

Reform Wedding Laws

UPDATE: The Law Commission is now consulting on reforms to wedding laws. Many of its proposals are in line with the NSS's own recommendations. [Read more...](#)

As one of the leading organisations advocating marriage equality across the UK and British Isles, we campaign for legally-binding weddings to be equally open to all, regardless of religion or sexual orientation.

What's the problem?

There are essentially two types of legally-binding weddings in England & Wales: religious weddings and civil weddings (and civil partnerships). In most cases, what determines the type of wedding is the building where it takes place. Religious weddings must be held in a registered place of worship, while civil weddings and partnerships must take place in an approved premises.

An exception to this are Jewish and Quaker weddings, which can take place anywhere because it is their registration process itself that determines their status.

But this system leads to inequality. Although the demand for religious weddings is declining, there are nearly 40,000 places of worship registered for marriage, but only 7,500 civil wedding venues.

The process for a place of worship to register itself is much cheaper than for a civil premises. A religious venue only needs to pay a one-off fee of £123 to its council to be registered. But a civil marriage venue needs to pay to renew its license every three years and the fee is much higher; sometimes close to £1000. This in turn contributes to the cost of weddings.

Furthermore, while approved premises for civil weddings and partnerships must by law hold ceremonies for same-sex couples, this is not the case for places of worship. In 2018, only 0.5% of places of worship were registered for same-sex weddings. This considerably reduces the options for same-sex couples, even those who are religious.

Whereas opposite-sex weddings are in slow decline, same-sex weddings are increasing. In 2015, a year after same-sex marriage legislations came in force, there were over 26,000 married gay couples in England and Wales. In 2016, this number more than doubled to over 60,000. It is therefore imperative that this inequality within our marriage system is addressed urgently.

The complexity over the legal status of religious weddings has also contributed to a rise in couples who have religious 'wedding' ceremonies that are not legally-binding. This is a particular problem among some Muslim communities. In 2014, a study of 50 Muslim women in the West Midlands found that while 46 were in an Islamic 'nikah' marriage, only 5 were in a legally-recognised civil marriage. Over half were unaware that they lacked the full legal rights and protections of civil marriage.

What are we doing?

- We've been making recommendations to the Law Commission on reforming wedding laws for greater simplicity, equality and fairness for all. The commission is now consulting on broad reforms to wedding laws, and many of its proposals are in line with our

recommendations. [Read more...](#)

- We also promote better citizenship education to ensure that every individual understands the rights and responsibilities involved in entering a marriage. No person should be left unaware of what constitutes a legal marriage and find themselves in a position where they are unwittingly left with no rights if the relationship breaks down.

What you can do:

[I support the NSS campaign for marriage reform for greater equality and fairness.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

More information

- [Briefing: Reform wedding laws](#) (PDF, 784 Kb)

A summary of our campaign to reform wedding laws, and why this is necessary.

- [Call for Muslim women to be better informed about legal rights relating to marriage and divorce](#)

A report from the Muslim Women's Network (MWN UK) has called for greater efforts to promote women's legal rights, warning that some Muslim men are using marriage and divorce as a "psychological tool against women".

[Read More](#)

- [Is it time to separate church and state in marriage?](#)

One fact that the on-going debate over equal marriage has highlighted is that current marriage laws in England and Wales are of Byzantine complexity. They grant the power to many, but not all, religious organisations to register marriages on behalf of the state – along with their respective religious ceremonial. Establishment, and the inclusion of religions as partners of the state has caused major hurdle for the Government trying to enact legislation to enable equal marriage.

[Read More](#)

While you're here

We're been challenging religious threats to equality and human rights for over 150 years. Our huge progress needs to be protected and there's still work to be done. Will you help?

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