Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Room 417
Parliament Buildings
Tel: 028 9052 1369

From: **Dr Janice Thomson, Clerk to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

To: **Peter Hall, Clerk to the Committee for Finance**

Date: **1 May 2026**

Subject: **Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill**

Dear Peter Hall

At its meeting of 30 April 2026, the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs considered your correspondence, dated 23 April 2026, in respect of the call for evidence for the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

Regards

Dr Janice Thompson

Clerk to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Finance
Room 346
Parliament Buildings

Tel: +44 (0)28 9052 1799

E-mail: mandcpbill@niassembly.gov.uk

To: **Statutory Committee Clerks**

From: **Peter Hall, Clerk to the Committee for Finance**

Date: **24th April 2026**

Subject: **Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill**

Dear colleagues,

The Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill was introduced on 16th March, with the Second Stage of the Bill completed on 20th April. In line with Standing Order 33(2), the Bill was referred to the Committee for Finance for its scrutiny on 21st April.

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 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.

The Committee for Finance agreed at its meeting on 22nd April to seek the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees and the Audit Committee to allow Members the opportunity to comment on issues in the Bill which may be of interest, as per normal practice.

Details of the Committee's Call for Evidence, Minutes of Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence will be published on the Finance Committee webpages when available. These

will be updated as the Committee Stage progresses. However, I have attached a copy of the Bill along with the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum for your committee's consideration.

I would be grateful if can you send any response your Committee may have, including a Nil Response, to me by noon on **Tuesday 9th June 2026**.

Regards,

Peter Hall
Clerk to the Committee for Finance

Encs.