legalfutures

The Law Firm Growth Report

August 2026

In association with Leonard Curtis

Contents

Private equity deals: Jan – Jul 2026

Name of firm	Size and location	Type of deal	When
Brady Solicitors	50 people in Nottingham	Minority investment by LDC	July
Hedges Law	£4m, 50 people in Oxford	Founding firm of Oak Legal Group, backed by private office CKM3	July
McKenzie Law	Nine people in Shrewsbury	Acquired by Higgs, backed by August Equity	June
Clarkslegal	40 people in Reading	Acquired by Orwins (formerly BBS Law), backed by Altier Capital	June
Hempsons	£24m, 250-person national firm	Acquired by HF, backed by CBPE Capital	May
Sorrymate – personal injury brand from Smooth Law	Nine people in St Helens	Acquired by Express Solicitors, backed by Ufenau Partners	May
Freeths – clinical negligence and Court of Protection teams	42 people, offices in Derby, Nottingham and Oxford	Acquired by Fletchers, backed by Sun European	May
EMG Solicitors	£11m-turnover Court of Protection specialists headquartered in Durham	Acquired by Fletchers, backed by Sun European	April
JE Bennett	43-person Court of Protection firm in Tunbridge Wells	Acquired by Fletchers, backed by Sun European	April
Aegis Legal	30-person personal injury firm in Cheshire	Acquired by Express Solicitors, backed by Ufenau Partners	April
Field Seymour Parkes	£15m firm in Reading	Acquired by Lawfront, backed by Blixt	April
Ives & Co	25-person conveyancing firm based in Nottingham	Acquired by search fund River Cam Group	March
Connect2Law – owner of Muve and Nova	Conveyancing firms with 70 staff in UK and 390 in Sri Lanka	Acquired by Alcuin Capital Partners	March
Northridge Law	44-person sports law firm	Minority investment from Cordillera Investment Partners	March
Jordans Solicitors	30-person Black Country firm	Bolt-on for FBC Manby Bowdler, founder of Horizon Capital-backed Adeptio Group	March
Crawford Legal Services	90-strong ABS owned by Crawford & Company	Assets acquired by HF, backed by CBPE Capital	February
Vialex	Scottish legal business	Acquired by Higgs, backed by August Equity	February
Unified Lawyers	60-strong Australian family law firm	Acquired by Stowe Family Law, backed by Investcorp	January
Canford Law	120-person national firm	Acquired by Queen's Park Equity	January
Gill Turner Tucker	37-person Kent firm	Bolt-on for Brachers, part of Blixt-backed Lawfront	January
Simpson Jones	Seven-person Derby conveyancing firm	Bolt-on for Nelsons, part of Blixt-backed Lawfront	January

Foreword

by **Dan Booth**, CEO, Leonard Curtis

The legal profession plays a vital role in supporting businesses through periods of growth, change and challenge. Whether helping clients manage risk, secure investment or overcome financial pressures, trusted legal advisers sit at the centre of critical decision-making.

That is one of the reasons Leonard Curtis is proud to support this report and conference. We have worked closely with law firms across the UK, building strong relationships based on a shared commitment to delivering positive outcomes for clients. In many cases, we are supporting those clients alongside their legal advisers, providing specialist expertise in restructuring, insolvency, funding, business services, M&A and legal matters. In others, we are working directly with law firms themselves as they look to grow, adapt to changing market conditions or navigate periods of challenge.

What we have learned over the years is that the most successful outcomes are rarely achieved in isolation. They come from collaboration between trusted advisers who understand both the technical issues and the commercial realities facing businesses today.

The legal sector has undergone significant change over the last decade and there is no sign of that slowing down. Client expectations continue to evolve, technology is reshaping the way services are delivered and firms are increasingly looking for opportunities to diversify, improve efficiency and create additional value for clients.

At Leonard Curtis, we have experienced that evolution first-hand. The launch of Leonard Curtis Legal nearly 10 years ago reflected our belief that clients benefit from access to a broader range of professional services and expertise. Since then, we have continued to invest in our capabilities, developing a multidisciplinary business that enables us to support clients and their advisers at every stage of the business lifecycle.

That commitment to continuous development remains as important today as it was then. A recent example is the expansion of our construction dispute resolution offering, which has been developed in response to growing demand from clients, legal advisers and the wider construction sector. It reflects our approach as a business: listening to the market, identifying where we can add value and investing in the expertise needed to support our clients.


Dan Booth, CEO, Leonard Curtis

As the legal market continues to evolve, the importance of strong professional relationships has never been greater. Law firms and their clients face increasingly complex challenges, but they also have access to more opportunities than ever before. Navigating that landscape requires advisers who can combine technical excellence with commercial understanding and a genuine focus on helping businesses move forward with purpose.

This report provides valuable insight into the issues, trends and opportunities shaping the future of the legal profession. We are very pleased to support its publication and would like to thank everyone who has contributed to it.

Introduction

by **Neil Rose**, Editor, Legal Futures

The timing of this *Legal Futures* Growth Report could not be better.

Our insights, stats and stories are hitting your screen, or getting into your hands, at an incredibly exciting time in the legal sector, as new technology, new capital and new ways of thinking reshape the world around us.

All these changes are leading to growth.

This is already looking like it will go down as a good year, with law firms across England and Wales enjoying their greatest level of growth in 15 years, according to the annual financial benchmarking survey published by the Law Society's leadership and management section.

The legal sector, made up of just under 9,000 firms, is now valued at close to £60bn.

Insights gathered by RBS reveal many firms are budgeting for "substantial growth" in 2026. The bank spoke to 110 firms, and one in four said they expected to see growth of more than 10% as the momentum from 2025 continues.

Other professions and sectors are in decline. But not the legal sector. The growth we are seeing in 2026 has been building for the last 10 years. It is not a blip, out of the blue.

As sector specialist Crispin Passmore says, quoting Ernest Hemingway, things happen "gradually, then suddenly". We hear from Crispin - a pioneer who advises lawyers and investors in the UK and around the world – in this report. It's an interesting mix of law and literature.

But growth is often measured and talked about in numbers, so let's pick out a few from the benchmarking survey: 85% of the 121 SME law firms polled celebrated year-on-year fee growth. More than half grew by 10%. One in five saw a rise of 20%.

Looking overseas, the export of legal services reached a historic milestone, hitting the £10bn mark for the first time. That's 30% growth in just 4 years.

You have to go back to 2010 to see growth figures like this.

Back then, Prince William became engaged to Kate Middleton. Apple launched the iPad. Downton Abbey hit the screens. David Cameron and Nick Clegg united in No 10's Rose Garden to form a coalition government.

In the legal sector, 2010 was a year of colossal change. The Legal Services Board went live. The legal sector was preparing itself for alternative business structures. The legal aid budget was cut by £350m. In addition, the Supreme Court took its first independent steps, crossing College Green, as the judiciary broke free from the Mother of Parliaments.

Today, Cameron is writing books in a shepherd's hut, Clegg is a tech-bro venture capitalist, William and Kate are married with three kids, and we're all addicted to Apple products.

The legal sector in 2026 looks different too, shaped by alternative business structures (ABSs), artificial intelligence (AI), private equity (PE) and M&A.

These four elements feature prominently in this report – which draws from the insights shared by speakers at our Law Firm Growth Summit in March 2026 – as we take a deep dive into growth in the legal sector where AI and PE are now omnipresent.

PE-based firms are growing faster than traditional firms, according to research, while M&A has been held back by caution over the last 12 months. However, confidence is expected to return as this year wears on, leading to a step up in the numbers of firms choosing to join forces.

In April, one giant deal captured the headlines; Hogan Lovells Cadwalader, the largest merger in history, creating a global team of 3,100 lawyers generating $3.6bn in fees, and forming a new partnership between the City and Wall

Neil Rose, speaking at the Legal Futures Law Firm Growth Summit in March 2026

Street. "Growth is good", as Gordon Gekko would say.

The mega-merger went live on 1 July.

In our report, we go beyond the City to look at the mergers and acquisitions taking place around the country, involving small and mid-sized firms. Here, M&A is a way to thrive. But for some, M&A means survival too. Getting the cultural fit right is at the heart of these stories.

And we stop off in Manchester to hear from Andrew Gregory about the moment Leonard Curtis Legal was formed, when two friends met in a pub for a pint, and its decade of growth as part of a multi-disciplinary professional services group. In the age of tech and AI, Andrew's story is a brilliant reminder of the importance of people, relationships and entrepreneurial spirit as a driver for growth.

We're sticking with the old mantra that good things always come in threes, so in this report, we explore three core themes: PE, M&A, and other growth models.

We hear from experts from across the modern legal landscape: lawyers, entrepreneurs – entrepreneurial lawyers, even – investors, accountants and consultants. This evolving, expanding, exciting ecosystem, in which lawyers, investors, tech specialists and business leaders can learn and grow from each other, is at the heart of the commercial changes we are seeing across the legal landscape.

The purpose of our report is not to just hold up a mirror to the legal sector in 2026, but to give you a roadmap for it, so you can learn more about the different routes that are available to you, on your PE or M&A journey, or via the latest business models now emerging.

We will be taking the gentler local A roads at times – where cultural fit, capping billable hours and employee ownership head towards their destinations – and we'll jump on the superhighway of large-scale PE, with fast lanes for automating digital services and growing at pace across the UK and beyond.

Just like back in 2010, there are colossal changes taking place in the legal sector today. We hope our report helps you make the most of them.

PART I: Private Equity

They call it the dating game. Law firms and private equity investors looking coyly at each other over a spreadsheet, or a glass of wine, looking for that chemistry and spark.

Going into 2026 one thing is certain; there is a lot of flirting and dating going on. According to a survey conducted earlier this year by accountants MHA, in association with the Law Society, 70% of mid-sized firms have been 'asked out' by a potential PE partner with capital to spend and one thing on their mind: acquisition.

It's easy to see the attraction.

Between 2019 and 2024, private equity investors pledged more than £1.2bn to firms in England and Wales, according to Acquira Professional Services.

And these investments have paid off, all round. Research by Hazlewoods in April 2025 showed that PE-backed law firms saw their top line grow by 30% – twice as fast as traditional firms.

Growth like this is enough to turn anyone's head. Even old-school partners leading old school partnerships.

Will Evans, managing director at Guggenheim Partners, told the conference: "What's helping investors get more conviction around the legal space is the fact that managing partners are starting to open their door to investors coming in, and talking to them about future plans in a way that they would not have done 10 years ago. Managing partners now see the unprecedented need to invest and change the way to operate as a modern law firm. So those new conversations

Will Evans, Managing Director, Guggenheim Partners contemplating how they want to evolve are happening now."

PE investors are drawn to the steady cash flow that law firms offer, how digital can scale legal services and the fragmentation in the legal sector. The latter is perfect for the buy-and-build strategy that many PE investors adopt; acquiring one larger firm which then acts as a platform for a dynamic mix of smaller firms from across different practice areas.

PE investors also see the legal market as a large growing market – valued at £60bn in 2026 – with lots of opportunities for consolidation and innovation, and significantly increasing efficiencies, profitability and value within law firms through AI.

Law firms are interested in how PE can help them grow through acquisition, attract and retain talent, boost profitability, provide know-how on new technology and expand into new markets and locations. Also, increasingly, firms are rapidly adopting AI strategies and need more capital to invest in the technology.

These are the commercial drivers that are bringing more and more PE investors and law firms together. From the first date onwards, these new couples have a lot in common: boosting profits and adopting AI.

This in many ways is the bond that brings PE investors and law firms together and has made Crispin Passmore rethink the key forces that are shaping the UK legal market in 2026 and beyond.

The summit's keynote speaker, Crispin was first at the Legal Services Board and then the Solicitors Regulation Authority as they opened up the market to non-lawyer owners, and is now a consultant helping many new entrants eyeing up investing in the law.

Crispin revealed that for many years he has had a list of three factors that make the legal sector tick: regulatory reform, technology and client pressure. But now he's added one more.

"I was right about all three, but I underplayed a fourth. I think I missed it. It was capital. In 2018, capital was circling. It was cautious. It hadn't yet committed. The investment thesis was being written, but the deals were not being done at scale. In 2026, capital has committed and everything is accelerating.

Tom Green, Partner, Inflexion

"Investors see an opportunity to bring capital, management discipline, and a longer-term perspective to firms that have been operating with one hand tied behind their back for decades. The private equity investment horizon is typically five years, which, while lengthy, creates a time frame which can create a dynamic culture sometimes missing in the traditional partnership model.

"Law firm partners are overly focused on year-end profit distribution. Investment equals lower pay. Building for capital growth rather than cash distribution is not a minor point. It's fundamental shift in how firms can compete for clients, for talent and for the future."

Tom Green, a partner at Inflexion, the London-based private equity house that is the largest investor in the law – including law firm DWF, bought in 2023 for £342m –

sees the legal sector as full of opportunity, which makes it attractive for investors to commit their capital.

"It's really quite straightforward. The legal sector is one of the largest and most fragmented professional services markets in the world. It provides mission-critical advice to people where the implication of getting that advice wrong is really high. It's non-discretionary. Margins are good. Cash flow is good. There's plenty of opportunity for growth through M&A. There's plenty of opportunity for team lifts. There's also plenty of opportunity for professionalisation."

With its HQ in London, Inflexion is one of Europe's largest teams of PE investors. Its mission is to "partner with ambitious, entrepreneurial management teams" running mid-market businesses and help them grow faster.

Inflexion manages £18bn in assets and has invested heavily in the legal sector. Alongside DWF, it owns employment law business WorkNest, conveyancing group Movera, compliance platform aosphere, and directory and data provider Chambers and Partners.

And there is more than money on the table. Law firms can plug into Inflexion's broad expertise in areas of commercial strategy, artificial intelligence, ESG and talent strategy.

"It's that private equity mindset, sharing best practice from other portfolio companies. It's a different way of thinking that can supplement a traditional partnership board and drive the best of both worlds, without taking control. We think that's going to be really attractive to legal and wider professional services."

Many people are looking at how PE transformed accountancy and asking the question: is legal next?

Neil Lloyd, chief executive of Lawfront and a buy-and-build guru, said: "Deal structures are really favourable at the moment. Valuations compared to other markets are very positive. I guess law is the next big thing after accounting. Accounting has been very successful for a number of private equity backers."

Lawfront is backed by Blixt. Its funding has enabled Neil Lloyd and his team to buy seven regional law firms to date, which in turn have made various bolt-on

Neil Lloyd, Chief Executive, Lawfront

acquisitions of their own. They retain their local identity but Lawfront is the back-office engine.

Tom Green agreed that law is the next big thing.

"One hundred and fifty years ago, industries such as banking and insurance broking were fragmented and have now consolidated. With accountancy firms, there's the Big Four and the tail after that. And for some reason, the legal industry hasn't – in the UK or globally. The hypothesis from investors in my position is not that it will concentrate to four firms or 10 firms, but there'll be a consolidation of legal firms as the competitive intensity increases in the market over the next 10, 20, 30 years."

Firms looking at a potential PE deal are being advised to write a 10-year business plan. Tom Green explained: "We want a coherent plan that is backable, sensible, and strategic. Our job is to back a management team with a plan, not to run law firms."

"We tend to look at a 10-year time horizon. So, we look backwards three years, to see whether this business is growing and improving its competitive position. Then we need to look forward for seven to 10 years. We

typically invest in a business for five years, so we focus on how the business is going to grow, and what the business will look like when we exit – but we look at 10 years because you are exiting the business to someone else in five years' time, and that incoming investor will want to underwrite the next iteration of that growth journey.

"You need to have a plan that your top team buys into, that articulates clearly why you want to do something and the strategic rationale behind it – and then you'll tend to find investors will be willing to support you."

Firms that want to maximise the opportunities that PE can bring are being advised to act fast. But this is where the different cultures collide.

Many of the private equity firms are relatively young businesses - Inflexion for example is 25 years old - that have grown up in a fast-moving corporate world defined by technology, creativity and agility. This is poles apart from the traditional conservative law firm led by partners who are instinctively cautious and want to take the profit out at the end of every year, rather than invest for the long term.

Investors are advising lawyers to set that attitude aside and act fast to reap the rewards. As Sir James Goldsmith once said: "If you see a bandwagon, it's already too late."

Moving quickly to sell all or part of your law firm is a giant step for most partners to take. Many are holding back. But investors say those who are brave enough to do it will see results.

Will Evans said: "Any firm could be a first mover with the right leadership and ambition. There's a widespread acceptance that the 20th or the 25th platform that comes into the market is not going to draw as much attention as the first five do – the evolution of the accounting market has demonstrated this. That dynamic is due to the scale of the market opportunity in front of firms today and the likely diminution of competitive advantage as others follow suit. So there's a positive flywheel that could emerge by being a first mover. But you need to be bold, and it requires partnership alignment." The importance of alignment takes us back to the dating game, and how people can go hot or cold the more you get to know someone.

The concerns around how damaging, and how risky, a misalignment could be are still very real for many law firms – while 2024 was a bumper year with £534m invested, PE investment fell back in 2025. Acquira's latest figures say £250m was invested last year and around £80m so far this – but deal volume was up.

"But many partners still question the PE-backed model in which profits that they usually shared amongst themselves are given to investors or used to service debt."

Was this down to business and economics? Or is there something more human and personal at play?

It is clear that many law firms are interested in the capital that is available. Tom Green's discussions with managing partners are proof of that. But many partners still question the PE-backed model in which profits that they usually shared amongst themselves are given to investors or used to service debt.

They look around the office and reflect on their career and fear the firm's culture will be lost, along with talent and clients too.

Joanna Kingston-Davies, the co-founder of MAPD – which stands for Making A Positive Difference – sees real opportunities for law firms of all sizes from working with PE partners, but she recognises the gulf between them.

Joanna Kingston-Davies, Co-Founder, MAPD

"Investors and lawyers are two very different beasts. We should not underestimate that the emotional journey of selling your business is huge. Most lawyers genuinely care about their clients and the legacy of those client relationships. It's a burden we don't take lightly in terms of making sure that we preserve and respect that legacy.

"Everybody talks about the transaction, the legal journey, the corporate finance journey. Nobody talks about the emotional journey for a lawyer whose identity is very often in some part, and often a great part, defined by what they do and that professional services environment they have grown up in. Respect for that is really fundamental."

A lot of deals are falling over because of a lack of alignment between sellers and purchasers, she went on.

Joanna explained that the tight ownership structures within many law firms, as well as shareholder agreements, can be an enabler of investment. This means there are fewer decision makers, making transactions easier to execute, while tight shareholder agreements which are clear on voting rights, delegation of authority and so on can make it much easier to get a transaction with a complex ownership structure over the line.

MAPD was formed in 2020. The group is investing in law firms across the country focusing on practice areas that help clients who are "fighting for justice, incorporating a new business, purchasing a new home or protecting a child".

The MAPD investment model is based on the firm making a "fair profit" on the back of delivering great client service and advice. Different to Inflexion's five-year exit strategy, MAPD focuses on sustainable growth and long-term value.

To be 'Powered by MAPD' as the branding says, firms agree to sell the members' interests of the LLP, or the share capital of the firm, to the group. The deal can be structured in different ways, depending on the type of firm, its practice areas, working capital requirements, capital accounts, or sustainable profitability.

This flexibility around the deal goes a long way to resolving the financial discussions, or mitigating the financial concerns, that surround every PE deal, Joanna said.

But securing the capital is only half the story. Firms are advised to focus too on how their values align with the investor, and if their ways of working are compatible. The term 'cultural fit' is heard a lot these days, along with 'people due diligence'.

The observation made in the Acquira research - *Private Equity's Next Frontier: Transforming UK Law Firms* - still echoes today.

It said: "Ultimately, for private equity to be a springboard rather than a stumbling block, leaders need a firm grasp of both the potential benefits – capital for expansion, upgraded technology, enhanced managerial skills – and the possible drawbacks, such as diluted control, intensified performance targets, and cultural disruption."

So what does it actually feel like to go through the PE process, and to get the capital?

Ken Fowlie is the chairman of Stowe Family Law, the largest specialist family law firm in the country, with 210 lawyers, and a turnover of just under £50m, up from £15m in 2020.

The original investor in 2017 was Livingbridge, which sold it in 2024 to Bahrain-based global alternative investment manager Investcorp.

He described it as "a classic private equity structure", with a majority external investor and the balance of the equity held by the wider management team.

"I don't think Stowe Family Law would be where we are

Ken Fowlie, Chairman, Stowe Family Law

"You shouldn't go into this if the expectation is it's going to be an easy ride."

today without the investment and the contribution that has been made by the investors," Ken told the conference. "That contribution is less about capital. The business has always been cash generative, and we've been able to support our activities through our own means. It's more about intellectual capital, the value that comes from having really smart people around and clarity on direction. Knowing what you're trying to do, where you play, how you win.

"PE guys love their spreadsheets, but it's more than that. Their ability to understand the business and add value to the journey that the management team are on is critically important.

"It's true that this journey is not for the fainthearted. There's a relentlessness about it, and the pace of what we're trying to do. That can be invigorating. But it can also be wearying. You shouldn't go into this if the expectation is it's going to be an easy ride."

Ken advised thinking about what the value was going to be at the end of each investment cycle. "It goes without saying that bigger numbers beget bigger numbers. So, if you can leave a bit of value on the table at the start and then grow with the business, it's going to be much more rewarding both professionally and commercially, rather than saying 'I've got to squeeze the lemon as hard as I can at the very beginning because that's my opportunity'. If that's what you're thinking, then maybe you've got the mindset slightly wrong."

Andrew Gregory is the founder of Leonard Curtis Legal. The firm, created in 2016, is part of the Leonard Curtis Group, a multidisciplinary professional services firm that employs 330 people and has revenues of more than £45m.

Last year, a private capital asset manager, Pollen Street Capital, acquired the group in a deal that saw the successful exit for multi-family investment office Arete and investment and acquisition vehicle Svella, which paid £15m for a significant stake four years earlier.

Andrew Gregory said the big change when investment first came into the business was how rapidly it grew after. "You can really feel the change, and it's exciting. We talk about our vision, and we talk about a plan. That's what people want. People want to feel that they're on a journey.

"The next generation of law firm owners are going to think very differently to us. Lots of younger lawyers don't want equity. A lot of them don't want the risk. There's also a much stronger drive for a better work life balance. And I think that we need to recognise this."

While he wanted to see investment and the ability to grow and develop, "it isn't really just about the money", Andrew went on. "It is about a lot more. It's about learning from other parts of the Pollen business, the know-how and the skillset they bring, their contacts and the other businesses together from within their portfolio.

"At the end of the day, we are an entrepreneurial business. We are a group. Ultimately, Leonard Curtis is a group of entrepreneurs, and that's something which I think has been recognised by the PE investors."

So, midway through 2026, the legal sector is clearly laying the foundations for a much broader engagement with private equity firms. The meetings with managing partners that Tom Green is having. The growth rates that PE-backed firms are enjoying. The need to invest in AI. And a new model for firms that works for Gen Z lawyers who don't want to be partners.

There are so many reasons now for law firms across the UK to open the door to PE and go out on that first date.

Meet the speaker: Crispin Passmore

In the story of PE in the law, Crispin Passmore is a leading character with an epic role. First as a director at the oversight regulator, the Legal Services Board, and then a director at the Solicitors Regulation Authority, he was at the heart of the liberalisation of the legal sector.

Describing the legal market today, Crispin turned to literature and the words of the American writer, Ernest Hemingway. In The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway wrote about a character, Mike Campbell, who went bankrupt: "Gradually, then suddenly."

This reflects how PE and capital has become major forces. Partners who have been naturally cautious until now cannot ignore how the narrative is changing. Firms need capital to invest in AI and talent, and to buy and build. Partners want to see the kind of growth that PE-backed firms are enjoying. Suddenly, PE makes sense.

"The Legal Services Act produced hundreds of ABSs, authorised law firms doing more for clients in more ways than the old market could deliver. The emergence of genuine multi-disciplinary practice, technology driven law, M&A activity that has accelerated consolidation, the growth of alternative provision, solicitors delivering legal services to the public outside of law firms – all can be traced, at least in part to the opening of the legal market inspired by the Legal Services Act.

"In 2018, capital was circling. It was cautious. It hadn't yet committed. The investment thesis was being written, but the deals were not being done at scale. In 2026, capital has committed and everything is accelerating."

Today, Crispin told the conference, PE investors see a £60bn market that is fragmented, undermanaged, underinvested, and historically insulated from competition. A market where the major players have distributed their balance sheet to zero every year-end for decades. They see limited investment in technology and no patient capital for M&A.

Crispin Passmore, Co-Founder, Passmore & Oliver Partners

They see a market with no national brands, where client demand is enormous but largely unmet. In a word, they see growth. Another word: opportunity.

Crispin stressed that PE is not right for every firm. But every firm needs to know its value. Crispin is advising all firms to do three things: know your enterprise value, not your profit per partner; fix your talent architecture now; and, if you're considering PE, get fit before you take it.

This means understanding your corporatised financials, strengthening your leadership team and building a governance structure that works for a capital growth model. Inspired by his old copy of The Sun Also Rises, Crispin said: "The gradually is behind us. This suddenly is here."

PART II: M&A

The legal sector has just seen the largest merger in its history.

The transatlantic coming together of Hogan Lovells and Cadwalader creates a global team of 3,100 lawyers generating revenues of $3.6bn – some 360 times greater than the average income for a UK law firm. It brings together a firm John Lovell set up as a one-man band in 1899 with the oldest one on Wall Street.

Of course, most law firm M&A is on a much smaller scale, but it has been noticeable this year that PE-backed firms have been leading the way – see the list on the inside front cover.

'Traditional' mergers still go on. Some are based on opportunity and a natural close fit, others are based on risk, survival or shoring up. But in the modern world of M&A, is it in fact just mainly acquisition?

Rothera Bray, based in the East Midlands, was created in October 2023 by bringing together Nottingham-based Rotheras and Bray & Bray in Leicester, firms best known for their private client and corporate/commercial work respectively. Revenue is now at £20m and further small deals have been done. The phone is often ringing.

Chief executive Christina Yardley told the conference: "We're getting approached by firms that would like to merge with us. And I think that's really come about because we've been more active in the space. We've done a deal each year since 2022. They have been a mixture in terms of size, with us either looking for geography or

From left to right: Matthew Leopold, Head of Market Insight, LexisNexis; Jeff Zindani, CEO, Acquira Professional Services; Andrew Gregory, Founder, Leonard Curtis Legal; Christina Yardley, CEO, Rothera Bray practice area. Culture wise, I think firms are looking at us, hearing how we do things and thinking, 'Okay, we could be a nice partner for them'. For firms looking at doing a traditional merger, I think there's comfort in that."

Rothera Bray has a 'no redundancies' policy for every merger. The team is now 250 strong. Christina is certain this assurance around job security is what encourages firms to get in touch.

She is focused on "geography, new practice areas, and strong departmental leads that will add something to what we have already and strengthen the business".

Rothera Bray is one of many mid-sized firms still using mergers to expand, while large firms still believe in them too. Weightmans merged with Myton Law and Elborne Mitchell in April to grow its shipping, logistics and insurance services in the UK and around the world.

Hogan Lovells turnover is around $3.2bn and Cadwalader's is $600m. But does comparative size matter when two firms merge? "I think it's the mindset, how you're approaching it, and what you're bringing together," said Christina. "You've got to be very clear on the benefits and why it's good strategically. You don't want to just put firms together just to be bigger."

The market insight team at LexisNexis has been tracking mergers in the UK for the last seven years, and the data shows a decline in the number of deals involving two firms of the same size.

It also revealed a distinct decline in the number of firms looking at M&A as part of their growth strategy – from 13% in 2023 to 5% in 2025.

Jeff Zindani, the founder and managing director of Acquira Professional Services, a specialist M&A broker for law firms, sees very few genuine mergers taking place.

"What I'm seeing is a real growth around smaller firms being acquired by larger regional platforms. It's happening at a pace. A lot of smaller firms, not high street firms so much, but £2m, £3m, up to £5m turnover firms are being bought. There are very few mergers. They are acquisitions. They're takeovers."

Recent activity seems to confirm this, while research published in April this year by Dye & Durham UK indicated that firms are more likely to base their growth strategy on PE, rather than merger. In it, managing director Colin Bohanna said: "This research confirms what many in the profession are increasingly alert to, and which many more have yet to realise: there is a monumental shift taking place in the UK legal market, and it will affect every part of the profession.

"While the traditional merger and partnership model is in no danger of going away, there is a remarkable transformation taking place in UK law, one that is changing how law firm leaders operate and which will have a growing influence in years to come."

Across all these recent deals, new cultures are emerging. Firms conduct their 'people due diligence' to make sure there is a cultural fit between both sides. But the proof is in the pudding.

Jeff Zindani, a former personal injury lawyer, said: "Law firms are like icebergs – it's all below the surface. When firms come together, more time is spent on the financial due diligence than on the people side. The new firm has the strap lines and the marketing spiel and everything else, but there can be a real disconnect. And it's only post-deal you find this out. A lot of these things fail. It's not all roses. Things don't always go the way people think they're going to go."

Christina Yardley added: "One of the things I've learned is that you cannot spend enough time communicating with your counterpart when you're bringing firms together. And even when you think you've nailed the shared values, you think you've spoken about everything you can possibly speak about, you will still – post-merger – find things where you think it's obvious that you should both think the same thing, and you don't.

"With lots of conversations, you're pretty much saying 'how do we do everything?'. And where you can, you want to absolutely agree that beforehand. The time spent building that relationship is the foundation for things going well.

"It's not always easy. But when you actually think this is better than what it was before, that for me is the real win. When you think this is getting better, this is better for our people, our clients, and we're able to do more. That's the exciting stuff."

Meet the speaker: Andrew Gregory

Leonard Curtis Legal was born in the centre of Manchester, in a pub called the Rising Sun. Ten years ago, over an entrepreneurial pint, Andrew Gregory and Leonard Curtis founder John Titley discussed starting a new firm. The rest is history, as they say. Since 2016, the firm has grown into a team of 23 fee-earners, turning over around £3.5m annually.

With the fresh injection of PE investment into the wider Leonard Curtis Group last year by Pollen Street Capital, Andrew and the team are focused on accelerating growth.

Andrew is a well-known lawyer in Manchester. He joined DWF in 1990, became an equity partner in 1995 and managing partner of the Manchester office three years later. After 25 years at DWF (this was before the firm's stock market listing and subsequent Inflexion deal), Andrew had a keen eye on the new legal world emerging around him and saw the inherent opportunity in being part of the Leonard Curtis Group.

Andrew recalls: "I was looking for a new challenge and wanted to do something different. I had read a lot about alternative business structures (ABSs) and how they were transforming the legal industry, and I thought here's something really interesting I should be getting involved with."

Then fate intervened. "I met John for a beer, and we were catching up when John just said, 'Why don't you come and set up a law firm for us, Andrew?' It took me by complete surprise, and I thought, why not? Why not give it a go. And so, we did it."

On Friday 15 January 2016, Andrew left DWF and walked into the Leonard Curtis offices the following Monday.

"I sat at a desk in our Manchester office and we started working on a plan to secure authorisation for a new law firm as an ABS, which we did. The plan was very much about working with the SME client base that Leonard Curtis had built up over the previous 20 years. But it was also about

Andrew Gregory, Founder, Leonard Curtis Legal

doing something different. ABSs were still a relatively new concept at the time and Leonard Curtis saw an opportunity to create a more integrated professional services model, bringing legal expertise alongside the wider advisory services already offered by the group.

"I'd always thought there was so much more that lawyers could do if they worked more closely with accountants and other advisers. Too often, legal advice was brought in late in the process. We wanted to create a model where legal services sat alongside other specialist advice, enabling clients to access the support they needed at the right time and from the right people."

He recounts how he would sit around the partner group table at DWF and ask for more referrals from corporate and litigation to enable his team to work with firms like Leonard Curtis.

"My point was always that we needed to build stronger links with the SME community and its adviser network. That's exactly what we set out to achieve with Leonard Curtis Legal. By combining legal expertise with the accountancy and advisory relationships already established across the group, we created a modern law firm built around collaboration and client need.

"Our early focus was insolvency, corporate M&A and dispute resolution, and growth came quickly. Without the support of Leonard Curtis, we would never have been able to build the business at the pace we did or attract the calibre of people who have driven that growth."

Looking back, he says, the decision to establish the firm as an ABS was an innovative move that reflected Leonard Curtis' entrepreneurial mindset. It recognised early that clients increasingly value access to a range of complementary services through a single trusted adviser.

"That approach has only become more relevant over time. Today, Leonard Curtis is a multi-disciplinary professional services group spanning legal services, commercial finance and funding, alongside its established corporate recovery business and a network of non-executive directors.

"Pollen Street's investment is a strong endorsement of that model. It reflects the strength of a business that has evolved beyond its recovery roots into a broad advisory platform with significant opportunities for future growth. For Leonard Curtis Legal, being part of that ecosystem creates exciting opportunities to expand our services, deepen client relationships and continue building on the success of the last decade."

PART III: Other Business Models

In the shadows of the mega-mergers taking place in the City and away from the PE investors spending hundreds of millions of pounds, there are other ways for a law firm to grow.

M&A and PE are not for everyone.

The difference between those who look towards M&A and PE for growth, compared to those who explore alternatives, is often down to values and personality, rather than just hard business decisions.

In the world of innovation, the people who develop other ways of working are known as ledge-dwellers. They don't follow the same rules or share the same mindset as those at the corporate centre, where a fear of risk or the need to protect the lucrative status quo often stifles creativity and innovation.

Big firms often can't afford to innovate. They just buy new ideas in.

But move away from the corporate centre – go beyond the City and, increasingly, regional hubs – and you see a spring-like blossoming of other ways of running and growing a modern-day law firm.

In 2026, these new ways of working are to some extent being shaped by the values of Gen Z lawyers. These lawyers are ambitious, but in different ways. Success is a genuine life/work balance – in that order.

They want their firms to grow, but in a sustainable way. This means protecting their values-led vision through a B-Corp accreditation and creating a culture where colleagues and clients work together in a more open and natural way; breaking down hierarchies, and getting results fast, rather than working all night. For ledge dwellers, burn-out is not a badge of honour.

Martin Holdsworth, CEO, IDR Law

The growth rates that some firms built on new business models are enjoying, and the interest they are starting to attract from potential buyers and investors, show that it is possible to build a law firm based on people, planet and profit; the triple bottom line.

There are so many examples now – like Instagram, Uber, Netflix and Zoom – of how easy it is for a ledge-dweller with a good idea, and some capital, to move from the fringe to the corporate centre in what feels like the blink of an eye.

This could easily happen in the legal sector over the next few years. So the conference moved to those stimulating fringes, to explore the other business models that are out there, driving growth across the UK.

Martin Holdsworth is the CEO of IDR Law. In less than a decade, IDR has built the largest contentious probate team in the UK – indeed, it is the only law firm in the country specialising purely in inheritance and trust disputes – in part by capping how many billable hours solicitors can work each week.

The cut off point is 25 hours. The CEO is clear: "Nobody is allowed to go over 25 hours." But rather than limit IDR's growth, the firm has seen growth of 40% for the last two years.

IDR has built a B2B network of 1,800 law firms across the country and receives 500 referrals each month.

The referrals are triaged by a non-lawyer, who distributes the work across the team of 27 lawyers; making sure everyone gets 25 billable hours each week. As the volume of work grows, so does the size of the team.

IDR has also built its own law tech, as well as an AI data moat from thousands of enquiries and cases that has enabled it to improve how the triaging team deal with approaching 65% of all incoming enquiries. Mr Holdsworth said: "The tech is in place so the lawyers can do what the lawyers do, at the right price, so we can pay them well. And because we know every lawyer is on an FTE of 25 billable hours a week, we know how many cases we need to keep them at that level. That's how it operates."

Some firms suggested that IDR could not make a profit or grow with a business model like this. But Mr Holdsworth says: "They're wrong. It works and it has longevity – no burn outs"

"We have less than 10% write off in terms of billable time recorded. There is no wastage. It's very lean. No PE invests in a law firm that can't demonstrate and then deliver sustainable growth year on year."

The British Growth Fund took a minority investment stake of £3.25m in IDR Law in 2023, to help the firm grow in lawyer numbers, locations, use of legal tech and improved governance.

"I was determined to create a law firm culture that set lawyers up to succeed without losing sight of their families."

"When I set up IDR Law, I was determined to create a law firm culture that set lawyers up to succeed without losing sight of their families. I've been described since as a passionate advocate for kindness and flexibility in the workplace, which I absolutely love – because it means our culture remains the driving force behind our growth.

Dave Hodgetts is the chief executive at Midlands firm Talbots Law; one of just approximately 40 employee-owned law firms in the country. Established in 1828, Talbots created its employee ownership trust in November 2021.

A non-lawyer by background, he said:

"The firm was facing a succession scenario, and our former CEO was very passionate about the employees who have helped grow the business. They've really delivered growth and performance. We had lots of approaches, but employee ownership was the preferred outcome for our founder. So we became the first employee-owned law firm in the West Midlands."

"A lot of it was around protecting the value of the brand, growing the firm, and safeguarding jobs. I know we use a lot of buzzwords these days, but making Talbots an EOT really was about creating a people-first, purpose-led business. Value-based metrics are really, really important to us."

"And being 100% employee owned helps us attract top talent. We have created a hybrid ownership model, where approximately 78% of the business is owned through a trust company. Via the trust company, every employee has one share in the business, and we have a director share scheme making up to 22% to ensure we can still be competitive in retaining and recruiting senior talent with eligibility at all levels of directorship. It's about future proofing our business model."

Talbots employs around 600 people, with 19 offices across the Midlands and surrounding regions, some added in recent years through M&A. But it is a broad mix, with offices with 200 people in them, right down to four in the smallest. That may not sound like an efficient property portfolio, but these are geographically strategic locations.

"Our business is all about client service. That comes before profit. That's a big mantra for me because that's how we're going to win and retain clients over the long term. It's not short term."

So is it working? "Over the last four years we've grown from £16m to £41m, with the strategy and plans being executed to get to £50m this year."

David Jones is a partner and UK head of legal at Glasyiers ETL. Glaisyers dates back to the mid-1970s, with strong roots in Manchester and Liverpool. In 2018, it joined ETL, a global group of lawyers, accountants and management consultants.

ETL also dates back more than 50 years, to Germany and an unqualified accountant called Franz-Josef Wernze. David Jones explained, after making a lot of money in business, Mr Wernze decided to buy a successful accountancy firm in the town next to his.

"Franz went to see the owner and he said, 'I'd like to buy your business.' And the owner said 'Well, you'd be an idiot. I have a very good business, but I've already started to pass my clients to my younger colleague, Sebastian, and they all love him. So if you buy my business, lock, stock and barrel, Sebastian will leave and he will take all the clients with

From left to right: David Jones, UK Head of Legal, ETL Global; Philip Young, co-founder & CEO, Garfield AI; Jay Bhayani, Managing Director, Bhayani Law and Executive Director, Make UK; Dave Hodgetts, CEO, Talbots Law him. What you really want to do, Mr Wernze, is buy 51% of my business, and then you should give the money to Sebastian to buy the other 49%."

And that's what Mr Wernze did. More than 800 times more, and today ETL is made up of 900 firms, turning over €2.5bn.

David Jones said: "It's a great idea." Why? Because it gives firms within the ETL Group the financial freedom to invest in the next generation of equity partners.

He believes too many firms miss out on investment – for IT, for recruitment and career development – because profits are allocated to retiring equity partners.

"Our model, as discovered by Mr Wernze in 1971, is a way of getting around that problem because we have long-term corporate equity partners – ETL.

"Because it's a shared equity model, we don't have people leaving because they can't see an equity position for themselves in the future. There are still youngsters out there who want to be equity partners, and we help them achieve that goal. With the ETL model, succession planning is there right from the start. It's built in and ETL funds it. So, when I hang up my pint pot and retire, I will have somebody else who Glaysiers will have identified to buy me out and those people will be funded by ETL at favourable rates."

There are so many dynamic and successful ledge-dwellers working in different ways in the UK legal sector today. The future of alternative business structures (ABSs) is increasingly exciting, fuelled by PE's on-going confidence in this model.

These examples only touch the surface. Beneath what is seen as a conservative profession, there has been a blossoming of entrepreneurialism in the law, triggered by the launch of alternative business structures in 2011. In fact, many of these businesses did not need to be ABSs (IDR Law, before taking external investment, being just one example) but the new structure unleashed the spirit.

The one common denominator across all this new activity is how people-focused it is, whether employee ownership, capping billable hours to prevent burn out, or investing in future equity partners. Each one shows a legal sector that is far freer and more creative, compared to the traditional firms and models that have defined law for so long. With the energy levels around it, these ideas are certain to keep on growing.


legalfutures
Law Firm Growth
Summit 2026

In association with Leonard Curtis

This report is based on discussions that took place at the Legal Futures Law Firm Growth Summit on 18 March 2026 as well as other publicly available sources. All information in this report was correct at the time of publication.