From the Minister of Finance

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Date: *19 March 2024*

Matthew, a chara

AMENDING THE LAW ON MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP—BELIEF MARRIAGE AND MINIMUM AGE

As you know, the Department consulted on aspects of the law on marriage and civil partnership in 2021-2022. Consultation focused on the formal inclusion of belief marriage—marriage ceremonies for people who subscribe to non-religious belief systems such as humanism—and the minimum age at which people can legally marry or form a civil partnership—whether this should be increased from the present 16 to 18.

The judgments of the High Court and the Court of Appeal in the *Smyth* case in 2017 signal that the law on marriage be amended to include belief marriage on the same basis as religious marriage. In the interim, and pending legislative change, belief marriages have been taking place on the basis of temporary arrangements.

There is no similar imperative to legislate with regard to minimum age. However, there is a global campaign to establish 18 as the universal minimum with the UN and international NGOs among its advocates. Those supportive of 18 as the minimum age allege that younger people are at risk of being forced into marriage and/or of missing out, through being married early, on key life chances such as educational opportunities. In 2019, the minimum age in the south was increased to 18 and the Westminster Parliament last year made the same change in respect of England and Wales.

The Department's consultation attracted 61 online responses and 17 written responses. Respondents included the three of the largest churches in the north, the Human Rights Commission, the Craigavon Travellers' Support Committee, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner. Departmental officials also met with several stakeholders, including the Youth Assembly.

The results indicated strong support for including belief marriage in the marriage law and close to unanimous support for increasing the minimum age to 18.

In view of these findings, my predecessor as Finance Minister, Conor Murphy MLA, made a written statement to the Assembly on 1 July 2022 advising of his preference to legislate with regard to belief marriage and minimum age when the Assembly and Executive were again operating. A copy of Conor's statement and a report of the findings of our consultation are available on the Departmental website: https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/marriage-law-consultation-written-ministerial-statement

I wish to advise the Committee that I am now minded to legislate to amend the marriage law to include belief marriage on the same basis as religious marriage and to amend the law on marriage and civil partnership to increase the minimum age to 18. I intend shortly to write to Executive colleagues to initiate the legislative process with a view to having the relevant legislative amendments complete within the remaining years of the present mandate.

The Committee will naturally be kept informed of progress and, in the first instance, my officials would be happy to attend a Committee meeting to address any initial questions relating to these proposals.

Is mise le meas,

DR CAOIMHE ARCHIBALD MLA
MINISTER OF FINANCE