



Government  
Equalities Office

# Exploring the Potential Uptake of Opposite-Sex Civil Partnership

**Research Brief**

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Government Equalities Office



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## Introduction

The Government Equalities Office commissioned research to assess the likely demand for civil partnerships amongst opposite-sex couples. This report summarises how this research was conducted and presents the data gathered.

To inform a decision on the expansion of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, the government wanted an estimate of the likely demand for this form of union. Previous consultations on civil partnerships had not estimated this demand systematically<sup>1</sup>.

## Approach

The survey questions were designed to explore the potential uptake of opposite-sex civil partnership amongst unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship and the potential impact this would have on their likelihood to marry. To gain an accurate estimate, and to avoid asking individuals about a hypothetical relationship, the survey was restricted to those who considered themselves in a serious relationship with someone of the opposite-sex and were not already married. All the survey questions and connected data tables can be found in Annex One.

The survey was conducted between 10<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> September 2018 through YouGov's online platform and with their panel. Responses were weighted to be representative of the general population. The initial (unweighted) sample size was 2,663 unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship. This was refined to an unweighted total sample of 2,390 respondents in a serious, opposite-sex relationship, who continued with the survey questions. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the unweighted sample. The data provided in the rest of the brief are based on the weighted figures (for the population of Great Britain, 18+ years).

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<sup>1</sup> In the Government's 2014 consultation, only 871 people (out of over 10,000) said they would prefer to enter a civil partnership than marry their opposite-sex partner. See the Command Paper ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/705768/Future-Operation-Civil-Partnership.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705768/Future-Operation-Civil-Partnership.pdf)).

**Table 1: Demographic split of respondents**

Demographics		Respondents*	Percentage**
Gender	Male	942	39%
	Female	1,448	61%
Age range	18-24	440	18%
	25-34	661	28%
	35-44	512	21%
	45-54	360	15%
	55+	417	17%
Relationship status	In a relationship, but not living together	670	28%
	Living with a partner but neither married nor in a civil partnership	1,710	72%

\*All figures presented are based on the unweighted data, n=2,390 (all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex, serious relationship).

\*\*Percentages will not add to 100% due to rounding.

A screener question before the survey allowed us to identify the number of adults in a serious-relationship. Using this figure, we were able to estimate that 17.1% of adults in Great Britain are in a serious, opposite-sex relationship but are unmarried. Applying this to the population of England and Wales<sup>2</sup> (the remit of the consultation and legislative change), estimates that 7.92 million individuals, or 3.96 million couples, are in opposite-sex, serious relationships.

## Findings

To examine the potential uptake of opposite-sex civil partnerships, it was important to distinguish how many couples intended to legalise their relationship (through getting married) irrespective of whether a civil partnership was available, and how many did not. This is necessary to estimate the proportion of civil partnerships that might happen instead of marriages (an estimate of displacement from marriages to partnerships) and the number that might happen as well as marriages (an estimate of additional partnerships).

To achieve this, respondents were firstly asked how likely they were to get married to their current partner in the future (Table 2). This established respondents' future intentions with their current partners, which may or not come to pass. Despite this, the question provided a suitable estimated proxy from

<sup>2</sup> ONS, 2017. National Population Projections: 2016-based statistical bulletin (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2016basedstatisticalbulletin/relateddata>)

which to provide a baseline count for how many respondents were likely and unlikely to legally recognise their relationship through the options currently available.

**Table 2: Likelihood to marry current partner**

<b>Likelihood to marry</b>	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Very likely	497	21%
Fairly likely	468	20%
Fairly unlikely	422	18%
Very unlikely	628	26%
Don't know	364	15%
<b>NET: Likely**</b>	<b>965</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>NET: Unlikely**</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>44%</b>

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex, serious relationship).

\*\*Does not include 'don't know' responses. Percentages will not add to 100% due to this.

All respondents were asked about whether they would be interested in entering a civil partnership, assuming that it was an option currently available to opposite-sex couples to legally recognise their relationship (Table 3). This allowed us to better understand the levels of interest and potential demand for opposite-sex civil partnerships.

**Table 3: Interest in having an opposite-sex civil partnership**

<b>Interest in a civil partnership</b>	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Very interested	350	15%
Fairly interested	504	21%
Not very interested	522	22%
Not at all interested	668	28%
Don't know	334	14%
<b>NET: Interested**</b>	<b>854</b>	<b>36%**</b>
<b>NET: Not interested**</b>	<b>1,190</b>	<b>50%**</b>

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex, serious relationship).

\*\*Does not include 'don't know' responses. Percentages will not add to 100% due to this.

Tables 4 and 5 illustrate how the interest in civil partnerships relates to respondents' previously declared interest in marrying. This was to enable us to distinguish between those who would form a civil partnership instead of marriage, and those who would not otherwise have formalised their union in the absence of civil partnerships.

**Table 4: Likelihood to marry and interest in civil partnership (respondents)**

		Likelihood to marry				
		Very likely	Fairly likely	Fairly unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know
Interest in civil partnership	Very interested	76	80	61	81	48
	Fairly interested	71	134	122	98	78
	Not very interested	120	94	136	125	43
	Not at all interested	141	86	74	284	73
	Don't know	87	74	25	33	109
Total*		494	468	418	622	350

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex serious relationship).

\*\*Percentages will not add to 100% due to the exclusion of 'Don't know' responses from these counts.

**Table 5: Likelihood to marry and interest in civil partnership (proportions)\*\***

		Likelihood to marry				
		Very likely	Fairly likely	Fairly unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know
Interest in civil partnership	Very interested	15%	17%	15%	13%	14%
	Fairly interested	14%	29%	29%	16%	22%
	Not very interested	24%	20%	33%	20%	12%
	Not at all interested	29%	18%	18%	46%	21%
	Don't know	18%	16%	6%	5%	31%
Total*		494	468	418	622	350

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex serious relationship).

\*\*Percentages will not add to 100% due to the exclusion of 'Don't know' responses from these counts.

Those who responded that they were interested in having their relationship legally recognised by a civil partnership instead of a marriage, were asked when this might occur (Table 6). This was used to establish the potential immediate demand for an opposite-sex civil partnership in a single year.

**Table 6: Likely timings for a civil partnership**

<b>Timings for Civil Partnership</b>	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Within the next year (i.e. between now and early September 2019)	157	18%
Longer than 1 year from now, up to 2 years from now	214	25%
Longer than 2 years from now, up to 5 years from now	214	25%
Longer than 5 years from now	87	10%
Don't know	182	21%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=854; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex serious relationship, interested in a civil partnership)

Further data on this topic was collected through three waves of the 'ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Omnibus Survey'<sup>3</sup>. As the ONS data did not yield a sufficient sample, only the YouGov data has been used for the impact assessment.

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<sup>3</sup> The data from the ONS survey is available at:  
<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=2000043>

## Annex One

The full survey questions are provided below with the accompanying data tables. All data in the tables are weighted. Please note that not all questions were answered by all respondents due to the routing of the survey.

1. You previously said that you were in a relationship, but not currently married. Do you personally consider yourself to currently be in a serious relationship (e.g. long-term relationship, committed relationship, relationship where you are thinking about the future etc.)?

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes, I am in a serious relationship	2,454	93%
No, I am not in a serious relationship	95	4%
Don't know	59	2%
Prefer not to say	33	1%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,641; all GB adults (excluding gay or lesbian) currently in an opposite sex relationship, but not married).

2. You previously said that you were in a relationship. Which ONE, if any, of the following is your current partner?

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	1,274	52%
Female	1,149	47%
Other	10	0%
Prefer not to say	8	0%
Refused	-	-

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,440; all GB adults (excluding gay or lesbian) currently in an opposite sex relationship, but not married).

3. You previously said that you consider yourself to currently be in a serious relationship. How likely or unlikely do you think you are to get married to your current partner in the future?

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very likely	497	21%
Fairly likely	468	20%
Fairly unlikely	422	18%
Very unlikely	628	26%
Don't know	364	15%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship).

4. [Only to those who respondent Very likely or fairly likely to question 3]

There are currently two ways people can legally get married in the UK, through a civil ceremony or a religious ceremony. A civil ceremony takes place in a registry office or on approved premises and a religious ceremony takes place in a place of worship. You previously said you think you are likely to marry your current partner. Which ONE, if any, of these describes the way you think you would be most likely to get married to your current partner?

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Through a civil ceremony	636	66%
Through a religious ceremony	213	22%
Don't know	116	12%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=965; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship, likely to get married).

**5.** [Only to those who responded Very likely or fairly likely to question 3]  
You previously said you think you are likely to marry your current partner...Approximately, when do you think you are likely to get married to your current partner? (If you are unsure please give your best estimate)

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Within the next year (i.e. between now and September 2019)	133	14%
Longer than 1 year from now, up to 2 years from now	214	22%
Longer than 2 years from now, up to 5 years from now	381	40%
Longer than 5 years from now	109	11%
Don't know	127	13%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=965; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship, likely to get married).

**6.** An alternative to marriage is a civil partnership. Civil partnerships were introduced for same-sex couples, before they could legally be married and give broadly similar rights and obligations as marriage. For the following question, please imagine that civil partnerships were available for opposite-sex couples. How interested, if at all, would you be in having a civil partnership instead of a marriage with your current partner?

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Very interested	350	15%
Fairly interested	504	21%
Not very interested	522	22%
Not at all interested	668	28%
Don't know	334	14%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=2,378; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship, likely to get married).

**7. [Only to those who responded 'Not very interested' and 'Not at all interested' to question 6].**

You previously said you are [Not very interested / Not at all interested] in having a civil partnership instead of marriage...Which, if any, of the following best describe your reason(s) for this? (Please select all that apply. If any of your answer(s) don't appear in the list below, please type them in the 'Other' box)

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
I can't see any benefits to having a civil partnership rather than a marriage	520	44%
I don't think my partner would be interested in this option	243	20%
I would need to discuss it with my partner first	108	9%
A civil partnership doesn't fit with my religious beliefs	80	7%
A civil partnership doesn't fit with my beliefs (other than religious beliefs)	71	6%
I would need more information about civil partnerships in order to decide	158	13%
I am not interested in legally recognising my relationship (i.e. with marriage or an alternative)	288	24%
I hadn't previously thought about it/ considered a civil partnership	173	15%
Other**	82	7%
Don't know	9	1%
Not applicable - there is no particular reason why I'm not interested in having a civil partnership	135	11%
Refused	-	-

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=1,186; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship, not interested in a civil partnership).

\*\*The other responses included the themes of: not being interested in legally recognising their relationship at all; the slightly different rights that having a civil partnership would entail; believing that they were not available to opposite-sex (heterosexual) couples; and, having previously been married.

**8. [Only to those who responded 'Very interested' and 'Fairly interested' to question 6].**

You previously said you would be [very interested / fairly interested] in having your relationship recognised by a civil partnership instead of marriage. For the following question, please imagine that civil partnerships were already available to opposite-sex couples... When do you think you would be likely to have a civil partnership? (If you are unsure please give your best estimate)

	<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Within the next year (i.e. between now and early September 2019)	157	18%
Longer than 1 year from now, up to 2 years from now	214	25%
Longer than 2 years from now, up to 5 years from now	214	25%
Longer than 5 years from now	87	10%
Don't know	182	21%

\*All figures presented are based on the weighted data (n=854; all GB unmarried adults in an opposite-sex relationship, interested in a civil partnership).



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