

# MEETING YOUR MP ABOUT HUMANIST MARRIAGES



A guide from Humanists UK

**Visiting your MP is one of the most effective ways that you can work to influence the law or Government policy to be more in line with your own views.** It is much more effective than writing to them because when you write, you will often get a response prepared by an MP's staff members and it may only be a party-held stock response. However, if you visit then the MP will have to think about the issue for some time; you can brief them on it more thoroughly than you could by email; and it's easier to get concrete commitments from them to take action.

This guide provides an overview of how to meet your MP, then some FAQs about humanist marriages and the campaign for legal recognition, and finally two briefings you can print out and give to your MP. The first of the two is an overview of humanism, our campaigns work and the work of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, while the second is specifically on the campaign for legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales.

We strongly recommend reading and trying to memorise this document as much as possible before the meeting. You could have this guide with you to consult with if needs be, but it's best not to simply read it as a set script but to go in and try and engage with your MP in a more bespoke and personal manner.

If you have any questions please email our Director of Public Affairs and Policy Richy Thompson at [richy@humanism.org.uk](mailto:richy@humanism.org.uk).

## ABOUT MEETING YOUR MP

Most MPs hold regular 'surgeries' (meetings with constituents) to discuss their concerns. Usually, these are held in their constituency, e.g. a municipal building or their office, but during the pandemic they have shifted to be online. Some MPs may hold open surgeries and some may require you to make an appointment. Therefore, it is best to contact your MP's office beforehand to check. Times and locations of surgeries can be found out either by phoning your MP's office or will be advertised locally, for example through your MP's website. You can also meet your MP in Parliament, but we recommend surgeries as easiest.

### Preparing for the meeting

When meeting your MP, you should prepare what you are going to say to your MP thoroughly before attending your meeting. Here are a few tips before you go:

- Have a concise summary of your issue to give to your MP. We've prepared a three-page briefing on this topic specifically and another that's about humanism and the work of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group more generally, both of which you can find at the end of this document
- Go over the arguments you are going to make and make sure you can explain the problem clearly before you go. You could practice with someone who is unfamiliar with the issue
- Make sure that you know what you want your MP to do as a result of the meeting
- Decide on a structure for how you want the meeting to run. It is best to start by introducing yourself and your relevant interests, then moving on to explain the issue, telling the MP what you want them to do about it, and asking for their thoughts on the matter. If more than one person is attending the meeting, decide beforehand who is going to speak and when
- Be prepared to defend your position. Your MP may not agree with you, so it is best to prepare answers beforehand for any questions or counter-arguments they might make



- Make sure you bring a notepad and pen with you.

### At the meeting

- Dress smartly. For your MP to take your issue seriously, they need to take you seriously, so it is best to dress in smart or smart-casual clothes if possible
- Make sure you are punctual. MPs are very busy people, so make sure you leave enough time to get to the meeting venue and to pass through security
- Don't assume your MP will know anything about the issue at hand, even if you've sent over a briefing or briefed their staff in advance!
- Always be polite
- If the meeting goes well, you could ask the MP if you can take a photo with them, you, and materials, to tweet showing their support, and/or get a quote from them to that effect.
- Don't forget to ask for copies of any actions they take on your issue.

### What you can ask your MP to do

There are three principal things you can ask your MP to do: first, if they are a backbench MP, you can ask them to support a backbench business debate on humanist marriages, which we are currently trying to arrange. Second, you can ask them to ask a parliamentary question on the matter, whether written or oral. And third, you can ask them to write to the relevant Government minister on your behalf. It's possible for your MP to take more than one of these actions. Broadly speaking, parliamentary questions are better than letters because they are a public commitment by the MP to your issue. We are happy to help MPs' offices in drafting questions and letters.

### After the meeting

- You may wish to send a thank you message to your MP after the meeting – this can also serve as an opportunity to remind them of anything they committed to, and offer to put them in touch with us so we can work with them on those actions
- Carry out any action points you agree with your MP in the meeting
- Feed back on how it went to Humanists UK staff. You can email our Director of Public Affairs and Policy Richy Thompson at [richy@humanism.org.uk](mailto:richy@humanism.org.uk).

## SOME FAQs ABOUT HUMANIST MARRIAGES

**Q: What are humanist weddings?** A: Humanist weddings are non-religious wedding ceremonies which are personal occasions that are fully customised to match the deepest-held values and beliefs of the couple getting married. They are conducted by a humanist celebrant, someone guaranteed to share their beliefs, who in consultation with the couple produces a bespoke script. Although at present not legally recognised in England or Wales, Humanists UK does more non-legal wedding ceremonies than any minority religious group does legal marriages.

**Q: If humanist weddings aren't legal, how do they currently happen at all?** A: At present, couples in England and Wales wishing to have a humanist wedding ceremony and to be legally married also have to go through a separate registry office wedding, often for practical reasons on a different date, in order to gain legal recognition for their marriage. This is an additional expense and administrative burden that religious couples don't have to face, but more than that, couples often complain that the marriage ceremony they see as their real wedding is not the one recognised in law or even by religious friends or relatives as when they become legally married.



**Q: How are humanist ceremonies any different from civil marriages conducted by registrars?**

A: When a couple opts for a civil marriage by a registrar, they can't choose to use a celebrant that shares their beliefs. There are strict limits on how far they can customise the script to fully match who they are as a couple – indeed they can't have any specifically humanist content at all, if that's what they want. For some people that's fine – not everyone wants this level of customisation, and not every non-religious person is a humanist. But for those who do want it, that's where humanist marriages come in – just as religious marriages are not for every religious couple but are legally available for those who want them. Only with a humanist marriage are non-religious couples guaranteed a celebrant who shares their beliefs, in a venue that is special to them (including outdoors), and using a fully customised script that reflects their deepest beliefs and desires.

**Q: Won't any relaxation of the marriage laws will open the door for a completely unregulated system?**

A: Absolutely not. The law already passed by Parliament only allows the Government to introduce marriage by organisations that promote non-religious beliefs, morality, and ethics. Furthermore, the Government can choose to lay an Order (i.e. put down the secondary legislation required to bring about legal recognition, without needing a new Act of Parliament) that provides just for Humanists UK to gain legal recognition for its marriages.

There is no group other than Humanists UK that wants to be able to perform belief-based marriages, never mind about another one that has the size, good repute, and proper training and accreditation processes that would be required for an Order to be granted. (Indeed, in Scotland, only humanist groups have made use of the legal recognition for belief-based marriages, since the law was changed in 2005.) But the fact that the Secretary of State may make as many orders as s/he likes obviates any objection it may have to such an Order being made, given that it would not fix marriage law in a state that gives Humanists UK any unfair advantage over other belief-based groups that may be able to make a similar case for such an Order.

**Q: Why don't you just go to Scotland if it's so important?** A: Some couples do this. But you shouldn't have to travel to another country to have a legal marriage in line with your worldview. Not only is this burdensome, but for many couples, the venue of the wedding is a deeply important part of the wedding itself.

**Q: At the moment, other forms of marriage generally can't legally take place outdoors. This is something you're demanding. How would that be fair?**

A: Actually, the Government has made outdoor civil marriages legal until at least April next year, and is consulting on extending that indefinitely. Further, the Church of England, the Quakers, and the Jews can already marry people outside – so we're not demanding something unprecedented but rights some groups already have. At any rate, the reality of the matter is that religious groups haven't been asking to marry people outside because for most religions it's important to have the wedding take place in a consecrated building. Outdoor locations in the midst of nature are special for many humanists. Besides, humanists have no 'places of worship' as required in law for religious weddings and so anyway need some different arrangement.

**Q: What's wrong with having to have two ceremonies?** A: Put simply, it's discrimination. It's a significant additional expense (often up to £500) and administrative burden that religious couples don't have to face, but more than that, couples often complain that the wedding ceremony they see as their real marriage ceremony is not the one recognised in law as when they become legally married.



**Q: What about Muslim marriages? They're not legally recognised either.** A: Many Muslim marriages have no legal recognition because in the eyes of sharia law, civil recognition of a marriage is not necessary for the marriage to be valid. This means couples don't then enjoy the same advantages and protections under the law that a legally valid marriage will give them.

But it's not the same as saying that Muslim marriages cannot be legally recognised. Mosques can register as places of worship just like any other, and so perform legal marriages like any other religion. The issue is they often choose not to do so, as opposed to their being unable to.

This is of course a problem that needs addressing, but it is an entirely different problem to that of lack of legal recognition of humanist marriages, and the need to address one should not affect the other.

**Q: What's the state of play in terms of recognition in... England and Wales/Northern Ireland/Scotland/Republic of Ireland/Jersey/Guernsey/Isle of Man?** A: Humanist weddings gained legal recognition as marriages in Scotland in 2005 and the Republic of Ireland in 2012. Northern Ireland and Jersey joined them in 2018, the former following a Court of Appeal case, and Guernsey did so in 2021. In England and Wales, since 2013 legal humanist marriages have been on the statute books, but the UK Government has not enacted that statute (i.e. brought it into force) – something that only requires an Order to do, and which we are working to see change. An Order is also known as a statutory instrument – it's secondary legislation that the Government itself can bring about without needing a new Act of Parliament. In this case, the Secretary of State for Justice is responsible for the Order-making power. There is no legal recognition on the Isle of Man.

**Q: The Law Commission is currently doing a review into marriage law, can't you just wait for that to solve this?** A: No. On humanist marriages, the Law Commission says it 'will not be making recommendations on whether as a matter of policy new groups [i.e. humanists] should be allowed to conduct legally binding weddings, which is a decision for Government.' So the Government still needs to take a view.

This is an outstanding human rights issue affecting thousands of couples and so the Government should just go ahead and resolve it immediately. Further, humanists have already been waiting for this change for decades on the back of one review or another. In 1999-2005 the Labour Government did a review of marriage venues and humanist marriages were discussed during that review. But nothing came of it. The same is true for 2014 MoJ and 2015 Law Commission consultations on humanist marriages. The present review is due to report in the second half of 2022; any legislation that follows might come into effect in 2023 at soonest. But it may not at all – only a third of Law Commission reviews since 2011 have been partly implemented, and only 5% since 2016. In the meantime, thousands of couples will miss out on the chance to have the sort of legal marriage they want.

At the very least, the Government should lay an order to bring about legal recognition, even if the state of law it produces is only an interim one until the implementation of whatever reforms the Law Commission review recommends. That's what they're doing already when it comes to outdoor civil marriages. Without that for humanist marriages, thousands of couples will be prevented from having the type of marriage which they would want, and to which human rights law means they should be entitled.



# HUMANIST CAMPAIGNS IN PARLIAMENT



An overview for MPs and peers

## ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At **Humanists UK**, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Since 1896, our work has been helping people be happier and more fulfilled. By bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Together with our partners Humanist Society Scotland, we speak for 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

## ABOUT HUMANISTS IN PARLIAMENT

**The All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG)** is a cross-party group of over 110 members from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords across all the main parties, and to which Humanists UK provides the secretariat. The Chair is Crispin Blunt MP and Co-Chair is Baroness Bakewell.

The APPHG meets around four times a year to hear speakers and discuss relevant issues. Humanists UK supports the APPHG in shaping or responding to parliamentary business including by providing briefings and research, by helping draft parliamentary questions, interventions, and EDMs, and by suggesting topics for debate.

Through our parliamentary work we have worked successfully to repeal blasphemy laws in England and Wales, supported the passages of the Equality Act 2006 and 2010 and the Same-Sex Marriage Act 2013, advocated for compulsory relationships and sex education in the school curriculum in England and Wales, and for the keeping of the so-called '50% cap' on religious selection in free school admissions. In 2018, the APPHG conducted an inquiry into the legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales, recommending that the Government use its existing powers to grant legal recognition.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, it conducted an inquiry into the place of religion in Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

We also have Coordinators working with humanist members of the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly.

## ABOUT OUR CAMPAIGNS

We campaign across four main areas: human rights and equality, secularism, education, and public ethical issues. We also campaign internationally on issues related to freedom of religion or belief, and provide support for non-religious asylum seekers.

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<sup>1</sup> APPHG, May 2018. *Any Lawful Impediment. A report of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group's inquiry into the legal recognition of humanists marriages in England and Wales.*

<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/APPHG-report-on-humanist-marriage.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> APPHG, February 2020. *Time for Reflection: A Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group on Religion or Belief in the UK Parliament.*

[https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/APPG-report\\_religion-in-parliament\\_Jan2020\\_print.pdf](https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/APPG-report_religion-in-parliament_Jan2020_print.pdf)



**Human rights and equality:** We promote an inclusive society free from discrimination, and see human rights such as freedom of thought, freedom of belief, women's rights, and LGBT rights as necessary underpinnings of an open and progressive society. We aim to challenge discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the workplace and in the provision of public services.

**Secularism:** Secularism simply means state neutrality on matters of religion or belief, guaranteeing equality for everyone. In UK society, religions and religious ideas receive preferential treatment in many aspects of life, such as in the education system, or in parliament. We work to challenge this and to ensure that no-one is disadvantaged on the grounds of their religious or non-religious beliefs.

**Education:** Every young person has the right to a broad and balanced education, regardless of their parents' religion or belief or where they happen to live. We support calls for an end to the state funding of faith schools. Our aim is to see a reformed education system where young people of all backgrounds can mix together and receive a full and objective education. We support the introduction of relationships and sex education onto the school curriculum, and campaign to see compulsory 'collective worship' in schools replaced by assemblies equally inclusive for all.

**Public ethical issues:** Humanists seek to address contemporary ethical problems from an evidence-based, empathetic perspective, and our role is to be a voice for the humanist perspective in public debate. Our policies on ethical issues span a range of emerging medical and scientific concerns, such as campaigning for the right to die, promoting equal access to abortion services across the UK, and supporting a move to opt-out organ donation rather than opt-in.

## ABOUT HUMANISM

The word humanist means someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic);
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals; and
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

A humanist is someone who shapes their own life in the here and now, because they believe it's the only life they have. We make sense of the world through logic, reason, and evidence, and always seek to treat those around us with warmth, understanding, and respect.

**For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:**

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# LEGAL RECOGNITION OF HUMANIST MARRIAGES IN ENGLAND AND WALES



Briefing from Humanists UK, June 2021

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?

On 20 June the Government announced that it will extend legal recognition to outdoor civil marriages from 1 July until April 2022, and will consult on extending this indefinitely.

But this announcement undermines all the arguments the Government has been using against legal recognition of humanist marriages, which were made on the basis of opposing any piecemeal reform. It begs the question as to why humanist couples can't have the same interim reform – which similarly can be made by regulations. Further, outdoors weddings reform is the precise change they claimed would be unfair if it were to happen for humanist marriages in isolation. But now they're doing it for civil marriages, which surely removes the alleged reason why they can't also do it for humanist marriages.

## HUMANIST MARRIAGES

Humanist weddings are non-religious wedding ceremonies that are fully customised to match the deepest-held values and beliefs of the couple getting married. They are conducted by a humanist celebrant, someone guaranteed to share their beliefs. In consultation with the couple the celebrant produces a completely bespoke script. The ceremony also occurs in whatever location is most meaningful for the couple.

Humanists UK has more than 300 trained and accredited wedding celebrants who already conduct over 1,000 weddings (without legal recognition) in England and Wales each year. Humanist marriages gained legal recognition in Scotland in 2005, the Republic of Ireland in 2012, and Northern Ireland in 2018 following a Court of Appeal ruling that concluded that a failure to do so would be a breach of human rights. Jersey also gave legal recognition to humanist marriages in 2019 and in 2021 Guernsey followed suit.

Legal recognition in England and Wales has been under constant Government review since 2013. The Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act gave the Government the power to enact legal recognition of humanist marriages by Order. But in the eight years since, the Government has not done this. Instead it has reviewed the matter three times. The third, current review is the Law Commission review. But 'the Law Commission will not make recommendations as to whether the groups who can solemnize marriages should be expanded', as this is said to be a policy matter for the Government.<sup>1</sup>

It will report in the second half of 2022. Any legislation that follows might come into effect in 2023 at the earliest – if at all (only a third of Law Commission reviews since 2011 have been partly implemented, and only 5% since 2016). Humanists are being made to wait.

<sup>1</sup> Law Commission weddings project terms of reference:

<https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2019/07/Terms-of-reference-for-the-Law-Commission-review-of-weddings-FINAL.pdf>



## GOVERNMENT POSITION ON HUMANIST MARRIAGES

The Government is yet to give its position. It has resisted doing so because it says it is waiting for the Law Commission report before deciding. But it has said that 'Reform of marriage law in England and Wales should be undertaken on a comprehensive rather than piecemeal basis.'<sup>2</sup>

This position was key to it winning a court case last year. In July 2020, six humanist couples took a legal case to the High Court. They argued that they were discriminated against by the fact that religious marriages are legally recognised but humanist marriages are not. The judge in the case agreed, ruling that 'the present law gives rise to... discrimination'. She also ruled that, in light of that, the Secretary of State for Justice 'cannot... simply sit on his hands' and do nothing.

However, given the ongoing Law Commission review, she also said that its refusal to act immediately can be justified 'at this time'. She did so because she considered 'the Defendant's stated desire to consider any reform on a wholesale, rather than piecemeal, basis' was a legitimate aim. She wrote:

'In the present case, the Government has identified concerns as to the potential consequences of addressing one area of unequal treatment without doing so as part of a more general reform. Specifically, in relation to the treatment of humanist and other non-religious belief marriages, particular issues were identified relating to the location where the ceremony might take place... these were matters seen to potentially give rise to new species of discrimination if reform was only undertaken on a piecemeal basis.'

From this she concluded, 'Although I may deprecate the delay that has occurred since 2015, I cannot ignore the fact that there is currently an on-going review of the law of marriage in this country.'<sup>3</sup> The couples are exploring an appeal of this. They think that the eight years the Government has already had reviewing the matter is long enough. They also do not understand why they couldn't have legal recognition of their marriages on an interim basis, even if marriage law is then changed again after the Law Commission review concludes.

## IMPACT OF CIVIL MARRIAGE REFORM ON HUMANIST MARRIAGES

The new civil marriage rules will be brought about by statutory instrument – by amending 'the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005 to allow legal outdoor civil weddings and civil partnership registrations to take place within the grounds of Approved Premises.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Written question answered 1 September 2020:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-07-21/77802>

<sup>3</sup> *Harrison & Ors, R (On the Application Of) v Secretary of State for Justice* [2020] EWHC 2096 (Admin) (31 July 2020): <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2020/2096.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> 'Outdoor civil wedding and partnership registrations to be legalised', 20 June 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/outdoor-civil-wedding-and-partnership-registrations-to-be-legalised>





As can be seen, the Government has delayed – for eight years and counting – any legal recognition of humanist marriages on the basis that piecemeal reform of marriage law is undesirable, and that wholesale reform is the only way to go. Piecemeal reform may, the Government says, lead ‘to new species of discrimination’, particularly ‘relating to the location where the ceremony might take place’.

But the Government has undermined these arguments against interim humanist marriage reform by making just such a reform for civil marriages.

The Government has emphasised, in its announcement of the civil marriage reform, the need for ‘greater flexibility especially during the pandemic when there are important public health considerations to take into account.’ But this logically also applies to humanist weddings. At the moment, all couples having a humanist wedding are forced to have two ceremonies to gain legal recognition, including their unwanted civil marriage. Removing the need for the civil marriage would be a very sensible reform during the pandemic, even if only interim.

**We want the UK Government to use its existing powers to enact recognition of humanist marriages, by Order, without delay – under section 13 of the 2013 Marriage Act. A draft has been produced and only needs a positive resolution with up to 90 minutes before each House. It can be done on the same interim basis as the civil marriage reform.**

## THE WIDER CASE FOR HUMANIST MARRIAGE RECOGNITION

- **It is fair:** the 1,000 couples a year who have humanist weddings here already should have the same opportunity to marry in line with their beliefs as their religious counterparts.
- **It is democratic:** 95% of respondents to a 2014 MoJ consultation supported it. A 2019 YouGov poll found 69% in favour and just 12% opposed, with a majority of every religious group in favour.
- **It is good for marriage:** FOI data from Scotland shows that couples married in a humanist ceremony are almost four times less likely to divorce compared with all other types of marriages.
- **It is popular and will be good for the economy:** The number of humanist weddings in Scotland have risen since legal recognition in 2005 to over 6,000 in 2019 – over 20% of the total, meaning there are now more humanist marriages in Scotland than Christian marriages.
- **It helps with the marriage backlog:** There is currently a backlog of couples wishing to get married post-Covid, and not enough registrars to go around. Many of those couples don’t want a civil marriage and just want their humanist wedding to be legally recognised. So extending legal recognition would clearly help address the problem.

**For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:**

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