

Outdoor weddings and civil partnerships consultation launched

- Temporary measures introduced in summer could be made permanent
- Religious weddings would also be allowed outdoors under plans
- Will provide greater flexibility and choice to couples and the weddings sector
- The location for the ceremony must be assessed to be dignified

It follows temporary legislation introduced in July, which allowed outdoor civil wedding and partnership ceremonies for the first time.

A consultation launched today seeks views on making this change permanent. It will also examine extending it to religious weddings so that these can take place outdoors at places of worship for the first time for most faiths, such as in the grounds of a church or chapel. Around 55,000 weddings a year would be affected by this change – in 2017, 96% of these were Christian ceremonies. No religious group would be obliged to provide outdoor ceremonies, and existing protections to safeguard religious freedoms would remain in place.

Prior to last summer's legislation, civil ceremonies at an approved premise such as a hotel had to take place indoors or otherwise within a permanent structure, such as a bandstand.

Couples can now have the whole ceremony outside in the grounds of such a venue – providing greater flexibility especially during the pandemic when there are important public health considerations to take into account.

Justice Minister Tom Pursglove said:

A wedding is one of the absolute highlights of a person's life and it is right that couples should have greater choice in how they celebrate their special day.

Our proposals would afford them that choice whether they choose a civil or religious ceremony, and would mark a huge boost for those planning a wedding over the coming years.

Crucially, this will also support the wedding sector by ensuring venues can continue to safely meet the demand for larger ceremonies.

George Buchanan, of Hodsock Priory in Nottinghamshire, said:

We converted an old tennis court into a licensed venue for civil ceremonies in November 2020. The first ceremony was held in June

2021 and it is immediately the most popular choice for our brides as their chosen place on site to say 'I do'.

Outdoor ceremonies will continue through the winter – the autumn colours are spectacular for this weekend's weddings. Guests love it as it feels romantic and is COVID safe so I would say it's a positive experience and asset to our venue.

The proposed changes in fact reflect medieval weddings, when it was common for ceremonies to take place outside the front of the church. This is why many churches from that period have a projecting porch.

Ministers would like to hear from professionals, religious bodies and couples who have used the current provisions or who would consider using the provisions in the future, in order to understand how they have worked or might work in practice and whether they should remain in force beyond April 2022.

A Law Commission review will separately present options for further marriage reforms to the Government. Things under consideration include:

- how ceremonies could take place in a broader range of locations;
- who can solemnise a marriage;
- how marriage by humanist and other non-religious belief organisations could be incorporated; and
- how provision could be made for the use of independent celebrants.

The Law Commission is due to report back by summer 2022.

Notes to editors:

- The [consultation](#) will run for six weeks.
- As with the initial changes which took effect on 1 July 2021, we propose that the new legislation for civil ceremonies will also be introduced via amendments to 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.
- The Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 came into force on 1 July 2021. These were time-limited amendments to the 2005 Regulations and will expire on 5 April 2022.
- Subject to the outcome of the consultation, the detail of the proposal is essentially the same as the changes made in July, however with the addition of proposals to extend the policy of permitting outdoor ceremonies to religious bodies and couples seeking a religious wedding.
- Since the proposal relating to approved premises is subject to this consultation and ordinary SI procedures, the Government cannot guarantee that a further SI would be in force by 6 April 2022. However, this is the Government's proposal and intention, and the Government will make every effort to provide a seamless transition from the current rules to the replacement rules.

- We intend that the proposed changes regarding religious ceremonies would be made through a legislative reform order under the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act 2006.
- All churches and chapels in which Church of England or Church in Wales weddings are held and all current registrations of certified places of worship as buildings for the solemnisation of marriages under the Marriage Act 1949, would be deemed automatically to include the outdoor areas within the property boundary. It would be a matter for the religious bodies to determine whether such weddings could or should be held and if so, at which locations and/or in what circumstances.
- In 2017, 54,346 weddings were celebrated according to religious rites. The majority of these (74%) were Anglican weddings. The next most popular form were Roman Catholic weddings, accounting for 11% of religious weddings, and a further 11% were celebrated by other Christian denominations. Only 4% were conducted according to non-Christian religious rites.
- In order to hold legal outdoor civil weddings and civil partnership registrations, a venue would have to be approved or must become approved under the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005, as amended.
- Previously, premises which sought approval must have comprised a permanent built structure (or permanently moored vessel) with at least one room which was to be approved for civil weddings and civil partnership registration. Under the amended regulations laid in summer, such premises, if approved, could also use any outdoor areas linked to the same venue to hold these ceremonies without having to re-apply for approval, subject to certain conditions. The consultation proposes continuing this policy.
- It is proposed that civil ceremonies would continue to be able to take place fully outdoors or under a partially covered structure if this has at least a 50% open area. Requirements for public access and signage must also be met.