

## 3.2 The legal profession – Solicitors and barristers

### 3.2a Solicitors

In 2008 there were about 75,000 solicitors working for firms in the UK providing legal advice to individuals and companies on a wide range of legal matters including buying and selling houses, family matters, contracts, tax and crime. As laws become more complicated and detailed, there is a growing trend for solicitors to specialise in a particular area of law, for example, crime or family or company. In addition, there were around 20,000 solicitors who did not practise. Solicitors are governed by the Law Society, which is responsible for setting training requirements, regulations and issuing certificates, which give individuals the right to practise as a solicitor.

The traditional and most common route towards becoming a solicitor in England and Wales requires a degree in law; however, other paths do exist and other methods of qualification have been developed in recent years. After obtaining a law degree, would-be solicitors must take the Legal Practice Course (LPC). This is designed to equip them with the knowledge required to practise as a solicitor. After passing the LPC, the next stage is finding a training contract in a law firm, which lasts two years. Upon completion, they are admitted to the profession as a solicitor.

### 3.2b Barristers

In 2008 there were approximately 12,000 barristers in independent practice known as the Bar. Their governing body is the Bar Council. It acts as their regulatory body and sets the requirements for training, qualification and professional development. The main role of a barrister is **advocacy** in the courtroom. Their time is mostly spent in court or preparing for court cases. They are self-employed and share premises called chambers with other barristers. Barristers work under what is known as the ‘cab rank’ rule. This means that they must accept any case which falls within their claimed area of specialisation and for which a reasonable fee is offered, unless they are already working on other legal cases.

To become a barrister in England and Wales, applicants need at least a second class degree in law (although other routes to qualification do exist). Following this, they have to join one of the four Inns of Court: Inner Temple, Middle Temple, Gray's Inn or Lincoln's Inn. These are all based in London and membership is part of the route to qualification. Students are then required to take a Bar Vocational Course (BVC) to prepare them for practice. As part of their qualification, students have to dine at their chosen Inn of Court twelve times. The idea is that students will benefit from the wisdom of experienced barristers if they sit amongst them at mealtimes. Once this has been completed they are called to the Bar. They must then find a place in a set of chambers to serve their pupillage. This is a one-year apprenticeship in which they assist a qualified barrister. There is great competition for pupillage places with only about 650 vacancies available each year. Once pupillage has been completed, a newly qualified barrister must then find a permanent place in chambers, referred to as a tenancy. There are only about 300 tenancies available each year and this forces many newly qualified members to do what is known as squat, i.e. remain in their pupillage chambers for as long as they are allowed without becoming a new member.