From: info@gccmovement.org <info@gccmovement.org>
Sent: 02 June 2026 10:30
To: +Marriage Bill <marriageandcivilpartnershipbill@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill - consultation response

Dear Mr Hall

I am writing further to our online response to the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill consultation, as we would like to submit the attached document as supporting information.

The Give Couples Choice Movement strongly welcomes the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and its commitment to building a fairer, more inclusive marriage framework for Northern Ireland. However, we would urge the Committee to seize this legislative moment to extend the Bill's scope to include independent celebrants as authorised officiants. Without this step, the Bill will fall short of the inclusion it seeks to achieve. Many couples – particularly those of mixed faith, no faith, or complex cultural and personal identities – cannot access a ceremony that genuinely reflects who they are through religious, humanist, or civil channels alone. Independent celebrants fill that gap.

In England and Wales, a consultation will be launched by 16th July 2026, specifically addressing the question of whether independent celebrants should be authorised. It would be a logical next step for the Committee for Finance to open a similar consultation before making any final decision on who should be included within this Bill.

Please find attached a paper which outlines our position on this matter.

If we can be of any help, we would be delighted to assist, so please feel free to get in contact with any questions.

Kind regards

Campaign Lead
Give Couples Choice Movement
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Response to the Northern Ireland Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

Submitted to the NI Assembly Committee for Finance

By the Give Couples Choice Movement (GCCM)

May 2026

Summary

The Give Couples Choice Movement (GCCM) strongly welcomes the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and its commitment to building a fairer, more inclusive marriage framework for Northern Ireland. We write to urge the Committee to seize this legislative moment to extend the Bill's scope to include independent celebrants as authorised officiants of legally binding marriages.

Without this step, the Bill will fall short of the inclusion it seeks to achieve. Many couples – particularly those of mixed faith, no faith, or complex cultural and personal identities – cannot access a ceremony that genuinely reflects who they are through religious, humanist, or civil channels alone. Independent celebrants fill that gap. Excluding them from the legal framework forces couples to bifurcate their wedding: a separate civil registration followed by a personally meaningful ceremony that is not legally binding. This is not equality.

We also directly address the concern raised by the Finance Minister about the prohibition on profit-making in the 2003 Order. As this submission and the attached GCCM Policy Paper demonstrate, the existence of a fee for services does not constitute "marriage for gain" in the legal sense. A robust regulatory framework – already being developed in England and Wales – can authorise independent celebrants without any relaxation of that prohibition.

1. About the Give Couples Choice Movement

The Give Couples Choice Movement (GCCM) is a campaigning organisation representing the interests of couples, independent celebrants, and members of the public who believe that the law on marriage should reflect the diversity of modern society. We advocate for a marriage system that is genuinely inclusive of all beliefs, backgrounds and cultures, and that places the couple at the centre of their own ceremony.

We have submitted a GCCM Policy Paper as an attachment to this response. Although that paper addresses the law reform process currently underway in England and Wales, the principles and arguments it contains are directly and fully applicable to Northern Ireland. We invite the Committee to consider both documents together.

2. Why Independent Celebrants Must Be Included

2.1 A Marriage System Inclusive of All Beliefs and Cultures

The Bill represents a significant step forward in recognising that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) must be protected within the marriage system. The inclusion of non-religious belief organisations is welcome. However, the Bill as drafted does not go far enough.

As MLA Eóin Tennyson noted during the Second Stage debate, some couples *"do not fit neatly into the belief marriage or the religious marriage space."* These include:

- Mixed-faith couples – for example, one partner from a Catholic background and another from a Muslim or Jewish background – who wish to honour both traditions in a single ceremony, but find that no authorised religious officiant can or will accommodate them.
- Intercultural couples who want to weave together the customs, languages and rituals of two different cultural heritages in a way that a standard civil or humanist ceremony cannot provide.
- Couples who hold personal spiritual beliefs that do not belong to any recognised religious or belief organisation, and for whom a civil ceremony feels too secular and a religious ceremony feels inauthentic.
- Couples who wish to combine religious, cultural and non-religious elements in a single legally binding ceremony – something that is simply not possible under the current framework.

For these couples, independent celebrants are not a luxury or a commercial preference – they are the **only** route to a marriage ceremony that genuinely reflects who they are. If the Bill is to deliver on its ambition of an inclusive marriage framework, independent celebrants must be part of it.

2.2 The Human Rights Dimension

The right to manifest one's religion or belief is protected under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into domestic law by the Human Rights Act 1998. The marriage ceremony is one of the most profound expressions of personal belief and identity that a person can undertake.

The *Smyth* judgment, which gave rise to this Bill, recognised precisely that principle. However, the principle does not apply only to humanists. It applies equally to all those whose deeply held beliefs – personal, spiritual, cultural or philosophical – cannot be accommodated by existing religious or belief organisations. The failure to authorise independent celebrants represents a continuing gap in the protection of FoRB that this Bill has the opportunity to close.

2.3 The "Two-Wedding" Problem

Under the current legal framework, couples who use an independent celebrant are required to register their marriage separately at a register office – a legal formality entirely disconnected from the ceremony that carries personal meaning for them. This enforced separation:

- Demeans and diminishes the personal ceremony by treating it as legally second-class.
- Incurs additional inconvenience and costs for couples whose time and finances are likely to already be stretched.
- Is experienced by many couples as deeply frustrating and contrary to the spirit of equality that the Bill promotes.

The solution is straightforward: a properly regulated framework for independent celebrants, similar to that already in place for religious and belief organisations, would allow the ceremony and the legal registration to be united in a single meaningful event.

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3. Addressing the Concern About Commercial Marriage

The Finance Minister raised a concern that authorising independent celebrants would create a commercial market for marriage, potentially conflicting with the prohibition in the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 against marriage conducted *"with the sole aim of making a profit."* GCCM respectfully but strongly contests this point.

3.1 Charging a Fee Is Not "Marriage for Profit"

The prohibition in the 2003 Order was designed to prevent the commodification of the marriage register itself – to stop commercially motivated entities from monetising the act of state registration of marriages. It was never intended to prevent skilled professionals from charging a reasonable fee to conduct a ceremony.

Consider the following analogies already embedded in our legal system:

- Registrars employed by local councils are paid professionals. The fact of their remuneration does not render civil marriage a commercial enterprise.
- Humanist celebrants, who are already authorised to conduct legally binding ceremonies, set their own fees and charge couples directly. These fees are broadly in line with those charged by independent celebrants – typically in the range of £500-£800. If fee-charging by humanist celebrants does not engage the profit prohibition, there is no principled basis for treating independent celebrants differently.
- Religious ministers and celebrants from belief organisations routinely receive fees or stipends for conducting ceremonies. This has never been treated as engaging the profit prohibition.

The logic that authorising independent celebrants would create a "commercial market" would, if applied consistently, require the de-authorisation of every paid professional already involved in marriage. Plainly, that is not the intention of the law and it should not be applied selectively to independent celebrants.

3.2 Regulation Can Distinguish Celebrancy From Commercialisation

The GCCM is not asking for an unregulated market in marriage ceremonies. We are asking for a properly regulated professional framework – one with clear competence requirements, a mandatory code of conduct, registration with an approved body, and ongoing professional standards. The appropriate response to the Minister's concern is not to exclude independent celebrants from the legal framework, but to design a regulatory framework that clearly distinguishes between:

- A professional charging a reasonable fee for their time, skill and services in conducting a ceremony – which is entirely proper and analogous to other authorised officiants; and
- A commercial enterprise whose primary motivation is profit from the legal act of registration – which the law correctly prohibits.

A well-designed scheme of authorisation – such as that proposed by the Law Commission in England and Wales and set out in detail in the attached GCCM Policy Paper – achieves exactly this. Independent celebrants can be required to register with an approved body, to demonstrate competence, to adhere to a code of conduct, and to meet ongoing professional standards, without any relaxation of the underlying prohibition on marriage for profit.

These are not theoretical models. They are functioning systems in jurisdictions closely comparable to Northern Ireland. The Committee is invited to draw on this established evidence base rather than treating the inclusion of independent celebrants as an untested risk.

4. Responding to the Minister's Specific Concerns

4.1 "It Would Require a Lengthy Policy Process"

We acknowledge the Minister's concern that addressing independent celebrants would delay the Bill. However, there are two responses to this:

1. The Committee could include in the Bill a **delegated power** enabling the Finance Minister to bring independent celebrants within the authorisation framework by secondary legislation, following a policy review. This would future-proof the Bill without delaying its core provisions, while creating a clear legislative mandate and timeline for action.

   In practical terms, such a power could allow the Minister to: authorise independent celebrants to conduct legally binding marriages; set eligibility criteria and require registration with an approved body; impose competence requirements and a code of professional conduct; set ongoing standards and monitoring arrangements; and provide for authorisation to be suspended or removed where those standards are not met.

   This is not a novel approach – it mirrors the kind of framework already used for other authorised officiants – and it would give the Committee and the public confidence that any extension to independent celebrants would be properly governed.

2. The policy work does not need to start from scratch. The Law Commission of England and Wales has conducted an extensive review of the law relating to marriage ceremonies. Their recommendations, and the ongoing consultation process in England and Wales, provide a detailed and well-reasoned framework that Northern Ireland can draw upon directly. The attached GCCM Policy Paper sets out those recommendations and their applicability to Northern Ireland.

4.2 "There Were Mixed Messages From Stakeholders"

We note the Minister's observation that the consultation produced mixed stakeholder views. This is not unusual for any significant reform. However, we would caution against interpreting mixed stakeholder views as a reason for inaction.

The interests of **couples** – who are the ultimate beneficiaries of marriage law – should be placed at the centre of this debate. The evidence from independent celebrants, from equality organisations, and from couples themselves consistently supports the inclusion of independent celebrants as a matter of both practical fairness and human rights.

We recognise that registrars, religious bodies and belief organisations may have concerns about the inclusion of independent celebrants, and we would expect the Committee to consider those views carefully. However, we would respectfully suggest that such concerns – while legitimate – should not override the core principles at stake: couple choice, equality of access, freedom of religion or belief, and proportionate regulation. A well-designed framework can address the interests of existing institutions while still delivering meaningful choice for couples.

4.3 "We Are Watching Developments in England and Wales"

We welcome the Minister's open mind and his stated intention to keep the issue under review. However, *watching and waiting* is not the same as acting. The couples of Northern Ireland deserve the same choices as those in England and Wales, where reform is already underway. We urge the Committee to ensure that the Bill, or the legislative process that flows from it, delivers that choice in this mandate rather than the next.

5. Proposed Recommendations

GCCM respectfully urges the Committee to:

- **Recommend the inclusion of a delegated power** within the Bill, enabling the Finance Minister to authorise independent celebrants as legally recognised officiants of marriage by secondary legislation. With this delegated power responsible for the authorisation and regulation of independent celebrants, the needs of all couples will be met and the concerns outlined in section 4 will be addressed.
- **Affirm the principle** that the marriage system in Northern Ireland should be inclusive of all beliefs, backgrounds and cultures, and that independent celebrants are a necessary element of any genuinely inclusive framework.
- **Reject the characterisation** of independent celebrants as creating a "commercial market" in marriage, and confirm that a properly regulated system of authorisation can accommodate independent celebrants without engaging the profit prohibition in the 2003 Order.
- **Invite the Finance Minister** to draw on the Law Commission's work in England and Wales in designing a Northern Ireland framework, rather than conducting a prolonged bespoke policy process.
- **Call for a short-life working group** to be established as part of this Bill's passage, tasked with producing a report on the authorisation of independent celebrants and recommendations for secondary legislation within twelve months of the Bill's enactment.

6. Conclusion

Northern Ireland has an opportunity through this Bill to create a marriage system that truly reflects the diversity of its people – a system in which every couple can have a ceremony that is both legally binding and personally meaningful. That opportunity will be incomplete if independent celebrants are left outside the legal framework.

The Give Couples Choice Movement stands ready to work with the Committee, the Finance Minister, and all relevant stakeholders to design a fair, well-regulated system that achieves this goal. We are grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to this consultation and would welcome the chance to give oral evidence if the Committee considers it helpful.

Give Couples Choice Movement

May 2026

Attachment: GCCM Policy Paper