YOUTH ASSEMBLY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

Young People's Views on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

May 2026

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Background

The Youth Assembly was established in June 2021. The current 90 Youth Assembly Members took their seats in November 2025. At the time of recruitment, they were in school years 9-12 which is approximately age 12-16. They are a diverse group. Membership includes young people from every constituency and recruitment was designed to ensure proportionate representation of Section 75 categories such as gender, religious background, race, care experience, sexuality, disability, and young people with caring responsibilities.

The Youth Assembly was established to perform three functions:

- To engage with the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly, specifically with Assembly Committees on legislation and inquiries relevant to young people;
- To undertake project work generated by the three Youth Assembly committees; and
- To enable consultation with government Departments and to participate in youth voice projects.

In April 2026, the Youth Assembly was invited to provide evidence to the Committee for Finance on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

Youth Assembly Members met online with the Clerk and Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk on 6 May 2026 to consider the Bill, and this report summarises the views of Youth Assembly Members. Members will give formal evidence to the Committee at their meeting on 17 June 2026.

The Youth Assembly wishes to express their thanks to the Committee and its staff for the opportunity to share their views on this issue.

Young People's Views on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

Introduction

On Wednesday 6 May 2026, the Youth Assembly met online to consider Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill, which is currently being scrutinised by the Assembly's Finance Committee. There were 22 Youth Assembly Members on the call. Members were able to contribute their views in a number of ways: by speaking during the session, posting comments in the Microsoft Teams chat function, responding to a series of closed questions through a Mentimeter poll, or submitting additional comments by email after the meeting. This approach was designed to ensure that all Members had the opportunity to contribute in a way that suited them.

The map below shows that Youth Assembly Members joined the session from across Northern Ireland, reflecting a broad geographical spread. Participants were located in a range of constituencies including Foyle, North Antrim, East Antrim, South Antrim, Lagan Valley, Strangford, South Down, Newry and Armagh, Mid Ulster, and Belfast. This distribution provided the session with perspectives from young people living in a variety of settings, including cities, towns, and rural communities across Northern Ireland.

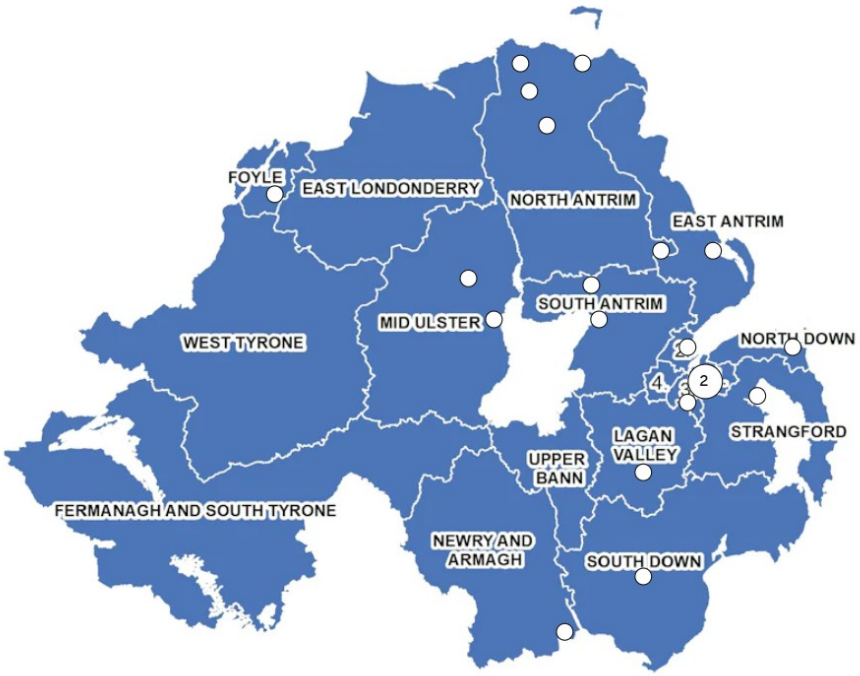


Figure 1: Where are you joining from? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Members had been provided with a short summary of the proposals in advance of the meeting. This summary is presented in Appendix One. The session began with a brief presentation outlining the proposed changes and explaining the Committee's role in scrutinising the regulations. Following this introduction, Members were invited to consider each of the key elements of the proposals in turn and share their views on how the measures might operate in practice and what impact they could have on young people.

A Mentimeter quiz was used to support structured discussion, capture anonymous views, and encourage participation from all Members.

Before today, how much did you know about laws on marriage and civil partnership?

Question 1 asked Members how much pre-existing knowledge they had on laws relating to marriage and civil partnerships prior to the online discussion. The chart presents responses from 20 participants and indicates that awareness levels were generally low to moderate.

The majority of respondents (65%) reported that they knew "a little" about these laws, suggesting a basic awareness but limited depth of understanding. A further 30% of participants indicated they knew "not much," reinforcing the view that a significant portion of the group had minimal knowledge before the session.

Only 1 participant stated that they knew "a lot," highlighting that comprehensive understanding of the topic was rare within the group. Notably, no participants selected "nothing at all," which suggests that all respondents had at least some level of prior exposure or familiarity with the subject.

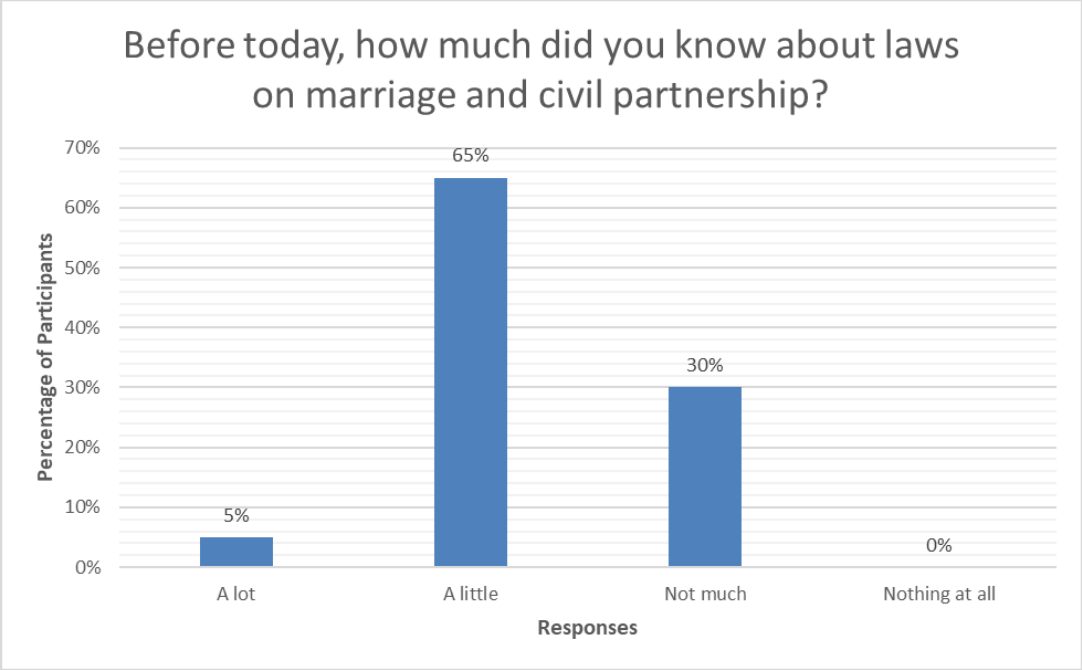


Figure 2: Before today, how much did you know about laws on marriage and civil partnership? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Do you think couples should be able to get married in a non-religious belief ceremony and have it legally recognised?

Question 2 asked Members whether they think couples should be able to get married in a non-religious ceremony and have it legally recognised. The chart shows responses from 20 participants and indicates strong support for this option.

The majority of respondents (75% participants) selected "yes," demonstrating clear backing for the legal recognition of non-religious belief ceremonies. This suggests that most participants are in favour of greater inclusivity and flexibility in how marriages are formally recognised. As one participant explained, *"Surely all people should be treated the same in the eyes of the law... People should be equal, so I'm not sure why people would not believe that humanists should not have equal rights to what wedding they choose."*

A smaller number of respondents (15% participants) answered "no," indicating some opposition to the idea. Meanwhile, 10% of participants selected "not sure," suggesting a degree of uncertainty or a need for more information on the issue.

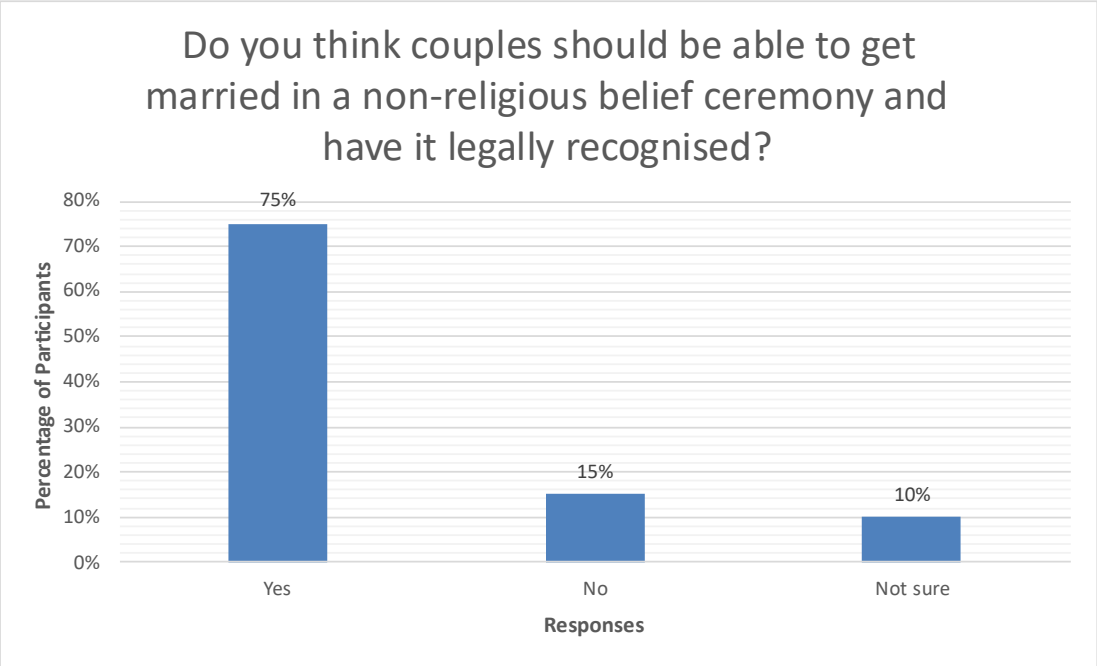


Figure 3: Do you think couples should be able to get married in a non-religious belief ceremony and have it legally recognised? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Do you think the law should treat religious and non-religious marriages equally?

Members were informed that the Bill would ensure that non-religious belief ceremonies (like humanist marriages) are treated the same as religious marriages in the law. Question 3 asked Members whether they think the law should treat religious and non-religious marriages equally. A clear majority of participants (65%) selected "strongly agree," indicating a high level of support for equal legal treatment. A further 25% chose "agree," reinforcing that most respondents were in favour of this approach.

A small proportion of participants expressed uncertainty or disagreement. Specifically, 5% selected "not sure" and another 5% selected "disagree." For example, one participant noted that *"a religious marriage [is one] that happens inside a church and has been authorised by the pastor or priest... The government shouldn't really be saying much about what happens in the church."* This highlights a concern about maintaining the independence of religious practices.

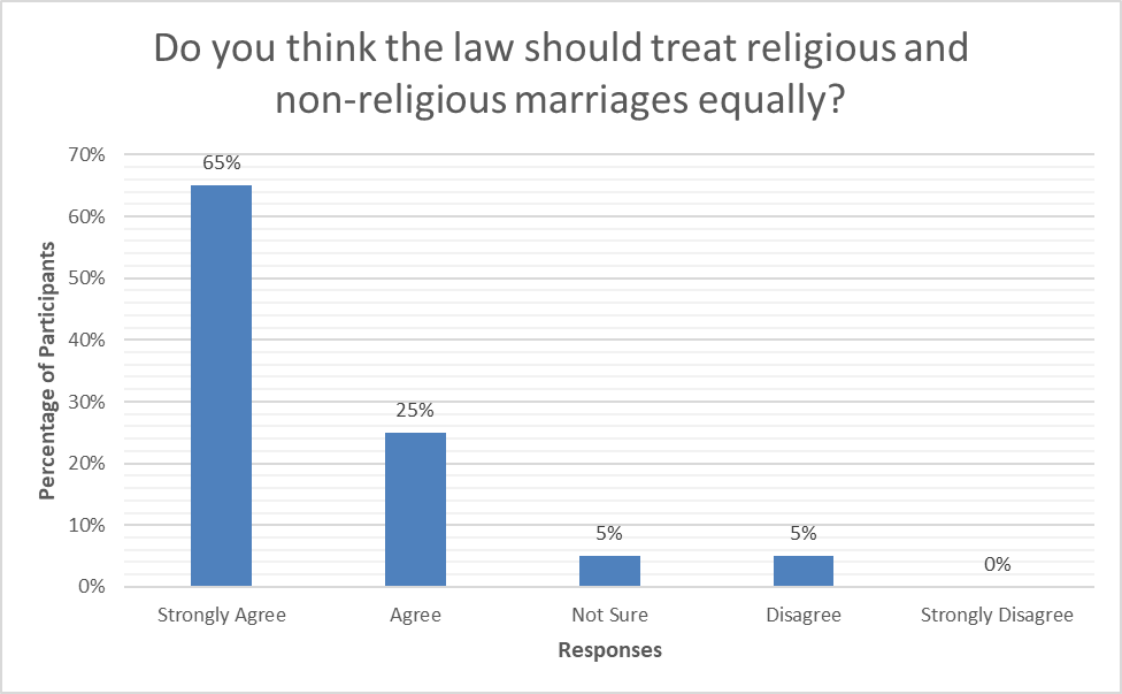


Figure 4: Do you think the law should treat religious and non-religious marriages equally? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

The Bill allows government to set rules in the future for groups that can conduct marriages if needed. Do you think this is a good idea?

Question 4 asked Members whether they think it is a good idea that the Bill allows government to set rules in the future for groups that can conduct marriages, if needed. A significant majority of participants (81%) selected "yes," indicating clear approval of allowing future flexibility in how marriage regulations are managed. This suggests that most respondents recognise the value of enabling government to adapt rules over time as circumstances change.

No participants selected "no," meaning there was no direct opposition to the proposal. However, 19% of participants chose "not sure," highlighting that while there is strong overall support, a minority may require further information or clarification before forming a definite opinion.

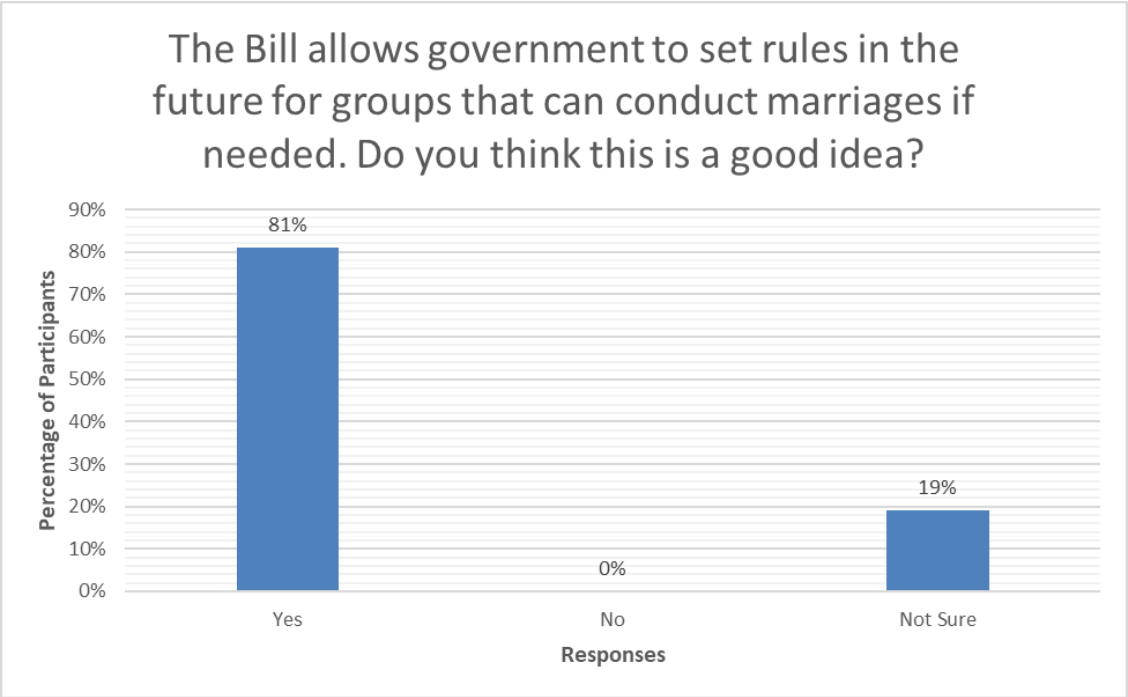


Figure 5: The Bill allows government to set rules in the future for groups that can conduct marriages if needed. Do you think this is a good idea? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

Do you agree with raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18?

Question 5 asked Members whether they agree with raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18, with no exceptions. An overwhelming majority of participants (95%) selected "yes," indicating clear agreement with increasing the minimum age. This suggests that nearly all respondents support the change and view it as a positive step. One respondent reflected on how quickly teenage years pass, questioning whether young people can fully grasp such a decision: *"I'm 9 months into my 16th year of living and it's gone like, so it's not a wide length of time. How can a 16-year-old really understand what marriage is... Can they really consent to that and know the commitment that it brings?"*

Participants also pointed to personal development and change over time, suggesting that relationships formed at a young age may not endure. As one response explained: *"Marriage is a big emotional commitment, and people change as they get older... by the time you maybe even get to like 18, 19, they might be a completely different person."* Similarly, another participant noted more generally that *"you get very reckless when you're a teenager,"* reinforcing concerns about decision-making at a younger age.

A very small proportion of participants (5%) selected "no," demonstrating limited opposition to the proposal. However, this young person continued to explain that their opposition related to the Bill not going far enough: *"I would personally think raising the age to a minimum of 21... getting married is a big commitment... If you get divorced... you have to give half of your stuff... That could send you broke."*

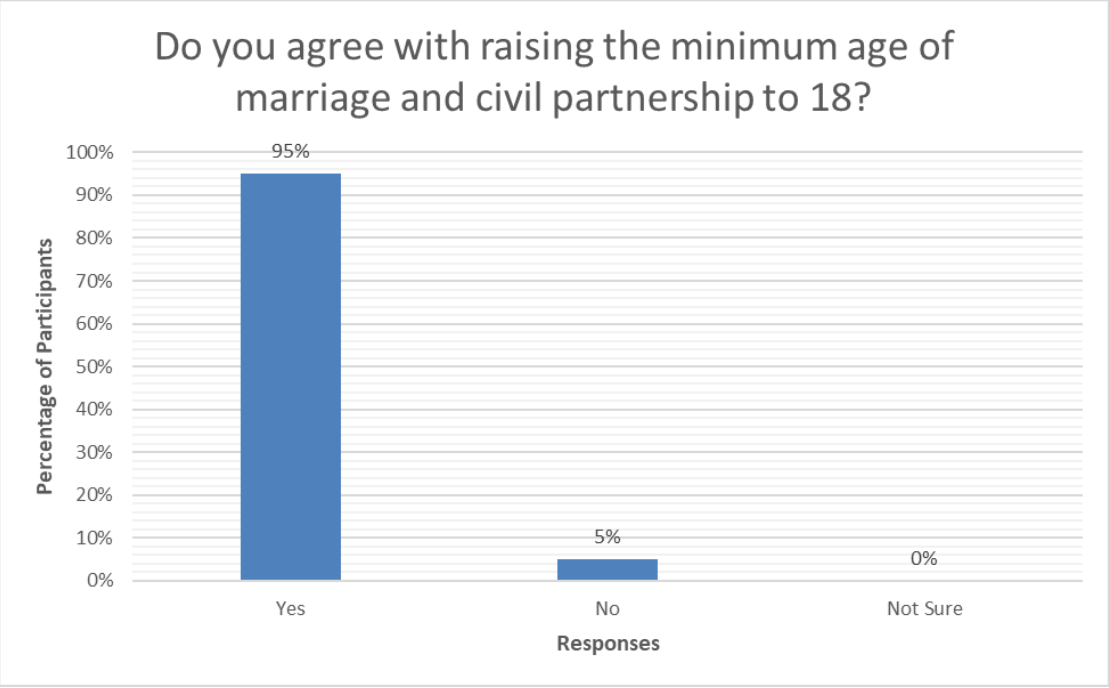


Figure 6: Do you agree with raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

What do you think are the benefits of setting the minimum age at 18?

Question 6 asked Members what they think are the benefits of setting the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership at 18. Responses highlight several key themes, particularly around protection, maturity, and rights.

A strong and consistent theme across responses was child protection and safeguarding. Many participants emphasised that raising the age would "*help stop child marriages in NI*," "*prevent forced marriage*," and offer better "*protection of children*." This reflects a clear view that increasing the minimum age would reduce risks of coercion and protect young people from harmful or exploitative situations.

Linked to this, respondents frequently referred to rights and equality, noting that the change would ensure "*children's rights [are] upheld,*" that "*girls are more protected*" and "*girls' rights [are] protected better*." Several participants highlighted that girls can be particularly vulnerable and saw the proposal as an important step in addressing this.

Another key theme was greater maturity and decision-making capacity. Participants stated that setting the age at 18 would allow individuals more time for "*brain development*," "*emotional maturity and intelligence*," and a fuller "*understanding of the extent of the commitment*." Many felt this would lead to stronger relationships, with some suggesting it could result in "*less divorce*" and that "*marriages would last longer*." Some participants explicitly referenced brain development science, with one noting: *"Isn't there a science thing about how the brain isn't fully developed until like 25? … marriage is a big commitment for a brain that isn't fully developed, so bringing the age up to 18 could improve that protective aspect of letting the brain develop properly."*

Others highlighted how relationships and perspectives can change rapidly during adolescence, which can make early commitments more unstable. As one participant explained: *"In your teenage years it's a constant cycle of 'this person is who I want to spend the rest of my life with…' to 'this person is the bane of my existence…' You're not really mature enough to commit. Could get VERY messy."* These reflections reinforce the view that increased age may support more stable, informed decisions.

Many participants also felt that greater maturity would lead to stronger and more lasting relationships, with suggestions that the change could result in "*less divorce*" and that "*marriages would last longer*."

There was also recognition of broader societal and legal alignment, with participants noting that the change would help keep Northern Ireland "*on par with other places*" and reflect a "*global movement*." This suggests awareness of international trends and a desire for consistency with neighbouring regions.

Are there any concerns or problems you think could come from raising the age to 18?

Question 7 asked Members whether there are any concerns or problems that could arise from raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18. Responses were mixed, with participants highlighting a range of potential issues, alongside some who expressed no concerns.

One of the most common themes was the possibility of unintended consequences, particularly that the issue could be displaced rather than resolved. Several participants suggested that raising the age in Northern Ireland might "*shift the problem elsewhere*" or "*redirect child marriage to countries abroad*," indicating concerns about enforcement and the global nature of the issue. One participant verbalised their concern, asking: *"Would the rise of the marriage age… stop forced marriage and child marriage or just redirect it to other countries where the age is lower?"*

Another key concern related to how the law would apply in international or cross-border situations. Participants questioned the legal status of marriages involving young people arriving from other countries. For example, one respondent asked: "*If someone… comes over and they're like 16 and they're married in the country they come from, is that marriage illegitimate or is it recognised*?" This reflects uncertainty around how such cases would be handled and the need for clearer guidance.

Another key concern related to whether 18 is still too young. A number of respondents questioned if the proposed age goes far enough, with comments such as "*too young, should be brought to 21*" and "*is 18 still too young?*" This reflects a view among some participants that, while raising the age is positive, further increases might better support safeguarding and maturity.

Participants also raised concerns about ongoing risks of coercion and forced marriage, noting that such situations "*may still occur but just over the age of 18*." This suggests that while the policy may reduce harm, it may not fully eliminate it without additional protections and support systems.

Some responses also highlighted questions around evidence and scale, with one participant noting: *"I… searched it up… less than five arranged marriages have happened this year that I could find."* This indicates that some participants are unsure about the extent of the issue and how frequently it occurs, raising questions about how the policy aligns with available data.

A smaller number of responses highlighted practical and implementation issues, including questions around "*who will monitor this*" and the challenge of gathering reliable data on forced marriage. Others pointed to the need for increased "*awareness*" and clearer information about where young people can access support.

There were also some concerns around personal freedom and choice, with one participant noting that raising the age could impact young people's autonomy, although they still supported the overall change.

At the same time, several participants indicated that they had no concerns, with responses such as "*no*," "*none*," and "*unsure*," suggesting that for some, the benefits outweigh any potential drawbacks.

Do you agree that forcing or pressuring someone under 18 to marry should be a criminal offence?

Question 8 asked Members whether they agree that forcing or pressuring someone under 18 to marry should be a criminal offence. All respondents (100%) selected "yes," indicating complete support for criminalising the act of forcing or pressuring a person under 18 into marriage. This demonstrates a very strong consensus that such behaviour is unacceptable and should be addressed through the law.

Participants reiterated their agreement with the statement through their discussion, with some suggesting that protections should extend even further. For example, one respondent stated, *"I feel like forcing someone to marry should be illegal regardless of age?"* Similarly, another participant questioned the absence of such protections more generally, noting: *"I don't know why pressuring anyone into a forced marriage shouldn't be a criminal offence."* This highlights a strong belief among participants that the law should take a firm stance against all forms of coercion in marriage.

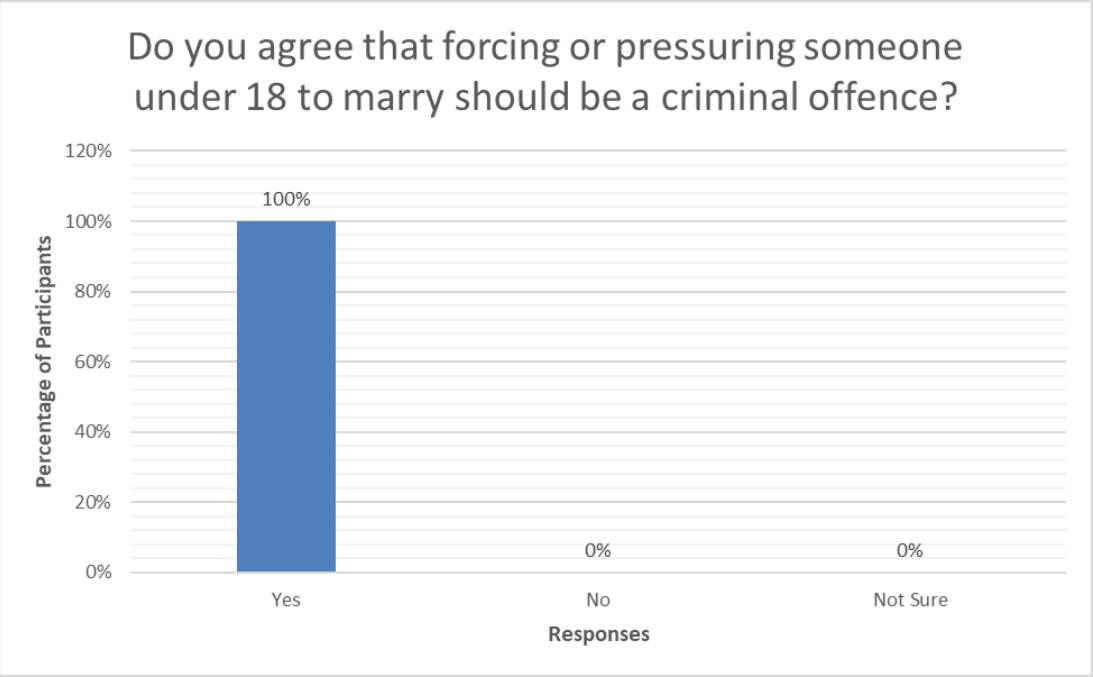


Figure 7: Do you agree that forcing or pressuring someone under 18 to marry should be a criminal offence? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026) Overall, should the Assembly pass this Bill?

Overall, should the Assembly pass this Bill?

Question 9 asked Members whether, in light of their discussion, the Assembly should pass this Bill. A clear majority of participants (95%) selected "yes," indicating overwhelming backing for the Bill in its current form. This suggests that most respondents view the proposals as positive and believe the legislation should proceed.

A small proportion of participants (5%) selected "needs changes," indicating general support for the Bill but with some reservations or areas they feel could be improved. As one participant noted, *"overall yes but it does need changing about the age to at least 21 if not 25,"* reinforcing the view that while the Bill is supported, some feel the age threshold should be higher.

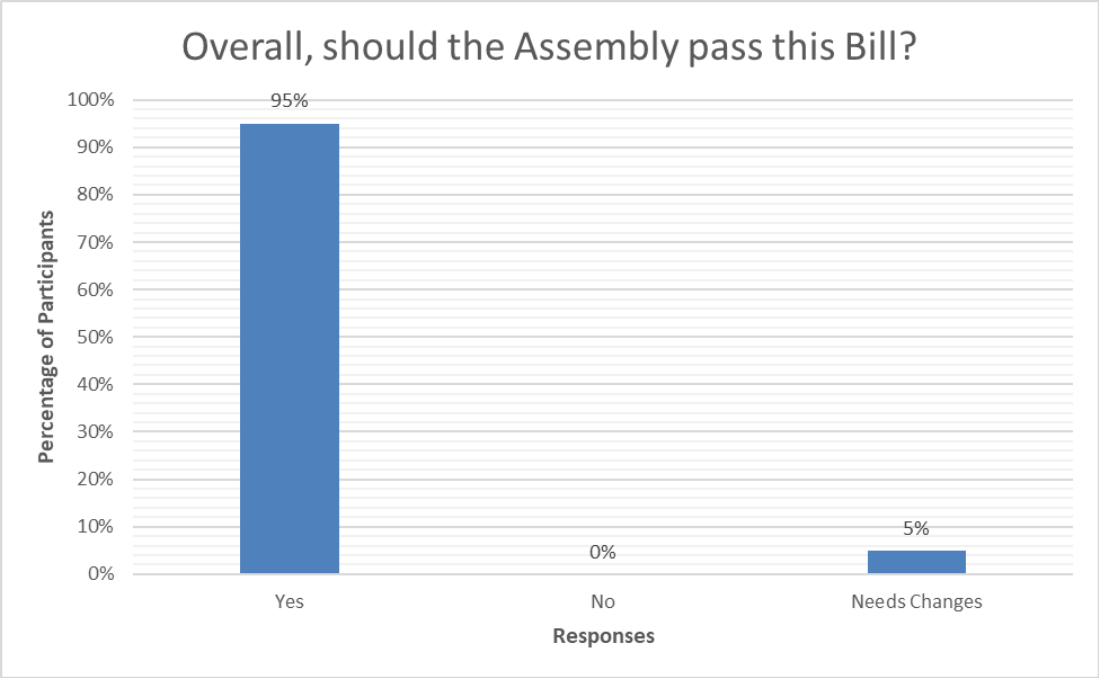


Figure 8: Overall, should the Assembly pass this Bill? (Youth Assembly Marriage Bill Online Consultation, May 2026)

What changes would you make to the Bill?

Members were subsequently asked what changes they would make to the Bill. A dominant theme, as aforementioned, was the view that the minimum age should be increased further, with many participants suggesting it should be raised to 21 rather than 18. Comments such as "*raise the age to 21*," "*put the age up to 21*," and "*change the age to 21 at a minimum*" were repeated throughout.

Another key suggestion focused on strengthening protections against forced marriage. Participants emphasised that safeguards should apply more broadly, with calls to "*have law to protect people against all forced marriages not just under 18"* and to ensure coercion is consistently addressed. There were also concerns about marriages taking place abroad or being recognised in Northern Ireland, particularly involving individuals under 16.

Some participants proposed alternative or additional approaches, including focusing on age gaps between individuals, rather than only setting a minimum age. For example, one suggestion was to introduce limits so that those aged 18–21 could not marry significantly older partners, aiming to reduce potential power imbalances.

Participants also emphasised the importance of education and awareness in supporting the aims of the Bill. One respondent suggested that schools could play a greater role in informing young people about these issues, stating: *"I think that there should be a part of the curriculum that teaches about this. For example, LLW could tell you about forced marriages. I'm not sure if they teach that at the moment."*

A smaller number of responses suggested additional legal restrictions, such as outlawing first cousin marriage, while others raised more practical considerations around how responsibility and consent are assessed.

Participants were also keen to emphasise that this Bill should be considered separately from debates on votes at 16. Several comments highlighted that marriage is a significantly more serious and long-term commitment. As one participant stated, *"I think when it comes to votes at 16 and the marriage at 16, they're two completely different things. A marriage can ruin somebody's life completely and it's so much more of a big thing than voting."*

At the same time, others recognised that both issues relate to young people's rights, noting that *"raising the marriage age and lowering the voting age are both about increasing freedom and choice for young people… raising the marriage age primarily protects young people… lowering the voting age gives young people more of a voice in their future."* This demonstrates that while participants saw links between the topics, they felt the Bill should be assessed on its own merits.

Conclusion

This report presents an overview of Youth Assembly Members' views on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. Overall, the findings demonstrate significant support for the key aims of the Bill, particularly in relation to improving protections for young people and promoting fairness within the legal framework for marriage.

Members supported the potential for greater equality in marriage, including the legal recognition of non-religious belief ceremonies and equal treatment between religious and non-religious marriages. The young people frequently emphasised principles of fairness, inclusion, and choice, indicating that they value a system reflecting diverse beliefs and experiences.

There was overwhelming support for raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18, with participants highlighting the importance of maturity, informed consent, and understanding the long-term implications of such a commitment. Many Members viewed the proposal as a necessary step in strengthening child protection and safeguarding, particularly in preventing forced and early marriages.

At the same time, the discussion highlighted important areas for further consideration. Some Members expressed concerns about potential unintended consequences, including the possibility of child marriage being displaced to other jurisdictions, as well as uncertainty around the legal recognition of marriages conducted abroad. A number of participants also questioned whether 18 is sufficiently high, with some advocating for raising the minimum age further to 21.

There was unanimous agreement that forcing or pressuring someone under 18 to marry should be a criminal offence, with many Members suggesting that protections against coercion should extend to individuals of all ages. Alongside legislative changes, participants emphasised the importance of education and awareness, highlighting a role for schools in ensuring that young people understand their rights and know how to seek support.

While a small proportion of Members felt that the Bill could be enhanced, there was general agreement that the Assembly should proceed with the legislation. Suggestions for refinement included raising the minimum age further, strengthening protections against forced marriage, clarifying provisions around international cases, and considering additional safeguards such as limits on age gaps.

In conclusion, Youth Assembly Members strongly support the direction of the Bill and recognise its potential to improve outcomes for young people. Their contributions demonstrate a clear emphasis on protection, equality, and informed decision-making, alongside constructive suggestions to ensure the legislation is as effective and robust as possible.

Appendices

Appendix One: Youth Friendly Summary - Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill



Tell me more about the...

YOUTH ASSEMBLY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Marriage Bill

The Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill is a new law that updates how marriage and civil partnership work in Northern Ireland. It is designed to make the law fairer, safer and clearer.

The Bill introduces two big changes to how marriage works in Northern Ireland. First, it raises the legal age of marriage and civil partnership to 18. Second, it updates the law on who is allowed to register and carry out a marriage.

Raising the Minimum Marriage Age to 18

What's changing?
Right now, people aged 16 or 17 can get married or enter a civil partnership if their parents agree. The Bill will raise the minimum age to 18. This means no one under 18 can legally marry or enter a civil partnership, even with parental consent.

Why does this matter?
Under 18s are legally considered children. Evidence shows that marrying young can increase the risk of forced marriage, limit access to education and opportunities, and affect mental and physical health, especially for girls.

Protecting young people
The Bill also makes it a criminal offence for adults to organise or help arrange a marriage involving someone under 18. The young people themselves are not criminalised.

International context
The United Nations defines marriage under 18 as child marriage. Countries are encouraged to set 18 as the minimum legal age to protect children's rights. This Bill would bring Northern Ireland in line with international children's rights standards.

Who can Register and Carry Out a Marriage?

What's changing?
Marriage can be carried out by:
- Civil registrars (for civil marriages)
- Religious officiants (such as priests or ministers)

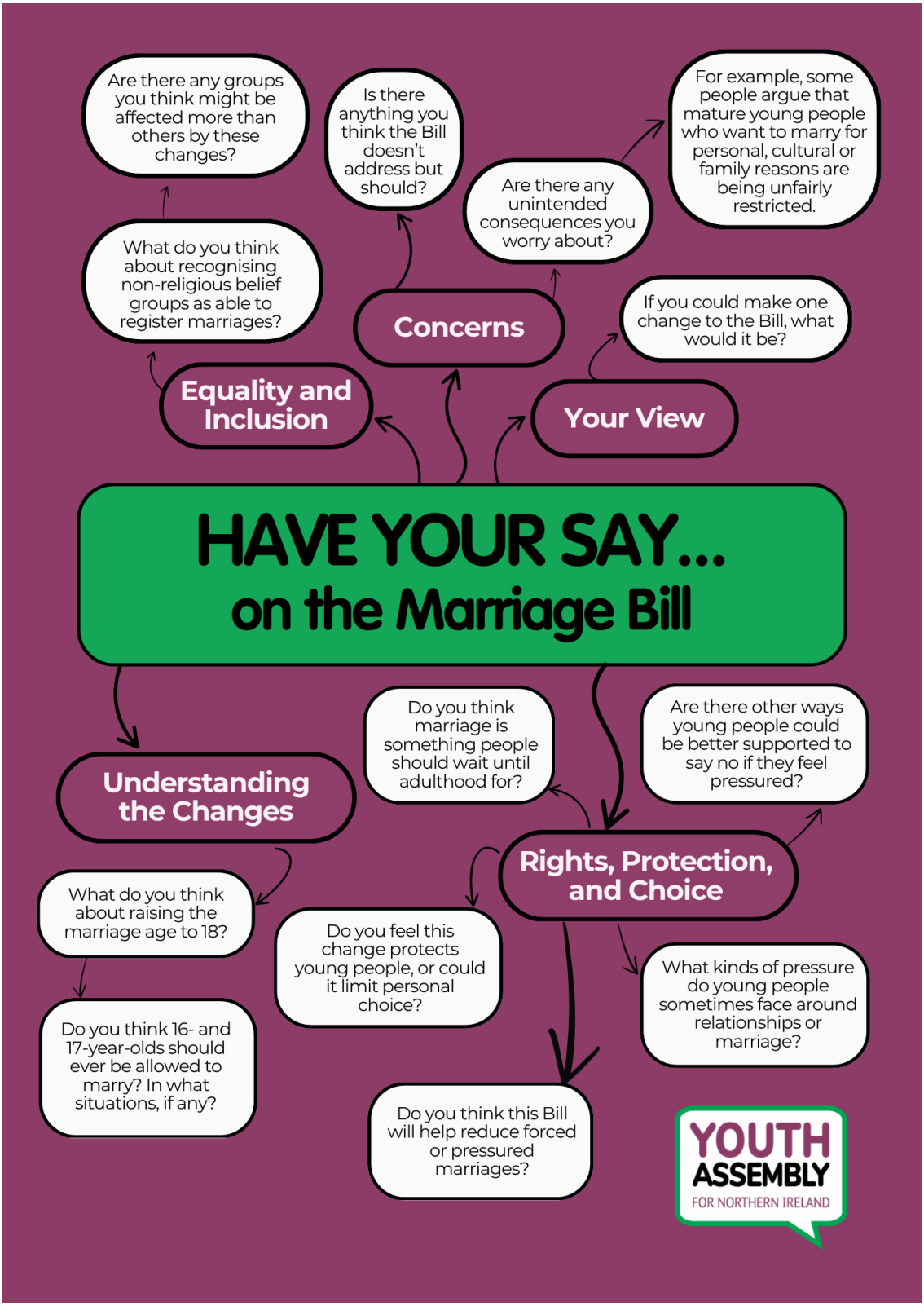
The Bill formally recognises non-religious belief groups (for example, humanist organisations).

What would this look like?
Belief groups that are not religious but have shared values or philosophies can apply to have trained officiants legally recognised. These officiants must meet the same standards and rules as religious officiants. This brings equality and choice, so couples can have a ceremony that reflects their beliefs.

Why does this matter?
It treats religious and non-religious beliefs equally under the law. It makes marriage law more inclusive while keeping strong safeguards in place.

Only approved and registered officiants can legally conduct a marriage – this helps prevent:
- Sham marriages
- Unsafe or unregulated ceremonies

The Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill May 2026


HAVE YOUR SAY...
on the Marriage Bill
Understanding the Changes
What do you think about raising the marriage age to 18?
Do you think 16- and 17-year-olds should ever be allowed to marry? In what situations, if any?
Rights, Protection, and Choice
Do you think marriage is something people should wait until adulthood for?
Are there other ways young people could be better supported to say no if they feel pressured?
Do you feel this change protects young people, or could it limit personal choice?
What kinds of pressure do young people sometimes face around relationships or marriage?
Do you think this Bill will help reduce forced or pressured marriages?
Equality and Inclusion
What do you think about recognising non-religious belief groups as able to register marriages?
Are there any groups you think might be affected more than others by these changes?
Concerns
Is there anything you think the Bill doesn't address but should?
Are there any unintended consequences you worry about?
For example, some people argue that mature young people who want to marry for personal, cultural or family reasons are being unfairly restricted.
Your View
If you could make one change to the Bill, what would it be?
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