

Equality Impact Assessment – Tying the Knot: *Reforming weddings law in England and Wales*

Policy Proposals Summary

1. This consultation seeks views on reforms to weddings law in England and Wales. The proposals follow the Law Commission's 2022 report on weddings law and the Government's announcement in October 2025 of its intention to modernise weddings law.¹
2. The current law regulates weddings primarily by the building in which they take place, rather than by the person conducting the ceremony. This creates barriers for groups whose beliefs do not associate their place of worship with marriage or who do not have places of worship. It also creates difficulties for couples of different faiths for whom a single place of worship isn't suitable for both their needs.
3. The current legal framework treats different types of weddings differently. Anglican, Jewish and Quaker weddings operate under bespoke rules. All other religious weddings must follow a single set of rules and a further set of rules governs civil weddings. Non-religious belief groups, such as Humanists, cannot conduct legal weddings in England and Wales.
4. This produces stark disparities in practice. The result is that some groups can marry freely according to their traditions, while others must adapt their ceremonies to fit a framework that does not align with their beliefs. In some cases, couples may need to have a separate civil ceremony in order to ensure that their marriage is legally recognised.
5. Couples may also face unnecessary administrative requirements. These include the need to give notice in person in the registration district where they live, a 7-day residence requirement before giving notice and the need to pay for civil registration officers to attend some ceremonies. Businesses may also need an approved premises licence to host civil weddings, which can restrict the range of venues available and increase costs for couples.
6. The reforms set out in this consultation will be delivered through a combination of primary and secondary legislation used, in conjunction with non-statutory reforms, to facilitate a clear new legal framework governing weddings.
7. These reforms are underpinned by four core principles:
8. **Providing a simple, fair and inclusive framework:** Establishing a clear, coherent and consistent legal structure for weddings, ensuring fairness across different groups through a common set of rules and enabling non-religious belief organisations, including Humanists, to conduct legally binding ceremonies.

¹ Law Commission, *Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law* (Law Com No 408, HC 557, 2022); Ministry of Justice, 'Major boost to economy through wedding law reform' (Press release, 2 October 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-boost-to-economy-through-wedding-law-reform>>

9. **Expanding choice as to how and where couples marry:** Allowing greater flexibility over the location and form of weddings, so ceremonies can better reflect couples' beliefs, backgrounds and circumstances.
10. **Upholding the dignity and significance of marriage:** Ensuring that all weddings meet clear and consistent standards of dignity through a comprehensive framework governing ceremonies and locations, supported by oversight of officiants and clear criteria for organisations in order to preserve the integrity of marriage.
11. **Protecting against forced, predatory and sham marriages:** Strengthening safeguards through a more effective system of checks and greater transparency in order to ensure marriages are entered into freely, with informed consent and are not used to gain unfair advantage.
12. Overall, the reforms are intended to modernise marriage law so that it better reflects the diversity of couples in England and Wales. The proposals would provide a clearer and more inclusive framework, increase choice in how and where couples marry, enable non-religious belief weddings to be legally recognised for the first time and strengthen safeguards protecting the dignity and integrity of marriage.

Equalities Duties

13. This document records the analysis undertaken by Ministry of Justice to fulfil the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. This requires the department to pay due regard to the need to:
 - **Eliminate unlawful discrimination** - direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, discrimination arising from disability, and harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
 - **Advance equality of opportunity** between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
 - **Foster good relations** between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it
14. The nine "protected characteristics" under the Equality Act are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
15. The Ministry of Justice has a legal duty to consider how the proposed policy proposals are likely to affect people with the protected characteristics listed above and to take proportionate steps to mitigate or justify any negative effects while advancing any positive ones.
16. Consideration has been given to the impact of the proposals against the statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010. These are outlined below:

Direct Discrimination

17. Under our initial assessment, none of the policy proposals are directly discriminatory within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010.

18. The proposed reforms will apply a clearer and more consistent framework to weddings across different groups. They would also provide greater flexibility for couples, regardless of a protected characteristic, to marry in a way that reflects their beliefs, traditions or preferences.
19. The reforms would not treat people less favourably because of a protected characteristic. Rather, they are intended to reduce differences in treatment between groups under the current law, particularly in relation to religion or belief.

Indirect Discrimination

20. Our initial assessment, based on the information available, is that the proposals would not be indirectly discriminatory within the meaning of the Equality Act. The proposed shift from a buildings-based model to an officiant-based model would apply across groups. We have not identified evidence to suggest that these proposals would result in anyone sharing a protected characteristic being put at a particular disadvantage compared to those who do not share that protected characteristic.

Discrimination arising from disability and duty to make reasonable adjustments

21. Our initial assessment, based on the information available, is that the proposals would not result in any discrimination arising from disability.
22. The existing duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people under the Equality Act 2010 will continue to apply. This means that those providing wedding-related services must continue to anticipate the needs of disabled people and make reasonable adjustments where required.
23. ONS 2021 census data shows that there were 10.4 million disabled people and 49.2 million non-disabled individuals.² Of these, 3.6 million disabled individuals were living as part of a married couple, representing 34.4% of all disabled individuals. This compared with 17.2 million non-disabled individuals who were living as part of a married couple, representing 34.9% of the non-disabled population. These data points aggregate same-sex and opposite sex weddings. The proportion of married people among disabled and non-disabled people is broadly similar.
24. Given that disabled people marry at broadly similar rates to non-disabled people, reforms to the weddings framework are likely to affect disabled and non-disabled people in similar ways. We have not identified evidence to suggest that the proposals would place disabled people at a particular disadvantage.
25. The proposals may, however, have a positive impact for some disabled people. By permitting weddings to take place in a wider range of locations, the reforms may enable couples to choose venues or settings that better meet accessibility needs. This could include outdoor locations or, where appropriate, private homes.
26. Under the proposed reforms, the core legal requirement of all wedding ceremonies is that the couple must give their consent to marry. In religious and non-religious belief weddings, couples will be able to express their consent through actions, however, in a civil ceremony, the couple will only be able to express their consent through specified words of contract, or words to the

² Office for National Statistics, 'Filter dimensions' (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/filters/080afeba-b764-4c24-b7de-e4239b9e7c69/dimensions>>

same effect. However, in line with current General Register Office (GRO) guidance, for individuals who are unable to express those words verbally, for example due to a hearing or speech impediment, there will be provision for the couple to employ the use of alternative methods of communication, such as interpreters or other assistive tools.

Discrimination arising from religion or belief

27. The current law applies different requirements to a wedding depending on the type of ceremony. This includes rules about the content of the ceremony, including how the couple express their consent to marry, where the ceremony can be held and who is authorised to conduct or register it. These differences create a complex, inconsistent and unfair framework, which can prevent some religious groups, that is, all but Anglican, Jewish and Quaker, from having a ceremony which is both legally binding and reflective of their beliefs and traditions.
28. The result of this framework is that some couples have two ceremonies, one of which is in accordance with their faith, and is therefore meaningful to the couple, their family and their community, and one which complies with the legal requirements.
29. The proposed reforms are intended to address the unfairness of the current rules in two key ways.
30. The first is that reforms will make it easier for couples to have a ceremony that is both meaningful to them and legally recognised. In particular, moving away from a buildings-based system and towards regulating authorised officiants would accommodate more belief weddings (whether religious or non-religious) and allow more weddings to take place outside registered places of worship, subject to appropriate safeguards.
31. Secondly, the proposals will permit consent to be expressed in ways that accord with religious or belief traditions, including giving non-verbal consent to marry. This may reduce the need for separate ceremonies to ensure legal recognition, for some couples. This will ensure that the law better reflects the diversity of traditions and practices that are meaningful to particular groups. It will also remove the inconsistencies in the current law which create confusing and unfair rules.
32. The Law Commission considered that, together, these proposals would be likely to reduce the number of non-legally binding ceremonies. The Government also considers that the proposals concerning the expression of consent, will allow couples to express their consent to marriage in a way that is personally meaningful for them, in line with their beliefs.

Discrimination arising from sex

33. As discussed, the current law places different requirements on each of the different types of ceremony, which creates a complex and inconsistent framework. A consequence of the current law is that some individuals or couples do not understand the legal requirements and may have a religious wedding that they do not realise is not legally binding.
34. Under the current law, a person who has entered into a non-legally recognised wedding ceremony will not have access to financial remedies on divorce because they are not legally

married. This may be particularly significant where the person is the financially weaker party in the relationship. This issue more often affects women; evidence shows that for 54.7% of 25-49-year-old women who were economically inactive in England and Wales this was because they were caring for their home or family in the 12 months to September 2025. This compares with 13.3% of men.³

35. This lack of protection may be particularly relevant to victim-survivors of domestic abuse, including economic abuse. Where a person has entered into a religious-only ceremony believing, or being led to believe, that they were legally married, they may later find that they do not have access to the legal rights and protections of being a spouse or civil partner e.g. financial remedies on divorce. This may exacerbate economic vulnerability and make it harder to leave an abusive relationship or recover financial security after separation.
36. Research published by Women's Aid in 2024 estimated that it could cost a victim-survivor almost £50,000 to leave an abuser.⁴ The potentially substantial costs associated with leaving an abusive relationship may act as an economic barrier, particularly where the victim-survivor has limited independent resources. This means that some women may choose to endure abusive relationships.
37. The proposals therefore seek to reduce the likelihood that couples will unknowingly enter into a non-legally binding wedding, by making it easier and more straightforward to have a religious wedding that is also recognised under the law. By reducing the risk of individuals inadvertently entering into non-legally binding ceremonies, the reforms may reduce the likelihood that victim-survivors are left without access to the protections associated with legal marriage.
38. The proposed reforms would also introduce a two-stage preliminary process that would provide strengthened protection against forced, sham and predatory marriage. The two-stage process will enable couples to submit their required information and documentary evidence ahead of the in-person interviews. This means that registrars will have access to the information at an earlier stage, meaning they can identify issues earlier on in the process, and have more time in the interviews to focus on safeguarding, rather than collecting and inputting the required information. This improved process is therefore expected to support a reduction in marriages that are not entered into freely or genuinely, which will particularly improve protections for women.⁵

Harassment and Victimisation

39. We do not consider that the proposals will give rise to harassment or victimisation within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010.

³ Nomis (Office for National Statistics), *Nomis – Official Census and Labour Market Statistics* <<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=181>>.

⁴ Women's Aid, *The Price of Safety: The Cost of Leaving a Perpetrator and Rebuilding a Safe, Independent Life* (2024) <<https://womensaid.org.uk/the-price-of-safety/>>

⁵ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2024' (3 July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024>>

Advancing Equality of Opportunity

40. Consideration has been given to how these proposals affect the duty to advance equality of opportunity by meeting the needs of adults, children and employees who share a particular characteristic, where those needs are different from the needs of those who do not share that characteristic.
41. These reforms would allow individuals from different religious and non-religious belief groups to conduct legally recognised marriages according to their beliefs, while also increasing choice and flexibility for couples who do not hold a belief. The proposals will therefore place all groups on an equal footing under the law.
42. A consequence of these reforms is that fewer people are expected inadvertently to enter marriages that are not legally recognised. This is because reformed weddings law will regulate the officiant rather than the location of the wedding, making it easier to have a wedding ceremony that is both reflective of the couple's beliefs and recognised under the law. However, where a religious-only wedding has taken place, the Government's upcoming cohabitation reforms will seek to provide legal and financial protections to cohabitants, with a route to claiming financial remedies, including for those who have been subject to economic or domestic abuse.
43. Weddings and cohabitation reforms will therefore work in tandem to provide stronger protections for both married and unmarried couples. Studies suggest that increased protections for cohabitants do not have a negative impact on marriage rates, meaning that the complementary reforms will offer better wrap-around protection and may provide increased confidence to flee abusive relationships regardless of marital status.⁶

Fostering good relations

44. We anticipate that the proposals are unlikely to have a negative effect on good relations between those who share protected characteristics and those who do not. The reforms are intended to make the legal framework for weddings clearer, more consistent and more accessible across different types of ceremony and therefore across all groups.

Data and Analysis

Age

45. According to ONS data, the median age for opposite-sex marriages in 2023, was 33.0 years old for women and 34.8 years old for men.⁷ This reflects a longer-term trend towards marrying later in life. Compared to 1970-79, the average median ages to get married have increased from 22.5 years old for women and 24.9 years old for men.

⁶ Kathleen Kiernan, Anne Barlow and Rebecca Merlo, 'Cohabitation law reform and its impact on marriage: evidence from Australia and Europe' (2007) *International Family Law* 63 <<https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/43709/>>

⁷ Office for National Statistics, 'Marriages in England and Wales' (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013>>

46. Table 1 shows the percentage of men and women who married in heterosexual marriages in 2023 disaggregated by age. The data shows very few people entering same-sex marriages were aged under 20. The largest proportion of both men and women marrying were aged 30 to 34. In total, 62.6% of men and 66.2% of women entering opposite-sex marriages in 2023 were aged between 25 and 39. This suggests that the reforms are most likely to affect adults in these age groups, although they will apply to all adults eligible to marry.

Table 1: Proportion of Marriages by Age and Gender

Year 2023	Ages 16 and over	Under 20	20-24	25 -29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65 and over
Men	100.0%	0.2%	3.5%	19.5%	27.6%	15.5%	8.8%	5.9%	5.7%	5.3%	3.6%	4.4%
Women	100.0%	0.4%	5.7%	25.8%	27.0%	13.4%	7.5%	5.3%	5.2%	4.4%	2.7%	2.7%

ONS Marriages in England and Wales, 2023, Table 4a

47. In the case of same-sex marriages, the median age in 2023 to marry was 34.0 years old for women and 37.4 years old for men. Because same-sex marriages only became legal on the implementation of the Marriage (Same Sex Couple) Act 2013, there are no equivalent long-term comparisons with the 1970s for same-sex marriages.

48. The following table, Table 2, shows the percentage of men and women who married in same-sex marriages disaggregated by age in 2023. A smaller proportion of men and women who married in 2023 were in the 20-24 years old age group compared to men and women who married in heterosexual marriages in 2023. 66.5% of men who married in a same sex partner in 2023 were between 25 and 44 years old. 75.0% of women who married in homosexual relationships in 2023 were between 25 and 44 years old.

Table 2: Proportion of Same-Sex Marriages by Age in 2023

Year 2023	Ages 16 and over	Under 20	20-24	25 -29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65 and over
Men	100.0%	0.2%	3.3%	14.1%	22.9%	17.9%	11.6%	7.9%	8.1%	6.7%	3.7%	3.6%
Women	100.0%	0.3%	6.0%	21.5%	27.3%	16.4%	9.8%	6.6%	5.3%	3.7%	1.6%	1.5%

ONS Marriages in England and Wales, 2023, Table 4b

49. Overall, across opposite and same-sex weddings, men are more likely to get married at an older age than women. Since the weddings reforms are not making any changes to the legal age required to get married, no direct or indirect discrimination on the basis of age is

anticipated. The reforms may benefit adults across age groups by increasing choice, improving clarity and reducing administrative barriers in the process of getting married.⁸

Disability

50. It is not anticipated that there will be an adverse impact on disabled individuals. For more details, refer to paragraphs 21-29.⁹

Gender Reassignment and Sexual Orientation

51. 2024 ONS sexual orientation data demonstrates that the proportion of gay and lesbian (14.0%) and bisexual (0.7%) individuals living together as married couples in same-sex relationships is lower than the proportion of heterosexual couples living together as married couples in opposite sex marriages (45.8%).¹⁰ 4.7% of gay and lesbian individuals and 15.5% of bisexual individuals reported that they were living together as married couples in opposite sex marriages.

52. The ONS noted that sexual orientation is self-reported and therefore subject to personal, cultural, or religious interpretations of one's identity. The misalignment between the type of legal partnership and reported sexual orientation of an individual can be attributed to:

- Change in sexual orientation after formation of partnership.
- Individuals who may enter partnerships that do not reflect their orientation due to external factors (e.g. societal/familial expectations).
- Respondent error – (i.e. misunderstanding the question).

53. The proposed reforms do not directly affect people on the basis of their sexual orientation and hence no adverse effects on such grounds are anticipated. Additionally, the proposed wedding reforms will allow couples to have their weddings in a far wider range of locations with more choice over how their ceremonies take place as well. They will also simplify civil wedding requirements. This will lead to greater flexibility and choice for couples, regardless of their sexual orientation.

54. Under current law, religious institutions are exempted from the requirement to marry same-sex couples on their premises as prescribed by the Marriage (Same Sex) Couples Act.¹¹ The reforms may permit some religious elements within civil ceremonies, provided that they do not replicate religious rites in full and that civil registrars do not participate in religious elements of the ceremony. This may allow same-sex couples to integrate some religious elements into their civil wedding ceremonies, thereby allowing them to get married in a way that better reflects their beliefs and preferences.

⁸ Ministry of Justice, 'Legal age of marriage in England and Wales rises to 18' (Press release, 27 February 2023) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/legal-age-of-marriage-in-england-and-wales-rises-to-18>>

⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Filter dimensions' (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/filters/a10455d0-8e50-4970-b444-de5df17e46c6/dimensions>>

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, 'Sexual identity, UK' (29 January 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/datasets/sexualidentityuk>>

¹¹ Government Equalities Office, *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act: A Factsheet* (April 2014) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/306000/140423_M_SSC_Act_factsheet__web_version_.pdf>

55. In 2023, 15.0% of all opposite-sex marriages and 1.3% of same-sex marriages took place in registered places of worship in England and Wales.¹² ONS Census 2021 data shows that 1.0% of religious individuals are gay or lesbian and 2.8% of non-religious individuals are gay or lesbian (out of those that disclose their sexual orientation and not including “not answered” responses).¹³ This suggests that same-sex religious couples are more likely to have civil wedding ceremonies than opposite-sex religious couples, meaning their wedding ceremonies may not reflect their beliefs or preferences. For this reason, allowing some religious elements within civil wedding ceremonies would ensure some same-sex religious couples to have wedding ceremonies that better reflect their beliefs and preferences.
56. We do not have any reliable data on the number of transgender individuals, but the policy area is not deemed to have any adverse impact on them.

Marriage and Civil Partnership

57. According to ONS marriage statistics in 2023 there were of 224,402 marriages in England and Wales.¹⁴ Labour Force Survey data shows that in 2025 there were 13 million married couple families and 216,000 civil partner couple families.¹⁵
58. According to ONS data (2024) on marital status, across all age-groups there were an estimated 24.4 million individuals who did not live in a couple and had never been married or in a civil partnership.¹⁶ This compares with an estimated 24.6 million married people and 0.4 million people in civil partnerships. There were also an estimated 3.8 million divorced people and 3.1 million widowed people. This demonstrates that there are a similar number of married people to people who have never married or formed civil partnerships in England and Wales. The proposed reforms are therefore likely to affect a substantial number of people who may choose to marry in future, as well as families and communities involved in weddings.
59. The number of marriages in England and Wales has declined over time. Comparing ONS wedding data for 1970-79 with data for 2014-2023, the average number of weddings per year fell from 386,454 in 1970-79 to 217,881¹⁷ in 2014-2023.¹⁸ This decline has been seen in

¹² Office for National Statistics, ‘Marriages and civil partnerships in England and Wales: 2023’ (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2023>>

¹³ Office for National Statistics, ‘Create a custom dataset’ (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/create>>

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics, ‘Marriages in England and Wales’ (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013>>

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics, ‘Families and households’ (17 April 2026) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds>>

¹⁶ Office for National Statistics, ‘Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales’ (15 October 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesbymaritalstatusandlivingarrangements>>

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics, ‘Marriages in England and Wales’ (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013>>, 2019 and 2022 data was removed due to potential COVID effects

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics, ‘Marriages in England and Wales’ (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013>>; Bastian Herre, Veronika Samborska, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and

several comparable countries. There has also been a decline in Anglican weddings with the average number of Anglican weddings falling from 137,625 per year in 1970-79 to 33,316 per year in 2014-23.¹⁹

60. The median duration of an opposite-sex marriage in 2023 (according to ONS divorce data) was 12.7 years, with the median duration for male same-sex marriages and female same-sex marriages being 7.2 and 6.3 years respectively.²⁰ This shows that on average, opposite-sex marriages last longer than same-sex marriages.
61. As far as median ages for divorce, it was reported that for opposite-sex marriages in 2019, it was 47.4 years and 44.8 years for men and women respectively. For same-sex marriages, the median ages for divorce were 39.2 years for men and 37.6 years for women.²¹ This demonstrates that men tend to get divorced at an older age than women and that those in opposite-sex marriages tend to get divorced at an older age than those in same-sex marriages.
62. The proposed reforms are intended to make the process of getting married clearer, simpler and more flexible, while maintaining the dignity and serious commitment of marriage. By increasing choice in the nature and location of wedding ceremonies, the reforms may remove some practical barriers for couples who wish to marry. Our assessment is therefore that the proposals are likely to have a positive impact on people who wish to marry.
63. We have not identified evidence to suggest that the proposals would have an adverse impact on people who are married, in a civil partnership, divorced, widowed or who have never married or formed a civil partnership.

Pregnancy and Maternity

64. While there is limited evidence directly linking pregnancy or maternity status to marriage behaviours, pregnancy may affect individuals' ability to engage with administrative processes or attend ceremonies due to health, mobility, or caring considerations. The increased flexibility in location and simplification of procedures introduced by the reforms may therefore improve accessibility for those who are pregnant and for new parents. In addition, where pregnancy is associated with economic dependence, reducing the likelihood of non-legally recognised marriages may help to ensure access to the legal protections associated with marriage. The proposed legislation is not deemed to have any discriminatory impact on this protected characteristic.

Max Roser, 'Marriages and Divorces' (*Our World in Data*, February 2025) <<https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>>

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Marriages in England and Wales' (18 November 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013>>

²⁰ Office for National Statistics, 'Divorces in England and Wales' (2 July 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/datasets/divorcesinenglandandwales>>

²¹ Office for National Statistics, 'Divorces in England and Wales' (2 July 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/datasets/divorcesinenglandandwales>>

Race

65. The 2021 ONS census data shows differences between ethnic groups in the proportion of people living together as married couples.²² The highest proportion was among the Asian population, at 39.9%, while the lowest is amongst mixed ethnic groups at 12.5%. The proportion was 20.3% among black individuals, 35.8% among white individuals and 34.9% of other ethnic groups were reported to be living together as a married couple.

66. We have not identified evidence to suggest that the proposed reforms would have an adverse impact on people because of race. The reforms would apply to all couples who are eligible to marry, regardless of ethnic background.

67. The proposals may, however, have a positive indirect impact for some ethnic minority groups as some individuals from ethnic minorities may be able to have weddings that better reflect their cultural beliefs.

68. For example, as set out in table 3 below, a greater proportion of Asian individuals are from religious belief groups than White individuals: Muslim (46.2% vs 0.5%), Hindu (17.5% vs 0.0%), Sikh (7.7% vs 0.0%) and Buddhist (2.9% vs 0.2%). Similarly, 17.3% of Black individuals identify as Muslim compared to 0.5% of White individuals.

Table 3: Proportion of Individuals identifying with a religious belief disaggregated by ethnicity

	Asian	Black	Mixed	White	Other
No Religion	9.0%	8.5%	43.7%	42.2%	12.1%
Christian	10.4%	67.0%	36.5%	50.2%	22.4%
Buddhist	2.9%	0.1%	0.6%	0.2%	1.1%
Hindu	17.5%	0.1%	0.6%	0.0%	3.7%
Jewish	0.0%	0.1%	0.4%	0.5%	2.4%
Muslim	46.2%	17.3%	8.3%	0.5%	42.5%
Sikh	7.7%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	7.0%
Other Religion	1.0%	0.6%	1.0%	0.5%	2.4%
Not Answered	5.3%	6.4%	8.5%	6.0%	6.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

ONS Census Data 2021²³

Religion or Belief

Table 4: Proportion of the Population By Religion in Census Data

	Total Number of observations	% of non-religious people	% of Christians	% of Buddhists	% of Hindus	% of Jewish people	% of Muslims	% of Sikhs	% of other religions

²² Office for National Statistics, 'Filter dimensions' (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/filters/3b879944-a12f-4e0f-a853-336e45d123c8/dimensions>>

²³ Office for National Statistics, 'Filtered dataset output' (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/create/filter-outputs/51dd1261-fda1-4372-ba52-855cda9d0988>>

Census 2021	59.6m	37.2%	46.2%	0.5%	1.7%	0.5%	6.5%	0.9%	0.6%
Census 2011	56.1m	25.1%	59.3%	0.4 %	1.5%	0.5%	4.8%	0.8%	0.4%
Census 2001	52.0m	14.8%	71.8%	0.3%	1.1%	0.5%	3.0%	0.6%	0.3%

ONS census: all usual residents, England and Wales²⁴

69. Census data shows that the religious composition of England and Wales has changed significantly over time. From 2001 to 2021, there has been an increase in the percentage of non-religious individuals, rising from 14.8% of the population in 2001 to 25.1% in 2011 and 37.2% in 2021. Over the same period, the proportion of people identifying as Christian decreased from 71.8% in 2001 to 46.2% in 2021.
70. As set out in table 4 above, from 2001 to 2021, the proportion of Muslims has risen from 3.0% to 6.5%, Hindus from 1.1% to 1.7%, Sikhs from 0.6% to 0.9% and Buddhists from 0.3% to 0.5%, whilst the proportion of Jews has remained at 0.5%.
71. The proposed reforms are likely to have a positive impact on people with the protected characteristic of religion or belief, including people who belong to religious groups and people who belong to non-religious belief groups. Under the current law, Anglican, Jewish and Quaker weddings operate under bespoke rules, while other religious weddings are subject to different requirements. The proposed reforms would replace this differentiated framework with more universal rules for religious and non-religious belief groups (with the exception of Anglican weddings).
72. Non-religious belief organisations, including Humanists, cannot currently conduct legally recognised weddings in England and Wales. Evidence from Scotland suggests that there is a demand for legally recognised Humanist weddings where they are available. In Scotland, 22.8% of wedding ceremonies were conducted by Humanist officiants.²⁵ It is likely that more couples in England and Wales would choose to have a Humanist wedding if this were legally recognised. There are currently about 1,000 Humanist wedding ceremonies per year in England and Wales, although these ceremonies are not legally recognised unless accompanied by a separate civil ceremony.²⁶
73. The proposed reforms would enable Humanist organisations, and other qualifying non-religious belief organisations, to nominate officiants to conduct legally recognised weddings. This would

²⁴ Office for National Statistics, 'Filter dimensions' (ONS) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/filters/1f6434cb-ecc4-44eb-bf07-3bf7da4dcd8b/dimensions>>; Office for National Statistics (via NOMIS), 'Query data: dataset 1607' <<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=1607>>; Office for National Statistics (via NOMIS), 'Query data: dataset 616' <<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?mode=construct&version=0&dataset=616>>

²⁵ National Records of Scotland, *Vital Events Reference Tables 2024* (26 August 2025) <<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/vital-events-reference-tables-2024/>> Table 7.05 and calculations used to estimate the percentage of Humanist weddings of the total number of weddings in Scotland through the summing up all Humanist weddings and dividing by the total number of weddings in Scotland in 2024.

²⁶ Lisa Rowland, *Humanist Marriage Ceremonies in England and Wales* (House of Commons Library, Research Briefing No 05864, 11 March 2026) <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05864/SN05864.pdf>>

advance equality of opportunity for people with non-religious beliefs by enabling them to have a wedding ceremony that reflects their beliefs and is legally recognised without the need for an additional civil ceremony.

74. The reforms are also likely to have a positive impact on religious and non-religious belief groups by creating a more consistent and inclusive framework for legally recognised weddings. Religious organisations and qualifying non-religious belief organisations that meet the relevant criteria would be able to nominate officiants to conduct legally recognised weddings. This would make it easier for couples to have a single ceremony that reflects their religion or belief and is also legally recognised, reducing the need for two ceremonies.
75. The proposals would also allow consent in religious and non-religious belief ceremonies to be expressed through actions, as well as through words, where this reflects the couple's religion or belief. This would better support the traditions and practices of different religious and non-religious belief groups and would advance equality of opportunity by enabling more couples to marry in a way that is meaningful to them while retaining the legal protections associated with marriage.

Sex

76. The proposed legislation is not deemed to have any discriminatory effect based on sex. The reforms themselves will not have an adverse impact on either men or women.
77. Financially weaker parties in heterosexual marriages tend to be women. Women on average are paid less than men. The gender pay gap for full time employees widens significantly with age, rising from 3.9% among those aged 30-39 to 9.1% among those aged 40-49, to over 12% for aged 50-59 years (12.5%) and over 60 (12.6%).²⁷
78. The reforms are likely to reduce the number of couples entering non-legally recognised marriages. As a result, when marriages break down, there will be less risk to the financially weaker party, as they will be entitled to legal protection.
79. Statistics from 2024 report that in 71% of cases of forced marriage, the victim is female, reinforcing that this is a crime which disproportionately affects women, though not exclusive .²⁸ Most victims were British or dual nationals (74%) and 65% of cases involved the "focus countries" of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, which may indicate that people from South Asian communities may be of disproportionate risk of forced marriage.
80. Through the reforms we intend better protect against forced and predatory marriage, and as well as against sham marriage. The proposals will see improvements made to the civil preliminaries process, through the introduction of a two-stage process which separates the

²⁷ Office for National Statistics, *Gender pay gap in the UK: 2025* (23 October 2025) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2025>>.

²⁸ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2024' (3 July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024>>

administrative aspects of the process from the safeguarding function. By separating these out, registrars will receive the required information earlier in the process which they can then review ahead of time. This will give them more time to focus on safeguarding conversations during the mandatory in-person interviews, which should help them to identify and consider any issues, such as indicators of coercion. This will particularly benefit women, who are more likely to be victims of forced and predatory marriages²⁹, as well as any men who are at risk of forced and predatory marriages.

Monitoring and Evaluation

81. In line with our ongoing Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) obligations we will continue to consider the relevant equalities data and evidence during the consultation. We also continue to pay due regard to the PSED as we take proposals forward and will consider the most effective ways of monitoring equality impacts, including monitoring any adverse or negative impacts identified in this equality analysis.

²⁹ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2024' (3 July 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2024>>