

# Permit weddings of 5 people during Covid-19 in Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 17 Gorffennaf 2020  
Petitions Committee | 17 July 2020

Reference: RS20/12961-5

Petition Number: P-05-976

**Petition title:** Permit weddings of 5 people (registrar/couple/2 witnesses) during COVID 19 in Wales.

**Text of petition:** While wedding parties are understandably postponed for social distancing reasons, being able to get legally married is important to many, and is achievable without significant risk of spreading COVID-19.

Marriage provides legal rights for inheritance, children, next of kin medical decisions and housing. In addition, due to spiritual and moral convictions regarding cohabiting before marriage, many engaged couples are being forced to live separately as their wedding date passes by.

Allowing couples the opportunity to provide these rights to each other will help them during this stressful time.

Plans have been reported by BBC News in regards to "small outdoor weddings" to be permitted in Northern Ireland from 8 June, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52809997>



## 1. Welsh Government action

On 19 June 2020, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS announced the latest easing of restrictions that had been placed on the movement and gathering of people in Wales in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) (Amendment) (No. 6) Regulations 2020, laid before Senedd Cymru on 22 June 2020, amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) 2020 (as amended). The latest regulations, as described in the Explanatory Notes, **remove limitations on marriage and civil partnership ceremonies taking place**, subject to physical distancing requirements.

However, the Regulations, as amended, only refers to marriage and civil partnership ceremonies in the context of ‘places of worship’. The Welsh Government’s guidance on reopening places of worship states that:

The term “place of worship” is not defined in the Regulations. For the purposes of this guidance, the term includes a confined or enclosed space, within buildings or outdoors, which is used for religious ceremonies, collective prayer and worship or similar gatherings, such as a church, gurdwara, mosque, temple, synagogue, prayer, meeting or church hall.

Neither the Regulations nor guidance provide clarity on the status of registry offices, although there are examples of some local authorities now providing registrar services for marriages and civil partnerships in Wales.

### The Regulations

The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 made provision for restricting the movement of individuals and gatherings during the emergency period. It also provided for restrictions on places of worship, businesses and other specific services. As a result, it was no longer possible to conduct the solemnization of marriages or civil partnership ceremonies in Wales.

The previous set of Regulations, the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 1 June 2020, made exceptions to the provisions imposing restrictions on marriages and

civil partnerships, by allowing this to happen when one of the couple had a terminal illness.

The latest amendments to the regulations amend Regulation 7, 8 and 8B of the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restrictions\) \(Wales\) 2020](#) (as amended):

- Regulation 7: is amended to permit places of worship, subject to physical distancing requirements of 2 metres is maintained between every person, to open for the **solemnization of a marriage or formation of a civil partnership**;
- Regulation 8: now permits, as a **reasonable excuse**, individuals to leave the place they are living to attend a solemnization of a marriage or civil partnership ceremony;
- Regulation 8B: was inserted by the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restrictions\) \(Wales\) \(Amendment\) \(No.5\) Regulations 2020](#). This regulation eased some of the restrictions on gathering outdoors with other persons, which included permitting gathering outdoors to attend a funeral. The latest regulations (No.6) amend the exceptions to include **attending a marriage or formation of a civil partnership**.

Further information on the regulations can be found on the [Welsh Government's website](#).

The next review of the rules will take place on 09 July 2020.

## 2. Background

All wedding and civil partnership ceremonies were halted as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The restrictions on gatherings and the movement of people, along with the closure of venues and services associated with administering weddings meant that ceremonies could no longer be held in Wales.

On [23 March 2020](#), the [First Minister](#), Mark Drakeford MS announced “all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, as well as gatherings of more than two people in public should not take place”. The only exception to this was the recognition of the need to attend funerals in certain circumstances. As such, funerals could be attended by close family members. However, most local authorities set limits on the number of attendees to a funeral (usually 5 or

10). These limits were applied to ensure the safety of staff members and officiants, as well as to suppress the virus.

However, the key legal requirement for funerals, as stated in the [guidance](#), is that ‘**all reasonable measures** are taken to ensure a **distance of 2 metres** is kept between those attending. This means a distance of 2 metres between members of different households, not necessarily between each individual person.’

Nevertheless, while such exemptions were provided for funerals, these did not extend to marriages and civil partnership ceremonies. In addition, since the passing of the Coronavirus Act 2020, the vast majority of business and licenced venues that may have accommodated a wedding have been required to close. This includes approved venues such as hotels, as well as registrar offices. Local authorities suspended all weddings and civil partnership services until further notice.

On 29 May 2020, the First Minister announced some easing of restrictions in Wales, but this did not extend to holding marriages and civil partnership ceremonies. The only exception to this restriction was when one of the couple had a terminal illness.

### Registrar services

Registrar services are delivered by local authorities, who will interpret and apply the Regulations and guidance in relation to their own area and service provision. All local authorities have temporarily changed or suspended registrar services for the purpose of conducting marriages and civil partnership ceremonies. However, there are signs that some authorities are now providing registrar services, with [BBC Wales reporting \(1 July 2020\)](#) on the wedding of a couple in north Wales where a registrar was in attendance for the church wedding.

In another recent [BBC Wales News article \(16 June 2020\)](#), it was reported that the majority of councils in Wales now have ‘personal protective equipment ready to be used by registrars, while ceremony rooms have been rearranged to allow for social distancing’. It was also reported that some councils are reviewing the possibility of streaming ceremonies online in the future.

## 3. Welsh Parliament action

On [2 June 2020, Nick Ramsay MS submitted a written question](#) to the Minister for Health and Social Services: ‘Will the Minister explain on what basis it has been

deemed acceptable for funerals to proceed with limited numbers in attendance, from a public health perspective, and why the same guidance has not been applied to wedding ceremonies?’

The Minister has yet to provide a response.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.