From: Philip Wales, Registrar General

Date: 19 October 2026

To: Finance Committee, NI Assembly

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

BRIEFING – PROVISION OF INFORMATION RELATING TO PROCESSES FOR THE LICENSING AND REGISTRATION OF GROUPS WHO CAN CELEBRATE MARRIAGES.

INTRODUCTION

1. This document is being provided in response to a request from the Finance Committee for briefing in relation to GRO's processes for the licensing and registration of groups who can celebrate marriage.

BACKGROUND

2. Legal wedding ceremonies can only be performed here by
   (1) Registrars appointed under the Marriage (NI) Order 2003;
   (2) Officiants approved to carry out religious ceremonies; and,
   (3) Belief-body officiants.

3. Registrars are employees of the local councils here and they are appointed, as a term of their employment, in accordance with the Marriage (NI) Order 2003 ("the Order"). Officiants approved to carry out religious ceremonies are appointed as an officiant on application by their religious organisation for a registration of their members to solemnise marriages. Belief-body officiants are also appointed by application as set out below.

GRO PROCESSES FOR APPROVING RELIGIOUS & BELIEF BODY OFFICIANTS

4. GRO's role is to maintain the database of authorised officiants who can perform legal marriage ceremonies in Northern Ireland. Registrars use this database when taking notice of a marriage.

5. Established churches (e.g. Catholic, Church of Ireland) appoint a central contact who is responsible for notifying GRO of permanent or temporary officiant appointments and updates. Only these central contacts can make nominations on behalf of established churches.

6. Independent churches and affiliates that cannot be sponsored by an established church must apply directly to GRO using the paper application process.

7. Applications for Religious officiants usually require:
    - A completed original signed application form.
    - Signatures from the applicant, a church official and 10 members of the church.
    - Supporting documents, including the organisation's constitution or statement of faith, wedding service/declaratory words, and a reference letter.
    - Evidence that the organisation is a genuine religious body that meets regularly for worship.

8. The application process for belief body officiants operates in the same way with approval granted on a temporary basis.A ‘belief’ is not defined but applications are assessed in the same manner. Applicants which meet the criteria are accepted and approved to perform a marriage, while organisations that do not meet the requirements are rejected.

9. GRO casework staff review all applications for completeness and eligibility. Once approved, the officiant is added to the authorised database and issued with an Officiant Handbook outlining legal marriage requirements.

10. Where an applicant is rejected, it is possible for them to appeal the decision to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance. This occurs very rarely.

ARRANGEMENTS PROPOSED UNDER THE MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

11. GRO's role is to implement and administer the policy and law in relation to marriages here, but GRO has no policy remit itself in setting policy.

12. However, as drafted, our first impression of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill is that it will have a negligible operational effect on GRO's processes in the administration of marriages, as it will serve mainly to put into legislation the case law that GRO already operates under.

13. This intent is set out in paragraph 9 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill: "*After careful consideration, the Minister noted that the legislative scheme for religious marriages has largely worked well in this jurisdiction for over 20 years. In order to avoid the type of legal challenge successfully brought before the courts in relation to equal treatment of religious and non-religious belief bodies, the option to provide a more proscriptive scheme for non-religious belief bodies only was not taken. It was also determined that to provide additional requirements for all bodies, whether religious or non-religious, when the scheme appears to work well, was not required at this stage. The Bill therefore replicates the Scottish approach and brings non-religious belief bodies within the current statutory framework."*

ENDS