career progression, which suggests that more needs to be done to highlight opportunities to students at university, this needs to be partnership approach with the university and law firms in Wales. Firms need to work with the universities to engage with students and really highlight the career possibilities available to them.

Many of the pupils studying at school or college stated they were put off by the rising costs of higher education and that this may prevent or delay them starting at university, however they all said that if a level 7 apprenticeship was available, they would take that route. What was encouraging to discover was that contrary to the UCAS findings of lack of information about apprenticeships, over two-thirds of the pupils had heard of the apprenticeship route, which highlights the growing demand for these routes to qualification in Wales.

The data collected from current students and newly qualified solicitors showed that those who study in Wales tend to want to stay in Wales for work, and many who planned to go to university outside of Wales still put down that they wanted to come back to Wales to work. This clearly demonstrates that there is a strong desire to stay in Wales.

The support for the traditional university route is not to be ignored, and that students feel that the experience of going to university as a full-time student, is not just about the learning and gaining employment, but that they learn and develop other skills associated with living away from home. Some also commented on the way apprenticeships are viewed by more traditional firms and feel it would put them at a disadvantage during the recruitment process. Which suggests that more needs to be done to educate the profession of these route.

However, it is not being suggested that these routes become an either or, but that there is room for both qualification routes in Wales as there is in England. The comments also raise the issue of the need for better promotion of the different routes into law and highlighting the benefits to a firm of the apprenticeship route.

Most students who have started the paralegal apprenticeship have done so as this is the only option available to them but would have definitely chosen the level 7 route if and when it comes into existence. There is clear support from all stakeholders for a level 7 Legal Apprenticeship route in Wales.

A Strong Case for Wales

The implementation of a Level 7 Legal Apprenticeship Programme in Wales is not only desirable but essential. The findings of this study demonstrate that such a programme would significantly help to address key challenges facing the legal profession, including recruitment and retention difficulties. By providing a cost-effective and practical, pathway

into the profession, apprenticeships would ensure that Legal education in Wales is in line with England and can become the first choice for aspiring solicitors in Wales.

Moreover, the programme would help to address skills gaps, meet the growing demand for legal services, and encourage innovation within the profession. By investing in apprenticeships, law firms in Wales could build a sustainable pipeline of talent, ensuring that they remain competitive in an increasingly challenging legal landscape. There is work that can be done now by all parties to encourage and engage with potential aspiring solicitors to showcase the opportunities in Wales and reassure them that there is career progression, however the rising costs of higher education is proving to be a barrier for young people. The Level 7 legal apprenticeship would be a way to break down this barrier and allow Wales to build a more diverse, inclusive, and effective legal profession and to make sure that Wales is not left behind and be able to compete as a desired destination for legal education and practice.

Bibliography

References

1. Bridge Group (2020) Socio-economic background and progression to partner in the law available at: [Microsoft Word - SEB Law Sep 2020 SUMMARY FINAL PUBLISHED.docx](#)
2. Burges Salom (2025) Legal Apprenticeships available at: [Legal Apprenticeship](#)
3. Chartered institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2022) Resourcing and talent planning report available at: [Resourcing and talent planning survey 2022](#)
4. Department of Education (2017) New levy to double annual investment in home-grown skills. available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-levy-to-double-annual-investment-in-home-grown-skills>
5. Department of Education (2023) Careers guidance and access for education and training providers Statutory guidance for schools and guidance for further education colleges and sixth form colleges. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63b69f3fe90e077246c83323/Careers_guidance_and_access_for_education_and_training_providers.pdf
6. Law Society (2019) Apprenticeships in the Legal Sector. available at : [apprenticeships-in-legal-sector-brochure-2019.pdf](#)
7. Legal Cheek (2025) Training contract and apprenticeship figures for Slaughter and May available at [Slaughter and May - Legal Cheek](#)
8. LEGALTECHTALK (2024) WRAP-UP REPORT available at [LEGALTECHTALK 2024 v6](#)
9. Slaughter and May (2024) Social Mobility Report available at; [Social Mobility Report 2023](#)
10. Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) (2025) Annual Statistics Report 2023: top-line report available at: [annual-statistics-report-2023.pdf](#)
11. Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) (2025) Diversity in Law Firms' Workforce available at: [SRA | Diversity in law firms' workforce | Solicitors Regulation Authority](#)
12. Sutton Trust (2024) where-next-what-influences-choices-would-be-apprentices UCAS report 2024. available at: [where-next-what-influences-choices-would-be-apprentices.pdf](#)
13. UCAS (2024) Where Next? Improving the route to becoming an apprentice available at: [md-7063-apprenticeship-note-v3.pdf](#)
14. UK Gov (2025) Apprebticehsip statistic for England (24-25). available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships>
15. UK Parliament (2025) Apprenticeship Statistics 2023. available at: [Apprenticeship statistics for England - House of Commons Library](#)



Cymdeithas y
Cyfreithwyr
The Law Society