

The Family Test – Tying the Knot: *A consultation on reforming weddings law in England and Wales*

Introduction

1. The Family Test ensures that the impact on families is considered when the Government develops policies. This includes all types of family relationships and structures including couples (whether married or not) immediate family and extended family.
2. This Family Test accompanies a consultation document which is seeking views on the reform of weddings law in England and Wales, specifically on the topics of wedding locations and ceremonies, with a particular focus on dignity; new roles for officiants; and an improved preliminaries process.

The Policy Background

3. The fundamental structure of weddings law dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries and the absence of systematic reform has created a number of distinct routes into marriage. This has led to inconsistencies in the legal requirements for different groups and created confusion, unfairness and cost barriers to marriage. In 2022, the Law Commission published a comprehensive report detailing its recommendations for reform.¹ Following that, in October 2025, the Government announced its intention to make the most significant reforms to weddings law since the 19th century.² These reforms will be designed to support marriage, better protect vulnerable people and ensure that everyone in England and Wales has equal rights when they choose to marry. The Government is launching this consultation to build upon the Law Commission's work and help shape Government's plans for reform.
4. Weddings reform will be based on two key principles recommended by the Law Commission: moving away from the regulation of buildings in which weddings take place towards the regulation of the person officiating the wedding and creating more universally consistent rules.
5. Marriage is one of our most important institutions, serving as the foundation for family life for millions of people in England and Wales. This is an opportunity to define the future of weddings and improve access to marriage and its benefits, which include emotional support, financial stability and legal protections. We believe that these reforms will inevitably contribute to the improvement of the quality and enjoyment of people's everyday lives.

Policy Summary

6. The Government intends to modernise weddings law through a package of reforms informed by the Law Commission's recommendations. The main reforms are:
7. **Objective 1: Providing a simple, fair and inclusive framework**
 - **Universal rules** - All religious weddings will be subject to the same framework.

¹ Law Commission, Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law (Law Com No 408, HC 557, 2022)

² 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>>

- **Humanist weddings** - Non-religious belief organisations, including Humanists, will be able to conduct legally binding weddings for the first time.
- **Consistent regulation** - All officiants (except for state-employed registrars) will be accountable in the same way, first to their organisation and, in turn, to a central regulator.
- **Belief in civil ceremonies** - Belief content will be permitted in civil ceremonies, provided that the ceremony remains identifiably civil, particularly to support mixed-faith and LGBTQ+ couples.

8. **Objective 2: Expanding choice as to how and where couples marry**

- **No fixed rules about location** - Couples can marry in any location, subject to meeting dignity and safety requirements.
- **Non-oral consent mechanisms** - Consent to marry may be expressed through actions, including rituals, in belief ceremonies.
- **Independent officiants** - Civil weddings will be permitted to be conducted by officiants independent of the state, enabling more personalised ceremonies and particularly benefitting mixed-faith and inter-faith couples (21% of couples).
- **Weddings on water** - Weddings will be able to take place in territorial seas, inland waters and on cruise ships in international waters, creating choice and growing the economy.

9. **Objective 3: Upholding the dignity and significance of marriage**

- **Dignity framework** - A comprehensive framework, which goes further than international comparators, will define expectations about dignity and set out factors that officiants must consider when approving both the location and the form of the ceremony.
- **Consequences for failure** - Officiants who fail to uphold their legal duties and standards will face sanctions, including deauthorisation.
- **Clear eligibility criteria for officiants** - Religious, independent and non-religious belief officiants will have to meet certain requirements in order to be able to conduct weddings. This will safeguard against insincere, undignified or poorly governed groups. There will be additional checks for independent officiants.

10. **Objective 4: Protecting against forced, predatory and sham marriages**

- **Two-stage preliminaries process** – There will be a two-stage process for giving notice for civil preliminaries, the first part demonstrating eligibility to marry and provide personal information online, the second part an in-person interview. This will allow an online system to include information on forced, predatory and sham marriage protections and provide time for the registrar to explore these issues at interview.
- **Publishing notices online** - Making it easier to become aware of an intended wedding, emphasising the public interest in weddings and the intention legally to marry. It will also make it easier for those who know of an impediment to the marriage to discover it is taking place.
- **Pre-emptive caveats** - Where a person (e.g. friend or family member) has legitimate concerns that someone may be at risk of being coerced into marriage, they will be able to ask for a caveat to be recorded before any notice of marriage has been given.

- **Legal duties on officiants** - An officiant will retain a legal duty to report suspicions of sham marriages and to ensure that the parties freely express consent to marry each other. A wedding will not be able to take place unless an officiant is satisfied of this.

Policy Aims

11. The policy aim behind the consultation is to seek views on a reform that will overhaul marriage law in England and Wales, making it simpler and less expensive for couples to get married. The proposals are intended to provide the widest choice as to how and where to marry, within a straightforward, fair and consistent legal structure that maintains and protects the dignity and integrity of marriage.
12. These proposals would also protect the vulnerable from non-legally binding, religious-only marriages and provide stronger safeguards against forced, sham, and predatory marriages. This supports the Government's top priority work to tackle violence against women and girls and the Government's mission to halve levels of these crimes within a decade.
13. The consultation covers some areas of weddings law, but the reforms will be far broader, building upon the recommendations made by the Law Commission in their comprehensive 2022 report.³ The Family Impact Test addresses the aspects of reform covered by the consultation, rather than the wider reforms.

Which aspects of the policy will have an impact on families?

14. The overall reforms have the potential to affect all couples planning to get married or who will marry in the future, across England and Wales as well as their families.
15. The policy will affect couples wishing to get married as it will overhaul existing marriage law with a clear focus on the dignity and significance of marriage. Reshaping weddings will ensure that marriage is always treated as a serious and lifelong commitment and therefore acts as a stable and secure foundation for many families.
16. The policy will also affect people who are vulnerable, as the consultation seeks views on strengthening the protections for those at risk of forced and sham marriages, through improved preliminaries processes. By improving opportunities for objections to be raised and for registrars to identify safeguarding concerns, there is a better chance of ensuring that all marriages are consensual, genuine and secure.

The Family Impact Test Questions

Question 1: What kind of impact might the policy have on family formation?

17. The proposals in this consultation concern the future shape of weddings law and therefore affect the formation of marriage, which serves as the bedrock of many families in England and Wales. While weddings law reform is not expected to affect whether people choose to form a relationship, it is expected to have an effect on whether people choose to marry.

³ Law Commission, Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law (Law Com No 408, HC 557, 2022)

18. The proposal to move away from a building-based regulatory model to one that regulates the officiant responsible for the wedding ceremony is expected to reduce practical and financial barriers. This is because couples will be able to access a wider and more affordable range of options for personally meaningful ceremonies, increasing choice for many couples, encouraging marriage and the protections it provides. It is likely to reduce costs because the current building-based regulations, which require businesses and organisations to pay for their premises to be approved to host weddings (costing on average ~£1,900) prices many smaller businesses out of the wedding market and leaves couples with mostly expensive options (the estimated average cost of a wedding is between ~£21,000-~£22,000).⁴ Reducing costs for families should relieve stress during the process of getting married and impose less of a financial burden. It will also increase choice because couples will no longer be limited to premises that have been approved and will be able to select more modest and/or meaningful locations.
19. There will be safeguards in place to ensure that while couples will have more choice about the form and setting of their ceremony, the act of entering into a marriage remains solemn, deliberate, safe and legally certain.
20. Analysis of the Office for National Statistics' 2019 marriage data, completed by the Marriage Foundation, indicates that the 'marriage gap' between lower and higher income groups has doubled over the past thirty years.⁵ This refers to the relationship status of parents of newborn babies and the increasing gap has been attributed, at least in part, to the perceived high cost of weddings being a barrier to poorer couples getting married, while richer couples (although also seeing a decrease) continued to get married.⁶ This may suggest that couples, in stable relationships who are not yet married for financial reasons, might be encouraged to marry as a result of the removal of some of the practical barriers.
21. 2024 data from the Office for National Statistics indicates that a slightly higher proportion of married couples have children (39%) than non-married couples (35%)⁷. A causal link does not appear to have been identified, but it may indicate that married couples are more likely to become parents.

Question 2: What kind of impact will the policy have on families going through key transitions such as becoming parents, getting married, fostering or adopting, bereavement, redundancy, new caring responsibilities or the onset of a long-term health condition?

⁴ How Much Does a Wedding Cost in the UK? The 2026 Average is £20,604' (Bridebook, 10 June 2026) <<https://bridebook.com/uk/article/how-much-does-a-wedding-cost-the-uk-average>> ; How Much Does a Wedding Cost in 2026? Average UK Wedding Now Costs £21,990' (Hitched, 12 January 2026) <<https://www.hitched.co.uk/wedding-planning/organising-and-planning/the-average-wedding-cost-in-the-uk-revealed/>>

⁵ The Marriage Foundation is a registered charity in England and Wales. Its purpose is to advocate the advantages of marriages, challenge social injustices of family breakdown, and demonstrate the value of marriage. It has a distinctly pro-marriage agenda.

⁶ 'Will Cheaper Weddings Bridge the Marriage Gap?' (Marriage Foundation) <<https://marriagefoundation.org.uk/research/will-cheaper-weddings-bridge-the-marriage-gap/>>

⁷ Office for National Statistics, 'Families and Households' (Dataset, 17 April 2026) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds/familiesandhouseholds/current>>

22. The proposals will primarily affect couples who are getting married, or who may marry in future, and may also affect their immediate and extended families.
23. We know that significant life transitions such as getting married can cause substantial stress. The proposed reforms may help ease some of that burden for couples and their families by giving couples greater flexibility over the form and location of their wedding. For example, this may support people with long-term health conditions who find it difficult to travel.

Question 3: What impact will the policy have on all family members' ability to play a full role in family life, including with respect to parenting and other caring responsibilities?

24. As the proposals are concerned with changing how people are able to get married, they are not expected substantially to affect family members' ability to play a full role in family life. However, there may be an indirect impact in the sense that our proposals aim to promote and strengthen the institution of marriage, which we hope will contribute to more secure, safe and nurturing relationships which may in turn provide a stable foundation that can support all family members to play full roles in their family life.⁸
25. There is a substantial body of research investigating the effects of marriage versus cohabitation primarily in relation to the children born into each type of family. Research suggests, in general, children born to cohabitating families experience higher levels of family instability in the first twelve years of their lives, suggesting that marriage appears to be associated with greater family stability for children and that cohabiting parents are more likely to separate than married parents.⁹ Whilst the research base has not identified a causal relationship between marriage and stability, it is possible that these findings support the notion that promoting marriage appropriately may, in some circumstances, provide the stability required for all family members to play active and full roles in family life, noting that of course this stability can also be found in families with unmarried parents.
26. Research suggests that relationships with the strongest prospects of lasting are more likely to lead to marriage.¹⁰ The proposed reforms may encourage couples in stable and secure relationships to marry where practical barriers have previously prevented them from doing so. This could, in turn, have a positive impact on family life.
27. Finally, research published in the British Medical Journal found that married couples are 10-15% less likely to die prematurely than the wider population, while the National Bureau of Economic Research found that married couples report higher life satisfaction, which suggests

⁸Laurie DeRose and W Bradford Wilcox (eds), *World Family Map 2017: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes* (Social Trends Institute 2017) <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/reports/wfm-2017-fullreport.pdf>; Kathleen Kiernan, Sam Crossman and Angus Phimister, 'Families and Inequalities' (2024) 3 *Oxford Open Economics* (Supplement 1) i645 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ooec/odad031>>

⁹Laurie DeRose and W Bradford Wilcox (eds), *World Family Map 2017: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes* (Social Trends Institute 2017) <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/reports/wfm-2017-fullreport.pdf>; Alissa Goodman and Ellen Greaves, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Relationship Stability* (Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN107, 2010) <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/bn107.pdf>

¹⁰ Alissa Goodman and Ellen Greaves, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Relationship Stability* (Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN107, 2010) <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/bn107.pdf>

that married partners may experience the conditions, for a longer and more satisfactory life that make it easier for them to play a fuller role in family life.¹¹

Question 4: How does the policy affect families before, during and after separation?

28. The policy is focused on the formation of marriage rather than separation, divorce or the consequences of relationship breakdown. We therefore expect limited to no direct impact on families before, during or after separation. However, the strengthened safeguards discussed above may help prevent marriages that are not entered into consensually or genuinely.
29. As discussed, there is evidence that married couples are less likely to separate than cohabiting couples.¹² Any impact of these reforms on separation is therefore likely to be indirect and limited.

Question 5: How does the policy affect those families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown?

30. The policy is concerned with reforms to the legal framework governing weddings and therefore is not anticipated to affect families which are at risk of deterioration of relationship quality or breakdown.

Are the impacts appropriate and justified?

31. The impact of these proposals on family life is expected to be primarily positive. The reforms are intended to make getting married more straightforward, fairer and more accessible which may support couples who wish to marry and may benefit immediate and extended families. As the most significant reform of marriage law since the 19th century, the proposals are also expected to bring the law more closely in line with modern society and the variations in the ways in which couples and families in England and Wales live today.

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¹¹David Gallacher and John Gallacher, 'Are Relationships Good for Your Health?' (2011) 342 *BMJ* d404 <<https://doi.org/10.1136/sbmj.d404>>; Shawn Grover and John F Helliwell, *How's Life at Home? New Evidence on Marriage and the Set Point for Happiness* (NBER Working Paper No 20794, December 2014) <<https://www.nber.org/papers/w20794>>

¹² To note that the research base tends to focus on comparing married versus cohabiting parents, as opposed to all married and cohabiting couples.