A HUMANIST MARRIAGE LAW FOR NI

Briefing from Northern Ireland Humanists, May 2026

Northern Ireland Humanists

ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is a section of Humanists UK, working with the Humanist Association of Ireland. Founded in 1896, we work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together, we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. We have more than 60 trained and accredited celebrants who conduct over 1,000 ceremonies in Northern Ireland every year. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support in Maghaberry Prison and elsewhere, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

SUMMARY

- We **welcome the introduction of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill** which will at last put humanist marriages on a statutory footing as marriages by a "belief" organisation.
- **However, we view that the proposed approach doesn't address serious existing problems in the law.** Currently, the criteria for registering as a religious or humanist group are extremely lax, so it is easy for so-called 'humanist' or 'faith' groups to be created as vehicles for commercial wedding provision, with no other religion- or belief-based activity. We urge the Bill be amended to introduce criteria on what constitutes a genuine group.
- **It's important to get this right the first time, given the importance of marriage as an institution and to uphold the integrity of belief marriages**. The Scottish Government is currently consulting on adding new qualifying requirements. This takes place after a whistleblower from National Records Scotland exposed the problems with the current Scottish system, which the current Bill for Northern Ireland proposes to follow.

ABOUT HUMANIST WEDDINGS

Humanist weddings are non-religious ceremonies that embody humanist beliefs by reflecting the deeply-held values and beliefs of the couple. They are recognised in law because the General Register Office (GRO) 'read in' belief marriages to the provisions related to religious marriages under the 2003 Marriage Order as a result of a successful legal challenge by humanists in 2017. Around 15% of all marriages in Northern Ireland are now humanist.[1]

MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

The bill proposes to bring non-religious belief marriages within the Marriage (NI) Order 2003 in order to put humanist marriages on a statutory footing. Northern Ireland Humanists welcomes this. We do not think the law is currently operating well.

However, the Bill proposes to do so in a loose manner, following what is known as the 'Scottish model'. In this approach, it is easy for groups to gain authorisation to solemnise marriages. This leads to **groups gaining authorisation that say they are 'humanist' or 'religious', but in fact are not especially interested in or motivated by their belief and instead solely or primarily train and provide celebrants for commercial purposes. This damages the integrity of marriage as an institution and the belief-integrity of legitimate groups.**

[1] 'Northern Ireland society "forever changed" as humanist marriages hit 15% of total', Northern Ireland Humanists, 15 September 2025: https://humanists.uk/2025/09/15/northern-ireland-society-forever-changed-as-humanist-marriages-hit-15-of-total/

A whistleblower leak from National Records Scotland in the *Sunday Post*[2] revealed the significant problems with the current Scottish system, which we urge MLAs to read given this is the approach mirrored in the Bill. This includes 'a surge in groups being handed temporary permission to carry out ceremonies – with many of them describing themselves as humanist despite there being little evidence to back it up', it stated '[d]espite claiming to be belief groups, many appear to have no followers and do not hold any regular meetings'; and alarmingly highlighted that 'a celebrant who had their registration removed after "gross misconduct and failure to return client funds" after not providing a marriage ceremony was able to leave one group and freely join another.'

The Bill introduces the ability for new qualifying regulations for religious and belief bodies to be laid if necessary in the future. The explanatory notes add that 'Scotland has similar provision in its legislation, though has yet to use the power'[3]. **But the Scottish Government is currently consulting on doing so. Why not get this right in Northern Ireland from the start?**

HOW SHOULD THE BILL BE AMENDED?

We want the Bill to be amended to use a modified version of the 'Dublin model', which operates for belief marriages in RoI[4]. This sets a higher bar to groups registering in order to prevent groups from being set up solely for the private purpose of providing marriages.

Key characteristics include: a higher number of minimum members (50 in ROI); satisfactory 'procedures in writing for selecting, training and accrediting members as fit and proper persons to solemnise marriages'; 'a body that has been 'in existence for a continuous period of not less than 5 years'; that it has been a charity for not less than 5 years', and that 'it is a body that does not have the making of profit as one of its principal objects'.

Another sensible criterion, not found in RoI, could be that any authorised group be principally engaged in an activity other than the provision of legally recognised marriages and/or the training and accreditation of celebrants for conducting such marriages.

It is important to get our system right from the start, before problems multiply and become harder to address. This is why we support the introduction of an amendment to introduce clear qualifying requirements. We have one drafted and ready for use.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact:

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humanists.uk

[2] *Sunday Post* investigation into marriages 'legally at risk' in Scotland 26 October 2025 https://www.sundaypost.com/fp/marriages-at-risk/

[3] Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill Explanatory and Financial Memorandum https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/executive-bills/mandate-2022-2027/marriage-and-civil-partnership-bill/marriage-and-civil-partnership-bill---efm---as-introduced---fpv.pdf

[4] A different system operates for religious groups in RoI – more akin to the Scottish model. But no-one has ever complained about this difference.