Supplementary written evidence

Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill, NIA Bill 30/22-27

From: Humanists Together Ltd, NI730734 | To: The Clerk, Committee for Finance | Date: 2 October 2026

Summary

- Humanists Together supports the Bill and wants it enacted within this mandate, including raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen (1.2).
- Humanists Together is a not for profit humanist organisation governed by a Board, with celebrant members, ordinary members and a wider community of supporters. Its origins are in a humanist community organisation and it was not created simply to provide legal wedding ceremonies (3.1 and 3.2).
- We correct one date from our oral evidence: the 5,000th legally recognised humanist marriage took place on 4 October 2025, not 2024 (2.1).
- The income figures we gave were estimates, not audited figures, built from figures Humanists UK has itself provided or published, and we stand over them. During the Chief Executive's five years as a Humanists UK celebrant, every couple was required to pay a compulsory £40 administration fee, with a year's membership included automatically; we understand that remains the practice (2.2).
- Celebrants now in Humanists Together had conducted 1,878 legally recognised humanist marriages by 4 October 2025 and 2,258 by 31 August 2026, over 96% of them in Northern Ireland (2.3).
- Humanists Together has seventeen celebrant members, all registered officiants. It charges couples no fee, has received no complaints, and self-disclosed one procedural issue, on which the General Register Office confirmed the celebrant acted correctly (3 and 4).
- Every celebrant is referenced, AccessNI checked and trained in marriage law, with continuing assessment to follow. The Board can suspend or withdraw accreditation (5).
- Qualifying requirements should test standards, not size or age. We would not object to the Scottish wording. We oppose membership and age thresholds on the Republic of Ireland model, and a qualifying period of non-legal ceremonies (6).
- We propose eight qualifying requirements, applied consistently to religious and belief bodies, with authorised bodies consulted before regulations are made (7).
- Humanists Together would not oppose consideration of a separate legal framework for independent celebrants, provided equivalent standards and protections for couples apply (8).
- We would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Deputy Chairperson's consideration of her amendment, and to engage with the Department and the General Register Office on future qualifying requirements (9).

Key figures

Celebrant members	Seventeen, all registered officiants with the General Register Office
Authorised by the General Register Office	June 2025
Legal humanist marriages conducted by our celebrants	1,878 to 4 October 2025; 2,258 to 31 August 2026
Other ceremonies conducted by our celebrants	382 funerals, 143 commitment ceremonies, 74 naming ceremonies
Ceremonies conducted for no fee	71
Fee charged to couples by Humanists Together	None
Chief Executive's pay	£1 per year
Annual budget	Approximately £10,000 to £15,000
Formal complaints received since inception	None

1 Introduction

1.1 Humanists Together gave oral evidence to the Committee on 23 September 2026. This supplementary evidence provides information we undertook to supply, clarifies points made during our oral evidence, responds to matters raised about our organisation during the preceding evidence session, and sets out our position on the definition of a belief body and on future qualifying requirements.

1.2 Our position remains unchanged. Humanists Together supports the Bill and wants to see it enacted within this mandate. We support raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen. We ask that any requirements applying to bodies which solemnise marriage are objective, published and applied consistently to religious and belief bodies.

1.3 This supplementary evidence was reviewed and approved by the Board of Humanists Together at its meeting on 30 September 2026 and represents the agreed position of the organisation.

2 Clarifications to our oral evidence

2.1 During oral evidence I incorrectly referred at one stage to 2024 when discussing the 5,000th legally recognised humanist marriage. The correct year is 2025. NISRA has confirmed that the 5,000th legally recognised humanist marriage took place on 4 October 2025.

2.2 In answering a question about commercial activity I referred to estimates of another organisation's income from celebrant training, of around £170,000 based on around 100 celebrants trained over several years, and from the administration fee it charges couples. Those were estimates, not audited figures, and I present them as such. They are reasonable estimates built from figures Humanists UK has itself provided.

Humanists UK told the Committee that it has 70 wedding celebrants in Northern Ireland. Its current published fee for its wedding celebrant training course is £2,307 including VAT. Seventy celebrants at that fee is £161,490, before counting celebrants it has trained who have since left, and before its separate training courses for funeral and naming celebrants.

I also referred to a £40 charge to couples. That was not an estimate. During my five years as a Humanists UK celebrant, every couple married by a Humanists UK celebrant was charged a compulsory administration fee of £40, paid directly to Humanists UK. The fee was separate from the legal paperwork, which is processed by the couple and the local registrar and for which the couple already pay the registrar £22 per person. A year's membership of Humanists UK was included with the fee automatically. Couples living outside the United Kingdom paid it too, and where a couple did not pay, the celebrant was expected to pursue it. I understand that remains the practice. Five thousand legal marriages at £40 is £200,000, and each of those couples also became members of Humanists UK for a year. I am content for the Committee to treat both figures on that basis.

The point I intended to make is about transparency: couples should be able to tell which charges are statutory and which are an organisation's own, and what they are being enrolled in when they pay. Our position is at 3.2, 4.1 and 7.1(g).

2.3 I also referred to approximately 2,000 legal marriages conducted across the careers of the sixteen celebrants who were members of Humanists Together at the time of our oral evidence. Most of those marriages were conducted while those celebrants were accredited with other bodies.

We have since verified that figure. By 4 October 2025, the date on which NISRA records the 5,000th legally recognised humanist marriage in Northern Ireland, celebrants who are now members of Humanists Together had conducted 1,878 legally recognised humanist marriages. By 31 August 2026 that figure was 2,258. Those marriages took place in Northern Ireland and Scotland, over 96% of them in Northern Ireland. The figure is not presented as a total conducted under Humanists Together's authorisation, and we make no claim to those marriages on behalf of the organisation.

We have not included a celebrant by celebrant breakdown, as doing so would unnecessarily disclose information about the historic professional practice of individual members. The underlying working is available to the Committee in confidence on request.

3 Humanists Together

3.1 **Origins and development.** The first meeting of Common Ground Humanists took place in December 2019. From 2020 until shortly before our authorisation by the General Register Office, the organisation operated as Common Ground Humanists.

The decision to become Humanists Together reflected the direction in which the organisation was developing. The change in name provided an opportunity to professionalise the organisation further, strengthen its identity and adopt a name capable of representing and engaging with communities across this island and more widely across these islands.

Humanists Together Ltd is a company limited by guarantee and operates on a not for profit basis. It is governed by a Board and was authorised by the General Register Office in June 2025 to nominate officiants.

Humanists Together was not created simply to provide legal wedding ceremonies. Its origins are in a humanist community organisation, and humanism remains central to its objects, governance, activities and ceremonies.

3.2 **Membership and growth.** Humanists Together currently has seventeen celebrant members. At the time of our oral evidence on 23 September, we had sixteen. One further experienced humanist celebrant has joined since that hearing.

Humanists Together also has ordinary members and a wider community of supporters who engage with the organisation without necessarily seeking formal membership.

Applications for wider ordinary membership are temporarily paused while the organisation completes its strategic planning. Recruitment of experienced humanist celebrants has not been paused. We continue to receive interest from experienced humanist celebrants, and a number of applicants who have completed our recruitment process currently have offers of membership under consideration.

We have received enquiries from Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales, and Scotland.

We have not yet opened training for people seeking to become humanist celebrants for the first time. Our present priority is to integrate and support the experienced humanist celebrants seeking to join us while continuing to develop the organisation's governance, systems and capacity.

Humanists Together does not require couples to become members, or to pay the organisation any fee, in order to be married by one of our celebrants.

3.3 **Website.** During the preceding evidence session, reference was made to my personal celebrant website. Earlier in September 2026, that website was temporarily replaced by a holding page following a technical failure. It was restored before the Committee meeting concluded on 23 September, including the reference to my being a humanist celebrant.

For approximately six years before that technical failure, my website consistently identified me as a humanist celebrant and contained material about humanism, humanist ceremonies and my own humanist values. The same identification has been reflected consistently across my professional social media and published material.

3.4 **Charitable registration and pay.** Humanists Together is currently engaged with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland in relation to charitable registration.

The Chief Executive is paid £1 per year. Our annual accounts will be published on our website.

3.5 **Governance and continuity.** Our Board has deliberately built continuity and succession into the organisation's governance. Our constitutional arrangements are intended to support leadership

change over time while retaining organisational knowledge, professional standards and accountability.

3.6 We also note the evidence given in the preceding session that the existence of other humanist organisations operating within the rules was not itself considered problematic. We agree. Our concern is that those rules should be objective, published and applied consistently.

4 Information invited by the Committee

4.1 **Current numbers.** Humanists Together currently has seventeen celebrant members, all of whom are registered officiants with the General Register Office.

Humanists Together also has ordinary members and a wider community of people who engage with the organisation through its newsletter, social media and other activities. We do not aggregate those different categories into a single membership and supporters figure, as they represent different forms of membership and engagement.

The Committee heard a figure of 6,500 "members and supporters" for Northern Ireland Humanists. Combined figures of this kind may be constructed differently between organisations and are therefore not necessarily directly comparable.

During my five years as a Humanists UK celebrant, every couple paid a compulsory administration fee of £40 for a legal humanist marriage, with a year's membership of Humanists UK included automatically. Humanists Together does not charge couples an administration fee and does not enrol couples as members as a consequence of being married by one of its celebrants.

Across their careers to 31 August 2026, our celebrants have conducted 2,258 legally recognised humanist marriages (see 2.3), 382 funerals, 143 non-legal commitment ceremonies and 74 naming ceremonies.

4.2 **Authorisation.** Humanists Together was authorised by the General Register Office in June 2025 to nominate officiants.

4.3 **Engagement with the General Register Office.** Humanists Together has developed an online marriage law theory test for its celebrants and has shared it with the General Register Office for review and comment. The test is described at 5.2.

4.4 **Regulatory record.** Humanists Together identified and self disclosed a procedural issue, which rested with the couple, concerning a marriage I had conducted. I recused myself and the investigation was led by our Chair. A full internal investigation was carried out. The General Register Office subsequently confirmed that the celebrant acted correctly.

4.5 **Complaints.** No formal complaints have been received since the organisation's inception, either as Common Ground Humanists or as Humanists Together.

A formal complaints procedure is in place and is available to couples, venues and members of the public.

4.6 **Fees and budget.** Humanists Together does not charge couples an administration fee.

Our annual organisational budget is approximately £10,000 to £15,000. It is funded principally through membership subscriptions and celebrant joining fees and supports training, vetting, safeguarding, governance and administration.

4.7 **Ceremonies without a fee.** Our celebrants conduct many ceremonies for no fee at all. Between them they have conducted 71 such ceremonies to 31 August 2026.

5 Standards applied by Humanists Together

5.1 **Before nomination.** Experienced humanist celebrants applying to join Humanists Together complete an application and recruitment process, provide references, are checked through

AccessNI and complete our legal training module, Legal Practice: Solemnising Marriage in Northern Ireland, together with its assessment.

Previous accreditation elsewhere does not exempt an experienced celebrant from completing Humanists Together's legal training requirements.

Humanists Together has not yet opened its training programme for people seeking to become humanist celebrants for the first time.

5.2 **Continuing competence.** Humanists Together has developed an online marriage law theory test for its celebrants. The assessment is currently in its testing phase and has been shared with the General Register Office for review and comment. We expect the testing phase to conclude by the end of October 2026.

Each sitting draws twenty questions at random from a bank of fifty. Once fully implemented, each celebrant's profile on the Humanists Together website will show the date on which they most recently completed the marriage law assessment successfully.

The purpose is to ensure that knowledge of marriage law is not treated as a one off requirement at the point of accreditation. It will instead be subject to continuing assessment, with the question bank updated as marriage law and regulatory requirements change.

5.3 **Policies and records.** Humanists Together maintains policies covering safeguarding, complaints, conduct, equality and data protection, together with a celebrant handbook. We have a Designated Safeguarding Officer in post.

Records relating to celebrants, accreditation, vetting, nominations and ceremonies are held centrally in accordance with our data protection arrangements.

Our policies, governance documentation and training materials are available to the Committee on request.

5.4 **Enforcement.** Our Board has the authority to suspend or withdraw a celebrant's accreditation. Where accreditation is withdrawn, Humanists Together will notify the General Register Office.

5.5 Humanists Together would be content for the standards described in this section to inform published qualifying requirements applying consistently to religious and belief bodies.

5.6 **Bursaries.** Earlier this year Humanists Together announced more than £15,000 of celebrant training bursaries for its planned 2027 to 2028 training intake.

The bursary programme is intended to reduce financial barriers to entry for people from underrepresented groups and people from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, creating opportunities for people who may otherwise be unable to access professional celebrant training to train as humanist celebrants and serve within their own communities.

The bursaries will support places on the Humanists Together training programme when that route opens for the 2027 to 2028 intake. Bursary support will not alter the training, assessment or professional standards required. Bursary recipients will be required to meet the same standards as every other person entering the programme.

6 Definition of a belief body and qualifying requirements

6.1 **Definition.** Clause 3 of the Bill currently defines a religious or belief body as an organised group of people which either meets regularly for common religious worship or has, as a principal object or one of its principal objects, the upholding or promotion of philosophical beliefs. The Bill therefore does not presently include a separate requirement that a belief body meet regularly for that purpose.

The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum reflects the Department's intention that religious and belief bodies should be brought within the same statutory framework while recognising that they may organise themselves differently.

6.2 **Scottish wording.** Scottish legislation defines a belief body by reference both to the promotion or upholding of philosophical beliefs and to meeting regularly for that purpose.

Humanists Together itself meets regularly, both as a wider organisation and through groups within the organisation. We would therefore not object to the Scottish wording being reflected in the Bill, provided that the drafting recognises the different ways in which belief bodies may meet and organise and that the wider regulatory framework continues to apply consistent standards to religious and belief bodies.

We consider regular organisational activity to be a different question from imposing arbitrary thresholds based principally on the size or age of an organisation.

6.3 **Republic of Ireland model.** The Committee has also considered the model operating in the Republic of Ireland. Section 45A of the Civil Registration Act 2004, inserted by the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012, places specific statutory requirements on a secular body seeking recognition. These include having at least 50 members, meeting regularly in relation to its beliefs, having written procedures for selecting, training and accrediting solemnisers, having existed continuously for at least five years, having held the relevant tax exempt status for five years, operating on a non profit basis and maintaining a register of members.

We ask the Committee to consider three aspects of that model.

First, those specific statutory thresholds form part of the definition of a secular body. The same size, age and five year tax status requirements are not contained in the statutory definition of a religious body.

Second, some elements of the Irish model test matters directly relevant to marriage regulation, including training, accreditation, governance and organisational purpose. Humanists Together supports rigorous standards of that kind.

Third, numerical membership thresholds and minimum periods of existence test the size and age of an organisation rather than, by themselves, the quality of its governance or the competence and accountability of its officiants. Their practical effect is to restrict access to recognition for newer or smaller secular organisations regardless of whether those organisations can demonstrate robust standards.

Our preference is therefore for requirements that test governance, training, safeguarding, accountability and continuing competence directly rather than using organisational size or age as proxies for those standards.

6.4 **Qualifying period.** It was also suggested by Northern Ireland Humanists in the preceding evidence session that a new humanist organisation might be required to serve a qualifying period, during which its celebrants could conduct non-legal wedding ceremonies, before being authorised by the General Register Office to nominate officiants.

In our view that proposal is neither practical nor implementable. A couple married in a non-legal humanist ceremony must also go through a separate civil marriage to be legally married. That was the position of every humanist couple in Northern Ireland before 2017, and it is the position Humanists UK itself went to court to end, in the case brought by Laura Lacole and Eunan O'Kane with its support. A qualifying period of that kind would reintroduce, for couples who choose a newer organisation, the two-ceremony arrangement which humanist organisations campaigned to remove. It would also test the age of an organisation rather than its standards, for the reasons given at 6.3.

7 Proposed qualifying requirements

7.1 The Bill already provides that an application may be rejected where a religious or belief body does not meet qualifying requirements prescribed by regulations. Those regulations would require approval by the Assembly.

Humanists Together believes those requirements should focus on whether a religious or belief body can demonstrate that it:

(a) is properly constituted with the upholding or promotion of its religion or belief as a principal object and undertakes activity in pursuit of that object beyond solemnising marriage;

(b) trains and assesses its officiants before nomination and provides for continuing competence and professional development;

(c) requires its officiants to undergo AccessNI vetting;

(d) maintains effective safeguarding, complaints and conduct arrangements, including an accessible complaints route for couples;

(e) maintains central records concerning officiants and ceremonies under appropriate data protection arrangements;

(f) has an effective governing body capable of suspending or withdrawing accreditation and notifying the Registrar General where accreditation is withdrawn;

(g) does not impose on couples, as a condition of being married by one of its officiants, a compulsory administration or membership fee payable to the body itself over and above any charge for the ceremony or the use of premises; and

(h) maintains transparent financial arrangements and operates its functions relating to the nomination and oversight of officiants on a not for profit basis.

These requirements concern charges levied by the nominating body and do not prevent individual officiants from charging professional fees for celebrancy services.

7.2 These requirements would address concerns raised during the Committee's evidence sessions about commercial activity, accountability and record keeping without assuming that a particular headcount or founding date is itself evidence of good governance.

They could also be applied consistently to religious and belief bodies.

7.3 **Charitable status.** Humanists Together is pursuing charitable registration and considers charitable status capable of providing useful evidence about an organisation's purposes, governance and public benefit.

We do not, however, believe charitable status by itself demonstrates that an organisation has the marriage specific competence, safeguards or accountability required to nominate officiants.

If charitable status forms part of any future qualifying framework, it should sit alongside substantive requirements concerning governance, training, vetting, safeguarding, complaints, record keeping and accountability. Any requirement should be objective, proportionate and applied consistently to religious and belief bodies, with appropriate arrangements for organisations progressing through the registration process.

7.4 **Consultation.** Humanists Together believes bodies already authorised under the existing arrangements should be consulted before qualifying requirements are made or materially amended.

Qualifying requirements should be objective, published and should not depend upon recognition by, or membership of, another national or international organisation.

7.5 Humanists Together supports the Bill being enacted within this mandate. If the Committee considers that greater certainty is required on the face of the Bill, the standards identified above provide one possible framework for its consideration.

8 Independent celebrants

8.1 Mr Tennyson raised the question of whether a separate framework for independent celebrants could address the possibility of individuals seeking to operate through belief bodies principally in order to obtain authority to solemnise marriages.

We recognise the concern underlying that question. In our view, however, the principal safeguard should be the standards applied to the body nominating the officiant rather than simply the route through which an individual came to celebrancy.

Experienced independent celebrants can move into established belief organisations subject to those organisations' recruitment, training and accreditation requirements. Previous independent practice therefore does not itself determine whether the belief body through which someone subsequently operates is legitimate or appropriately governed.

The relevant regulatory questions are whether the individual is properly trained, assessed and vetted and whether the nominating body provides effective governance, safeguarding, complaints arrangements, record keeping and accountability.

Humanists Together would not oppose consideration of a separate legal framework for independent celebrants provided equivalent standards and protections for couples applied.

Our principal concern in relation to this Bill is that the belief body route remains objective, transparent and properly regulated.

9 Assistance to the Committee

9.1 During our oral evidence, the Deputy Chairperson, Ms Diane Forsythe, indicated that she was considering an amendment concerning the definition or qualification of belief bodies. Humanists Together would welcome the opportunity to contribute directly to her consideration of that amendment and to provide any further information which may assist the Committee.

9.2 We would also welcome engagement with the Department and the General Register Office on the content of any future qualifying requirements. Our training materials, policies and governance records are available to the Committee on request.

Humanists Together has also recently submitted evidence to the Ministry of Justice consultation on reform of weddings law in England and Wales, drawing on experience gained under the arrangements operating in Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland. Our engagement reflects the wider relevance of these questions across Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, and the value of sharing experience on marriage law, regulation and celebrant standards across these islands.

9.3 We are grateful to local registrars for their engagement with our celebrants and to the Committee for the opportunity to provide supplementary evidence.

Michael Conlon

Chief Executive, Humanists Together

ceo@humaniststogether.com | chairperson@humaniststogether.com | www.humaniststogether.com