NSPCC
NORTHERN IRELAND

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NSPCC Northern Ireland Response to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Finance Call for Views on the Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill

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Introduction

The NSPCC is the leading children's charity fighting to prevent child abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. We help children who have been abused to rebuild their lives, protect those at risk, and find the best ways of preventing abuse from every happening. To achieve our vision, we:

- create, deliver and evaluate services for children which are innovative, distinctive and demonstrate how to enhance child protection;
- provide advice and support to ensure that every child is listened to; and
- campaign for changes to legislation, policy and practice to ensure the best protection for children.

The NSPCC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Finance's call for views on the Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill. Our comments are limited to the proposal to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years, which we strongly welcome.

We previously responded to the Department of Finance's public consultation on Marriage Law in 2022, where we supported calls to raise the minimum age at which people can legally marry or enter into a civil partnership from 16 to 18. Under the Marriage (NI) Order 2003 and the Marriage Regulations (NI) Order 2003, young people aged 16 and 17 can marry with parental consent in Northern Ireland. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has criticised the availability of marriage to 16 and 17 year olds both here and in other jurisdictions.

We are also aware of a wider campaign against child marriage which has been supported by international non-governmental organisations, local groups and stakeholders. It is important to note that the minimum age of marriage has now increased in England and Wales through the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, which gained Royal Assent in April 2022 and came into force in February 2023. We note that in the Republic of Ireland, the law has also already been changed.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Royal Patron: Her Majesty The Queen. President: HRH The Countess of Wessex. Founded in 1884. Incorporated by Royal Charter RC000374. Registered charity number 216401 (England and Wales) and SC037717 (Scotland).

With other countries raising the minimum age of marriage to 18, there could be a risk in relation to possible marriages taking place in Northern Ireland where one or both of the parties are under eighteen.

Across the UK, we afford 16 and 17 year olds certain rights and freedoms in recognition of their degree of maturity, but have safeguards in place to ensure they are protected from abuse by adults around them. The NSPCC fully supports efforts to protect 16 and 17 year olds from being coerced into marriage.

We agreed with and supported the Department of Finances's stated intention in the 2022 consultation that, "*minimum age regulations are intended, primarily, to protect children from being coaxed or coerced into marriage as well as to ensure that children can experience and enjoy their childhoods and fully avail of opportunities such as education.*"[1]

We recognise that legislation against forced marriage is already in place. The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 applies in Northern Ireland and enables a court to issue a Forced Marriage Protection Order for a person who is either threatened with or already in a forced marriage. Similarly, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act 2015 criminalises forced marriage whether it has taken place in this jurisdiction or elsewhere. It is important to note that according to the 2022 consultation document, the majority of the marriages in Northern Ireland that involved under 18s were marriages where one or both parties were from outside the jurisdiction – accounting for 65% of registered child marriages in 2018; rising to 71% in 2019.[2] We welcome clause 6 of the Bill which creates an offence relating to any conduct for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage before 18, whether or not the conduct is carried out in Northern Ireland.

The NSPCC previously encouraged the Department to engage proactively with representatives from communities which would be particularly affected by any legal change on the minimimum age of marriage, especially children and young people themselves. It is essential that this engagement continues as the legislation take effect and to inform implementation. It is also critical that awareness raising efforts are taken forward to ensure the public in Northern Ireland is aware of legislative change, and the rationale for taking this forward. We had previously advised that the Department consider what learning there is from other jurisdictions, on their

[1] Public Consultation on Marriage Law | Department of Finance, page 25.
[2] As above.

approaches to the age of marriage and appropriate safeguards for 16 and 17 year olds. This should inform efforts and approaches to implement legal change.

We also encourage ongoing training designed to facilitate recognition of the signs of coercive marriage in schools. The latest Forced Marriage Unit Statistics published by the Home Office show that in 2025, 28% of referrals were made by social services, 13% by the police, and 6% by education professionals. Just 14% of referrals were made by victims seeking support and guidance. 23% of cases were referred by friends, partners, family members, colleagues, health professionals, NGOs and others.[3] The NSPCC would also highlight the availability of the Childline service for children who wish to avail of its support, and the NSPCC's Helpline service for adults with any concerns about a child.

Conclusion

The NSPCC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Committee's call for views on the Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill, and specifically to comment on the NSPCC's welcoming of the proposal to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18, in line with legislative changes that have taken place in England and Wales. We view the legislative proposals as critical in wider efforts aiming to keep children safe and to live a life free of coercion and abuse.

[3] Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2025 - GOV.UK