Written Submission to the Committee for Finance

Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill (Bill 30/22-27)

Response to the Committee Stage call for evidence

To: Committee for Finance, Northern Ireland Assembly
From: Humanists Together
Subject: Response to the call for evidence on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill
Date: 4 June 2026

About Humanists Together

Humanists Together welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Finance's call for evidence on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

Humanists Together is a non-religious belief organisation supporting humanist ceremonies, including weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies and other important life ceremonies. Our work is grounded in humanist values, including dignity, equality, compassion, reason, personal responsibility, freedom of belief and respect for the choices people make at significant moments in their lives.

Humanists Together is the first humanist organisation to be established on an all-Ireland basis. Our celebrants and members are drawn from across the island of Ireland, reflecting the reality that non-religious belief communities, couples and families frequently live, work and form relationships across the border.

Humanists Together supports the development of a clear, fair and accountable framework for non-religious belief marriage in Northern Ireland, North of Ireland.

Summary of our position

Humanists Together strongly supports the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

We particularly welcome the Bill's intention to place non-religious belief marriages within the statutory framework of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states that Part 1 of the Bill will “cement the inclusion of non-religious belief marriages” within that framework. It also explains that Part 2 will raise the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18 and introduce an offence

relating to conduct intended to cause a child to enter into marriage before their eighteenth birthday.

Humanists Together supports both of these objectives.

We believe that the Bill, and the regulations and guidance that follow it, should:

- recognise non-religious belief marriages on an equal statutory footing with religious marriages;
- treat non-religious belief bodies in the same way as religious bodies, so that each qualifying body may nominate its own officiants, with no organisation holding permanent or exclusive authorisation;
- protect equality and pluralism among humanist and non-religious belief organisations;
- ensure that no single organisation becomes the sole gatekeeper for humanist marriage;
- give couples meaningful choice among recognised, accountable belief bodies;
- provide a fair, transparent and proportionate process for recognising belief bodies, based on objective criteria;
- take account of the cross-border reality of humanist practice across the island of Ireland; and
- raise the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18 as an important safeguarding measure.

1. Legal recognition of non-religious belief marriages

Humanists Together strongly supports the legal recognition of non-religious belief marriages.

Marriage is one of the most significant public and personal commitments two people can make. For many couples, the ceremony is not simply a legal formality. It is a meaningful expression of their values, their relationship, their family life and the community of people who support them.

For humanist couples, a humanist wedding is not a lesser alternative to a religious ceremony. It is the ceremony that most accurately reflects who they are and what they believe.

It is therefore right that the law should recognise non-religious belief marriages within the same statutory framework as religious marriages.

Temporary arrangements have allowed belief marriages to proceed, but those arrangements should not remain temporary indefinitely. The Department of Finance has described the Bill as putting those belief marriage arrangements on a permanent and official footing. Humanists Together welcomes this move towards legal certainty.

Couples, celebrants, belief bodies and registrars all benefit from a clear statutory framework. The Bill provides an opportunity to remove uncertainty and to ensure that non-religious belief marriage is recognised openly and properly in law.

2. Equality between religious and non-religious belief bodies

Humanists Together believes that the law should treat religious and non-religious belief bodies fairly and consistently.

Couples with religious beliefs have long been able to marry in ceremonies that reflect those beliefs. Couples with humanist or other non-religious beliefs should have the same dignity, recognition and legal certainty.

Humanist belief is not simply the absence of religion. It is a coherent non-religious ethical life stance grounded in reason, compassion, human dignity, personal responsibility and the conviction that people can live meaningful, ethical lives without religion.

The Bill gives effect to this equality in a clear and welcome way. Under the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, each religious body nominates its own members to be registered as officiants, and no single denomination holds an authorisation through which the others must pass. The Bill extends that same arrangement to non-religious belief bodies, by adding the words “or belief” to the relevant Articles, so that a religious or belief body may nominate its own officiants in the same way. Treating humanist bodies in the same way as religious bodies is therefore not a special concession. It is the existing logic of the framework, applied consistently.

The purpose of the Bill should be to secure that equality between religious and non-religious belief bodies, and not to preserve a hierarchy in which religious ceremonies are treated as more substantial or more legitimate than belief ceremonies.

3. Equality and pluralism among humanist and non-religious belief organisations

Humanists Together believes that the Bill should protect equality not only between religious and non-religious belief marriage, but also among qualifying non-religious belief bodies.

We recognise and respect the important work undertaken by established humanist organisations in securing legal recognition for humanist marriage in Northern Ireland, North of Ireland. The purpose of the Bill, however, should not be to create institutional exclusivity for any one organisation. Its purpose should be to recognise non-religious belief marriage within a fair statutory framework.

Humanism is a belief position, not a brand. It is a non-religious ethical life stance held by individuals and communities. No single organisation owns humanism.

The law does not require religious marriage to be channelled through one dominant religious institution. Different religious bodies may each be recognised where they meet the relevant legal requirements. The same principle should apply to non-religious belief bodies.

The Bill is sound in this respect, because it applies the religious-body model to belief bodies. The one provision that could, in future, narrow that openness is the new power for the Department to prescribe additional eligibility requirements for religious or belief bodies. On its face, the power is neutral and applies to all bodies equally. The risk is that such requirements, if not carefully framed, could be set at a level that only a long-established or dominant body could meet, or could be used to confer a privileged status on one organisation. Humanists Together therefore welcomes the safeguard that any such regulations must be laid before and approved by the Assembly, and asks that any eligibility requirements made under that power be objective, proportionate, applied equally to religious and belief bodies, and never used to create exclusivity.

To recognise only one humanist organisation would risk replacing one inequality with another. It would also treat humanism less favourably than religion by denying pluralism within non-religious belief, when religion is afforded pluralism as a matter of course.

Humanists Together therefore recommends that the Bill, regulations and accompanying guidance should make clear that more than one non-religious belief body may be recognised, provided each body satisfies clear, objective and proportionate criteria.

Those criteria might include:

- a clear non-religious belief basis;
- a written constitution or governing document;
- transparent governance and accountability;
- a defined process for selecting, authorising, supervising and removing officiants;
- appropriate training, assessment or evidence of competence;
- complaints and safeguarding procedures;
- record keeping and compliance with marriage law; and
- a commitment to equality, dignity and non-discrimination.

Recognition should not depend on an organisation being the largest, longest established or most dominant provider. Nor should it depend on a body's previous involvement in litigation or campaigning. Those contributions may be respected, but they should not become the basis for exclusive control.

The relevant question should be whether a body can demonstrate a clear belief basis, sound governance, accountability and competence. Any credible and properly constituted belief body, Humanists Together among them, should be able to meet such criteria, and recognition should follow from meeting them rather than from size or history.

4. Avoiding monopoly and protecting couple choice

Humanists Together would be concerned by any framework that had the practical effect of recognising only one humanist organisation as the gatekeeper for all humanist marriages in Northern Ireland, North of Ireland.

Such an outcome would be inconsistent with the spirit of the Bill, and with the equal treatment of religious bodies on which the framework is modelled.

The experience in Scotland is instructive. The Department has chosen to follow the Scottish framework, which is welcome. In practice, however, one organisation in Scotland has come to hold the dominant, permanently authorised position. Northern Ireland, North of Ireland, can adopt the Scottish structure while avoiding that single-incumbent outcome, by ensuring from the outset that recognition is open to every qualifying belief body on the same footing as religious bodies, with no permanent or exclusive authorisation reserved to any one organisation.

The Bill should not replace the previous lack of statutory recognition with a new model of institutional control. Couples should be able to choose from recognised, accountable humanist or non-religious belief bodies whose values, standards and celebrants best reflect their needs.

Choice matters because ceremonies are personal. A couple's relationship with their celebrant, their confidence in the organisation, and their sense that the ceremony reflects their values are all important.

Public confidence can be protected without requiring monopoly control. A fair statutory framework can allow more than one qualifying belief body to nominate officiants, provided each body meets appropriate standards. This better reflects the diversity of humanist practice and provides couples with meaningful choice.

5. The importance of non-religious belief ceremonies

Humanist ceremonies are personal, inclusive and grounded in the lives, values and relationships of the people involved.

A humanist wedding allows a couple to make a public commitment in language that reflects their own convictions. It may include personal vows, music, readings, symbolic gestures, family involvement and reflections on the couple's story. It is non-religious, but it is not without meaning, depth or seriousness.

For many couples, a civil ceremony meets the legal requirement but does not fully meet their emotional, ethical or personal needs. A humanist ceremony can provide a more meaningful option for those whose beliefs are non-religious.

Humanists Together believes that marriage law should support this choice.

6. Cross-border recognition and practical operation of officiants

Humanists Together asks the Committee to consider the cross-border reality of humanist belief, family life and ceremony practice on the island of Ireland.

Northern Ireland, North of Ireland, is a distinct legal jurisdiction, and we recognise that marriage law must operate within that framework. Couples, families, celebrants and belief communities, however, often live and work across the border.

This is not an abstract consideration for Humanists Together. As the first humanist organisation established on an all-Ireland basis, our celebrants and members are drawn from both jurisdictions, and many of the couples and families they serve have connections on both sides of the border. Humanist belief does not stop at a border.

For this reason, the implementation of the Bill should take account of cross-border practicalities. Humanists Together recommends that the Department and the Registrar General provide a clear process by which a recognised belief body may nominate suitably trained and accountable officiants who:

- live in Northern Ireland, North of Ireland;
- live elsewhere but are members of, or connected to, a recognised belief body operating in Northern Ireland, North of Ireland; or
- already hold recognised celebrant or solemniser status in another jurisdiction, subject to meeting the requirements of Northern Ireland marriage law.

This would not mean automatic recognition without scrutiny. It would mean a fair, transparent and workable process for assessing officiants who are already experienced, trained and accountable within a recognised humanist or belief framework. The aim is to remove an artificial barrier based on residence, not to lower the standard that officiants must meet.

We also recommend that guidance clarify how organisations operating on an all-island basis may apply for recognition, including where their membership and governance include celebrants from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

A narrow or overly localised interpretation of eligibility could unintentionally exclude credible organisations and experienced officiants. The legislation should support legal clarity while recognising the practical reality of humanist practice across Ireland.

7. Raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18

Humanists Together strongly supports raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18.

Marriage and civil partnership are adult legal commitments with significant personal, financial and social consequences. It is appropriate that the law should set a clear minimum age of 18.

The Bill makes provision for this and introduces an offence relating to conduct intended to cause a child to enter into marriage before their eighteenth birthday. Humanists Together supports this as an important safeguarding measure.

The change sends a clear message that children should not be placed under pressure, coercion or expectation to enter marriage. It also brings greater clarity to the law and better protects young people.

8. Implementation and guidance

Humanists Together recommends that clear guidance be developed for belief bodies, celebrants, registrars and couples as the Bill progresses. This guidance should address:

- the process for recognition of belief bodies;
- the objective criteria by which belief bodies will be assessed;
- the process for nominating, registering and removing officiants;
- the requirements for temporary authorisations;
- information for couples explaining the difference between civil, religious and belief marriages;
- a clear transition process for existing belief officiants operating under temporary arrangements; and
- expectations on safeguarding, complaints, professional standards and record keeping.

Guidance should be clear, practical and consistent across registration offices.

Humanists Together also recommends that the Department engage directly with more than one humanist or non-religious belief organisation when developing any regulations, guidance or implementation processes. This would help ensure that the final framework reflects the diversity of humanist practice and does not unintentionally favour one organisation.

9. Public confidence and professional standards

Humanists Together supports a framework that protects the integrity of marriage law.

Celebrants authorised to solemnise marriages should understand the legal responsibilities involved, and should work to appropriate professional and ethical standards.

Humanists Together supports the principle that recognised belief bodies should have clear internal processes for:

- the selection and authorisation of celebrants;
- training and continuing professional development;
- complaints and concerns;
- safeguarding;
- record keeping;
- supervision and peer support; and
- the removal of authorisation where necessary.

These standards help to protect couples, support public confidence and ensure that marriage ceremonies are conducted with care and legal accuracy. They should apply equally to all recognised bodies, which also reinforces the case for plurality: where several bodies operate to the same clear standards, no single body need act as gatekeeper for the rest.

Humanists Together would welcome the opportunity to work constructively with the Department, the Registrar General and the Committee to ensure that the framework is robust, fair and workable.

10. Human rights, equality and freedom of belief

The Bill supports freedom of belief and equality before the law.

For humanists and other non-religious people, this is not simply an administrative change. It recognises that non-religious beliefs can be coherent, ethical and deeply held.

It also recognises that people should not have to choose between a legally recognised ceremony and a ceremony that reflects their convictions.

Humanists Together believes that this is consistent with a modern, inclusive and plural society. The legal framework should recognise belief, not institutional dominance, and should ensure that credible non-religious belief bodies are treated fairly, transparently and proportionately.

11. Recommendations

Humanists Together recommends that:

- the Bill should proceed and should place non-religious belief marriages on a clear statutory footing;
- non-religious belief bodies should be treated in the same way as religious bodies, with each qualifying body able to nominate its own officiants and no organisation holding permanent or exclusive authorisation;
- the Bill, regulations and accompanying guidance should make clear that more than one non-religious belief body may be recognised;
- recognition should be based on objective criteria, not on organisational size, dominance, history or prior campaigning;

- any eligibility requirements made under the Department's regulation-making power should be objective, proportionate, applied equally to religious and belief bodies, and never used to confer exclusivity;
- the criteria for recognising belief bodies should be published and should be fair, transparent and proportionate;
- the framework should not create a monopoly or sole gatekeeper for humanist marriage, and should avoid the single-incumbent outcome seen in Scotland;
- couples should be able to choose from recognised, accountable humanist or non-religious belief bodies;
- the Department should consult more than one humanist or non-religious belief organisation when developing guidance and implementation;
- the framework should take account of cross-border realities, and recognised belief bodies should be able to nominate suitably qualified officiants regardless of the jurisdiction in which they reside, provided Northern Ireland requirements are met;
- guidance should address how all-island or cross-border belief bodies may apply for recognition;
- the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership should be raised to 18; and
- clear guidance should be provided to registrars, celebrants, couples and belief bodies.

Conclusion

Humanists Together strongly supports the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

We believe the Bill will provide legal certainty for non-religious belief marriages, treat religious and non-religious belief bodies more equally, give couples greater choice, and strengthen safeguarding by raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18.

The Bill must also secure fairness and pluralism within non-religious belief. Humanism should not be treated as the property of one organisation. The framework should allow any credible, accountable and properly constituted humanist or non-religious belief body to seek recognition on the basis of clear and objective criteria, on the same footing as religious bodies.

The question should not be which organisation is largest or most dominant. The question should be whether an organisation can demonstrate a clear belief basis, sound governance, accountability, professional standards and legal competence.

Humanists Together believes that this is the fairest and most principled approach. It protects couples, supports public confidence, respects freedom of belief, and ensures that the Bill fulfils its purpose of creating equality in marriage law.

Humanists Together would welcome the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee, particularly on the need for a fair, plural and proportionate recognition process for non-religious belief bodies that does not create a sole gatekeeper for humanist marriage.

References

[1] Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill: Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (as introduced), NIA Bill 30/22-27, Northern Ireland Assembly.

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[2] Department of Finance, news release on raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership. https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/news/raising-marriage-age-better-protects-our-children-and-young-people-odowd

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