

Give couples greater freedom over where they marry, says NSS

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The National Secular Society has welcomed proposals to grant couples more freedom over where they choose to marry in England and Wales in response to a consultation.

Last year the Law Commission [proposed comprehensive reforms to wedding law](#) in England and Wales.

The NSS has now responded to the commission's consultation on the plans, and said they offer "a balanced, practical and sensible model for more equal and inclusive weddings for people of all religions and none".

The commission's proposals include the introduction of [an officiant-based system for the legal recognition of marriage](#), to replace the current restrictive building-based system, in line with previous NSS recommendations.

In response to the consultation the NSS said this change would "significantly increase freedom and fairness for all couples to marry how they want, and where they want".

The change would mean more couples could legally marry outdoors if they chose to do so, and would be in line with existing law in Scotland.

Currently only Jewish and Quaker weddings are legally recognised if they take place outdoors in England and Wales.

Other proposals and NSS response

The NSS also supported several other proposals which it has previously lobbied for.

These included a plan to introduce universal civil preliminaries – the steps that must be taken before a couple is authorised to have a legally binding wedding. The society said this would make the law clearer and fairer.

The NSS also said several of the commission's other proposals would expand couples' freedom of choice, including:

- A plan to relax prohibitions on religious content – for example in songs, readings and hymns – in civil weddings.
- A more inclusive approach to authorising which religious groups can officiate legally-recognised weddings, and a move to consider including "non-religious belief groups" into the sphere of groups that can nominate officiants.
- A recommendation to consider enabling independent officiants to hold legally-recognised weddings.

NSS comment

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "The Law Commission's proposals would bring substantial and welcome change to wedding law.

"They would make the law simpler and grant couples greater opportunity to marry in a way that's meaningful to them.

"The commission and the government should proceed with plans to reform the law in this area, and ensure freedom, fairness and individual rights are central considerations in their plans as they do so."

Notes

- The Law Commission is a statutory independent body, tasked with keeping the law in England and Wales under review and recommending reform where it considers it necessary.
- The NSS [campaigns for legally-binding weddings to be equally open to all](#), regardless of religion or sexual orientation.

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