

Wedding reform: “High level of support” across faiths & beliefs

Posted: Tue, 14th Dec 2021

Proposed reforms to wedding laws have a "high level of support" from people of different religions and beliefs, according to a new study.

The results of the study published in a [briefing paper](#) this month found participants regarded wedding laws in England and Wales as "outdated" and "in need of reform" to reflect changes in society, including "religious and cultural diversity".

The study demonstrates broad support for reforms proposed by the Law Commission to wedding laws in England and Wales. The proposals were also [backed](#) by the National Secular Society in its response to a consultation by the commission in January.

The paper, whose authors include specialist advisor to the commission's weddings project Professor Rebecca Probert, investigated why wedding ceremonies are conducted outside the legal framework.

The study examined the views of 167 individuals from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds who had either participated in, or been involved conducting, different kinds of non-legally binding wedding ceremonies.

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 a legally recognised marriage.

Problems in wedding law

Key issues raised by participants included the perceived lack of recognition of non-Christian ceremonies, the non-recognition of ceremonies conducted by humanists and independent celebrants, and the limited options for interfaith weddings.

These issues result partly from the law in England and Wales which specifies the vast majority of legally recognised weddings can only take place in registered place of worship or approved premises. Only weddings held according to Jewish or Quaker traditions may take place in any setting.

Participants considered these rules "unnecessarily restrictive", especially those who have limited access to a registered place of worship or who wanted to marry outdoors.

The Law Commission proposals, supported by the NSS, would replace the restrictive building-based system with an officiant-based one for the legal recognition of marriage.

An officiant-based system would entail a more inclusive approach to authorising which religious groups can officiate legally recognised weddings, and could include "non-religious belief groups" including humanists. It could also include independent celebrants and would make it easier for couples to hold interfaith weddings.

The proposals found "widespread support" among participants.

Additionally, having weddings on approved premises contributed to the cost of getting married, participants said. Many expressed that having a wider choice of venues by removing restrictions would reduce costs.

The Law Commission has also proposed to lift restrictions on religious content at civil ceremonies. This would mean marrying couples could choose to have a hymn sung or prayer read at their ceremony.

Only one participant expressed concerns that permitted this would "draw away" from the role of religious groups in weddings. Other participants supported the proposals, which are also backed by the NSS.

Many participants also considered the legal processes for getting married to be "complex and uncertain". The Law Commission's proposals aim to simplify many of these aspects, including introducing standardised civil preliminaries.

NSS comment

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "This study underscores the urgent need for reform of wedding laws in England and Wales to make them simpler, fairer and fitting for the 21st century.

"Participants' views reveal these laws are archaic and cannot accommodate the increasingly irreligious and religiously-diverse society we have today.

"The Law Commission's proposals would make it easier and cheaper for everyone, whatever their religion or belief, to have the wedding that best suits them. The government should embrace these plans to ensure no-one faces unnecessary barriers to marriage."

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.

What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

- [Read the Secular Charter](#)
- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Marriage](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[Reform wedding laws](#)

Make marriage fairer for all people of all religions and beliefs.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

[Don't let the Church dictate how we marry](#)

In justifying its uniquely privileged position as the [established religion](#), the Church of England likes to portray... [Read More »](#)

[Homophobic churches and liberal states make for unhappy bedfellows](#)

Parliament should begin the process of disestablishment rather than try to fix the Church of England, argues Stephen... [Read More »](#)

[NSS welcomes recommended reform to weddings](#)

The National Secular Society has welcomed a government-commissioned report recommending reform of wedding laws in... [Read More »](#)

[N. Ireland to adopt marriage law reforms backed by NSS](#)

Northern Ireland will adopt proposals backed by the National Secular Society to modernise marriage laws.

In a [statement...](#) [Read More »](#)

NSS welcomes legalisation of outdoor weddings in England & Wales

The National Secular Society has welcomed moves to permanently allow outdoor weddings in England and Wales.

The government... [Read More »](#)