



# Joint Committee on Human Rights

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From the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights

**Lord Ponsonby**

[Delivered by Email]

**Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State**

24 March 2025

Dear Lord Ponsonby,

The Joint Committee on Human Rights would be grateful to know when and how the Government proposes to address the continuing lack of legal recognition for humanist wedding ceremonies in England and Wales, bearing in mind the Administrative Court's judgment in the *Harrison* case in 2020.

As you will be aware, the case was brought against the Justice Secretary by six couples who identified as humanists. They argued that it was contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights to deny state recognition for marriages conducted in accordance with humanist beliefs.

Mrs Justice Eady held that, at the time of her judgment, it was legitimate for the Justice Secretary to consider the matter as part of a wholesale rather than piecemeal reform of English law relating to marriage. This did not, however, mean that it was legitimate for the Justice Secretary to do nothing. The judge said:

“Acknowledging that the removal of discrimination may be complex cannot, of itself, make a failure to address that discrimination a legitimate aim; it cannot be open to the Defendant to simply sit on his hands because taking steps to address a discriminatory difference in treatment impacting upon one group may give rise to issues relating to others... This is an area of social policy where a margin of judgment is properly to be allowed. Although that does not mean that taking no action would be justified, or that the balance might not shift over time, addressing the differences in treatment identified by the Claimants would not be straightforward and this justifies the aim of considering the appropriate remedy as part of a more wholesale reform. 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 that will necessarily engage with the wider concerns that have been raised.”

The judge took into account that the Law Commission was at the time conducting a wider review of the law relating to weddings. The Government asked the Law Commission in December 2014 to conduct a review of the law governing how and where people can marry in England and Wales. The Law Commission published a scoping paper in December 2015 concluding that there was a need for a wholesale review of the law in this area. It began work in July 2019, and published a report in July 2022 entitled “Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law”. The report made recommendations which would allow weddings conducted by non-religious belief organisations to be legally recognised, should Government enable them to do so.



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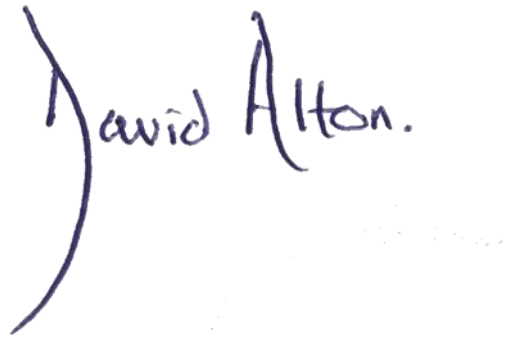
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From the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights

So far, there has been no Government response to the Law Commission's report. The previous Government said that it would need to take the time to consider the recommendations fully, and that it would publish a response in due course. Since the election, you and your department have said you are giving the matter careful consideration and will set out a public position in the coming months.

I would be grateful if you could set out the specific steps the Government intends to take following the Law Commission's report, bearing in mind the judge's findings in the *Harrison* case almost 5 years ago.



**Lord Alton of Liverpool**

Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights