GUIDANCE FOR OFFICIANTS ON MARRIAGE PROCEDURES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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1. Introduction

1.1 It is essential that religious/belief Officiants are fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to marriage procedures and follow the information in this guidance.

1.2 If further information or advice is required in relation to the appointment of an Officiant you should contact the General Register Office (GRO) at gro_nisra@finance-ni.gov.uk (please note underscore (_) between gro & nisra in the email address).

1.3 Further advice in relation to marriage procedures can be obtained from the district registration office located within the Local Council.

Legislation

1.4 Marriage in Northern Ireland (NI) is primarily governed by the Marriage (NI) Order 2003 which defines the responsibilities of the Registrar General (RG), Registrars and Officiants.

1.5 The Marriage Regulations (NI) 2003 prescribe the detailed procedures and forms that should be used in the marriage process.

1.6 From 13 January 2020, The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) and Civil Partnerships (Opposite-Sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2019 came into force which enabled same-sex civil marriage in Northern Ireland.

1.7 The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 introduced same-sex religious marriage in Northern Ireland.

1.8 From 7 December 2020, The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Northern Ireland) (No2) Regulations 2020 introduced conversions for same sex civil partnerships to marriage and opposite sex marriage to civil partnerships. Conversions finished on 6th December 2023 and are no longer permitted.

1.9 The Marriage, Civil Partnership and Civil Registration (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 came into operation on 11 March 2022. From the introduction of the legislation a couple giving notice of marriage will be able to select a language for the certificate headings, including the marriage schedule in either English, Irish, or bi-lingual English and Irish.

2. Appointment of Officiants

2.1 A religious/belief marriage can only be solemnised by a member of the body who has been appointed as an Officiant by GRO.

2.2 Application forms for all Officiant processes outlined below are available at: https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/officiant-registration

2.3 A religious/belief body can apply to the Registrar General for a member, aged 21 or over, to be registered to carry out marriage ceremonies in Northern Ireland. This person is called an Officiant. The term 'Officiant' covers many titles including Ministers, Priests, Pastors, Chaplains etc.

2.4 A religious body can apply to appoint permanent or temporary Officiants. A temporary Officiant will be authorised for a specific marriage for a period of time for both a religious or a belief body.

2.5 Each new religious and belief body is required from 1st September 2020 to inform GRO of the marriage preference of the religious or belief body and if they opt in to carry out same sex marriage. GRO must be advised of the marriage preference of the officiants. Notification to GRO is through the forms below.

Permanent Officiant – Religious

2.6 A permanent Officiant applies to be appointed under Article 10 of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

2.7 An Officiant must be nominated by a church official, for example a senior elder, president or secretary.

2.8 If the church body has not had a permanent Officiant approved by the Registrar General since 1 January 2004, application form GRO 460 "Application for Approval as a Permanent Officiant" should be completed. The form can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/permanent-officiant-application-form

Additional Permanent Officiant - Religious

2.9 In some cases, an additional permanent Officiant may be approved. If the church feels it requires another permanent Officiant, application form GRO 461 "Application for Approval as an Additional Permanent Officiant" should be completed. The form can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/additional-permanent-officiant-application-form

Temporary Officiant - Religious

2.10 A temporary Religious Officiant is appointed under Article 14 of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

2.11 If a church has a permanent Officiant but needs temporary approval for another Officiant, application form GRO 464 "Temporary Officiant Application Form for Church with Permanent Officiant" should be completed. The form can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/temporary-officiant-application-forms

2.12 If a church does not have a permanent Officiant and requires temporary approval for an Officiant, application form GRO 465 “Application for Temporary Approval as an Officiant in Northern Ireland where no Permanent Officiant has been Appointed” should be completed. The form can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/temporary-officiant-application-forms

2.13 Application forms should be completed in block capitals, except for signatures and returned to the General Register Office, Colby House, Stranmillis Court, Belfast BT9 5RR.

Temporary Officiant - Belief Bodies

2.14 A temporary Belief Officiant is appointed under Article 14 of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

2.15 To enable Officiants to be appointed, each Belief Body should apply using application form GRO 466 “Application for Temporary Officiant Application Form for Belief Bodies”. The form can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/temporary-belief-body-officiant-application-form

2.16 Application forms should be completed in block capitals, except for signatures and returned to the General Register Office, Colby House, Stranmillis Court, Belfast BT9 5RR.

2.17 Any questions about an Officiant application should be emailed to: gro_nisra@finance-ni.gov.uk (please note underscore (_) between gro and nisra in the email address).

3. Marriage Notice

3.1 Any two people, regardless of where they live, may marry in Northern Ireland as long as there is no impediment to their marrying.

Marriage of a Couple Under 18 with an Address in the Republic of Ireland

3.2 If one or both parties to the marriage are over 16 and under 18 years old, an Officiant must advise the couple that, while they can marry in Northern Ireland, their marriage will not be recognised in the Republic of Ireland. The minimum age for marriage in the Republic of Ireland is 18 years of age and this remains the case even if the marriage takes place in Northern Ireland. Although this policy applies to all couples under the age of 18 it is particularly relevant to those couples marrying in Northern Ireland, where one or both parties is under the age of 18, who have a home address in the Republic of Ireland.

Marriage of a Couple Under 18 with an Address in England and Wales

3.3 From 27 February 2023 the legal age requirement for a marriage in England & Wales is 18 years old which means that it is no longer possible for a couple where one or both parties are under the age of 18 to marry there. The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 makes it an offence to cause a child resident in England and Wales to marry in any circumstances. This offence also applies to marriages in Northern Ireland if they involve a 16- or 17-year-old who is habitually resident in England or Wales.

3.4 As a result of this law a Registrar in Northern Ireland cannot accept notice of marriage from a person who is under the age of 18 with an address in England or Wales who intends to marry while they are under the age of 18. The Registrar can accept notice of marriage for a person under 18 if they intend to marry on or after their 18th birthday.

Consent Forms

3.5 Where one or both persons will be under 18 years of age on the date the marriage will be solemnised, consent forms will be given to the relevant party or parties by the Registrar who will advise on whose consent is required.

3.6 Where one or both parties will be getting married on their eighteenth birthday, consent is not required, but the schedule will not be issued until the day of the marriage.

3.7 An Officiant who is conducting the couple's ceremony cannot sign the consent form. There needs to be a degree of separation between the signing of the consent form and the completion of the marriage ceremony. The following people can witness a consent form:

- Magistrates or Justices of the Peace
- Peace Commissioners
- Commissioners for Oaths (usually solicitors, barristers etc.)
- Ministers of Religion – cannot witness consent forms for a marriage they are officiating at
- Medical Practitioners
- Persons on the active list of the permanent Civil Service of the Crown who are of executive rank or higher, or
- Members of a police service not below the rank of Sergeant.

Foreign Countries

- British Diplomatic or Consular Officers empowered by law to administer Oaths, or
- Public Notaries or other persons competent by the law of the country to administer Oaths.

Other

- Officers of Her Majesty's Naval, Military or Air Forces on active or half-pay or pension lists, or
- Master of British Merchant Navy.

3.8 An Officiant must advise each party to give notice of marriage on separate forms to the Registrar for the registration district in which the marriage is to take place. Notice forms can be downloaded at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/marriage-notice-form

3.9 The Marriage, Civil Partnership and Civil Registration (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 allow a couple giving notice to select a language for the certificate headings (including the marriage schedule) in English, Irish or bi-lingual English and Irish. While the choice of headings will be available, the registration process, content and information provided for the registration will continue to be provided in English only. Marriage notice forms contain a tick box to allow the couple to select their preference. Once a marriage schedule has been issued by the Registrar it will not be possible to change the language choice. It is therefore important that the Officiant discusses this with the couple prior to the submission of their notice forms to the Registrar.

3.10 The notice form must be signed by the Officiant who is carrying out the ceremony and the notice must be accompanied by the prescribed fee and the required documentation. Current fees and documentation required can be seen at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/how-and-when-give-notice-marriage

3.11 Notice can be given in person, through a third party, by post or by email. A Schedule cannot be issued until the required evidence is provided proving that both parties are free to marry.

3.12 Notice must be given to the Registrar at least 28 days before the date of the intended marriage. In exceptional circumstances for example a party being terminally ill the Registrar General may consider a lesser notice period. Notices can be accepted by a Registrar up to a year before the date of the intended ceremony.

3.13 Ideally, notices from parties that have not been married or in a civil partnership should be submitted at least eight weeks before the proposed ceremony date and at least ten weeks before if either party has been married or in a civil partnership previously.

3.14 The Registrar can request that both parties attend the office for interview. If notices are received by post or email the Registrar will need to see one or both parties in person and originals of the documentation before the Schedule is issued.

3.15 The Registrar can still accept notice from parties to a marriage without the full complement of documentary evidence, but any outstanding evidence must be received before the Schedule can be issued.

3.16 The Registrar receiving the notice of marriage may request specified evidence at any time on or after the date of notice but before the marriage Schedule is issued. That evidence may include checks regarding impediments to marriage and immigration status.

3.17 Once notice is given, the details will be displayed in public view outside the registration office.

Objections

3.18 If someone claims that they have a valid reason to object to an intended marriage, they must write to the Registrar, stating their objection prior to the solemnisation.

3.19 If the Registrar is satisfied that the objection relates to an inaccuracy in the marriage notice, they will notify the parties, carry out further enquiries and make appropriate corrections, subject to approval from GRO.

3.20 In the case of an Officiant ceremony, if the Schedule has already been issued, the Registrar will notify the Officiant of the objection and advise them not to solemnise the marriage, pending the investigation being resolved.

4. Marriage Schedule

Issue

4.1 A Marriage Schedule is required before an Officiant can conduct a marriage ceremony.

4.2 The Marriage Schedule will only be issued by the Registrar when proper notice has been given, and the Registrar is satisfied that both parties are free to marry.

4.3 The Registrar will issue the Schedule 14 days prior to the date of the marriage. It is essential that at least one of the parties attends the registration office to collect the Schedule and confirm that the details held by the Registrar are correct.

4.4 Once collected the couple should present the Schedule to the Officiant.

Change of Venue

4.5 If, for any reason, the marriage cannot be solemnised at the venue specified in the marriage Schedule and the Schedule has been issued, the Officiant should contact the Registrar who can direct that the new venue is substituted in the Schedule as long as the new venue is in the same registration district.

4.6 If the new venue is in a different district, new marriage notice will be required, the Registrar will be able to advise on the action required.

Change of Officiant

4.7 If the Officiant specified in the Schedule is unable to solemnise the marriage, another approved Officiant may solemnise and substitute their name in the Schedule. This will only be permitted as a result of illness, sudden death or unavoidable delay. A letter of explanation, on headed paper from the

relevant body must accompany the Schedule when it is returned to the Registrar.

Change of Date

4.8 If the Officiant has the Schedule, the Registrar should be advised of the change of date to ensure that the 28 clear days will have elapsed between the date of notice and the new marriage date. If all is in order the Registrar will advise the Officiant to update the Schedule.

Return of Schedule

4.9 After the marriage ceremony, the Schedule must be signed and completed by the parties, two witnesses aged 16 or over and the Officiant who solemnised the marriage.

4.10 The parties must arrange for the return of the Schedule to the Registrar within 3 working days of the ceremony to enable the marriage to be registered.

4.11 If the Schedule is not returned the Registrar will contact the Officiant to check that the marriage took place and that the Schedule was signed and given to the parties. The Registrar will then follow up the return of the Schedule with the couple.

Schedule – Lost or Destroyed

4.12 If a Schedule is lost or accidently destroyed before the marriage ceremony takes place, the Registrar will need to issue another one.

4.13 If a Schedule is lost or destroyed following the signing by the parties and the Officiant, the Registrar will produce a duplicate Schedule and arrange for a recall of the parties to sign it.

Cancellation of Ceremony

4.14 The Registrar must be advised of any cancellation of a marriage ceremony.

5. Marriage Ceremony

5.1 It is for each individual Religious/Belief Body to decide appropriate venues for marriages.

5.2 Only an approved and registered officiant can solemnise a marriage.

5.3 The Officiant must have a marriage Schedule issued by the Registrar before they can proceed with the ceremony. Both parties and two witnesses aged 16 or over must be present. The ceremony must include an appropriate declaration.

5.4 An "appropriate declaration" means a declaration by the parties, in the presence of –

(a) Each other
(b) The person solemnising the marriage, and
(c) Two witnesses.

that they accept each other as husband and wife for a male and female, or husband and husband for two males or wife and wife for two females. These are the only options available. Two people of the same sex cannot use the terms husband and wife.

5.5 The appropriate declaration can be "I do", "I will" or a sentence including the words "I take" or similar.

5.6 If an interpreter of sign language or a language other than English is required, to assist with the completion of the Declaration, they must be provided by the parties. The couple should not act as an interpreter for each other. The interpreter should be advised that they are required to sign a statement before and after the signing of the Schedule to confirm that they have accurately translated all questions and responses.

Stopping a Marriage Ceremony

5.7 Although it is for each religious/belief body to set its standards regarding what can happen at a marriage ceremony, the Officiant has the authority to stop proceedings if either party is considered unfit to appreciate the nature of the contract.

5.8 To be a valid marriage, it must be a voluntary act of both parties. If the Officiant believes either party to be acting under duress, proceedings should be stopped. The ceremony should only take place if the Officiant is satisfied that it is still the wish of the party to proceed.

6. Marriage Registration

6.1 Once the marriage Schedule is returned to the Registrar the registration of the marriage will be completed. The couple can obtain certificates, with the headings in the language selected at time of giving notice, on payment of the required fee.

7. Contact Details

District Registration Offices

Details of Registration Offices can be found at:

https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/district-registrars-northern-ireland

General Register Office

Address: Colby House
49 – 55 Stranmillis Court
Belfast BT9 5RR

Email: gro_nisra@finance-ni.gov.uk