

Committee for Finance

Report on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

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Report: NIA 208/22-27 Committee for Finance.

Contents

Powers and Membership 3

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report 5

Executive Summary 6

Introduction 9

Committee Approach 11

Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill 60

Links to Appendices 62

- Appendix 1: Memoranda and Papers from the Department of Finance 62
- Appendix 2: Memoranda and Papers from Others 62
- Appendix 3: Minutes of Proceedings 62
- Appendix 4: Minutes of Evidence 62
- Appendix 5: Written submissions 62
- Appendix 6: Research Papers 62
- Appendix 7: Other Documents relating to the report 62
- Appendix 8: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee 62

Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Finance is a statutory departmental committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department of Finance and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- consider relevant subordinate legislation and take the Committee Stage of primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise

Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Matthew O'Toole (Chairperson)
- Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Steve Aiken MLA
- Gerry Carroll MLA
- Deirdre Hargey MLA
- Áine Murphy MLA*

- Harry Harvey MLA**
- Brian Kingston MLA***
- Áine Murphy MLA*
- Eóin Tennyson MLA

* Ms Áine Murphy replaced Miss Jemma Dolan with effect from 7 September 2026.

** Mr Harry Harvey replaced Mr Paul Frew with effect from 23 September 2025.

*** Mr Brian Kingston replaced Mr Phillip Brett with effect from 23 September 2025.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

DoF: Department of Finance

RalSe: [Assembly] Research and Information Service

GCCM: Give Couples a Choice Movement

NICCY: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

NSS: National Secular Society

PCI: Presbyterian Church in Ireland

NI Humanists: Northern Ireland Humanists

GRO: General Register Office

RG: Registrar General

ECHR: European Convention on Human Rights

Executive Summary

1. This report sets out the Committee for Finance's consideration of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. The Bill is an amending Bill, which seeks to amend existing marriage and civil partnership legislation in Northern Ireland. It consists of thirteen clauses across three Parts and a Schedule, and has two main purposes.

2. First, the Bill will bring non-religious belief marriages within the statutory framework of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 ("the 2003 Order"), as amended. This builds on temporary arrangements that have been in place following the judgment in the *Smyth* case. In that case, a couple with humanist beliefs challenged the decision of the Registrar General to refuse authorisation for a humanist celebrant to conduct a marriage ceremony. The High Court found that the provisions of the 2003 Order were not compliant with the human rights of the couple and determined that belief marriages should be treated in the same way as religious marriages. While the Court of Appeal took a different approach to enabling marriages to take place with belief officiants, the former Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, agreed that temporary arrangements should be observed to permit belief marriages to proceed in the same way as religious marriages. The first purpose of the Bill is therefore to place non-religious belief marriages on a clear statutory footing and to make the necessary amendments to the 2003 Order.

3. For over 20 years, the 2003 Order has provided a consistent statutory framework for the preliminary requirements applicable to all couples seeking to marry in Northern Ireland. The temporary arrangements have also enabled several thousand belief marriages to be conducted in recent years, again in a manner that appears to have worked well. However, the Department recognises that, for both religious and non-religious belief marriages, it is sensible to future-proof the legislation so that it can respond more easily to any difficulties that may arise. The Bill therefore provides a power for the Department of Finance (the "Department") to introduce additional qualifying requirements for religious and non-religious belief bodies, should these be considered necessary in future.

4. The second aspect of the Bill relates to the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership. Currently, a person aged 16 or 17 may marry or form a civil partnership where the relevant consents are in place, usually parental consent. International research and best practice indicate that child marriage can be detrimental for a range of reasons, and the Department's consultation showed almost total support for raising the minimum age to 18 for both marriage and civil partnership.

5. Part 2 of the Bill therefore increases the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18. It also introduces a new offence of carrying out conduct for the purpose of causing a child, defined as a person under 18, to enter into a marriage before their eighteenth birthday. The offence applies to conduct intended to cause a child to enter into a marriage in Northern Ireland. It also applies where the conduct occurs at a time when either the person carrying out the conduct or the child is habitually resident in Northern Ireland, or where the child is a UK national who has been habitually resident in Northern Ireland and is not habitually resident or domiciled in Scotland.

6. Part 3 of the Bill contains provisions relating to interpretation, power to make consequential provision and the short title and commencement. The Schedule to the Bill provides for minor and consequential amendments relating to belief marriage, and the age of marriage and civil partnership.

7. While the Bill is relatively focused in scope, it raises important legal and policy considerations. It deals with two distinct but important areas: placing non-religious belief marriages on a clear statutory footing, and raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. In doing so, the Bill engages issues of equality, human rights compliance, personal autonomy and the protection of children. The Committee's scrutiny therefore provided an opportunity to consider both the technical operation of the proposed changes and the wider rights-based and safeguarding issues raised by the Bill.

8. The Committee held oral evidence sessions with the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, Northern Ireland Humanists, Humanists Together, the Give Couples a Choice movement (GCCM) and the General Register Office (GRO). The Committee also held two briefings from the Assembly's Research and

Information Service (RalSe), one on an overview of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and the second on the review of costs of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. Copies of the oral evidence can be found at Appendix 4 and copies of the RalSe reports can be found at Appendix 6.

9. The Committee also received written responses from the following stakeholders, copies of the written responses can be found at Appendix 5;

- NICCY;
- National Secular Society (NSS);
- Humanists Together;
- Northern Ireland Humanists (NI Humanists);
- Give Couples a Choice Movement (GCCM);
- An Independent Celebrant (personal details redacted)
- Coalition for Marriage
- The Northern Catholic Bishops;
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC);
- The Christian Institute;
- General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster Government and Morals Committee;
- Russell Sanberg, Professor of Law, Cardiff University;
- The Law Society of Northern Ireland;
- The Methodist Church in Ireland;
- NSPCC Northern Ireland;
- Presbyterian Church in Ireland;

- General Register Office (GRO)

10. In addition, the Committee also carried out a detailed online survey. Copies of the survey and the responses can be found at Appendix 5.

11. The Committee sought advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules in relation to the range of powers within the Bill to make subordinate legislation. The Examiner considered the Bill and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum and was satisfied with the rule making powers provided for in the Bill.

12. The Committee also sought legal advice from the Assembly Legal Services Office to inform its scrutiny of the Bill. The advice considered the Bill's compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights and whether its provisions fell within the scope of Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework.

13. The Committee heard oral evidence from Departmental officials and engaged with the Department on a number of issues during Committee Stage including around the definition of a Belief Group, qualifying criteria, the dignity of a marriage ceremony and independent celebrants. Copies of the oral evidence can be found at Appendix 4.

14. The Department confirmed that the Bill is an amending Bill, which seeks to place on a permanent statutory footing the arrangements for non-religious belief marriages that have operated on a temporary basis following the Smyth case. The Bill provides for the formal recognition of non-religious belief marriages within the existing statutory framework, alongside provisions to raise the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18, and to enable the introduction of additional qualifying requirements for religious and belief organisations, should these be deemed necessary in the future.

15. The overall consensus of the Bill is largely positive, albeit with some neutral views. The Bill received cross-party support during the Second Stage debate; however, some frustration was expressed regarding the delay of its introduction and the lack of inclusion of 'no fault divorce'.

Introduction

16. The Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill (the “Bill”) was introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly by the Minister of Finance on 16 March 2026 and was referred to the Committee for Finance for consideration in accordance with Standing Order 33(1) on completion of the Second Stage of the Bill on 21 April 2026.

17. At introduction, the Minister made the following statement under section 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: 'In my view the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill would be within the legislative competence of the NI Assembly'.

18. The Bill contains 13 clauses, divided into three Parts, and a Schedule. It has two main purposes.

Belief Marriage

- Places non-religious belief marriages within the statutory framework of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.
- Amends the 2003 Order to provide formally for the inclusion of non-religious belief bodies within the statutory scheme, bringing the legislation into line with relevant case law and identified obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (“ECHR”).
- Provides for the Department to introduce additional qualifying requirements for religious and belief marriages, should these prove necessary in the future.

Minimum Age For Marriage Or Civil Partnership

- Increases the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18.
- Introduces an offence criminalising conduct carried out for the purpose of causing a child to enter into a marriage before their eighteenth birthday.

Final Provisions

- Contains provisions relating to interpretation.
- Provides the power to make consequential provision, and the short title and commencement of the Bill.

Schedule

- The Schedule provides for minor and consequential amendments relating to belief marriage and to the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership.

Committee Approach

19. On 1 May 2026, the Committee wrote to a wide range of stakeholders inviting feedback on the Bill by 12 June 2026, providing a six-week consultation period. The Committee also published a media notice in the *Belfast Telegraph*, *The Irish News* and *News Letter*, inviting responses to its Bill survey. Copies of the survey are included at Appendix 5.

20. The Committee received twenty two responses to the survey, from independent celebrants and various humanist organisations including; NI Humanists, Humanists UK, the Humanist Society Scotland and the Humanist Association of Ireland. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, 14 of which related to the content and clauses of the Bill.

21. The Committee also used social media to raise awareness of and engage with the public to encourage participation in the Committee Stage of the Bill. X (formerly known as Twitter) and the Northern Ireland Assembly website were used to disseminate information on the Bill.

22. During the period covered by this report the Committee considered the Bill and related issues at 20 meetings. The minutes of proceedings are included at Appendix 3.

23. The Committee had before it the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill (NIA 30/22-27) and the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum (EFM) that accompanied the Bill. The Bill and EFM are included at Appendix 1.

24. At its meeting on 29 April 2026, the Committee agreed a motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill to 13 November 2026. The extension reflected the need to progress the legislation in a timely manner, while ensuring robust and detailed consideration by the Committee. In agreeing the extension, the

Committee also took account of the Assembly's Summer and Halloween recess periods, which affected the Committees scrutiny timetable. The motion to extend was supported by the Assembly on 11 May 2026. The minutes of proceedings are included at Appendix 3.

25. The Committee sought advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules in relation to the range of powers within the Bill to make subordinate legislation. The Examiner considered the Bill and the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum and was satisfised with the rule making powers provided for the Bill.

26. The Committee engaged the Legal Services Office, who identified several Convention rights relevant to the Bill, particularly in relation to recognising non-religious belief marriages, raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18, and extending forced-marriage protections. While a recommendation for further detail to be sought from the Department on the operation of certain provisions, no particular concerns were identified regarding the Bill's compatibility with Convention rights, and Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework is not engaged.

27. The Committee held oral evidence sessions with stakeholders including; the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, Northern Ireland Humanist, Humanists Together and Give Couples a Choice Movement. The minutes of evidence are included at Appendix 4.

28. The written and oral evidence provided to the Committee indicated strong support for the introduction of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill. There is a clear consensus that the Bill should promote equality, protect individual rights and provide appropriate safeguards, with strong support for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18 to protect children and young people. While there is broad support for the aims of the Bill, differing views have been expressed on some provisions, particularly around religious freedoms, the recognition of marriages and the regulation of celebrants. The written submissions are included at Appendix 5.

29. To assist consideration of specific issues highlighted in the evidence, the Committee commissioned two research papers from the NI Assembly Research

and Information Service on the provisions and review of costs of the Bill. A copies of these papers are at Appendix 6.

30. The Committee received two oral briefings from the Department. The second briefing highlighted the need for an oral briefing from the GRO to enable the Committee to fully scrutinise the processes for registering individuals to solemnise marriages and the associated qualifying requirements. The minutes of evidence are included at Appendix 4.

31. The Committee carried out informal deliberations on the Clauses of the Bill and undertook its formal clause by clause scrutiny of the Bill at its meeting of 10 November 2026.

32. At its meeting of 11 November 2026, the Committee agreed its report on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and ordered that it should be published.

Consideration the Bill

33. The Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill is an Executive Bill introduced by the Minister of Finance on 16 March 2026. The Bill seeks to amend existing marriage and civil partnership legislation in Northern Ireland. It has two main purposes: to place non-religious belief marriages on the same statutory footing as religious marriages, following the temporary arrangements introduced after the 2017 Smyth court judgments; and to raise the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18, including the introduction of a new criminal offence relating to child marriage. The Bill consists of 13 clauses across three Parts and one Schedule.

34. As part of its scrutiny, the Committee sought written evidence through a public call for evidence and received briefings from the Department of Finance, the General Register Office and a range of stakeholders, including humanist organisations, independent celebrant representatives and the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. The Committee also considered research provided by RaISe.

35. The Committee received 18 written submissions in response to its call for evidence and heard oral evidence from the Youth Assembly, four stakeholder groups, as well as Department of Finance officials and the General Register

Office. The Committee also received 22 responses to its public survey on the Bill via Citizen Space.

36. During its consideration of the Bill, the Committee examined a number of issues raised in the evidence, including the definition of belief bodies, additional qualifying requirements, the dignity and solemnity of marriage ceremonies, the protection of religious freedoms, the regulation of independent celebrants and the implementation of the provisions relating to child marriage. The Committee's consideration of the clauses was informed by the written and oral evidence received, the results of its online survey and consideration of the approaches adopted in other jurisdictions. A summary of the evidence received in relation to each clause and the Committee's consideration of the issues raised is set out below. A copy of the results of the Committee's online survey can be found at Appendix 5.

Other Jurisdictions - Belief Marriage

37. The Committee considered the position in Scotland, England and Wales, and the Republic of Ireland in relation to non-religious belief marriage. It also considered the criteria which apply to organisations seeking recognition as belief body, and the position of independent celebrants in each jurisdiction. There are differences between the approaches taken.

Scotland

38. Scotland has recognised “religious or belief marriage” since amendments made by the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014. A religious or belief body is an organised group which either meets regularly for religious worship or has as its principal object, or one of its principal objects, the upholding or promotion of philosophical beliefs and meets regularly for that purpose[1].

39. An authorised celebrant from a qualifying belief body can conduct a legally valid marriage. This includes authorised celebrants from Humanist organisations.

[1] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/5/contents

40. The Scottish Government recently consulted on whether additional qualifying requirements should apply to religious and belief bodies. The Family Law Consultation closed on 21 April 2026.

41. The proposals included requirements relating to an organisation's constitution or statement of belief, regular meetings, track record, celebrant training, complaints and disciplinary procedures, and safeguards relating to forced and sham marriage. The consultation also considered how to ensure that organisations seeking recognition are genuine religious or belief bodies rather than bodies established primarily to provide commercial wedding services[2].

42. The consultation is now closed. Any resulting changes would add to the existing framework rather than introduce belief marriage for the first time.

43. Scotland does not provide a separate route for unaffiliated independent celebrants to solemnise legal marriages. Independent celebrants may conduct personalised ceremonies, but legal authority to solemnise a marriage must come through the civil registration system or an authorised religious or belief body.

England and Wales

44. England and Wales do not currently provide a statutory route for non-religious belief organisations, including Humanist organisations, or independent celebrants to conduct legally binding weddings. Humanist, belief and independent celebrant ceremonies may take place, but couples must separately comply with the legal requirements for marriage.

45. The UK Government consultation, Tying the Knot: Reforming Weddings Law in England and Wales, opened on 16 July 2026 and closed on 24 September 2026. The proposals would move towards an officiant-based system and would

[2] Scottish Government, Family Law Consultation (2025), Part 3: Qualifying Requirements for Religious and Belief Bodies. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-consultation-family-law/pages/4/

allow qualifying non-religious belief organisations to nominate officiants to conduct legally binding weddings[3].

46. The consultation proposes that a qualifying non-religious belief organisation should advance a system of beliefs of sufficient cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance to qualify as philosophical beliefs. It also proposes safeguards including a close connection between the organisation's beliefs and marriage, a minimum three-year period of establishment, and a proposed minimum membership representing 100 households. These proposals are not yet law and will be considered following the close of the consultation.

47. The consultation also proposes a separate route for independent officiants, who would not need to represent a religious or non-religious belief organisation. The Government's initial position is that independent officiants should be able to conduct legally binding weddings, subject to regulation.

48. Proposed requirements include membership of a recognised professional body, training, fit-and-proper-person checks, continuing professional development, complaints and disciplinary procedures, insurance and periodic reauthorisation. The proposals therefore distinguish between belief officiants, whose authority would derive from a qualifying organisation, and independent officiants, whose authority would derive from professional regulation.

Republic of Ireland

49. The Republic of Ireland recognises legally binding secular marriages under the Civil Registration Act 2004, as amended by the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012. A secular marriage may be conducted by a registered solemniser nominated by a qualifying secular body. A person must be on the Register of Solemnisers, or hold a temporary authorisation, to legally solemnise a marriage[4].

[3] Ministry of Justice, Tying the Knot: Reforming Weddings Law in England and Wales (July 2026). Available at: UK Government consultation

[4] Civil Registration Act 2004 (No. 3 of 2004), as amended by the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012 (No. 48 of 2012). Irish Statute Book

50. A qualifying secular body must be an organised group with at least 50 members, whose principal objects are secular, ethical and Humanist. Its members must meet regularly in relation to their beliefs, and the organisation must have existed continuously for at least five years.

51. The body must also have written procedures for selecting, training and accrediting members as fit and proper persons to solemnise marriages, maintain a register of its members, meet specified tax-exemption requirements and not have profit-making as one of its principal objects. Its rules on marriage must also comply with the law.

52. Certain organisations are expressly excluded, including political parties or bodies promoting political causes, trade unions, employers' representative bodies and chambers of commerce[5].

53. A secular body may nominate a member aged 18 or over for registration as a solemniser. It must certify that the member has been selected, trained and accredited and is considered a fit and proper person to solemnise marriages. Temporary authorisation may also be granted to a member of a qualifying religious or secular body.

54. There is no separate route for an unaffiliated independent celebrant to become a registered solemniser. Current Irish Government guidance states that a solemniser must be either a registrar or a member nominated by a qualifying religious or secular body, and that there is no other provision for registration[6].

55. The legislation also allows the registration of a solemniser to be cancelled where that person has carried on a business of solemnising marriages for profit or gain. This further distinguishes the statutory role of a solemniser from commercial independent celebrancy[7].

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[5] Civil Registration Act 2004, section 45A (as amended). Law Reform Commission – Revised Act

[6] Department of Social Protection, Register of Solemnisers (last updated 5 May 2026). Government of Ireland

[7] Civil Registration Act 2004, section 55(1)(c)(ii). Law Reform Commission – Revised Act

56. The Republic of Ireland does not provide a separate route for unaffiliated independent celebrants to conduct legally binding marriages.

57. A marriage must be conducted by a person on the Register of Solemnisers, who must be either a registrar or a member nominated by a qualifying religious or secular body. Independent celebrants may conduct personalised ceremonies but cannot legally solemnise marriages unless separately registered through one of these routes.

Other Jurisdictions – Minimum Age For Marriage Or Civil Partnership

58. The minimum age at which a person may legally marry in other jurisdictions is not consistent. While England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland set the minimum age at 18, Scotland currently permits marriage from the age of 16, although this is the subject of recent consultation on possible reform.

Scotland

59. The minimum age for marriage in Scotland is currently 16. Section 1 of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 provides that a person domiciled in Scotland may not marry before the age of 16 and that a marriage solemnised in Scotland involving a person under 16 is void. A person aged 16 or 17 does not require parental consent to marry in Scotland[8].

60. The Scottish Government recently consulted on whether the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership should be increased from 16 to 18. The Family Law Consultation closed on 21 April 2026[9].

England and Wales

61. The minimum age for marriage in England and Wales is 18. The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 increased the minimum age from 16 to 18 and came into force on 27 February 2023. Before the change, a person

[8] Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977, section 1. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1977/15/section/1

[9] Scottish Government, Family Law: Consultation (29 December 2025), Part 2: The Minimum Age of Marriage and Civil Partnership. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-consultation-family-law/pages/3/

aged 16 or 17 could marry with parental or judicial consent. The 2022 Act removed that exception[10].

62. The Act also affects recognition in England and Wales of marriages entered into elsewhere, including Scotland or Northern Ireland, where a party aged under 18 is domiciled in England and Wales[11].

Republic of Ireland

63. In the Republic of Ireland, the minimum age for marriage is 18. Section 31 of the Family Law Act 1995 provides that a marriage involving a person under 18 is not valid in law. Irish Government guidance similarly states that a person must be at least 18 on the date the marriage is solemnised[12].

64. The law previously allowed exemptions from the minimum age requirement in certain circumstances. Those exemptions were subsequently removed by the Domestic Violence Act 2018[13].

Stakeholder views

Northern Ireland Humanists

65. Northern Ireland Humanists welcomed the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill, particularly the proposal to place humanist marriages on an express statutory footing as marriages conducted by a belief organisation. They recognise that humanist marriages are already legally recognised in Northern Ireland and stated that they account for around 15% of all marriages.

66. However, Northern Ireland Humanists expressed concern that the Bill adopts what it described as the "Scottish model", under which it considered the requirements for organisations seeking authorisation to solemnise marriages to

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[10] Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, section 1. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/28/section/1

[11] Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, Explanatory Notes, paragraph 2. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/28/notes/division/2

[12] Family Law Act 1995, section 31. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1995/act/26/section/31/enacted/en/html

[13] Domestic Violence Act 2018, section 45(1)(d)–(e). Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/6/section/45/enacted/en/html

be too permissive. Northern Ireland Humanists argue that this could allow bodies with limited genuine religion or belief activity to obtain authorisation primarily for commercial wedding services, potentially undermining the integrity of the system.

67. Northern Ireland Humanists recommended that the Bill be amended to introduce clearer qualifying criteria for religious and belief organisations from the outset. They favour a modified version of the approach used for belief organisations in the Republic of Ireland, including requirements relating to minimum membership, the selection and training of celebrants, length of establishment, charitable status and non-profit objectives. They also suggested that authorised bodies should be principally engaged in activities other than providing marriages or training celebrants.

68. Northern Ireland Humanists also expressed concerns about the potential introduction of independent commercial celebrants. They question what additional benefits such provision would offer couples, given the existing flexibility of civil marriage ceremonies in Northern Ireland. They raised concerns about the regulation and training of independent celebrants, the potential for couples to be misled by providers advertising humanist ceremonies, and how accountability would be maintained where celebrants had been refused accreditation or removed for misconduct. They also highlighted the potential financial implications for councils.

69. Northern Ireland Humanists provided detail on the qualifying criteria it considered necessary to safeguard the integrity of marriage ceremonies. These included requirements for organisations to have an established history and genuine religion or belief activities, regular meetings of members, and appropriate procedures for the selection, training, accreditation and discipline of celebrants. Minutes of evidence is at Appendix 4 and written evidence at Appendix 5.

Humanists Together

70. Humanists Together strongly support the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill, welcoming the statutory recognition of non-religious belief marriages and the

proposal to raise the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18 as an important safeguarding measure.

71. Humanists Together emphasise that non-religious belief bodies should be treated on an equal footing with religious bodies, including the ability for qualifying bodies to nominate their own officiants. Humanists Together argue that more than one humanist or non-religious belief organisation should be capable of recognition, subject to clear, objective and proportionate criteria. They caution against any framework that would create a monopoly or sole gatekeeper for humanist marriage. Humanists Together also call for clear implementation guidance, meaningful choice for couples, and arrangements that take account of cross-border and all-island humanist practice. Minutes of evidence are at Appendix 4 and written evidence at Appendix 5.

Give Couples a Choice Movement (GCCM)

72. GCCM welcome the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and its aim of creating a fairer and more inclusive marriage framework. However, they argue that the Bill should go further by providing for independent celebrants to be authorised to conduct legally binding marriages. GCCM contend that this would particularly benefit couples of mixed faith, no faith, or diverse cultural and personal backgrounds who may not feel adequately served by existing religious, humanist or civil marriage options.

73. GCCM argue that excluding independent celebrants can require couples to have a separate legal registration and a second, personally meaningful ceremony. They reject concerns that authorising fee-charging independent celebrants would necessarily create a commercial market in marriage, maintaining that an appropriately regulated system could distinguish professional celebrancy from marriage undertaken for profit. GCCM recommend that the Bill include a delegated power enabling the Minister to authorise and regulate independent celebrants by secondary legislation, and also proposed a short-life working group to consider the issue and make recommendations following enactment. Minutes of evidence is at Appendix 4 and written evidence at Appendix 5.

National Secular Society (NSS)

74. The NSS broadly supports the Bill's principal reforms. They support provision for non-religious belief marriages, but argue that the definition of "belief" should extend to any qualifying non-religious belief system rather than being limited to humanism. The NSS also support raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18, which they consider would strengthen children's rights and Northern Ireland's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, however they raise concerns about children under 18 entering unregistered, religion-only marriages.

75. The NSS however, considered that the Bill represented a missed opportunity to address wider inequalities in marriage law. In particular, they call for restrictions on the locations in which civil marriages and civil partnerships may take place to be removed, so that civil ceremonies have the same flexibility as religious and belief marriages. They argue that the existing restrictions could particularly disadvantage same-sex couples and those on lower incomes.

76. The NSS also recommend removing the blanket prohibition on religious content in civil ceremonies, provided the ceremony remained clearly identifiable as a civil rather than religious service. They argue that this would allow couples, including those from different religious or belief backgrounds, greater scope to personalise their ceremony. Finally, NSS argue that independent celebrants should be permitted to conduct legally binding marriages, particularly to provide greater choice for couples whose religious, non-religious or philosophical beliefs do not fit within established religious or belief organisations, including couples seeking interfaith ceremonies. A copy of the written evidence at Appendix 5.

Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

77. The Northern Ireland Youth Assembly considered the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and expressed broad support for its principal aims. Members of the Youth Assembly particularly welcomed measures intended to strengthen protections for young people and promote greater equality and fairness within the legal framework for marriage and civil partnership. Members supported proposals aimed at achieving greater equality between different forms of marriage, including the legal recognition of non-religious belief ceremonies and

more equal treatment of religious and non-religious marriages. In discussing these provisions, Members placed particular emphasis on the principles of fairness, inclusion and individual choice, and on the importance of the law reflecting a diversity of beliefs and experiences.

78. There was strong support for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. Members highlighted the importance of maturity, informed consent and an understanding of the long-term implications of marriage or civil partnership. Many regarded the proposal as an important safeguarding measure, particularly in relation to preventing forced and early marriage.

79. Members also identified a number of issues which they considered merited further consideration. These included the possibility that marriages involving persons under 18 could take place in other jurisdictions, and questions regarding the recognition and treatment of marriages entered into abroad. Some Members questioned whether a minimum age of 18 was sufficient and suggested that consideration should be given to raising the minimum age to 21.

80. There was unanimous support among participating Members for making it a criminal offence to force or pressure a person under 18 to marry. A number of Members also considered that protections against coercion should apply irrespective of age. Members emphasised that legislative measures should be supported by education and awareness-raising, including through schools, to ensure that young people understand their rights and know where to seek advice and support.

81. Overall, Members supported the Bill proceeding, although some considered that its provisions could be strengthened. Suggestions included increasing the minimum age beyond 18, strengthening protections against forced marriage, providing greater clarity in relation to marriages conducted outside the jurisdiction, and considering additional safeguards, including restrictions relating to significant age differences between parties.

82. The Youth Assembly's consideration of the Bill therefore demonstrated substantial support for its overall direction, particularly its emphasis on safeguarding, equality and informed decision-making. Members also identified a number of areas in which they considered additional safeguards or clarification

could strengthen the legislation. A copy of the Youth Assembly Bill report is at Appendix 5.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

83. NICCY welcome the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and support raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. They consider the reform essential and necessary to safeguard children's rights and to bring Northern Ireland into line with UNCRC standards and international recommendations relevant international children's rights standards.

84. NICCY did not consider parental consent to be an adequate safeguard for 16- and 17-year-olds, emphasising that pressure or coercion may arise from parents, wider family or community expectations. NICCY also highlighted the disproportionate impact of child marriage on girls and young women and associated risks to education, employment, health and protection from violence.

85. NICCY supported provisions criminalising the conduct or facilitation of child marriage, including conduct relating to marriages outside Northern Ireland, and called for relevant offence data to be collected and published.

86. NICCY sought clarification on the proposed two-month commencement period and on the position of existing or continuing unions involving persons below the new minimum age. They asked the Committee to seek assurances that adequate protections would be available to affected young people. NICCY also emphasised meaningful engagement with those affected by the reforms and supported commencement of the legislation without delay. A copy of the written evidence at Appendix 5.

Christian Churches

87. The Christian organisations who contributed views on the Bill raised a number of common issues, while there were differences in their views on some provisions in the Bill.

88. Several organisations had concerns about belief marriage. The Northern Catholic Bishops, the Christian Institute and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) said the definition of a "belief body" was too broad or unclear. They

wanted clearer rules about which organisations could qualify to conduct belief marriages.

89. The Free Presbyterian Church opposed putting non-religious belief marriages on the same footing as religious marriages. They also called for stronger protections for people and churches whose religious beliefs might conflict with the law, and for limits on the powers to place extra requirements on religious bodies. PCI also expressed concerns about treating belief marriage in the same way as religious marriage.

90. The Methodist Church in Ireland took a more supportive approach. While setting out its own Christian understanding of marriage, it recognised that people with other beliefs may also value marriage. It welcomed the role of the Registrar General in deciding whether belief bodies met the required standards and asked for religious bodies to be consulted when those standards were developed.

91. Some organisations also raised concerns about how marriages would be conducted. The Christian Institute and PCI wanted stronger rules to prevent marriage ceremonies being run for profit. The Christian Institute also wanted clearer rules to make sure ceremonies were conducted in a dignified way. Northern Catholic Bishops stressed that the Catholic Church should remain free to decide how, where and by whom Catholic marriages are conducted.

92. On the minimum age for marriage, most of the organisations supported raising it to 18. This included the Northern Catholic Bishops, the Christian Institute, the Methodist Church and the Free Presbyterian Church. PCI however, took a different view and supported keeping the option for 16- and 17-year-olds to marry where suitable safeguards were in place. A copy of the written evidence at Appendix 5.

Citizen Space

93. The Committee received 22 responses to its Citizen Space questionnaire. Respondents included independent celebrants and a number of humanist organisations, including Humanists Northern Ireland, Humanists UK, the Humanist Society Scotland and the Humanist Association of Ireland. Overall,

the responses showed broad support for the main aims of the Bill, particularly the legal recognition of non-religious belief marriages and raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18.

94. There was strong support for the provisions relating to belief marriage. Around 91% of respondents agreed that non-religious groups should be able to register people to conduct marriages and receive temporary authorisation in the same way as religious groups. Around 86% agreed that belief bodies should be treated in the same way as religious bodies under marriage law.

95. The main issue raised by respondents was the need for clearer rules on which religious and belief bodies should be allowed to conduct marriages. Humanist organisations supported stronger qualifying requirements to make sure that organisations were genuine belief communities and that commercial celebrant businesses could not present themselves as belief bodies simply to gain authority to conduct legal marriages. Suggested requirements included minimum membership and length of operation, charitable or non-profit status, clear governance arrangements, appropriate training and accreditation of celebrants, complaints procedures and quality assurance. Respondents also called for greater clarity in the definition of a religious or belief body and considered that an organisation whose main purpose was providing wedding ceremonies or operating as a commercial celebrant business should not qualify.

96. Some respondents also called for independent celebrants to be considered as part of the reforms. They argued that some couples, including those from mixed-faith, spiritual or different cultural backgrounds, may not be served by a single religious or belief body. Some suggested either including independent celebrants within the Bill or carrying out a separate consultation on their role.

97. There was also strong support for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. Around 91% supported increasing the minimum marriage age, while around 86% supported increasing the minimum age for civil partnership. Around 73% supported making it a criminal offence to take action intended to cause a person under 18 to marry, even where force or threats were not used.

98. The Citizen Space responses largely support the Bill, but many respondents want clearer and stronger eligibility, governance and regulatory requirements for bodies authorised to conduct belief marriages. A smaller number also wanted the role of independent celebrants to be considered as part of wider marriage law reform. A copy of the results of the Committee's online survey are at Appendix 5.

Clause by Clause Consideration of the Bill

99. A summary of the evidence received in relation to each Clause of the Bill and the Committee for Finance's consideration of the issues raised in written and oral evidence is set out below. The Committee for Finance's consideration of the Clauses of the Bill was informed by its online survey and the written and oral evidence it received throughout the Committee Stage of the Bill. A copy of the Committee online survey is at Appendix 5, minutes of oral evidence is at Appendix 4, and copies of the written evidence at Appendix 5.

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

100. **Clause 1** amends the 2003 Order to ensure that belief bodies are treated the same as religious bodies when registering officiants to solemnise marriages in Northern Ireland. It does this by updating relevant articles so they refer to "religious or belief bodies". Applications to register officiants will continue to be made by the body the person belongs to, but the change clarifies that both religious and belief organisations are covered equally.

101. The clause also introduces a power for the Department to set eligibility requirements, through regulations, for bodies applying to register officiants if needed in the future.

102. The Committee noted broad support among stakeholders for the statutory recognition of non-religious belief marriages. The NIHRC, Law Society, NI Humanists, Humanists Together and the NSS welcomed the principle of equal treatment between religious and belief marriages. The Committee also noted the findings of the public consultation, in which 90.91% of respondents supported allowing non-religious groups to register officiants in the same way

as religious groups. Similarly, 75% of Youth Assembly participants supported the legal recognition of non-religious ceremonies.

103. A key area of the Committee's scrutiny concerned the qualifying requirements for religious and belief bodies seeking to register officiants. NI Humanists expressed concern that the Bill did not sufficiently distinguish genuine belief organisations from bodies established primarily to provide commercial wedding services. They advocate for a more prescriptive approach, drawing on the model operating in the Republic of Ireland, including requirements relating to minimum membership, charitable status, a minimum period of operation, established training and accreditation arrangements, and evidence of wider belief-based activities. They consider that these safeguards should be included in the Bill itself rather than left to future regulations.

104. In contrast, Humanists Together supported transparent and objective qualifying criteria but cautioned against fixed membership thresholds or minimum periods of existence, arguing that these could disadvantage smaller or emerging organisations. They emphasised that organisations should be assessed on their genuine philosophical beliefs, governance, professional standards and community activities rather than size or age alone. They also called for clear guidance on the recognition of belief bodies, the nomination and removal of officiants, safeguarding, complaints procedures and cross-border arrangements.

105. In response, the Department advised that the existing registration arrangements had operated effectively for a number of years, with no evidence of significant problems in Northern Ireland. They emphasised that the Bill was intended to formalise existing arrangements rather than establish a new regulatory framework. The Department confirmed that the power under Clause 1(2)(d) would only be exercised where an evidence-based need arose. Any additional qualifying requirements would apply equally to religious and belief bodies and would be subject to stakeholder engagement, public consultation and the draft affirmative procedure, allowing for Assembly and Committee scrutiny. The Department also advised that it was monitoring developments in Scotland but had no current plans to introduce stricter criteria.

106. The Committee examined the operation of the existing registration arrangements during the Department and General Register Office (GRO) oral briefing on 3 November 2026. GRO explained that religious and belief bodies are subject to comparable assessment processes, requiring supporting documentation relating to the organisation's constitution, ethos and beliefs, together with confirmation that nominated officiants are ‘fit and proper persons’ to solemnise marriages. The GRO maintains records of recognised bodies and registered officiants, and each individual must be nominated through an appropriate religious or belief organisation.

107. The GRO advised that the Registrar General has discretion to refuse applications where insufficient evidence is provided regarding the nature of the organisation or the suitability of an officiant. Existing safeguards also include powers under Article 12 of the 2003 Order to cancel registration, alongside established appeals arrangements. The GRO informed the Committee that there were approximately 3,000 active officiants in Northern Ireland, around 100 of whom were associated with belief bodies, and that the registration system had operated effectively with very few applications being refused. The Department further highlighted that over 5,000 belief marriages had taken place under the temporary arrangements without substantive concerns being identified.

108. The Committee questioned whether the existing administrative safeguards should be more explicitly reflected in legislation. The Department and GRO maintained that the current arrangements were sufficiently robust and that additional statutory requirements were not justified in the absence of evidence demonstrating a need for change.

109. The Committee also considered concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the dignity and solemnity of marriage ceremonies. The Northern Catholic Bishops sought greater clarity on the definition of belief bodies and reassurance that the Bill would not interfere with the autonomy of religious organisations. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Christian Institute also emphasised the importance of maintaining the seriousness of marriage. The Christian Institute proposed an express statutory requirement for ceremonies to be conducted with dignity, supported by guidance and enforcement arrangements.

110. Members questioned the Department on whether additional safeguards were necessary to prevent ceremonies becoming trivialised or commercialised, and how fees and expenses could be distinguished from profit-making activity. The Department acknowledged these concerns but advised that there was no evidence of significant problems under the existing arrangements. It considered that dignity would be difficult to define and enforce objectively and that additional requirements could create administrative and financial burdens for GRO.

111. GRO confirmed that the assessment of applications already considers whether an organisation's ethos and beliefs provide an appropriate framework for conducting a solemn marriage ceremony. The Department also highlighted the existing power under Article 12 to cancel registration where an officiant carries on the business of solemnising marriages for profit or gain.

112. The Committee also received evidence advocating the recognition of independent celebrants. GCCM, NSS, an independent celebrant and Professor Russell Sandberg argue that a separate regulatory route would provide greater choice for couples seeking personalised or interfaith ceremonies. They propose safeguards relating to training, professional standards, accountability and GRO oversight. NI Humanists, however, raised concerns about the potential commercialisation of marriage and the implications for professional standards and accountability.

113. The Committee explored whether the absence of a separate route for independent celebrants could encourage individuals to seek registration through belief organisations without a genuine philosophical basis. The Department acknowledged these arguments but advised that introducing independent celebrants would represent a substantial extension of marriage law, requiring detailed policy development and extensive public consultation. They therefore considered that this issue should be examined separately from the current Bill.

114. The Committee further considered the delegated power contained in Clause 1, particularly its potential implications for religious freedom and equality. Some religious stakeholders expressed concern that future regulations could impose requirements affecting the beliefs or practices of religious organisations. The

Department advised that any additional criteria would need to comply with Convention rights and would be subject to appropriate consultation and Assembly scrutiny. The Committee also received legal advice that the delegation of legislative power was not inappropriate and that the draft affirmative procedure provided an appropriate level of scrutiny.

115. In light of the evidence received and the concerns raised regarding the dignity, solemnity and integrity of marriage, the Committee agreed that additional wording should be included in the EFM to clarify the policy intention underpinning the power to introduce further qualifying requirements for religious and belief bodies. The Department agreed to the Committee's request to include the following wording under the Background and Policy Objectives section:

“The Department recognises the importance of maintaining the dignity and solemnity of marriage and safeguarding public confidence in the marriage process. The power to introduce additional qualifying requirements for religious and non-religious belief bodies, should these be considered necessary in future, will provide an important safeguard to ensure that bodies seeking to nominate persons to solemnise marriages operate to appropriate standards, reflecting the significance and legal responsibilities associated with marriage."

116. The Committee also sought additional clarification in the EFM on the purpose of the delegated power under Clause 1, particularly its role in safeguarding the dignity and integrity of marriage. The Department agreed to include the following additional wording in the explanation of **Clause 1**:

"The purpose of this provision is also to ensure that the Department retains the ability to introduce appropriate safeguards to uphold the dignity and integrity of marriage and maintain public confidence in those bodies whose members are authorised to solemnise marriages."

Clause 2: Belief bodies: temporary authorisation to solemnise marriage

117. **Clause 2** amends Article 14 of the 2003 Order to ensure that references to religious marriage also include belief marriage, so both are treated consistently.

118. Article 14 allows the Registrar General to grant temporary authorisations for individuals to solemnise marriages. The amendment clarifies that this applies equally to religious and belief contexts.

119. The clause also introduces a safeguard: the Registrar General cannot grant a temporary authorisation if the person's religious or belief body does not meet any eligibility requirements that may be set by Departmental regulations.

120. Clause 2 is closely linked to Clause 1, which provides for the registration of members of religious and belief bodies to solemnise marriages. While Clause 1 addresses the registration of officiants, Clause 2 extends the equivalent arrangements for temporary authorisations.

121. As outlined in its consideration of Clause 1, the Committee noted broad stakeholder support for placing non-religious belief marriages on a permanent statutory footing. The NIHRC, the Law Society, Humanists Together and NSS welcomed the provisions as an important step towards equality and legal certainty. The Committee also noted that 90.91% of respondents to its Citizen Space consultation supported allowing non-religious groups to obtain temporary authorisation to perform marriages, while 72.73% supported the Registrar General refusing authorisation where eligibility requirements were not met.

122. The Committee's consideration of Clause 2 raised many of the same issues examined under Clause 1, particularly regarding the qualifying requirements for religious and belief bodies. NI Humanists reiterated its concerns that the existing arrangements could allow individuals and organisations to present themselves as humanist celebrants without demonstrating a genuine commitment to humanist beliefs. They highlighted concerns that some organisations could appear to exist primarily to provide commercial wedding ceremonies rather than undertake wider philosophical or community-based activities.

123. As detailed under Clause 1, NI Humanists advocate for stronger qualifying criteria relating to minimum membership, charitable status, an established period of operation, wider belief-based activities and appropriate training and accreditation arrangements. In contrast, Humanists Together emphasise the importance of fair and proportionate requirements which would not

unnecessarily disadvantage smaller or emerging organisations. They consider that detailed qualification and approval arrangements should be determined by the Department and Registrar General, with appropriate scrutiny and consistent treatment across the sector.

124. The Committee explored whether stronger qualifying requirements were necessary to prevent inappropriate organisations from obtaining temporary authorisation. The Department acknowledged stakeholder concerns but maintained that the existing assessment process operated by the Registrar General was sufficiently robust. They explained that applicants are required to provide evidence of their organisation's constitution, purpose, membership, nominated officiants and proposed marriage ceremony, together with confirmation that nominees are ‘fit and proper persons’.

125. The Department advised that the existing arrangements had operated effectively and cautioned that additional requirements, particularly minimum membership thresholds or periods of existence, could have unintended equality implications for smaller, newly established or breakaway religious and belief groups. They emphasised that any stricter criteria would need to apply equally to religious and belief bodies and would require further policy development and public consultation.

126. The Committee also considered concerns about the potential impact of future qualifying requirements on religious freedoms, an issue which had similarly arisen during scrutiny of Clause 1. The Coalition for Marriage expressed concern that the regulation-making power was too broadly framed and could potentially affect religious organisations' beliefs, teaching or worship. They seek safeguards to ensure that future requirements would not interfere with religious doctrine and would be introduced only following consultation and an equality impact assessment. The Methodist Church welcome the provision allowing the Registrar General to refuse authorisation where prescribed requirements were not met but emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement with religious organisations.

127. Members specifically questioned whether Clause 2 could permit future qualifying requirements that might compel religious organisations to conduct

marriages contrary to their beliefs. The Department reassured the Committee that the Bill would not alter the existing freedoms of religious organisations or require them to conduct ceremonies contrary to their beliefs. They clarified that any additional criteria would be intended to strengthen the existing approval process and would require consultation and Assembly approval rather than being introduced solely at the discretion of the Registrar General.

128. The Committee noted GRO's confirmation that Clause 2 would extend the existing temporary authorisation provisions to belief bodies and ensure that authorisation could not be granted where any prescribed qualifying requirements were not met. GRO regarded this as a future-proofing provision, consistent with the approach taken under Clause 1. The Committee noted that the existing registration and assessment safeguards, examined in detail during its consideration of Clause 1, would remain relevant to the operation of temporary authorisations.

129. The Committee also noted stakeholder concerns regarding the potential commercialisation of marriage ceremonies. The Christian Institute called for clearer guidance on the existing restrictions on conducting marriages for profit or gain, particularly the distinction between legitimate fees for preparing and conducting ceremonies and commercial profiteering. These concerns overlapped with the wider issues of dignity, solemnity and appropriate oversight considered under Clause 1.

130. The position of independent celebrants was also raised during the Committee's consideration of Clause 2. Members questioned whether greater access should be provided for independent celebrants offering personalised marriage ceremonies. The Department acknowledged the potential merits of reform but advised that this remained an untested policy area, presenting regulatory challenges relating to commercial activity, professional oversight and equality between marriage providers. They confirmed that developments in England and Wales were being monitored but that significant further policy work would be required before legislation could be introduced. The Committee considered this issue alongside the wider evidence on independent celebrants discussed under Clause 1.

131. The Committee further considered the delegated power provided for in Clause 2, including its compatibility with Articles 9, 12 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Convention Rights Memorandum recognised that extending temporary authorisations to belief bodies would support freedom of religion or belief, the right to marry and equality of treatment, while emphasising that any future restrictions must be justified, proportionate and applied fairly.

132. The Department confirmed that any additional qualifying requirements would be developed through consultation and would be subject to Assembly debate and Committee scrutiny. The Committee also received legal advice that the delegation of legislative power under Clause 2 was not inappropriate and that the draft affirmative resolution procedure provided an appropriate level of legislative scrutiny.

133. In considering Clause 2, the Committee noted that the principal issues raised by stakeholders and Members were closely aligned with those examined under Clause 1. In particular, the Committee considered the balance between ensuring equality of treatment for religious and belief bodies and maintaining appropriate safeguards through the existing authorisation process. The Committee noted the Department's assurances regarding the effectiveness of current arrangements, the protection of religious freedoms and the requirement for consultation and Assembly approval should additional qualifying criteria be introduced in the future.

Clause 3: Belief marriage: definitions

134. **Clause 3** updates the definitions in Article 2 of the 2003 Order so that references to “religious bodies” and “religious marriage” become “religious or belief bodies” and “religious or belief marriage”. It also inserts a new definition of “religious or belief body”, widened to reflect that belief organisations may be structured differently from religious bodies and may not involve regular meetings for worship.

135. Clause 3 is closely linked to Clauses 1 and 2, which provide for the registration and temporary authorisation of members of religious and belief bodies to solemnise marriages. Consequently, many of the concerns raised during the

Committee's consideration of Clauses 1 and 2 were also relevant to its scrutiny of Clause 3, particularly regarding the breadth of the definition, eligibility requirements and the potential for inappropriate organisations to obtain recognition.

136. The Committee noted broad stakeholder support for extending the existing statutory definitions to include non-religious belief marriages. The NIHRC and Humanists Together welcomed the provisions as providing greater legal certainty and equality of treatment between religious and non-religious beliefs. The NSS similarly supported the extension, emphasising that recognition should extend to qualifying non-religious belief systems generally rather than being confined to humanism. The Committee also noted that 81.82% of respondents to the relevant Citizen Space consultation supported extending references to religious bodies and marriages to include belief bodies and marriages. However, support for the proposed approach to defining belief bodies was more mixed, with 50% supporting a definition accommodating different forms of organisation, 22.73% opposing it and 18.18% unsure.

137. A key area of the Committee's scrutiny concerned whether the proposed definition was sufficiently precise to distinguish genuine philosophical belief organisations from groups established primarily to conduct wedding ceremonies or pursue other purposes. As outlined in its consideration of Clauses 1 and 2, NI Humanists expressed concern that the definition was too broad and could allow commercial providers to seek recognition as belief bodies without demonstrating a genuine commitment to a philosophical belief system.

138. NI Humanists advocated tightening the definition within primary legislation rather than relying on future regulations. They proposed additional safeguards relating to charitable or community-focused status, minimum membership, an established period of operation, regular meetings, wider belief-based activities and appropriate celebrant training and accreditation. They also raised concerns about organisations operating primarily outside Northern Ireland seeking authorisation without a meaningful local presence, while recognising that organisations based elsewhere could legitimately operate in Northern Ireland where they had established activities and representation.

139. In contrast, Humanists Together supported the proposed definition and did not seek amendments to its wording. They cautioned against adopting the more restrictive model operating in the Republic of Ireland, arguing that this could favour established organisations and limit opportunities for smaller or emerging belief groups. They emphasised that recognition should be based on genuine philosophical beliefs, appropriate governance, professional standards and accountability, rather than organisational size or longevity. Humanists Together also highlighted the importance of maintaining choice and facilitating cooperation between organisations operating across jurisdictions.

140. The Committee also received evidence from religious stakeholders expressing concern about the breadth of the definition. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland advocated more specific qualifying criteria, drawing on the model operating in the Republic of Ireland, while the General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster proposed adopting the Scottish requirement for belief bodies to meet regularly in furtherance of their beliefs. Both considered that clearer requirements would help ensure that organisations seeking recognition were genuine belief bodies rather than groups established primarily to conduct weddings.

141. The Christian Institute similarly argued that the proposed definition could encompass political, ethical, environmental or single-issue campaigning organisations without requiring evidence of a settled philosophical worldview or established communal practices. They advocated a more clearly defined framework to distinguish genuine belief organisations from groups whose activities were not principally concerned with the expression of a coherent belief system.

142. The Committee explored these concerns during its evidence sessions with the Department, questioning whether the definition could allow organisations based on trivial or inappropriate beliefs, or political and advocacy groups, to qualify to conduct marriages. Members also considered whether the definition should include additional statutory safeguards, rather than relying primarily on the Registrar General's existing assessment process.

143. The Department explained that the proposed definition had been drawn largely from Scottish legislation, but that the requirement for belief organisations to meet regularly had been omitted following advice that it had caused practical difficulties in Scotland. The Department advised that belief organisations may express and promote their philosophical beliefs through activities other than regular meetings and that requiring them to operate in a manner comparable to religious worship could be unnecessarily restrictive.

144. The Department acknowledged that the definition was broad and could potentially encompass political or advocacy organisations. However, it emphasised that meeting the general description of a belief body would not automatically entitle an organisation to conduct legally binding marriages. Applications would continue to be assessed by the Registrar General on a case-by-case basis, taking account of the nature of the organisation, its stated beliefs and the relevant legal requirements.

145. The Department maintained that the existing arrangements had successfully balanced flexibility and legal certainty since the temporary recognition of belief marriages following the Smyth judgment. They advised that the Bill would place those arrangements on a clear statutory footing without materially changing how belief bodies and their celebrants were assessed in practice.

146. The Committee specifically questioned whether clearer statutory definitions or safeguards should be included in the Bill. The Department indicated that it was willing to consider alternative wording where this could improve the legislation, while reiterating its confidence in the existing assessment arrangements. They also explained that the proposed power to introduce stricter qualifying requirements was distinct from the statutory definition itself. Any consideration of additional qualifying requirements would require further policy development and consultation, with the Department advising that such work would fall to a future Assembly mandate.

147. The Committee noted GRO's acknowledgement that religious and belief bodies may organise themselves differently. The Department advised that GRO's existing assessment process takes account of the relevant legislation and the principles established by the Smyth judgment when determining whether an

organisation qualifies as a genuine belief body. They further indicated that some applications had been unsuccessful under the existing arrangements, although detailed information on refusals would be a matter for the Registrar General.

148. The Committee also considered the human rights implications of the proposed definition. The NIHRC emphasised that the recognition of belief marriages engaged Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and highlighted the State's obligations of neutrality and impartiality in matters of religion and belief. They highlighted that protected philosophical beliefs must meet established standards of seriousness, sincerity and respect in a democratic society. The Committee considered these principles alongside stakeholder calls for clearer eligibility criteria and the potential equality implications of imposing additional restrictions on belief organisations.

149. In considering Clause 3, the Committee examined the balance between providing a sufficiently flexible definition to accommodate different forms of religious and philosophical belief and ensuring adequate legal certainty regarding the organisations eligible to solemnise marriages. The Committee considered the differing stakeholder views on whether the definition should be strengthened in primary legislation, alongside the Department's confidence in the existing assessment process and its willingness to consider alternative wording. The Committee also noted that the proposed definition was central to the operation of Clauses 1 and 2 and that any future qualifying requirements would need to be considered in the context of equality, religious freedom and the effective administration of marriage law.

Clause 4: Belief marriage: further provision

150. **Clause 4** makes further consequential amendments to the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, extending remaining references to “religious marriage” and “religious body” to include belief marriage and belief bodies. The amendments cover objections, marriage notices and schedules, solemnisation and registration, the Registrar's power to require delivery of marriage schedules, and protections from compulsion in relation to same-sex marriage.

151. Clause 4 is closely linked to Clauses 1 to 3, which provide for the registration and authorisation of belief marriage officiants and define religious and belief

bodies. It also provides for Assembly scrutiny of any future regulations prescribing additional qualifying requirements under Clauses 1 and 2, requiring draft regulations to be approved through the affirmative resolution procedure. The clause further introduces Part 1 of the Schedule, containing consequential amendments relating to belief marriage.

152. As outlined in its consideration of the preceding clauses, the Committee noted broad stakeholder support for placing belief marriages on a permanent statutory footing. The NIHRC welcomed Clauses 1 to 4, highlighting their importance in addressing the unequal treatment identified in the Smyth judgment and protecting freedom of religion or belief. The NSS similarly supported the reforms, emphasising that recognition should extend to all qualifying non-religious belief systems rather than being limited to humanism. The Committee also noted that 86.36% of respondents to the relevant Citizen Space consultation question supported treating belief bodies in the same way as religious bodies.

153. A key area of scrutiny concerned Clause 4(9), which requires regulations introducing additional qualifying requirements to be approved by the Assembly. This overlapped with the Committee's consideration of Clauses 1 and 2, where stakeholders expressed differing views on whether stronger criteria should be included in primary legislation or introduced through future regulations.

154. NI Humanists reiterated their support for stronger qualifying requirements, drawing on elements of the model operating in the Republic of Ireland. However, they expressed reservations about restrictions within that model which could prevent secular organisations from undertaking campaigning or advocacy activities. They also raised concerns about relying on future regulations to strengthen the framework, particularly given the potential for delays where the Executive was not functioning. They advocated for stronger clearer safeguards should therefore be included in the Bill.

155. In contrast, Humanists Together supported objective, transparent and proportionate qualifying requirements, emphasising that recognition should not depend on an organisation's size, longevity or previous campaigning activities. They supported criteria relating to genuine philosophical beliefs, governance,

accountability, training and safeguarding, while cautioning against a framework that could allow one established organisation to control access to legally recognised humanist marriages.

156. The Committee considered these views alongside the Department's responses to scrutiny points raised by RaISe. The Department maintained that existing arrangements for registering religious and belief bodies and their officiants had operated effectively and that there was insufficient evidence to justify additional requirements at present. However, they acknowledged that regulations might be necessary if problems emerged following enactment.

157. The Department advised that it had not identified definitive additional criteria, as these would depend on any future issues identified. They confirmed that policy development would take account of experience in other jurisdictions, including Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, and would involve stakeholder engagement and public consultation. Any resulting regulations would be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, ensuring Assembly approval before additional requirements could take effect.

158. The Committee also considered concerns raised by religious stakeholders regarding the potential implications of future qualifying requirements for religious freedom. The General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster expressed concern that broad regulation-making powers could be used to impose requirements inconsistent with the beliefs and practices of religious organisations. They argued that appropriate protections should be included in primary legislation.

159. Officials addressed concerns regarding the impact of the Bill on religious organisations, particularly in relation to same-sex marriages. The Department drew attention to Clause 4(8), which extends the existing statutory provisions concerning protection from compulsion to belief marriage. They emphasised that these protections were separate from the power to prescribe additional qualifying requirements and that the Bill would not alter existing religious freedoms or compel religious organisations to conduct ceremonies contrary to their beliefs.

160. The Committee also noted GRO's confirmation that Clause 4 would extend the relevant provisions of the 2003 Order to belief marriages and that any regulations introducing qualifying requirements would require Assembly approval. The GRO considered these provisions consistent with the wider approach adopted by the Bill.

161. In considering Clause 4, the Committee noted that many of the issues raised overlapped with its scrutiny of Clauses 1 to 3, particularly regarding qualifying requirements, equality of treatment and religious freedoms. The Committee considered the Department's assurances that any future requirements would be evidence-based, subject to consultation and require Assembly approval. They also recognised the importance of ensuring that the wider provisions of the 2003 Order apply consistently to religious and belief marriages while maintaining appropriate statutory safeguards and protections.

Clause 5: Raising the minimum age for marriage

162. **Clause 5** amends the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Age of Marriage Act (Northern Ireland) 1951 to increase the minimum age for marriage from 16 to 18. The clause also removes the existing provisions allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to marry with parental or other relevant consent. Under the proposed changes, a marriage involving a person under the age of 18 would be legally prohibited, and a marriage involving a person below the minimum age would be void.

163. The Department explained that the purpose of the provision is to strengthen protections for children and young people against the risks associated with early and forced marriage, including coercion, exploitation and the potential loss of educational opportunities. The Department noted that relatively few 16- and 17-year-olds who are ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland marry each year and considered that the impact of raising the minimum age would be limited. They advised that any interference with the rights of those affected would be outweighed by the additional safeguards provided, particularly for young women.

164. The Committee received significant support for the proposed increase in the minimum marriage age. NICCY, NIHRC, NSPCC and Law Society of Northern

Ireland welcomed the provision, highlighting its importance in strengthening child protection and bringing Northern Ireland into closer alignment with international human rights standards. Stakeholders referred to recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and other international bodies that the minimum age for marriage should be set at 18, without exceptions.

165. NICCY strongly supported the proposed reform, stating that children under 18 cannot provide full, free and informed consent to marriage and that parental consent does not necessarily remove the risk of coercion. They highlighted the potential influence of family and community expectations and argued that girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage. NICCY also provided figures from NISRA showing that, between July 2022 and June 2025, 91 girls and 25 boys under the age of 18 registered for marriage in Northern Ireland. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that the legislation provides effective protection for all children, alongside measures to address forced marriage and exploitation.

166. The Law Society similarly highlighted the risks associated with child marriage, including early pregnancy, domestic violence, reduced educational opportunities and restrictions on personal independence. They referred to international human rights instruments supporting a minimum marriage age of 18 and considered that the existing position in Northern Ireland was inconsistent with international child protection standards. The NSPCC also strongly welcomed the proposed increase, describing it as an important measure in protecting children from coercion and abuse and bringing Northern Ireland into line with legislative changes already introduced in England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

167. Support was also expressed by a range of religious and non-religious organisations. Humanists Together and Northern Ireland Humanists welcomed the increase, with Humanists Together highlighting the significant personal, financial and social consequences of marriage and the importance of ensuring that young people are not placed under pressure to enter into such commitments. The National Secular Society, Northern Catholic Bishops, Methodist Church, Christian Institute and General Presbytery of the Free

Presbyterian Church of Ulster also supported raising the minimum age to 18. The Northern Catholic Bishops highlighted the importance of maturity and capacity when entering marriage and welcomed greater consistency with legislation in the Republic of Ireland.

168. The Youth Assembly expressed strong support for the provision. In it's report, 95% of participating Members supported raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18 without exceptions. Members identified safeguarding, greater maturity and protection from coercion as key benefits. They also highlighted the importance of allowing young people sufficient time to understand the emotional, legal and financial consequences of marriage. A small minority questioned whether 18 was sufficiently high, suggesting that a greater minimum age could provide additional protection.

169. During oral evidence, Youth Assembly Members reiterated these views and highlighted the importance of maturity and informed decision-making. Members also raised concerns about the vulnerability of young women to coercion and exploitation. The Committee explored whether the views expressed were representative of young people more generally, and Youth Assembly representatives considered that their diverse membership reflected a broad range of backgrounds and perspectives. The Youth Assembly also identified a need for improved education and awareness, observing that many Members had limited knowledge of marriage law and the rights and responsibilities associated with marriage. They suggested that these matters could be addressed more fully through education in schools.

170. While most stakeholders supported increasing the minimum age, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland expressed a different view. They highlighted that the age of sexual consent remains 16 and that relatively few 16- and 17-year-olds seek to marry. On that basis, it favoured retaining the option for marriage at 16 or 17, provided appropriate safeguards were in place. They also questioned whether marriage involving a person under 18 should give rise to criminal liability where suitable protections had been established.

171. A further issue raised in the evidence concerned the difference between the proposed minimum age for marriage and the existing age of sexual consent.

Although the Christian Institute supported raising the marriage age to 18, they argue that the age of sexual consent should also be increased. They raised concerns that preventing marriage below 18 could result in some young people entering informal cohabiting relationships instead, without the legal protections associated with marriage. The General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster also questioned the consistency of treating those aged 16 and 17 differently across areas of law involving consent and personal decision-making.

172. The Department acknowledged that some stakeholders had called for the age of sexual consent to be increased alongside the minimum marriage age. However, it clarified that the age of sexual consent is a matter for the Department of Justice and that any proposal to amend it would be for the Justice Minister to consider. The Department further advised that there is no necessary correspondence between the age of sexual consent and the minimum age for marriage, stating that the two thresholds have differed previously. During Second Stage debate, the Minister also distinguished the minimum age for marriage from other legal age thresholds, emphasising that marriage involves a different level of commitment.

173. The Committee also considered how the proposed increase would apply to marriages involving individuals under 18 who had married in another jurisdiction. Members questioned whether young people ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland could travel elsewhere to marry and subsequently have that marriage recognised. The Department advised that, although it could not prevent a marriage taking place in another jurisdiction, a marriage involving an underage person ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland who travelled abroad to marry would not be recognised locally. RaISe subsequently explained that recognition could depend on individual circumstances, distinguishing between Northern Ireland residents travelling abroad to marry and individuals who had lawfully married while resident elsewhere before subsequently moving to Northern Ireland.

174. Members also raised concerns about the recognition of marriages involving very young individuals arriving from other countries. The Department acknowledged the complexity of this area, particularly in relation to international law and the

recognition of marriages conducted in other jurisdictions. They advised that they had no evidence of such cases arising in Northern Ireland and cautioned that further legislative changes could create additional legal complications, particularly in relation to neighbouring jurisdictions. Similar concerns were raised by Youth Assembly Members, who questioned whether increasing the minimum age could displace child marriage to countries where lower age thresholds continued to apply.

175. Human rights considerations were also examined in relation to the provision. The Convention Rights Memorandum identified that raising the minimum marriage age engages Article 8, concerning private and family life, Article 12, concerning the right to marry, and Article 14, concerning non-discrimination, of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Department considered that the proposed restriction pursued the legitimate aim of protecting children and was proportionate to that aim. The Department also addressed concerns about potential impacts on particular communities, noting that the Craigavon Travellers Support Committee had supported raising the minimum age to 18. The Department considered that the limited impact on those aged 16 and 17 was justified by the wider safeguarding benefits.

176. In relation to implementation, the Committee considered the need for public awareness of the change in the minimum marriage age. The Department confirmed that it had not undertaken an assessment of whether associated communications activity could be accommodated within existing departmental budgets. They advised that it was engaging with the GRO on public awareness arrangements and stated that experience in Scotland suggested such costs could be met from existing resources. The GRO confirmed that its operational processes would be adjusted to reflect the increase in the minimum age.

177. Further evidence highlighted the importance of ensuring that the legislative changes are supported by effective safeguarding and awareness measures. The NSS raised concerns about unregistered religious-only marriages involving children, while NICCY called for improved monitoring and publication of data relating to child marriage offences following implementation. Youth Assembly Members similarly emphasised the importance of accessible information and

education to ensure that young people understand their rights and are aware of the support available where coercion or exploitation may arise.

Clause 6: Offence of conduct relating to marriage of persons under 18

178. **Clause 6** amends section 16 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to create a new offence that criminalises any conduct carried out for the purpose of causing a child (under 18) to enter into a marriage before turning 18.

179. Unlike the existing forced marriage offence (which focuses on violence, threats, coercion or similar pressure), this new offence is broader: it can apply even where there is no coercion, deception, threats or violence, so long as the conduct is intended to cause a child marriage.

180. The offence can apply whether or not the conduct takes place in Northern Ireland, and it covers conduct intended to cause a child to marry in Northern Ireland, as well as conduct occurring when either the child or the person involved is habitually resident in Northern Ireland, or where the child is a UK national with the specified Northern Ireland residency connection (and not habitually resident or domiciled in Scotland).

181. The Committee received support for the introduction of the offence from a range of stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), NSPCC, Humanists Together and the General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of protecting children from coercion, exploitation and the potential harms associated with early marriage. Humanists Together supported the introduction of the offence alongside raising the minimum marriage age, while the General Presbytery welcomed the proposed criminalisation of conduct intended to cause a person under 18 to marry.

182. The NIHRC welcomed Clause 6, noting that it closely reflects provisions introduced in England and Wales through the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022. They highlighted that the offence would apply regardless of whether violence, threats, coercion or deception were involved, thereby strengthening the protection available to children. The Commission also

referred to international human rights standards, which recognise child marriage as a form of forced marriage where children cannot provide full, free and informed consent.

183. The NSPCC also supported the provision, emphasising the importance of protecting 16- and 17-year-olds from being coaxed or coerced into marriage. They acknowledged that existing legislation provides both criminal and civil protections against forced marriage, including Forced Marriage Protection Orders. However, they welcomed the broader offence under Clause 6, particularly its application to conduct occurring outside Northern Ireland. The NSPCC also highlighted that a significant proportion of marriages involving under-18s in Northern Ireland had involved individuals from outside the jurisdiction.

184. The Youth Assembly expressed strong support for criminalising forced or pressured marriage involving children. In their report, all participating Members supported making it a criminal offence to force or pressure a person under 18 into marriage. Members emphasised the importance of protecting young people from coercion and exploitation, with some questioning why similar protections should not apply to individuals of all ages. During oral evidence, Youth Assembly representatives reiterated that preventing forced marriage was an important safeguarding measure and reflected wider concerns about protecting young people.

185. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation also indicated broad support for the provision. Of the 22 responses recorded, 72.73% supported making it a criminal offence to take action intended to cause a child under 18 to marry, even where no force or threats were used. No respondents opposed the proposal, while 18.18% were unsure and 9.09% did not answer. The Department separately advised that a little over three quarters of respondents to its earlier online consultation supported the proposed criminalisation of adult organisers of child marriage.

186. During Second Stage debate, questions were raised about the scale and circumstances of forced marriage in Northern Ireland. Clarification was sought on the evidence underpinning the proposed changes, including whether forced

marriage was associated with particular communities or cultural settings. In response, the Minister emphasised that raising the minimum age for marriage was intended to protect the development and welfare of young people and was not primarily a measure addressing forced marriage.

187. The Committee sought clarification on the Department's engagement with the Department of Justice in developing the new offence and the arrangements for its implementation. The Department confirmed and advised that it had engaged with the Department of Justice during the development of the Bill and would continue that engagement to ensure appropriate procedural safeguards were in place for individuals subject to criminal liability.

188. The Committee also considered the potential financial implications of the offence for criminal justice organisations, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Public Prosecution Service, Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland. Clarification was sought on whether criminal justice costs had been assessed, as had been the case for similar legislation in England and Wales and Scotland. The Department confirmed that a decision had been taken not to carry out a specific assessment of the anticipated policing and criminal justice costs associated with Clause 6. In explaining this decision, the Department referred to NISRA figures showing that, between 2020 and 2024, an average of approximately 37 marriages per year involved at least one person under 18, representing around 0.54% of marriages during that period. It advised that there was no evidence that any of these marriages were forced and considered that the likely additional costs for policing, prosecution and the courts would therefore be limited.

189. The Committee also examined the human rights implications of introducing the offence. The Convention Rights Memorandum identified that Clause 6 engages Articles 6 and 7 of the European Convention on Human Rights, concerning the right to a fair trial and the principle of legality. The creation of a criminal offence requires the law to be sufficiently clear and foreseeable and not to apply retrospectively. In response, the Department advised that the proposed criminalisation of adult organisers of child marriage followed from the increase in the minimum marriage age and considered that the changes were clear. It

also confirmed that there was no intention to apply the provisions retrospectively.

190. Further consideration was given to the potential implications under Articles 8, 12 and 14 of the Convention, concerning private and family life, the right to marry and non-discrimination. Questions were raised about whether the offence would operate proportionately and avoid unjustified impacts on particular cultural or religious groups. The Department stated that it was satisfied that the proposed criminalisation of adult organisers of child marriage would operate proportionately. They referred to the level of support received during consultation and reiterated that it would continue to engage with the Department of Justice to ensure appropriate procedural safeguards were in place.

191. In addressing concerns about the potential impact on particular communities, the Department acknowledged that some consultation respondents had suggested that early marriage was a tradition within the Traveller community and that the proposed increase in the minimum age could be discriminatory. However, it highlighted that the Traveller organisation which made a written submission to the consultation had fully supported the proposals to criminalise adult arrangers of child marriage. The Department considered that this support, alongside the wider consultation findings, reinforced its assessment that the proposed offence was proportionate.

192. A further issue raised in evidence concerned child marriages conducted outside the United Kingdom. While welcoming the extended territorial application of the offence, the NIHRC identified a potential gap in relation to marriages legally entered into in another jurisdiction before the individuals subsequently moved to Northern Ireland. They recommended that the Committee consider how such marriages would be treated. The Commission also highlighted the need for improved data collection, public education, frontline training, multi-agency cooperation and appropriate support services to strengthen protections against child marriage.

193. The NSS raised related concerns about children entering unregistered religious-only marriages, which may take place outside the statutory marriage framework. They highlighted the need to address informal arrangements that could expose

children to abuse or exploitation. These concerns raised wider questions about the practical application of the legislative protections, particularly where a ceremony does not result in a legally registered marriage.

194. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of ensuring that the offence was supported by effective implementation and awareness-raising measures. The NSPCC called for continued engagement with children, young people and communities potentially affected by the legislation, alongside public information about the changes. They also highlighted the importance of training professionals, particularly within schools, to recognise signs of coercive marriage and ensure that children at risk could access appropriate support. The NIHRC similarly highlighted the need for frontline training, public education and improved cooperation between relevant organisations.

195. During oral evidence, the Youth Assembly also highlighted the importance of education in preventing child marriage. Members considered that young people would benefit from a greater understanding of healthy relationships, consent and marriage law, and suggested that these matters should be addressed more effectively through relationships and sexuality education and subjects such as Learning for Life and Work. The Department's response to questions on implementation confirmed that it would work closely with the Department of Justice.

196. The GRO noted and supported Clause 6 as an additional safeguard for children at risk. The evidence received highlighted the importance of ensuring that the new offence is accompanied by appropriate operational arrangements and cooperation between relevant Departments and criminal justice organisations.

Clause 7: Raising of minimum age for civil partnership

197. **Clause 7** amends the Civil Partnership Act 2004 to increase the minimum age for entering into a civil partnership from 16 to 18. The provision mirrors the proposed increase in the minimum marriage age under Clause 5 and is intended to ensure that the same minimum age applies to both marriage and civil partnership.

198. Much of the evidence received on Clause 7 overlapped with that considered in relation to Clause 5, as stakeholders generally addressed the proposed increases in the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership together. The principal issues relating to safeguarding, maturity, consent and international human rights standards have therefore been considered under Clause 5 and are not repeated in full here.

199. The Committee received broad support for raising the minimum age for civil partnership to 18. NICCY, NIHRC, Humanists Together and NSS supported the proposed increase, highlighting the importance of protecting children from coercion and exploitation and ensuring consistency with international children's rights standards. NICCY emphasised that children under 18 should be afforded protection regardless of whether they are entering a marriage or civil partnership, while the NIHRC welcomed Clause 7 as aligning with international human rights standards.

200. Support was also expressed by a range of religious organisations, including the General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster and the Methodist Church. The Methodist Church welcomed the increased minimum age as providing additional protection for young and vulnerable people and ensuring greater consistency with other legal responsibilities associated with adulthood. Humanists Together similarly highlighted the significant personal, financial and social consequences of marriage and civil partnership and considered that a minimum age of 18 would provide greater clarity and protection for young people.

201. The Youth Assembly also expressed strong support for the provision. In its report, 95% of participating Members supported raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18 without exceptions. Members highlighted safeguarding, maturity and informed decision-making as important considerations, with many expressing concern that young people may not fully understand the consequences of entering into such commitments. As outlined in the Committee's consideration of Clause 5, Youth Assembly Members also emphasised the importance of education and awareness to ensure that young people understand their rights and responsibilities.

202. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation indicated strong support for the provision. Of the 22 responses recorded, 86.36% supported raising the minimum age for civil partnership from 16 to 18, while no respondents opposed the proposal. A further 4.55% were unsure and 9.09% did not answer the question.

203. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland expressed reservations about removing the option for 16 and 17-year-olds to marry, provided appropriate safeguards were in place. They also suggested that where adequate safeguards existed for those aged 16 or 17 entering a marriage or civil partnership, criminal sanctions should not apply. These concerns reflected broader questions raised during scrutiny of Clause 5 about the relationship between the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership and the age of sexual consent.

204. In responding to concerns about the impact of increasing the minimum age, the Department advised that no person aged 16 or 17 had entered into a civil partnership in Northern Ireland since the Civil Partnership Act 2004 came into effect. They also noted that relatively few young people ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland entered into marriage before the age of 18. The Department considered that the proposed increase would affect only a small number of individuals and that any restrictions arising from the changes were justified by the additional protections provided to young people.

205. The Department also addressed concerns about the potential impact of the proposed minimum-age changes on particular communities. They acknowledged that some consultation respondents had suggested the increase could be discriminatory, particularly in relation to the Traveller community. However, it highlighted that the Craigavon Travellers Support Committee, which represented approximately 200 Traveller families, had supported the proposed changes. The Department also referred to support from the Northern Ireland Council for Racial Equality and the wider consultation findings. They considered that any interference with Convention rights arising from the proposed minimum-age changes was justified and proportionate.

206. A further issue raised in the evidence concerned the difference between the proposed minimum age for marriage and civil partnership and the existing age

of sexual consent, which remains 16. As outlined under Clause 5, the Department advised that the age of sexual consent was a matter for the Department of Justice and that there was no necessary correspondence between the two age thresholds. The Minister similarly clarified during Second Stage debate that the age of consent was separate from marriage law and fell outside the scope of the Bill.

207. The evidence received on Clause 7 largely reflected the views expressed in relation to Clause 5, with stakeholders largely supporting a consistent minimum age of 18 for marriage and civil partnership. The Department's response emphasised the absence of civil partnerships involving 16- and 17-year-olds since the introduction of the 2004 Act and its view that the proposed change was proportionate to the safeguarding objectives of the Bill.

Clause 8: Civil partnerships registered outside Northern Ireland

208. **Clause 8** makes amendments to provisions of the 2004 Act that deal with civil partnerships registered outside of Northern Ireland in order to provide that such partnerships are void if, when the partnership was registered, either party to the partnership was domiciled in Northern Ireland and either party was aged under 18.

209. The evidence received on Clause 8 largely reflected the views expressed in relation to Clauses 5 and 7, with stakeholders largely supporting the increase in the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership to 18. NIHRC welcomed Clause 8, highlighting its alignment with international human rights standards and recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child that the minimum age for marriage should be 18. The NSS also supported the wider changes to the minimum age, emphasising the importance of protecting children's rights.

210. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation indicated support for the provision. Of the 22 responses recorded, 77.27% supported making civil partnerships invalid where someone under 18 from Northern Ireland entered into one outside the jurisdiction. A further 4.55% opposed the proposal, 9.09% were unsure and 9.09% did not answer the question.

211. The Convention Rights Memorandum identified potential implications arising from the non-recognition of certain civil partnerships formed outside Northern Ireland. These included rights under Articles 8, 12 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, relating to private and family life, the right to marry and non-discrimination. Particular consideration was given to whether the provision could disproportionately affect individuals from jurisdictions where civil partnerships involving those under 18 remained legally permitted.

212. In response, the Department advised that the proposed non-recognition of civil partnerships registered outside Northern Ireland was unlikely to have any significant impact on 16 and 17-year-olds normally resident in Northern Ireland. They highlighted that no individuals in this age group had entered into a civil partnership in Northern Ireland in the more than 20 years since the Civil Partnership Act 2004 came into effect. The Department also stated that it had no information suggesting that individuals in this age group had entered into civil partnerships elsewhere.

213. The Department further clarified that the proposed restrictions were intended to apply where there was a relevant connection to Northern Ireland. It distinguished these circumstances from civil partnerships, or equivalent relationships, legally entered into by two individuals living outside Northern Ireland. The Department advised that such relationships would continue to be recognised in accordance with existing UK-wide arrangements.

214. The General Register Office noted the provisions of Clause 8 and had no further comments.

Clause 9: Minimum age for marriage and civil partnership: consequential amendments

215. **Clause 9** introduces Part 2 of the Schedule, which contains minor and consequential amendments required to give effect to the increase in the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18.

216. The Committee received limited evidence specifically addressing Clause 9, with stakeholders generally commenting on the wider proposals to raise the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership, as considered under Clauses 5

and 7. The NIHRC welcomed Clause 9, noting its alignment with international human rights standards and recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The NSS also supported the proposed increase in the minimum age to 18, highlighting the importance of strengthening protections for children and improving compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

217. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation indicated support for the proposed technical amendments. Of the 22 responses recorded, 16 supported the changes, four were unsure and two did not answer. No respondents opposed the proposal.

218. The GRO noted the provisions of Clause 9 and had no further comments. The Committee's deliberations on the clause were limited, with the principal policy issues relating to the increase in the minimum age for marriage.

Clause 10: Saving provisions

219. **Clause 10** provides transitional arrangements to ensure that the increase in the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18 does not apply retrospectively. The clause preserves the validity of marriages and civil partnerships entered into before the relevant provisions come into operation. It also allows marriages and civil partnerships to proceed under the existing rules where the necessary notices and consents have been provided before commencement, and makes provision for certain overseas marriages and civil partnerships.

220. The Convention Rights Memorandum identified that the transitional arrangements engage Articles 8, 12 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, concerning private and family life, the right to marry and non-discrimination. The provisions are intended to protect individuals who have already taken formal steps towards marriage or civil partnership, while providing legal certainty and ensuring that the changes do not apply retrospectively.

221. NICCY raised concerns about the proposed transitional arrangements, questioning the need for a two-month period between Royal Assent and commencement. NICCY noted that Clause 10 would allow certain marriages

and civil partnerships involving those under 18 to proceed despite the proposed increase in the minimum age. It sought clarification on what protections would be available to young people entering such unions and whether further legislative provision might be required. NICCY also emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement with those affected by the reforms during implementation and monitoring.

222. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation indicated support for the transitional arrangements. Of the 22 responses recorded, 72.73% supported allowing existing marriages and civil partnerships, or those where the necessary formal steps had been completed before commencement, to remain valid or proceed under the existing rules. A further 4.55% opposed the proposal, 13.64% were unsure and 9.09% did not answer.

223. The GRO noted the provisions of Clause 10, particularly in relation to marriage and civil partnership notices submitted before the increase in the minimum age comes into operation. It confirmed that the transitional arrangements would be reflected in its operational processes.

Clause 11: Interpretation

224. **Clause 11** defines “the 2003 Order” to mean the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and defines “the 2004 Act” to mean the Civil Partnership Act 2004.

225. The Committee received limited evidence in relation to Clause 11, with the GRO noting the provisions of the clause. No other written or oral evidence was received specifically relating to Clause 11, and no issues or concerns were raised during the Committee’s consideration of the clause.

Clause 12: Power to make consequential provision

226. **Clause 12** provides the Department of Finance with the power to make regulations containing provisions consequential on the Bill. This includes the power to amend existing legislation where necessary to give effect to the Act. Regulations amending primary legislation would be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, requiring Assembly approval, while other regulations would be subject to the negative resolution procedure.

227. In response to scrutiny points raised by RaISe regarding the appropriateness of the regulation-making powers, the Department advised that it considered the powers reasonable and standard for legislation of this nature. They explained that the consequential powers would ensure that the statute book remained coherent, functional and consistent following the Bill's enactment and allow the Department to respond to relevant changes in the law. The Department further advised that the use of affirmative procedures for amendments to primary legislation and negative procedures for other consequential amendments provided an appropriate balance between flexibility and Assembly scrutiny.

228. The Committee also considered the operation of the delegated powers during oral evidence with Northern Ireland Humanists. Members raised questions about the use of the affirmative resolution procedure, particularly in circumstances where there was no Minister of Finance or where the Assembly or Executive was not functioning. Legal advice provided to the Committee indicated that the delegation of legislative power contained in the Bill was not inappropriate.

229. Responses received through the Committee's Citizen Space consultation indicated support for the provision. Of the 22 responses recorded, 68.18% supported allowing the Department to make additional rules, including amendments to existing legislation, to support the Act. No respondents opposed the proposal, while 27.27% were unsure and 4.55% did not answer.

230. Other stakeholder evidence addressed the Bill's regulation-making powers more broadly. The Youth Assembly expressed support for allowing the Government to introduce future requirements for organisations conducting marriages, with 81% of participating Members supporting this approach. Humanists Together also emphasised the importance of ensuring that any regulations and guidance provided for a fair, transparent and proportionate process for recognising belief organisations. These views related principally to the Bill's wider regulatory framework rather than the specific consequential powers under Clause 12. The GRO noted Clause 12 and had no further comments. The evidence received on the clause was limited, with the principal issues concerning the scope of the delegated powers and the level of scrutiny provided by the relevant Assembly procedures.

Clause 13: Short title and commencement

231. **Clause 13** provides the Department of Finance with power to make regulations that make provision that is of a consequential nature.

232. The Committee received limited evidence in relation to Clause 13, with the GRO noting the provisions of the clause. No other written or oral evidence was received specifically relating to Clause 13, and no issues or concerns were raised during the Committee's consideration of the clause.

Schedule Minor and Consequential Amendments

Part 1 Belief Marriage

233. **Part 1 of the Schedule** contains consequential amendments relating to belief marriage.

234. The Committee received limited evidence in relation to Part 1 of the Schedule, with the GRO noting the provisions of the clause. No other written or oral evidence was received specifically relating to Part 1 of the Schedule, and no issues or concerns were raised during the Committee's consideration of the clause.

Part 2 Age of Marriage and Civil Partnership

235. **Part 2** of the Schedule contains minor and consequential amendments relating to the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership.

236. The Committee received limited evidence in relation to Part 2 of the Schedule, with the GRO noting the provisions of the clause. No other written or oral evidence was received specifically relating to Part 2 of the Schedule, and no issues or concerns were raised during the Committee's consideration of the clause.

Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill

237. Having considered the written and oral evidence received on the Bill and the reassurances from the Department via amendments to the Bill's EFM, the Committee undertook its formal Clause-by-Clause consideration at its meeting on 10 November 2026 - see Minutes of Proceedings in Appendix 3 and Minutes of Evidence in Appendix 4.

Clause 1

238. The Committee was content with this Clause as drafted by the Department. Noting the Department's amendment to the EFM.

Clause 2

239. The Committee was content with this Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 3

240. The Committee was content with this Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 4

241. The Committee was content with this Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 5

242. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 6

243. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 7

244. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 8

245. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 9

246. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 10

247. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 11

Interpretation

248. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 12

Consequential provisions

249. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Clause 13

Short title and commencement

250. The Committee was content with the Clause as drafted by the Department.

Schedule

251. The Committee was content with the Schedule as drafted by the Department.

Long Title

252. The Committee was content with the Long Title as drafted by the Department.

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Memoranda and Papers from the Department of Finance

View Memoranda and Papers supplied to the Committee by the Department

Appendix 2: Memoranda and Papers from Others

View Memoranda and Papers supplied to the Committee by other individuals or organisations

Appendix 3: Minutes of Proceedings

View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report

Appendix 4: Minutes of Evidence

View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report

Appendix 5: Written submissions

View written submissions received in relation to the report

Appendix 6: Research Papers

View Research Papers produced by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) in relation to the report

Appendix 7: Other Documents relating to the report

View other documents in relation to the report

Appendix 8: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- The Northern Ireland Youth Assembly
- Northern Ireland Humanists
- Humanists Together
- Give Couples a Choice Movement
- Department of Finance
- General Register Office

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