

Coalition for Marriage - response to the Ministry of Justice consultation “Tying the Knot: Reforming weddings law in England and Wales”

This is the response of Coalition for Marriage (C4M) to the Ministry of Justice consultation published on 16 July 2026, which closes at 11:59am on 24 September 2026, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tying-the-knot-reforming-weddings-law-in-england-and-wales>. It's sent by email to weddingslawconsultation@justice.gov.uk by Dr Tony Rucinski, our Chief Executive, on behalf of C4M and our supporters across England and Wales. C4M exists to champion marriage as the voluntary, exclusive, lifelong union of one man and one woman, the gold standard for families and society. We answer the questions on which C4M has a view, under the paper's numbers. Page references are to the consultation paper CP 1653, which replaced CP 1628 without changing the proposals, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a6349b62dc18ebe4c3b2b97/Tying_the_knot_-_Reforming_weddings_law_in_England_and_Wales__web_.pdf.

The Government has presented this reform as a matter of where couples may marry, “a beach, a forest, a family garden or a canal boat” (page 23). But its foreword calls it “the most significant reform of weddings law in over two centuries” (page 4). It would replace registered buildings with licensed officiants, let paid independent celebrants conduct legal weddings for the first time and bring nominated, independent and maritime officiants under a new central regulator (pages 66 to 81).

The Government's “overarching objective in reforming weddings law is to strengthen the institution of marriage by ensuring that the law supports, and does not frustrate, couples who have chosen to enter into this serious and lifelong commitment” (page 25). We share that objective and have tested each proposal against it. Much of the paper passes. We support the two-stage preliminaries, with a compulsory private interview for each party, and the retained 28-day notice period (pages 28 to 30 and 72). We support signposting to the Forced Marriage Unit (page 29) and a legal duty on every officiant to uphold the dignity and significance of marriage (page 57). We support the new caveat. It would let a friend or relative with “legitimate concerns that someone may be at risk of being coerced into marriage” have a caveat recorded “before any notice of marriage has been given”, in the words of the family test published with the consultation (paragraph 10), at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a5632832f6185941a9a648a/Family_Test_-_reforming_weddings_law_in_England_and_Wales.pdf. No question asks about it, but it belongs in the Bill. We also support making it easier for a religious ceremony to be the legal wedding, so that fewer women discover too late that they were never married in law.

Three proposals fail the test. In religious and belief ceremonies a person could be married without speaking, on an action the officiant and witnesses are left to interpret, in a private home before witnesses who may belong to a family putting pressure on them. The words the law would require at a civil wedding carry no promise of permanence or of faithfulness, and offer “spouse” to those who “do not identify with” husband and wife. And the Government nowhere restates the protections Parliament gave in 2013, so that no religious organisation or minister can be compelled to conduct a same-sex wedding, although those protections are

written around the registered buildings this reform would replace.

We ask for four things on the face of the Bill. The first is consent expressed personally by each party at every wedding, of every faith and of none, in words that at least one person from outside both families can hear, or signed by a party who can't speak. Weddings should also stay in public places, open to anyone who wants to see them. The second is required words that name husband and wife, keep each person's declaration that they're free to marry, and carry the couple's own promise of faithfulness for life. The third is the 2013 protections restated for every religious organisation and every officiant it nominates. That includes the protection in equality law for refusing, and the new protection for owners of religious premises that the Law Commission said an officiant scheme needs, in its 2022 report at https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250109115755mp_/https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/30/2022/07/A-new-weddings-law-LC-report.pdf. With it should come a bar, so that no officiant the new regime licenses can be refused authorisation, found unfit, sanctioned or deauthorised for believing that marriage is the union of one man and one woman. The fourth is civil registration before or alongside every religious marriage ceremony, extending to every faith the reform that the Home Office's 2018 independent review of sharia law recommended for Islamic marriages, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a822842ed915d74e34020a3/6.4152_HO_CPGF_Report_into_Sharia_Law_in_the_UK_PRINT.pdf.

The Government's own papers make the case for marriage. The consultation records that "marriage is associated with greater family stability, with married parents less likely to separate" (page 21). The family test says that "the research base has not identified a causal relationship between marriage and stability" (paragraph 25). But in July 2026 the Centre for Social Justice analysed 3,286 couples across their first fourteen years of parenthood, at https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/CSJ-Poverty_and_Family_Stability.pdf. Earlier analyses, including those by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said that most of the difference in how often married and unmarried parents separate came down to who chooses to marry. They often left out up to a quarter of the sample (pages 8 and 9 of the report). Using the full sample, the Centre found that the differences between the couples who marry and those who don't, though important, "do not explain most of the difference" (page 9 of the report). It also found that "parents in the poorest fifth of households who marry at any point are less likely to separate - even after controlling for a wide range of socio-economic and demographic characteristics - than parents in the richest fifth who never marry" (page 3 of the report). The chance of separating was 26 per cent for the poorest parents who married, against 46 per cent for the richest who never did. So the stability that goes with marriage isn't simply a matter of who marries or what they earn, and a Government that wants stable families should want more couples to marry.

The Government is far less demanding of the evidence for its own reform. Its impact assessment assumes a 3 per cent rise in weddings while stating that "There is no quantitative evidence to suggest that the number of weddings will be greater following the legal reforms" (page 48), at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a563b682f6185941a9a6499/Weddings_Reform_Consultation_-_Impact_Assessment_-_Final.pdf. The same assessment says longer-term trends in marriage behaviour suggest "the total number of weddings may remain

stable or continue to decline”, but it still uses the 3 per cent rise in the table that follows (page 50). It values the wedding industry at “£14 billion in 2023” on the strength of a post on weddingindustrynews.com (page 6, footnote 13), and works out how long officiants would need to learn the new rules from reading speeds on readingsoft.com (page 13).

The foreword says reform “will likely also bring down the costs of getting married, so that couples can make the choice to marry no matter their budget” (page 4). But the Government’s own figures show any saving would be small beside what a wedding costs. The paper says the average wedding in 2023 cost around £20,000, “largely driven by optional services chosen by couples” (page 68). The impact assessment calls the saving to couples from venues no longer needing council approval for weddings “Small, likely to be insignificant”, and says “it is unknown whether businesses will lower prices” (page 30). It expects couples to save £138.9 million over ten years after the new fees for approving wedding locations are taken off (page 39). The largest saving, £93.9 million, would go to couples whose own ceremony the law doesn’t recognise, many of them religious, who would no longer pay for a second, civil wedding. The next, £54.8 million, would come from needing one registrar instead of two at a civil wedding at a venue. On the assessment’s central estimate that saves a couple £294.11 (page 25), a small sum beside an average wedding that cost around £20,000 in 2023.

Beyond the Bill, we ask the Government to withdraw the claim that reform will let couples marry “no matter their budget”. The family test says the “marriage gap” between lower and higher income groups “has doubled over the past thirty years” (paragraph 20), and we share the aim of closing it. If the Government wants more couples to marry, it should reduce or remove the couple penalty in the benefits system. It should also build on its plan to point couples to “relationship education resources” when they give notice (page 29), so that every couple is offered real preparation for marriage. The Centre for Social Justice’s report shows that, even in the simplest case, a mother at home looking after her one-year-old “would be £5,700 per year worse off if she marries, or even moves in with, the child’s father who earns £20,000 per year gross” (page 12 of the report).

A reform meant to strengthen marriage should strengthen the commitment couples make, but the Government’s plans for couples who live together without marrying would weaken it. The consultation is part of “a wider programme intended to modernise family law” (page 24). The paper says its proposals sit “alongside our plans to reform the law of financial remedies on divorce and introduce rights for cohabitants on separation and death” (page 24). The Government consulted on those plans in June, in “A fairer end to relationships”, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-fairer-end-to-relationships>. As we said in our response to that consultation, “You do not uphold marriage by building its replacement.” If couples who haven’t married get rights when they separate or when one of them dies, they lose one reason to make a deliberate, public commitment to each other, because they’d have those rights without it. And couples who want the legal rights without marrying can already have them in a civil partnership, which the paper says “provides substantially the same legal rights and responsibilities as marriage” (page 7). The equality impact assessment says that “Studies suggest that increased protections for cohabitants do not have a negative impact on marriage rates” (paragraph 43), at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a54a4a7c3d64d94cacab7dd/Equality_Impact_Assessment_-_reforming_weddings_law_in_England_and

[_Wales.pdf](#). It cites only one study, published in 2007 and drawn from “evidence from Australia and Europe” (footnote 6). One study nearly twenty years old isn’t enough to show that rights for couples who live together won’t harm marriage in England and Wales.

Question 1 - Should information and signposting be provided on the online notice platform in order to support and safeguard couples, including in relation to forced marriage, consent and capacity? Yes. Every person giving notice should be told plainly that no one may be married without their free consent, and how to reach the Forced Marriage Unit.

Question 2 - Do you agree with the type of information the Government proposes should be provided at the online notice stage? Yes. The signposting to “relationship support and guidance” (page 29) should include preparation for marriage, offered to every couple who gives notice. It should also tell couples what the Government itself says marriage is, “a serious and lifelong commitment” (page 21).

Question 4 - Do you agree that at the in-person interview, registrars should be required to ask a specific set of questions aimed at identifying forced, predatory or sham marriages? Yes. The compulsory separate interview, which the paper rightly calls “a very important safeguard” (page 30), is the strongest proposal in the consultation, and a set list of questions will make it consistent across districts. But that interview happens before the wedding day, so it can’t take into account anything that happens after it, such as pressure from a family. The ceremony is the last point at which a woman under pressure can refuse, in front of people who can hear her. That’s why our answers to Questions 5 and 20 put safeguards at the ceremony.

The paper would also abolish the rule that each person must have lived for seven days in the district where they give notice (pages 18 and 28). We oppose that. When the Law Commission consulted on it, most of those who answered opposed abolition, and the Commission recommended it regardless (paragraph 3.40 of its 2022 report). Its reasons included making it easier for couples who live overseas to marry here, including at heritage venues, and the economic benefit that would bring (paragraphs 3.37 and 3.44). It also wanted to help same-sex couples reach the few places of worship that have opted in to same-sex weddings (paragraph 3.43). None of those is a reason to cut the link between a couple’s notice and the place where they actually live. Some councils told the Commission the rule could be met by staying with friends or in a hotel (paragraph 3.38). If that’s so, the rule should be tightened, not scrapped.

Question 5 - Do you agree with the proposal to allow consent to be expressed through the performance of actions in religious and non-religious belief ceremonies? No. At every wedding, of every faith and of none, each party should express consent personally, in words that at least one person from outside both families can hear, or where a party can’t speak, by signing it. That applies to Jewish and Quaker weddings as much as to any other. They need no prescribed words today (page 20), but the paper would bring every wedding except Anglican ones under the same rules (pages 12, 24 and 25). We ask the same of every wedding, our own included, which is what one law for everybody means. The paper’s examples of consent by action are the Hindu walk around the sacred fire and the Muslim exchange of *ijab* and *qubul*, offer and acceptance, which the paper says are understood within these religions to be “a central act by which the couple enter into marriage” (page 33). Rituals

like these may go with each party's own consent, but they must never replace it.

The Government has already made the case for consent everyone can hear. It wants "a clear and observable point at all weddings at which both parties confirm that they freely agree to marry" (page 32). It keeps required words for civil weddings to protect "the state's interests in ensuring that both parties have freely agreed to marry" (page 33). It says it's "non-negotiable that the location should enable the couple clearly to understand each other when expressing consent to marry and for this to be witnessed" (page 41). Its dignity standard asks for consent "in a manner that is intelligible" (page 39). Yet nothing in the paper or its three assessments requires either party to say a word at their own wedding, and the word "audible" appears in none of them. An action counts as consent if "the couple, the officiant and the witnesses share an understanding of the meaning and significance of the action or words" (page 33). Only the couple, the officiant and the witnesses can meet that test, and nobody else can check afterwards whether they did. The state's interest in free consent is the same at a religious wedding as at a civil one. Nor would spoken consent shut out anyone who can't speak, since for civil weddings the Government already plans "alternative methods of communication, such as interpreters or other assistive tools" (equality impact assessment, paragraph 26).

Consent by action is most dangerous in a forced marriage, where the officiant and witnesses who must share an understanding with the bride may be the people putting pressure on her. In 2025 the Forced Marriage Unit handled 58 cases with "no overseas element, with the potential or actual forced marriage taking place entirely within the UK", up from 15 in 2024 and 10 in 2023, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2025/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2025>. The Unit says this "continues to highlight that forced marriages can and do take place in the UK", though it warns that its 2025 figures aren't directly comparable with earlier years, because it changed how it records cases. In 42 of those 58 cases, 72 per cent, the victim was female. Across the Unit's 406 cases of forced marriage or female genital mutilation that year, 74 per cent involved female victims. In 163 of those cases - 40 per cent - the victim was 17 or under, and 87 were 15 or under. In May, GB News reported that a London centre offering Islamic marriage contracts had published guidance under which a virgin bride's silence is "considered as implicit agreement", at <https://www.gbnews.com/news/sharia-britain-marriage-investigation-legal>. Under the Government's test, an officiant and witnesses who follow guidance like that would be the ones deciding what the bride meant. A bride's silence must never be enough to marry her.

Question 6 - Do you agree with the proposed required words for civil weddings? No. The proposed words, "I [name] accept you [name] as my [husband / wife / spouse]", are what the paper calls "a short statement of contract" (page 34). Today's prescribed words carry no promise of permanence either (page 20), but this reform is the moment to change that, because the Government has written its own definition into the paper. Marriage, it says, "is a serious and lifelong commitment", entered "with the expectation that the commitment will endure for life" (page 21). The paper calls marriage lifelong eleven times. Every officiant would be under a legal duty to uphold a standard requiring the wedding to "reflect the significance and seriousness of marriage as a major life event and lifelong commitment" (pages 39 and 57). The officiant would be bound by law to uphold a lifelong commitment the couple are never asked to make.

We ask for required words that name husband and wife and carry the couple's own promise, lifelong and exclusive. For example, "I [name] take you [name] to be my wife [husband], to be faithful to you alone for as long as we both live." The Centre for Social Justice's report offers the wedding itself as part of the explanation for married couples' greater stability. It notes that "couples publicly commit to one another through a wedding ceremony, increasing their willingness to hold themselves to account for that decision" (page 10 of the report). The exclusive half of the promise matters as much as the lifelong half. The Home Office's 2018 independent review of sharia law said that requiring Islamic marriages to be registered "would be to prohibit informal polygamy through multiple Islamic marriages" (page 17 of the review cited above). Today each person also declares that they're free to marry (page 20). The proposed words leave that declaration out, and the Bill should put it back, because circumstances can change in the weeks between notice and the wedding. The words should also promise the faithfulness that marriage requires. The words "forsaking", "fidelity" and "faithful" appear nowhere in the consultation paper or its three assessments. We also oppose offering "spouse" for "couples who do not identify with the terms 'husband' and 'wife'" (page 34). Marriage law should call a husband and a wife what they are.

Question 7 - Are there any specific variations to the required words that should be considered acceptable and to which "words to the same effect" should apply? Yes, but only the same words said in another language, or spoken differently because of a disability or medical condition, as in the paper's examples (page 34). The paper would leave each officiant to decide whether a variation is acceptable, with guidance from the regulator (page 34), so the Bill should say that no variation may drop husband and wife, or the promise of faithfulness for life we ask for at Question 6.

Question 8 - Do you agree with the Government's proposed new dignity framework to support officiants in their legal duty to ensure that weddings are dignified? Yes. The standards are sound. But they're applied one wedding at a time by the officiant, and they don't replace the public ceremony that the "open doors" rule protects today, which the reform would end (page 49).

Question 9 - Do you agree with our proposed overarching dignity standard? Yes, with the protection for belief we ask for at Question 23. Its first element, consent "in a manner that is intelligible", is why we ask at Question 5 for spoken consent at every wedding. Its third, a "lifelong commitment", is why we ask at Question 6 for words in which the couple promise to be faithful for life (page 39).

Questions 10 to 13 - the supporting standards for a dignified location and ceremony, and the factors officiants should consider for each? Yes, for the reasons we give at Question 8.

Question 14 - Do you think there should be restrictions on the consumption of food or drink, including alcohol, during a wedding ceremony? Yes. Drinking for pleasure has no place in the ceremony at which two people consent to marry, and the exceptions the paper proposes for religious and belief rituals, for children and for medical need are right (page 43).

Question 15 - Do you think there should be specific restrictions on gimmick-based or trivialising acts or elements within a wedding ceremony? Yes. A ceremony staged "as a parody or comedic sketch, with the expression of consent treated as part of the performance"

(page 42) should be ruled out in the Bill.

Question 16 - Should religious or non-religious belief content be permitted in a civil ceremony, provided that the ceremony does not replicate, or amount to, a full religious or non-religious belief service? No. The proposal would give same-sex couples religious content at their weddings without any religious body having opted in, and so get round the opt-in Parliament gave religious bodies in 2013. Under the present law, religious content in civil ceremonies is “tightly restricted” (page 45). The proposal would allow “a Bible reading” and other religious elements, led by a guest or by a paid independent officiant (pages 46, 47 and 68). A couple could then have a ceremony that looks like a church wedding, led by someone no church has authorised. The paper says the change “may be particularly relevant for couples from different faith or belief backgrounds and same-sex couples” (page 46). The family test says belief content will be permitted in civil ceremonies “particularly to support mixed-faith and LGBTQ+ couples” (paragraph 7). The equality impact assessment sets the 2013 exemption for religious bodies beside the proposal, and says it “may allow same-sex couples to integrate some religious elements into their civil wedding ceremonies” (paragraph 54). We ask for the present law to be kept.

Question 17 - Do you agree that state-employed officiants, i.e., registrars, should not be permitted to lead or participate in religious or non-religious belief content? Yes. Registrars “should not be expected to lead or participate in religious or non-religious belief elements”, and their participation “could also be perceived as state endorsement of particular beliefs” (page 47). The paper takes care to keep registrars out of belief elements (pages 46 and 47), but for the religious officiant asked to conduct a same-sex wedding it offers only one general sentence, in its discussion of home weddings (page 52). We return to that at Question 23.

Question 20 - Are there other safeguards required to (1) protect against forced, predatory, or sham marriages and (2) ensure the safety of ceremonies conducted in private homes? Yes. The paper says “A private home may not always be a neutral environment and may not offer the same visibility as a public or commercial venue. This could make it harder to identify forced, predatory, sham marriages or wider abuse” (page 51). The Government is minded to permit home weddings “only if it is satisfied that robust safeguards are in place to protect those getting married” (page 52). It notes that the Law Commission found no evidence of increased forced, predatory or sham marriage where home weddings are already allowed (pages 51 and 52). But the Forced Marriage Unit’s statistics say forced marriage is “often hidden in nature”, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2025/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2025>, so finding no evidence of it doesn’t mean it isn’t happening. Under the present law a civil wedding must be open to the public, so that anyone can see it and object (pages 9 and 19). The Government agrees with the Law Commission that this “open doors” requirement is “impractical, unnecessary” (page 49), and the only people who must be present are the couple, the officiant and two witnesses (page 32). At a wedding in a private home, nobody need be there who wasn’t invited.

Weddings should stay in public places, open to anyone who wants to see them. The Bill shouldn’t allow weddings in private homes, and if Parliament allows them regardless, it should at least include the safeguards below.

We ask for three safeguards at the ceremony, each on the face of the Bill. At any wedding in a private home, the officiant must see each party alone on the day and record that each freely wishes to proceed. At any such wedding, at least one of the two witnesses must be unrelated to either party and to the officiant. And at every wedding, the officiant must be under a duty to stop the ceremony and report where they suspect a forced or predatory marriage. The paper's list of officiant duties already requires the officiant to "Ensure that both parties freely express consent to marry each other", but its only reporting duty is "Report suspicions of a sham marriage" (page 57). The third safeguard adds the duty to report forced and predatory marriage. The Law Commission says an officiant who is complicit in a forced marriage already commits a criminal offence (paragraph 4.26 of its 2022 report, cited above). The Bill should also make it an offence for an officiant to go ahead with a wedding when they know or suspect that either party isn't freely consenting.

A fourth safeguard is civil registration of every religious marriage, because the law doesn't recognise a religious-only wedding at all. A couple whose ceremony isn't recognised "will not have any of the legal rights associated with marriage, or to remedies upon breakdown" (page 21). A religious-only wedding also bypasses the preliminaries, and with them the private interview. The paper cites a 2017 Channel 4 survey which found that six in ten women who had a Muslim religious wedding hadn't also had a legal one (page 23). It also found that "almost 3 in 10 of those in religious marriages did not realise they only had limited legal protections" (page 23). Its answer is to make the legal route easier. That's welcome, but it leaves registration optional. The Home Office's 2018 independent review of sharia law recommended amending the Marriage Act 1949 "to ensure that civil marriages are conducted, before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage ceremony", with penalties for celebrants who fail to ensure registration (page 17 of the review). The Register Our Marriage campaign seeks reform of the Marriage Act 1949 "to make it compulsory for all UK religious marriages to be registered", at <https://registerourmarriage.org/about>.

The review would bring Islamic marriage "in line with Christian and Jewish marriage in the eyes of the law" by making civil registration a legal requirement at the ceremony (page 17 of the review). These proposals instead change the law's rules on consent to fit the religious ceremony, and leave registration optional. The equality impact assessment says the proposals will permit "non-verbal consent to marry", so that "the law better reflects the diversity of traditions and practices" (paragraph 31). For a woman whose wedding was religious-only, the same assessment offers "the Government's upcoming cohabitation reforms" (paragraph 42). But the review recognised that Muslim couples in these marriages see themselves "as married, and not as co-habitees" (page 17 of the review). Treating them as cohabitants would leave these wives unmarried in law.

The Law Commission left the review's recommendation to the Government, calling it "a matter for Government to determine" (paragraph 9.5 of its 2022 report, cited above). It did so because the Government had committed to explore "limited reform relating to the law on marriage and religious weddings" (paragraph 1.58). The impact assessment cites the review (pages 5 and 6), but the consultation paper doesn't mention it at all. The Commission did recommend two offences to protect couples who are misled about whether their wedding is legal, and the paper takes up neither. One would make it an offence for an officiant, or anyone leading a

ceremony, to dishonestly mislead either of the couple about the effect of the ceremony. The other would make it an offence for an officiant not to tell a couple that the ceremony won't give rise to a valid marriage, unless they acted reasonably (Recommendation 42, paragraph 9.201). The paper proposes no new offence of any kind, and the Bill should include both. We ask for one marriage law for everyone, with civil registration before or alongside every religious marriage ceremony.

Question 21 - Do you agree that weddings should be able to take place in territorial seas and inland waters, subject to the assurance that safety and dignity are maintained? No. Once a boat has left its mooring, a bride under pressure can't walk away from the ceremony. If Parliament allows weddings on water regardless, the safeguards we ask for at Question 20 should apply on board.

Question 22 - Do you agree that weddings should be permitted in international waters on UK-registered cruise ships with a port of choice in England and Wales, provided they abide with the civil preliminaries process? No. The paper recognises "concerns about forced, predatory and sham marriage on cruise ships given their isolation as a location" (page 70). The impact assessment gives a commercial reason for the change, that "As Bermuda does not permit same-sex weddings, the UK doing so could provide a comparative advantage and encourage more companies to register ships under the UK flag" (page 10). It values the "destination weddings" market at "\$36.49 billion USD (£27.12 billion) in 2024", growing "to over \$135 billion USD (£100.33 billion) by 2029" (page 10). The Government says a wedding day must always "reflect the serious and life-long commitment that marriage represents" (page 4), and it shouldn't be offering weddings at sea to win ship registrations from Bermuda.

Question 23 - Do you agree that all officiants should have a legal duty to uphold the dignity and significance of marriage? Yes. If the law binds every officiant to uphold marriage, it must also protect the officiant who believes that marriage is the union of one man and one woman. When Parliament redefined marriage in 2013 it protected religious organisations and their ministers from being made to take part in same-sex weddings. A religious organisation conducts same-sex weddings only if it opts in. No person may "be compelled by any means (including by the enforcement of a contract or a statutory or other legal requirement)" to conduct, be present at, carry out, otherwise participate in, or consent to a religious same-sex wedding, as the Law Commission sets out at paragraphs 8.14 to 8.25 of its 2022 report. Alongside that, a person "does not violate equality law by refusing to conduct, be present at, carry out, otherwise participate in, or consent to a religious same-sex marriage" (paragraph 8.25).

Those protections are written around the system this reform would replace. The opt-in works through each religious organisation's governing authority and the registration of its places of worship for same-sex weddings (paragraphs 8.19 and 8.20). Under the proposals, places of worship "would no longer need to be registered for weddings" (page 60). The Law Commission's terms of reference required it "to maintain existing protections for religious groups in respect of same-sex marriage" (paragraph 4.81). It kept them for its officiant scheme: organisations would opt in, individual officiants would opt in themselves, no one could be compelled to take part, and the exceptions in equality law would continue (paragraphs 8.31 to 8.38). It also said an officiant scheme "does require the addition of a further protection", an

exception in equality law so that owners of religious premises “could refuse to allow their premises to be used for a same-sex wedding” (paragraph 8.43). The Government adopts the officiant scheme and restates none of them. None of the four principles that “underpin all the proposals in the consultation” mentions freedom of religion or conscience (page 13). The consultation paper mentions same-sex couples only once, in passing (page 46). The word “conscience” appears in none of the four published documents. The only acknowledgement of the 2013 protections is one sentence at paragraph 54 of the equality impact assessment, which calls the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 the “Marriage (Same Sex) Couples Act”. Paragraph 47 gets the name wrong a second way, as the “Marriage (Same Sex Couple) Act 2013”.

The paper comes closest at page 52, where it accepts that belief officiants “would remain able to impose their own requirements on their ceremonies, in accordance with their beliefs”. That principle belongs in the Bill, in terms. We ask for a clause in two parts. The first restates the 2013 protections for the new scheme. No religious organisation, no officiant it nominates and no one else taking part in a religious wedding may be compelled by any means to conduct, be present at, carry out, otherwise participate in, or consent to the marriage of a same-sex couple. None of them acts unlawfully under the Equality Act 2010 by refusing. It should add the protection the Law Commission said an officiant scheme needs, so that the owners and trustees of religious premises may refuse their use for a same-sex wedding. The second part is new. No authorisation may be refused, suspended or withdrawn, no finding of unfitness made and no sanction imposed on any officiant the new regime licenses because they believe, teach or act on the belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman. The second part is needed because a licensing regime brings new powers to find ministers unfit and to deauthorise them, which the 2013 Act never had to deal with. A regulator applying an undefined standard answers to the words of the Act, so the protection has to be in those words. A Bill without these protections on its face should not pass.

Question 24 - Do you agree that organisations should have to be established for a minimum of three years before nominating officiants to conduct legal weddings? Yes. Three years is the right test for a group that has formed quickly around a single idea, and it’s one reason the rise to 100 households at Question 25 isn’t needed.

Question 25 - Do you agree that for a belief organisation to be able to nominate officiants to carry out legally binding weddings the minimum number of households who are members of that organisation should be 100? No. Twenty households “has been the law since 1837” (page 64). The Government’s reasons for a five-fold rise are that nominated officiants could marry couples anywhere, that the population has grown and that people can now “organise quickly around a single idea or belief” (page 64). The risk in all three is that a small group, formed quickly, could put forward officiants. The paper already deals with that risk through its definitions of religion and belief, a three-year establishment period and a connection test it calls a “further important filter against joke or bogus organisations” (pages 60 to 63). The call for a higher figure came from national bodies, “including the Church of England and Humanists UK” (page 64). A threshold of 100 households would fall hardest on small congregations with no national body behind them, such as an independent chapel or a congregation in decline. Such a congregation “would not be able to nominate or re-appoint officiants” once it fell below

100 (page 64). Before it legislates, the Government should publish how many congregations now registered for weddings would fall below 100 households, and in which denominations. It says it's "particularly interested in the potential impact of this threshold on smaller belief organisations" (page 64). We ask for 20 households to be kept. The paper would also bring Jewish and Quaker weddings under the same universal rules as every other wedding except Anglican ones (pages 12, 24 and 25). They have taken place "according to the usages" of each since the Clandestine Marriages Act 1753 (page 19), and under the reform "all belief officiants" would act as nominated officiants (page 59). The Bill should say plainly what that means for them, and our answer at Question 5 asks the same of their weddings as of every other.

Question 26 - Should the Government have express exclusions on certain groups being precluded from being able to nominate officiants as belief organisations? No. The Law Commission recommended none, because bodies such as political parties and trade unions would fail the definitions anyway (page 65). If the Government legislates exclusions regardless, the list should be closed and on the face of the Bill, with no "Other (please state)" category of the kind the question invites (page 66). The paper says organisations "should not be excluded solely because they hold minority views" (page 65), which would still let an organisation be excluded partly because of its views. The Bill should say that no organisation may be excluded because it holds that marriage is the union of one man and one woman.

Question 27 - Do you agree with allowing independent officiants to conduct legally binding weddings? No. Marrying a couple is a public office, held for generations by registrars and by ministers answerable to their churches, and it shouldn't become a service sold by whoever holds a licence. The Government "has taken the initial view" that independent officiants should be allowed (page 67). The Law Commission estimated they could conduct "around 50,000 weddings each year" (page 67), and the impact assessment expects them to conduct 22.8 per cent of all weddings, on what it calls "a weak assumption" (pages 22 and 49). Registrars conducted 85 per cent of weddings in 2023 (page 3). Even without independent officiants their share would fall to 34.6 per cent (page 13), because religious and belief weddings would become legal in their own right. With independent officiants it would fall to 11.8 per cent (page 22). On the impact assessment's figures, non-religious belief officiants and independent celebrants would conduct 45.6 per cent of weddings between them (page 22). The paper's answer to concerns about commercialisation is that "Weddings already take place within a largely commercial environment" (page 68). Its case that independent officiants would serve mixed-faith couples, "who represent around a fifth (21%) of all couples" (page 68), rests on a blog post in Psychology Today (footnotes 38 and 78). An officiant paid by the couple, with no community behind them, has a financial interest in the ceremony going ahead, which conflicts with the duty to stop it that we ask for at Question 20. The paper sees the risk of an officiant "financially incentivised to recommend a certain location to couples" (page 69). Couples who now use an independent celebrant would save the separate legal ceremony they need today (page 67), but the celebrants' own fees are "broadly comparable" to registrars' (pages 68 and 69). If Parliament allows independent officiants regardless, they should carry every duty and safeguard in this response. They should also face a cap like Quebec's, which the impact assessment says usually limits a designated officiant to a maximum of three weddings to "prevent the commercialisation of the solemnisation of weddings" (page 49). The same

footnote describes Las Vegas, where officiants may conduct “an unlimited number of weddings” and the county clerk “recorded 75,324 weddings” in 2024 (page 49), and the consultation proposes no cap of any kind.

Question 28 - Do you agree with allowing maritime officiants to conduct legally binding weddings on international waters on cruise ships registered in the UK? No, for the reasons we give at Question 22.

Question 29 - Do you agree that only deck officers should be authorised as maritime officiants, but with a preference for ships captains? No. The Government agrees that maritime officiants “must not act where there is a conflict of interest” (page 73), but a deck officer serves on a ship whose operator earns from the wedding, so every deck officer who conducts a wedding on board has that conflict. The impact assessment says weddings at sea “can contribute to up to 10% of a cruise ship’s turnover, with individual ceremonies often generating £100,000 or more” (page 34).

Question 30 - Do you agree with the definition of ‘fit and proper’ outlined above? No. An officiant must be “of good character” with no conviction that the proposed central regulator “considers incompatible with the role” (page 73), and the nominating organisations “will be responsible for applying the ‘fit and proper’ person test” (page 73). “Good character” is nowhere defined, and it would be judged by the body that has chosen to put the officiant forward. That’s too weak for an office that could marry a woman in her own family’s home, on an action the officiant must judge to be consent.

We ask for three changes. Good character should be defined in statute. It should exclude anyone who has knowingly conducted or facilitated a ceremony of marriage involving a person under the legal age for marriage at the time, or a person under coercion, whether or not there was a conviction. The central regulator, not only the nominating body, should verify it, using independent referees of the kind the paper cites from New Zealand, where independent officiants provide “four signed letters of support and two separate character referees” (page 73). And the definition should state on its face that holding, teaching or acting on the belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman can never make anyone unfit.

To decide which non-religious belief organisations may nominate officiants, the proposed scheme borrows the “Grainger criteria”, established in case law for deciding “what constitutes a protected philosophical belief in the workplace under the Equality Act 2010” (pages 61 and 62). Its connection test also admits only organisations “for whom marriage is a meaningful expression of their beliefs” (page 62). A scheme that borrows the test for protected belief, and admits only organisations with beliefs about marriage, shouldn’t then let an officiant be found unfit for believing that marriage is the union of one man and one woman.

Question 32 - Do you agree that all officiants (excluding Anglican clergy) should be required periodically to renew their authorisation every 5 years? No, not for ministers of religion. The Law Commission recommended against periodic renewal because it “could create uncertainty for couples about an officiant’s future availability and undermine the potentially lifelong nature of the role” (page 74). The Government departs from that recommendation for every denomination except the Anglican churches, the Church of England and the Church in Wales (page 6). A rolling five-year licence for ministers, against standards the Bill hasn’t yet defined,

would give the state a say over religious ministry that the present law doesn't give it.

Question 33 - Do you agree that officiants who fail to apply the dignity framework, the fit and proper person standards and their other duties and responsibilities should be subject to sanctions, including deauthorisation? Yes, for genuine failures. An officiant who marries a party without free consent, ignores a safeguarding concern or falsifies a record should lose the authority to marry anyone. But a standard as open as "dignity" needs the statutory bar we ask for at Question 23. Nothing in the paper would stop a complaint that an officiant's teaching that marriage is the union of one man and one woman is itself undignified, so the Bill should rule it out.

Question 34 - Do you agree with having a central regulator oversee complaints for nominated, independent and maritime officiants? Yes, on two conditions. The regulator's identity and powers, the dignity standards and the protection for belief at Question 23 should all be set out in primary legislation where Parliament can scrutinise them, and not left to regulations, guidance or a body not yet created (pages 80 and 81). And a complaint about an officiant's belief or teaching that marriage is the union of one man and one woman, as distinct from how a wedding was conducted, should be inadmissible.

Question 39 - Do you agree with the Law Commission that the GRO would be the organisation most suited to undertake the role of central regulator? Undecided. Whichever body regulates, whether the General Register Office or a new one, the Bill should name it and set out its powers, with the protection for belief at Question 23.

The Government's foreword says that "Marriage is one of our most important social institutions - providing stability for families, strengthening communities and contributing to higher levels of satisfaction in life" (page 4). Its family test calls marriage "the foundation for family life for millions of people in England and Wales" (paragraph 5). We agree, and we ask the Government to put into the Bill the four things we set out at the start of this response. We've asked our supporters to respond in their own words, and we ask that each of those responses be read and counted as an individual response. C4M and its supporters would welcome the chance to discuss this response with officials.