Department of Finance
An Roinn Airgeadais
www.finance-ni.gov.uk

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Our reference: *GM-0452-2026*

Date: *15 June 2026*

Dear Peter

CALL FOR EVIDENCE – MARRIAGE & CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

Following a request for evidence from the committee to the General Register Office (GRO), their return is now complete.

I wish to give you sight of the GRO response, included at Annex A.

Yours sincerely

GERARD WILLIS
DEPARTMENTAL ASSEMBLY LIAISON OFFICER

ANNEX A (see PDF Attachment)



Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill - GRO

Department of Finance
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To: The Finance Committee Clerk

From: Philip Wales, Registrar General

Date: 9 June2026

Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

Background

GRO is responsible for the administration of the marriage and civil partnership law in Northern Ireland and the outworkings of that through operational management of marriage and civil partnership preliminaries and their registration.

The Bill Team from the Civil Law Reform Division has engaged regularly with the General Register Office ("GRO") Team, and the Registrar General ("RG") is supportive of the provisions.

Please find responses below.

Part 1 – Belief Marriage

Clause 1: Belief Bodies: registration of members to solemnise marriage

GRO Response

GRO notes this provision which provides that religious and belief bodies are treated in the same way for the purposes of the registration of persons as officiants under the Marriage (NI) Order 2003.

GRO notes the provision for the Department to prescribe regulations for qualifying requirements of Officiants should this be required in the future. There is currently no evidence to suggest that this is required but this will be a future-proofing provision.

Clause 2: Belief bodies: temporary authorisation to solemnise marriage

GRO notes that reference will be made to both religious and belief marriage with amendments to Article 14 of the 2003 Order which allows the RG to grant temporary authorisations to solemnise marriages as well as the addition of a provision preventing the RG from granting these if the requirements made by any future regulations under clause 1, are not met. Again, a future-proofing provision.

Clause 3: Belief marriage: definitions

GRO notes the different ways religious and belief bodies may organise themselves.

Clause 4: Belief marriage: further provision

GRO notes the inclusion of “or belief” into other parts of the 2003 Order and that should the Department propose to exercise its power to prescribe qualifying requirements by regulations, the drafts must be laid before and approved by resolution of the Assembly.

Clauses 5 & 7: Raising of minimum age for marriage and civil partnership

GRO notes the raising of minimum age of marriage from 16 to 18 and operational processes will be adjusted to reflect this when the Bill is introduced.

Clause 6: Offence of conduct relating to marriage of persons under 18

GRO notes and supports this clause as a safeguard for children at risk.

Clause 8: Civil partnerships registered outside Northern Ireland

GRO notes this clause and has no further comment.

Clause 9: Minimum age for marriage and civil partnership: consequential amendments

GRO notes this clause and has no further comment.

Clause 10: Saving provision

GRO notes this clause particularly with regard to marriage or civil partnership notices placed prior to the provisions relating to the increase in the minimum age coming into operation. This will be reflected in operational processes.

Clause 11: Interpretation

GRO notes this clause and has no further comment.

Clause 12: Power to make consequential provision

GRO notes this clause and has no further comment.

Clause 13: Short title and commencement

GRO notes this clause and has no further comment.

Schedule: Minor and Consequential amendments

GRO notes this schedule and has no further comment.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Finance

General Register Office

Issued via email to: gro_nisra@finance-ni.gov.uk

1st May 2026

Our Ref: 2026/053

Dear Dr Wales

Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

The NI Assembly Committee for Finance would like to hear your views on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

The Bill was introduced by the Finance Minister, John O'Dowd MLA, on 16th March 2026. The Bill has two main purposes:

1. The Bill seeks to formally **include non-religious belief marriages within the legal framework of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003**, building on temporary measures introduced after the Smyth judgement in 2017. In that case, a humanist couple successfully challenged the refusal to allow a humanist celebrant to conduct their marriage. The High Court ruled that the law did not comply with their human rights and that belief marriages should be treated the same as religious marriages. Although the Court of Appeal ultimately adopted a different route to permit such marriages, temporary arrangements have since been maintained, with the support of the former Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, to allow belief marriages to be conducted on an equal footing with religious ceremonies. **The Bill also introduces provisions intended to future-proof the system by enabling authorities to set additional requirements for both religious and belief organisations**, if needed, ensuring the legislation remains adaptable while building on a framework that has operated effectively for over two decades.
2. The Bill also **raises the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership in Northern Ireland from 16 to 18**. This reflects evidence that child marriage can be harmful and recognises strong public support for reform. The Bill removes the possibility of under-18s to marry or enter a civil partnership, even with parental consent, and **introduces a new**

Matthew O'Toole, Chairperson, Committee for Finance,
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criminal offence relating to actions that cause a person under 18 to enter into a marriage in Northern Ireland. This includes protections for those who are habitually resident in Northern Ireland, or who are UK nationals, in certain circumstances.

Further information on the Bill can be found below:

- A copy of the Bill and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.
- The Hansard report of the Second Stage Assembly debate on the principles of the Bill that took place on 20 April 2026.
- The Hansard report of the briefing session with Department of Finance officials on the principles of the Bill on 23 April 2026 (available when published).
- A research paper prepared by the Assembly's Research and Information Service on the Bill (available when published).

How to submit your views

Your submission should be structured to address the specific clause of the Bill. If appropriate, it should include any amendments you wish to propose to the text of the Bill.

Written submissions should be sent electronically in Word format (not PDF) to: mandcpbill@niassembly.gov.uk . If you cannot submit electronically you may send in a hard copy written submission to: The Finance Committee Clerk, Room 382, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX.

Organisations or individuals responding to this call for views should note that their written submission (either in whole or part) may be published on the Committee webpage and may be quoted in the Committee's report or referred to in Committee meetings (which are public and are broadcast).

The Committee recognises that in some circumstances people may prefer for their evidence to be treated as confidential, or published anonymously. If you wish to do this, please make this clear when submitting your evidence.

Before sending us your views please read the Northern Ireland Assembly Privacy Notice. This tells you how we process your personal data.

If you have any queries or require any further information about the call for evidence or the Committee Stage of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill the Committee Clerk, Peter Hall can be contacted via email: mandcpbill@niassembly.gov.uk or by phone: 028 9052 1799.

A response would be very much appreciated by **Friday 12th June 2026**.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew O'Toole MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Finance

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