SPOTLIGHT
THE LEGAL SECTOR

Farebrother

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The Law is one of the biggest drivers of demand for high quality Workspace with many of those searches focused here in the Centre of London. Global and UK practices are seeking offices to help them attract talent, support hybrid working and reflect their brand. There is a strong push towards modern, amenity rich space but with a lack of stock and a drive towards best in class - what's next for the Legal sector?

Shifts in working patterns are shaping what Legal firms want from their workspace as well as the introduction of new technology, changing the way firms are thinking and working. Many now prioritise flexibility, collaboration areas, sustainability and strong tech infrastructure, a marked shift from traditional working methods. The move towards more open plan desking with only limited private offices is also proving more popular especially where possible on a single floor. This is driving more space efficiencies and in some cases the need to take less space but better quality. However there is a restricted supply of offices designed to meet these modern needs and finding the right space is becoming tougher.

LEGAL DEMAND

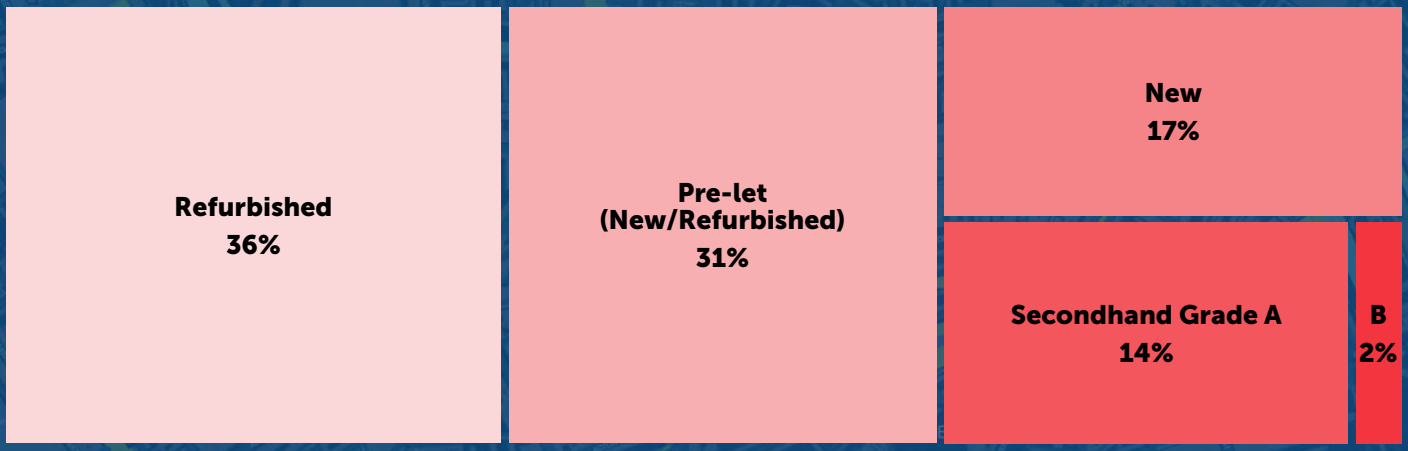
The Midtown office market has always had strong activity from the Legal sector - the 10 year average annual quantum of take-up has risen to 300,000 sq ft over the last five years, accounting for an average 18% of the Midtown market share. The current drive for best-in-class is clear – over the last five years 67% of Legal take-up in Midtown has been for pre-let or refurbished space with a further 17% taking new space (a brand new building). Second-hand Grade A space still plays a role, but only where an existing fit-out or location can bridge the quality gap.

Demand from legal occupiers considering new office space in Midtown remains strong, with more than 1.5 million sq ft of live requirements currently in the market. However, these numbers include firms who are also considering a stay versus go strategy. Some legal occupiers may ultimately choose to stay put or reconsider relocation plans given the sharp increase in occupational costs. For firms currently paying rents of around £60–£70 per sq ft, moving to new space at £80–£90 per sq ft - alongside significantly higher fit-out and relocation costs that are not fully offset by rent-free periods - can materially impact partnership earnings and relocation plans. In cases where existing space is no longer ideal, a more cautious hybrid approach may emerge, with firms retaining part of their current accommodation while selectively acquiring new space.

Examples of large law firms with active requirements considering Midtown

Occupier	Current Address	Requirement (sq ft)	Comment
Macfarlanes	Fetter Lane, Cursitor Street, EC4	175,000 – 225,000	Multiple leases with expiries between 2028-2032
Mishcon de Reya	Africa House, Kingsway, WC2	125,000 – 150,000	Lease expiry 2029
Sullivan & Cromwell	1 New Fetter Lane, EC4	100,000 – 150,000	Lease expiry 2030
Weil	110 Fetter Lane, EC4	100,000 – 140,000	Lease expiry 2030
Fladgate	Great Queen Street, WC2	55,000 – 65,000	Lease expiry 2029
Essex Court Chambers	24 Lincoln's Inn Fields, WC2	50,000 – 60,000	Lease expiry 2028
Farrer & Co	Lincoln's Inn Fields, WC2	8,000 – 20,000	Overflow space until 2031

5-year legal take-up by grade of space



LEGAL OCCUPIER TYPES

Legal occupier demand within Midtown can be grouped into three broad categories, each with distinct space, location and operational requirements.

Large international law firms typically require significant floor space, often from 100,000 sq ft to well over 1 million sq ft. They favour large Grade A or headquarters-style buildings, with a strong focus on the City core and Midtown. Occupation is usually secured on long institutional leases - often via pre-lets - with highly corporate layouts, extensive meeting and client-facing space, and a strong emphasis on brand presence.

Mid-size and boutique law firms operate at a smaller scale, generally occupying between 5,000 and 40,000 sq ft. They typically seek multi-let buildings or self contained floors, with Midtown - particularly Holborn and WC1 - remaining a key location. Lease terms are shorter and more flexible, workspace layouts are hybrid, and amenity provision and branding are more modest than those of larger City firms.

Barristers' chambers represent a distinct occupier group, usually occupying 3,000 to 25,000 sq ft and remaining closely clustered around the Inns of Court. Space is often located within period buildings or sensitively converted offices, arranged around individual rooms supported by shared clerks' rooms and libraries. Chambers tend to hold long leases, with branding rooted in tradition rather than corporate visibility, and relatively low day to day client footfall.

Gray's Inn Square, Gray's Inn

OCCUPIER ACTIVITY

Farebrother research shows that the Midtown legal sector occupies more than 4.5 million sq ft of office space. With 55% having remained in the same building for 15 years or more, this points to a significant pool of occupiers with the potential to re gear, upgrade or relocate as firms look to modernise their workplaces in line with evolving operational and talent requirements.

55% OF LEGAL OCCUPIERS IN MIDTOWN HAVE REMAINED IN THE SAME BUILDING FOR 15 YEARS OR MORE

Legal occupiers already located in Midtown generally want to stay in the area but only if there is quality workspace available. Looking deep into the pipeline to secure good quality space is essential but with 70% of space under construction pre committed ahead of completion last year, future supply remains limited, with only a modest volume due to deliver over the next three years - well below current levels of demand. As competition for prime buildings intensifies, many legal occupiers face a difficult choice: adapt to space that no longer fully meets their needs, or compete aggressively for the small number of best in class offices that do come to market.

Length of time a tenant has been in occupation of their building

Less than 5 years	21%
5-10 years	24%
10-15 years	24%
15-25 years	20%
25 years+	11%

55% of Legal Midtown occupiers have been in occupation of their offices for 15 years+

Larger firms with upcoming lease events are therefore starting their searches much earlier than in previous cycles, while smaller firms are also facing reduced choice as the best buildings let quickly. This imbalance is likely to continue placing upward pressure on rents, as occupiers seek locations that support talent attraction and retention, and is encouraging many firms to bring forward upgrade and relocation decisions well in advance of lease expires.

Atlantic House, unlocking development opportunity

OUR VIEW

As a number of law firms approach the end of their current leases, Midtown is entering a period of renewed opportunity. Occupier churn is releasing well located buildings back into the development cycle, creating scope for comprehensive refurbishment and redevelopment that will modernise stock and reinforce the area's long term appeal. This dynamic is already evident at 5 Chancery Lane, EC4, where the departure of Lewis Silkin enabled the repositioning of approximately 100,000 sq ft, delivering one of the few significant schemes scheduled for completion in early 2027. Further opportunities are emerging at Africa House, WC2, ahead of Mishcon de Reya's lease expiry in 2029, and at Atlantic House on Holborn Viaduct following Hogan Lovells' relocation to newly delivered pre let accommodation. Together, these schemes illustrate how occupier movement is unlocking a pipeline of regeneration opportunities, supporting rental growth, ESG upgrades and a new generation of best in class buildings across Midtown.

THE LEGAL SECTOR REMAINS A CORNERSTONE OF MIDTOWN OFFICE DEMAND

A challenge for the legal sector is adapting to changing patterns of workplace occupation and a gradual shift towards less compartmentalised working environments among solicitors, while barristers' chambers remain less advanced in this transition. At the same time, the significantly higher fit-out costs associated with legal occupiers - driven by the need for enhanced sound attenuation and greater levels of confidentiality across meeting rooms and offices - continue to limit the appeal of fitted space solutions, particularly for barristers, where such opportunities are often largely unsuitable making some occupational moves challenging.

5 Chancery Lane, formerly occupied by Lewis Silkin

Royal Courts of Justice

In summary - The legal sector remains a cornerstone of Midtown office demand, supported by a large and established occupier base, strong live requirements and a clear preference for best in class accommodation. While much of the focus is on larger firms competing for prime buildings and pre let opportunities, smaller and boutique practices are also playing a critical role in sustaining market activity, seeking high quality, well located space that supports more flexible and efficient working models. With a constrained development pipeline limiting choice across all size bands, competition is intensifying, driving earlier decision making and encouraging occupiers to upgrade, reposition or pre let space. Together, these dynamics are reinforcing Midtown's role as a long term legal hub and creating clear opportunities for the regeneration and modernisation of its office stock.

Come and talk to us to explore how Farebrother can help you unlock your opportunities.

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