

‘Tying the Knot’ - Ministry of Justice’s public consultation on reforming wedding law in England and Wales - closes 24th September 2026

British Marine welcomes this consultation and its proposals to create a modern framework for marriage law which better reflects today’s society and will provide couples with greater freedom over how and where they can legally marry, including onboard vessels either moored or underway in inland, coastal or international waters.

The planned reforms aim to benefit society and the economy, whilst at the same time preserve the dignity and significance of marriage and include measures to help protect against forced or sham marriages. The consultation paper, which includes a summary of its questions at the end of the paper, can be read [here](#).

This note summarises the main proposals and focusses on proposed changes to civil weddings and the reforms that could be relevant to marine businesses interested in commercial opportunities these proposals could provide. We encourage members to share their view with us before 15th September to help inform our response to the Government. Key issues for consideration include:

- 1) To what extent might the proposed ‘Dignity Framework’, as described in Chapter 4, including its standards and factors for consideration, affect the type of vessels that could be used for wedding ceremonies; and what mitigation measures might marine businesses be able to put in place to avoid potential disruptions and distractions?
- 2) Subject to the views of our members, British Marine is minded to recommend that weddings in international waters be not only allowed onboard UK-registered cruise ships, but also onboard other professionally crewed UK registered vessels of appropriate size.
- 3) British Marine agrees that ‘maritime officiates’ should be regulated by the Marine & Coastguard Agency but is minded to recommend ‘maritime officiants’ be expanded to not only include deck officers of UK-registered cruise ships but also appropriately trained senior professional crew onboard other vessels. This would enable marine operators offering weddings onboard their vessels to also potentially offer a maritime officiate, thus removing the need for couples to source their own independent or nominated officiate.

The Consultation paper cover the three legal stages of a wedding

- **Preliminaries** for civil wedding’s, including the requirement for couples to give 28 days’ notice of their intention to get married and to then be interviewed by a registration officer – no significant changes are proposed.
- **Ceremony** (location and form) - we currently have a buildings-based system where civil weddings must take place in a register office or in an approved premises or approved outdoor grounds that are deemed “seemly and dignified”. A key change would be moving away from this system, to an officiant-based system where the officiant would become legally responsible for upholding the dignity & significance of marriage.

Civil weddings currently require presence of both a superintendent registrar and registrar, plus two witnesses, they must be open to the public and use prescribed words. The reforms will allow greater flexibility in how ceremonies are conducted.

Officiants which currently include, registration officers, Anglican clergy, nominated officiants and maritime officiants are responsible for ensuring weddings are legally compliant. The reforms propose also allowing “independent officiants” who would need to belong to a recognised, regulator approved membership organisation, which would assess whether applicants are “fit & proper” and provide training etc (see page 77)

- **Registration** – marriage notice that is currently issued by the superintendent registrar in the district in which the wedding takes place must be signed at the ceremony and delivered to the registrar for the district within 21 days of the wedding.

Introducing a new Dignity Framework (Chapter 4)

This sets out three core stages officiants would be expected to consider:

1. Overarching standard for dignity against which the wedding should be assessed – relevant to BM as it requires the occasion not to be “*undermined by distraction or trivialisation*”
2. Two supporting standards covering location and ceremony
 - a) the paper defines a dignified location as one which “*permits participants to attend safely..and to minimises risk of any distraction that could have reasonably been foreseen and prevented*”
 - b) requires those involved “*to focus on the proceedings*”.
3. List of factors the officiant must take into account when deciding whether the proposed location and ceremony are appropriate include:
 - separateness from other activities (to avoid interruptions and distractions)
 - privacy (avoid undue intrusion)
 - personal significance – “this may support, but not determine, the assessment of whether a location is dignified”

The officiant would need to consider the following when assessing the suitability of a location to ensure the safety of the environment:

- Personal safety, accessibility and physical condition – any risks or practical concerns arising from the condition and site of the location
- Environmental risks that could disrupt the proceedings, including weather, and extent to which these can mitigated through contingency measures

It also lists factors for assessing whether the ceremony is dignified, including control of the immediate environment, including preventing distractions or interruptions.

Specific Locations for Weddings (Chapter 5)

Currently local authorities maintain lists of premises that have been approved to host civil weddings. Approval is granted for a minimum of three years and subject to conditions. The Government agrees with the Law Commission that the law should no longer require weddings to take place in pre-approved venues but allow officiants to decide if the location is suitable.

However, the Government proposes **allowing venues to apply voluntarily for pre-authorisation** as suitable wedding venues. This would enable a list of established venues to be available and help where venues are used on a regular basis. It is proposed that authorisation be granted for a fixed period, (see Q19) and renewal required with the regulator having power to revoke authorisation.

Weddings on the water (Chapter 5, pages 52-55)

Currently weddings cannot generally take place on moving vessels or in open water. Civil weddings can already take place onboard permanently moored vessels confirmed as approved venues under 2025 regulations. Informed by British Marine, the Law Commission recommended that weddings be permitted in territorial seas (up to 12 miles out to sea), inland waters, as well as aboard cruise ships in international waters.

The paper states that *“If permitted, weddings in territorial seas and inland waters would include weddings on, for example (but not limited to) **canal boats, narrowboats, river cruise boats** (such as those on the Thames) and historic or decommissioned ships. It could also include larger vessels on coastal waters, such as **chartered passenger ferries and yachts or sailing boats**, which are popular in many coastal areas..”* Therefore, the proposed Dignity Framework will be key and consultation seeks views as to whether additional safeguards would be needed to ensure weddings taking place on the water are safe, accessible and consistent with the dignity of marriage.

Re weddings in international waters. Some cruise ship companies already offer weddings at sea where the ship is registered in a country whose laws permit this eg Malta and Bermuda. The Law Commission recommended that civil weddings in international waters be permitted only onboard cruise ships, in the presence of maritime officiant, and limited to cruise ships because *“those vessels have professional crews, appropriate safety arrangements and the ability to confirm the location of the vessel.”* The Government agrees with that view.

Officiants (Chapter 6)

Civil officiants include registration officers, independent officiants and maritime officiants – all of which are distinct from belief officiants. All officiants would have legal duty to uphold the dignity and significance of marriage and to apply the dignity framework. Where a venue is not pre-authorised the officiant should conduct a site visit or take appropriate actions to ensure venue is in line with requirements.

Re independent officiants – the paper notes that there are already 1000 independent celebrants who conduct 10,000 non-legally binding wedding ceremonies each year. It argues that by allowing independent officiants to conduct legally binding weddings it would bring England and Wales into line with other jurisdictions like New Zealand, Australia and some US states. Government does not consider this would introduce undue commercialisation into wedding law!

Independent officiants would be brought within a clear system of legal duties and regulation. Importantly, they would not be able to act where there is a conflict of interest, such as where they are financially incentivised to recommend a certain location. (see Chapter 7)

Maritime officiants – the Law Commission recommended that weddings in international waters be conducted by this new category of officiants and the Government agrees given the “legal and practical requirements” that apply to a wedding at sea. The maritime officiant would need to have sufficient authority and navigational knowledge to confirm the ship’s location at the time of the ceremony. The Government accepts the Law Commission’s recommendation that only deck officers should be able to act as maritime officiants. This comprises of the captain, chief mate and other officers who take charge of navigation watch onboard a ship. The consultation paper proposes that maritime officiants also authorised as independent officiants if they so choose.

Maritime officiants would be subject to the same requirement to avoid conflicts of interest as independent officiants would be and subject to all the other legal duties required by other officiants. The same preliminaries would apply for couples getting married at sea.

Regulation of officiants (Chapter 7)

The Government accepts the Law Commission's proposed requirements for the regulation of officiants, including high-entry requirements and placing legally binding duties on officiants. It is also considering how to enhance regulations and what the role of the regulator should be in providing oversight and training. The consultation paper makes reference to officiants needing to be "*fit and proper*" persons and "*must not act where there is a conflict of interest*" and avoid them requiring couples to choose a particular venue or service.

The Government proposes that **independent officiants** be required to belong to a recognised, regulator-approved membership organisation similar to the approach proposed for belief groups. The membership organisation would take on responsibility for assessing whether applicants are "fit and proper", provide facilities for training, monitor compliance and handle complaints. The regulator would approve and oversee those bodies.

To be approved, an organisation would need to be a legally registered UK body with an established governance structure; it would also need to operate a robust application process for officiants, be responsible for providing and requiring completion of training eg Ofqual approved courses, provide CPD and maintain a clear code of conduct and disciplinary framework, re-authorises officiants every five years and ensure officiants have appropriate liability insurance.

The Government proposes that the MCA, which already holds responsibility for overseeing deck officers, acts as the membership organisation for **maritime officiates**.

Central Regulator – this would either be the General Register Office (GRO) as recommended by the LC or, a newly established organisation providing a bespoke organisation designed to focus on wedding regulation. Both options under consideration with more detailed plans to be set out at a later stage.

If you would like to help shape British Marine's response to this consultation, and in turn inform planned legislative changes, please contact Joanna Richardson, our External Relations Manager, via email jrichardson@britishmarine.co.uk or Telephone 07860 848834 **before 15th September**.