FINANCE COMMITTEE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

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.

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS RESPONSE TO CALL FOR EVIDENCE

1. **What is your name?**

2. **What is your email address?**

3. **If you are providing a submission on behalf of an organisation, please state its name.**

Northern Ireland Humanists

4. **Do you consent to your submission being published on the Committee's website and included in the Committee's report?**

Yes

Clause 1: Belief bodies: registration of members to solemnise marriage.

5. **Do you agree that non-religious groups (for example humanists) should be allowed to register people to perform marriages in Northern Ireland, the same way religious groups can?**

Yes

Clause 2: Belief bodies: temporary authorisation to solemnise marriage.

6. **Do you think non-religious groups (for example humanists) should be allowed temporary permission to perform marriages like religious groups?**

Yes

7. **Should the Registrar General refuse temporary permission to groups that don't meet the eligibility requirements?**

Yes

Clause 3: Belief marriage: definitions

8. **Do you agree that references to religious bodies and marriages should be expanded to include belief bodies (for example humanists) and belief marriages (for example humanists' marriages)?**

Yes

9. **Do you agree that the definition of a "religious or belief body" should allow for different forms of organisation (for example, not requiring regular meetings for worship)?**

See our response to this question in 'additional comments'

Clause 4: Belief marriage: further provision

10. **Do you think belief bodies (for example humanists) should be treated the same as religious bodies under marriage law in Northern Ireland?**

Yes

11. **Do you think the minimum age for marriage should be increased from 16 to 18?**

Yes

Clause 12: Power to make consequential provision

16. **Do you agree that the Department of Finance should be able to make additional rules, including changing existing laws, to support this Act?**

Yes

17. **Are there any other comments you wish to make?**

About humanist ceremonies

A humanist wedding is a non-religious ceremony conducted by a humanist celebrant who shares the beliefs and values of the couple. Humanist weddings differ from other types of ceremony in that they are entirely individually crafted, a process that takes a significant period of time, to honestly reflect the humanist beliefs and values of the individuals involved. They are conducted by a celebrant who gets to know the couple well through the extensive process of creating the ceremony, and who shares their humanist beliefs and values. Humanist ceremonies can take place in any venue, indoors or outdoors, that has meaning and relevance to the couple or family.

There are over 550 trained and accredited celebrants who are part of Humanists UK's Humanist Ceremonies network, around 65 of whom are Northern Ireland Humanists wedding celebrants. Our celebrants conduct ceremonies across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Channel Islands, including legally recognised marriages in Northern Ireland from 2018, Jersey from 2019, and Guernsey from 2021. Our sister society, Humanist Society Scotland (HSS), has over 130 celebrants, has been conducting legally recognised marriages since 2005, and is now Scotland's largest provider of religion or belief marriages. We have a reciprocal arrangement with HSS by which we recognise each other's celebrants for occasional ceremonies in the other's jurisdictions.

We have been performing weddings for the duration of our history, since the 19th century. We believe we were the first organisation in the UK to perform non-religious weddings, and invented or pioneered most of the common features of such ceremonies today.

Humanist ceremonies are a manifestation of what it means to be a humanist, namely they are an expression of the belief that what gives our lives meaning is the meaning we create for ourselves, and the happiness we bring about in others. Humanist ceremonies are a reflection of what is most meaningful to the participants. They are built around the idea that the best ceremonies are all about the participants, their beliefs, their values, their family, their friends, and their wider place in the world. And they recognise the need to be inclusive of all those attending, and their diverse religions and beliefs.

The process of creating a thoughtful, meaningful, and personal wedding ceremony for a couple is extensive. Humanist celebrants can spend as much as 35 or 40 hours working closely with the couple, often even more. This is quite a lot longer than the average for people who preside over weddings, who in some cases may of course only turn up for the wedding itself. And that is because the process the humanist celebrant is engaged in is a lengthy one that is focused on getting to know the couple well, finding out what matters to them collectively, and helping the couple explore what most matters to them about each other, so that the ceremony produced can be as meaningful and have as strong a lasting impact as possible. Along similar lines, it is therefore seen as important that the ceremony happens in whatever location is most meaningful to the couple.

The role of the celebrant is vital in such ceremonies, and ensuring the highest of standards is therefore essential. People who come to Northern Ireland Humanists for training as celebrants undergo a rigorous application and training process, with no guarantee of success. Our courses run for three months and include an induction day, two residential training sessions, coursework, and a mentor to support with the training from the outset (and give trainee celebrants the chance to observe a practising celebrant conduct ceremonies). No celebrant can practice/operate until they are accredited, which many applicants and trainees are not. Once accredited, they become a part of a growing national network who have professional indemnity insurance, are quality-assured, and are regulated by a code of conduct.

To retain accreditation status, celebrants are required to pursue continuing professional development to ensure they uphold the highest standards, undertaking their work with compassion and dignity. Our celebrants have a lot of support once they become accredited to the network, with a coordinator for each region and nation; local groups, upon whom they can rely for support and sharing of good practice; as well as an entire online resource and support system. As well as this, there is also a dedicated team of staff who work tirelessly to support the whole network and build understanding about humanist ceremonies with the wider public.

We have strict standards that need to be met to gain accreditation and remain accredited, and we offer our network a range of opportunities to improve their own practice, be it CPD sessions, conferences, or access to online support. Should a celebrant not meet our standards, there is a rigorous quality assurance process that allows us to work with the celebrant to address the

problems, and, if that doesn't work, to de-accredit (i.e. remove) them from the network. We also have a rigorous complaints procedure for the couples and industry partners we work with, if one of our celebrants does not meet the standards they or we expect. With that said, complaints are rare and our celebrants on average are rated five out of five 97% of the time, by those who have taken them on for a ceremony.

Northern Ireland Humanists' response to the Bill

Northern Ireland Humanists welcomes the introduction of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. We strongly support the Bill's central aim of placing humanist marriages on an explicit statutory footing in Northern Ireland.

Humanist marriages have been legally recognised in Northern Ireland since 2018, following the successful legal challenge brought by humanists and the subsequent approach taken by the General Register Office to read belief marriages into the existing provisions for religious marriages. The Bill is therefore a welcome and necessary step in putting that position beyond doubt and ensuring that humanist couples and celebrants are afforded equal treatment, recognition, and respect under marriage law.

However, while we welcome the Bill, we believe it should be amended to introduce clear qualifying criteria for religious and belief bodies seeking authorisation to solemnise marriages. This would address current serious existing problems in the law. This would see the Bill move away from using what is referred to as the 'Scotland 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. We expand on this below.

Recent Scottish Government whistleblower leak

A recent whistleblower leak from National Records Scotland has revealed the significant problems with the current Scottish system. A report in the *Sunday Post* outlined how:

> [T]here has been 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.
>
> …
>
> Temporary permissions were originally designed to be a rare occurrence but insiders warn a lack of proper controls or oversight has led to a burgeoning black market of those looking to exploit the system for cash.
>
> …
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> One whistleblower pointed to the list of requirements a celebrant must go through to ensure a couple is legally married, including making sure the correct legal declarations are made in front of witnesses.

> He said a lack of structure, training and compliance makes it impossible for the Registrar General to ensure weddings are being conducted in accordance with the law.
> …
> *The Sunday Post* has seen evidence dating back to 2017 that includes letters, emails, legal opinion from a leading KC and a privately-funded investigation into the matter paid for by Humanist Society Scotland.
>
> The documents raise major doubts about the authenticity of many of the organisations solemnising marriage in Scotland and the recurring and consecutive use of temporary authorisations for groups.
>
> Despite claiming to be belief groups, many appear to have no followers and do not hold any regular meetings – both key tests in the legislation. If they are not belief groups, officials are compelled by law to remove their authorisation.
>
> The law also prohibits organisations from running a commercial wedding business but many appear to be aggressively marketing themselves as such on social media. Some have even falsely represented themselves as charities.
>
> From a free giant game of Jenga to upselling entertainment and DJ packages, some of the groups investigated were found to be extraordinarily blatant in offering commercial services alongside weddings.
> …
> In another instance, 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."[1]

That last problem is worth emphasising: if a celebrant is expelled from a legitimate provider's network for failing to meet its standards, or a prospective celebrant is refused training or subsequent accreditation for similar reasons, that individual could easily then instead join some other authorised provider, or has even set one up. It very much undermines the ability of the legitimate provider to maintain a high standard of their own ceremonies, to maintain the integrity of their religion or belief, or to impose serious consequences when a celebrant misbehaves. We at Northern Ireland Humanists have also received complaints about the quality of our ceremonies, only for when we investigated, it to turn out it wasn't our celebrant.

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on its family law including qualifying requirements for religious and belief bodies to meet when they solemnise marriage or civil partnership. We urge Northern Ireland to do so now, and get the law right from the start, rather than having to change it years on.

<u>How the Bill should be amended: criteria for belief marriages</u>

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

We want to see the Bill amended to use a modified version of the 'Dublin model', which operates for belief marriages in RoI. 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 of the Dublin model 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.

We would be concerned if the Dublin model was adopted outright, as it excludes groups that promote political causes, and this is a major problem. This is because religious groups in Northern Ireland (and, for that matter, the Republic of Ireland) can be authorised to conduct marriages while also being able to promote political causes. So it would be discriminatory to restrict humanist groups from being able to do likewise. We campaign for a wide variety of political causes, from inclusive schools to the repeal of blasphemy laws. If we were prohibited from doing so then we would consider that to be a serious breach of humanists' rights, under article 14 (taken with article 9) of the Convention.

<u>Specific criteria that could be considered</u>
In light of the above, we recommend the Bill is amended to include specific criteria that should be considered before the GRO authorises a belief group to conduct weddings, should include that belief group must:
i. have a wedding service and belief about marriage that is rooted in its belief system;
ii. have as its principal or sole purpose the advancement of its religion or belief;
iii. principally be engaged in activity other than the provision of legally recognised marriages and/or the training and accreditation of celebrants for conducting such marriages;
iv. be a registered religion or belief charity in the UK or Republic of Ireland, possibly for a set minimum period of time – as is a requirement in the Republic of Ireland[2]
v. have been in continuous existence as a religion or belief body operating in Northern Ireland for a set minimum period of time, e.g. five years, as is the case in the Republic of Ireland[3], or ten, as has previously been proposed in England and Wales (this criterion being crucial to prevent entryism). We note that in Australia this is a requirement for three years[4];
vi. have been performing weddings (potentially without legal recognition) in Northern Ireland for its members for a set period of time, e.g. five years – as has previously been proposed

[2] Civil Registration Act 2004, section 45A(1)(g): http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/48/section/3/enacted/en/html
[3] Civil Registration Act 2004, section 45A(1)(f)
[4] Australian Government. Recognised religious denominations for the purposes of the Marriage Act 1961. https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/marriage/recognised-religious-denominations

in England and Wales (again this could help with entryism)[5]
vii. have in place procedures for the selection, initial and continuing training, accreditation, discipline, and de-accreditation, of fit and proper persons to conduct solemnisation of marriage, that are to the satisfaction of the registrar general – as has previously been proposed in England and Wales[6], and is the case in the Republic of Ireland[7] and Australia – such training to include the legal aspects of conducting a recognised marriage[8];
viii. have a higher minimum number of members based in Northern Ireland who should sign a statement of support for such legal recognition being granted – we think some way higher than 50 (we note that in Australia a 'substantial'[9] number of members is required);
ix. have regular meetings of its members for the purpose of worship or in furtherance of their religion or belief – which we think should be interpreted to mean at least monthly.

Response to question 9: Do you agree that the definition of a "religious or belief body" should allow for different forms of organisation (for example, not requiring regular meetings for worship)?
We were not sure of the exact meaning of this question in the survey questionnaire so in line with advice from the Committee clerk, we have responded to it as we understand it here.

We agree that different forms of organisation should be permitted which apply to both religious or belief bodies e.g. humanist groups, however we view this should at the very least be amended in line with the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 which sets out in Chapter 3 (4) (a) (b) 'the principal object (or one of the principal objects) of which is to uphold or promote philosophical beliefs and **which meets regularly for that purpose**" [emphasis added]. The requirement to meet regularly would raise the bar to make sure that groups are not primarily set up for the purpose of providing weddings.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact:

Coordinator of Northern Ireland Humanists

humanists.uk

[5] e.g. Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill Second Marshalled List of Amendments to be moved in Committee, House of Lords, 18 June 2013, amendments 22A and 27A: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2013-2014/0029/amend/ml029-ii.htm
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Civil Registration Act 2004, section 45A(1)(e)
[8] Australian Government. Recognised religious denominations for the purposes of the Marriage Act 1961. https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/marriage/recognised-religious-denominations
[9] *Ibid.*