

Statistical bulletin

# Marriages in England and Wales: 2016

Number of marriages that took place in England and Wales analysed by age, sex, previous marital status and civil or religious ceremony.



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# 1 . Main points

- In 2016, there were 249,793 marriages in England and Wales, 1.7% more than in 2015, but 1.0% fewer than in 2014.
- 97.2% of all marriages were between opposite-sex couples and 2.8% were between same-sex couples.
- There were 7,019 marriages between same-sex couples in 2016, an increase of 8.1% from 2015; of these marriages, 55.7% were between female couples.
- Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2016 were lower at all ages compared with 2006, except for men aged 60 years and over and women aged 50 years and over.
- For the first time ever, less than one-quarter (24%) of all marriages in 2016 were religious ceremonies.
- 30 July was the most popular day to get married in 2016, with 4,742 marriages on this day.

## 2 . Statistician's comment

“Marriage rates remain at historical lows despite a small increase in the number of people who got married in 2016. Most couples are preferring to do so with a civil ceremony and for the first time ever, less than a quarter of everyone who married had a religious ceremony. Meanwhile, the age at which people are marrying continues to hit new highs as more and more over 50s get married.”

Kanak Ghosh, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics

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## 3 . Things you need to know about this release

- Marriage statistics are derived from information recorded when marriages are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement.
- Figures represent civil and religious marriages that took place in England and Wales only.
- Marriages to residents of England and Wales that took place abroad are not included, while marriages that took place in England and Wales to non-residents are included.
- Marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014.
- Same-sex couples in a civil partnership have been able to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage, if they so desired, from 10 December 2014; these are not included in the marriage statistics but are reported separately.

## 4 . Small increase in marriages between opposite-sex couples

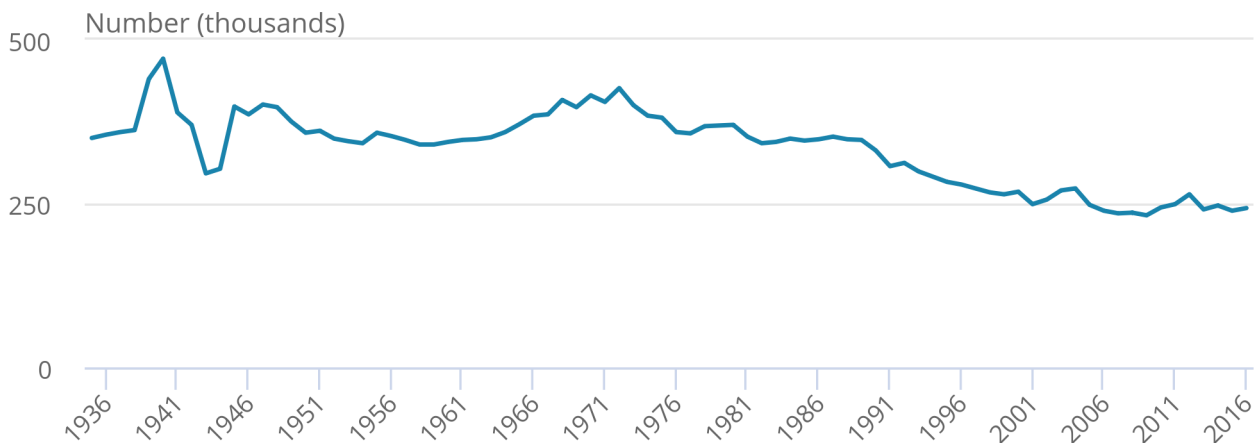
There were 242,774 marriages between opposite-sex couples in England and Wales in 2016, a 1.6% increase compared with 2015. The number of couples who chose to have a civil marriage increased by 3.6% compared with 2015, while those who chose to have a religious marriage declined by 4.2%. Looking back at the last two decades, there were 36,201 fewer weddings between opposite-sex couples in 2016 than in 1996.

**Figure 1a: There has been a gradual long-term decline in the number of marriages of opposite-sex couples since 1972**

Number of marriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1935 to 2016

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Number of marriages of opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1935 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

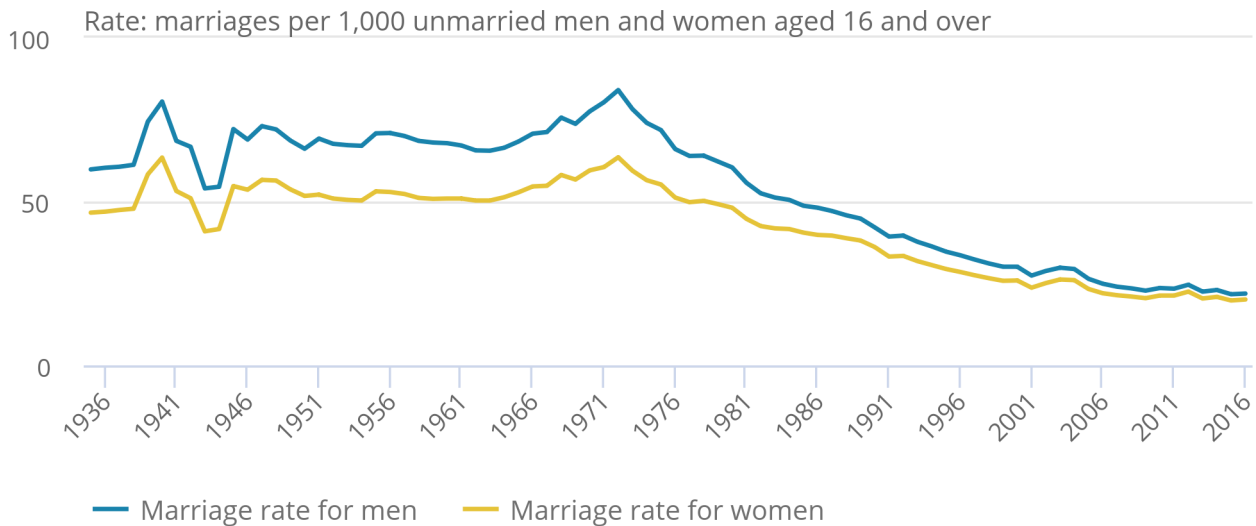
Marriage rates for both men and women in 2016 were slightly higher than in 2015, when they were at a historical low. In 2016 there were 21.9 marriages per thousand unmarried men and 20.1 marriages per thousand unmarried women, representing increases of 0.9% and 1.5% respectively, compared with 2015.

## Figure 1b: Marriage rates have generally fallen since their peak in 1972

Marriage rates, England and Wales, 1935 to 2016

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Marriage rates, England and Wales, 1935 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

#### Notes:

1. The marriage rate shows the number of marriages per thousand unmarried men and women aged 16 years and over.

More information on the long-term decline in marriages and marriage rates between 1972 and 2009 is available in the release [Marriages in England and Wales: 2013](#).

Marriage rates provide a better indication of trends than simply looking at the number of marriages. This is because they take account of changes in the size of the unmarried adult population, as well as the number of marriages.

The percentage of men and women who have ever married has been declining over recent decades along with the percentage of men and women who have ever remarried. A more detailed explanation of these trends is available within the published [dataset](#) for this release.

## 5 . The average age at marriage continued to rise

For marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average (mean) age for men marrying in 2016 was 37.9 years, while for women it was 35.5 years. This was a slight increase for both men and women from the previous year and continued the overall rise recorded since the 1970s. The average age at marriage for same-sex couples in 2016 was slightly higher at 40.8 years for men and 37.4 years for women.

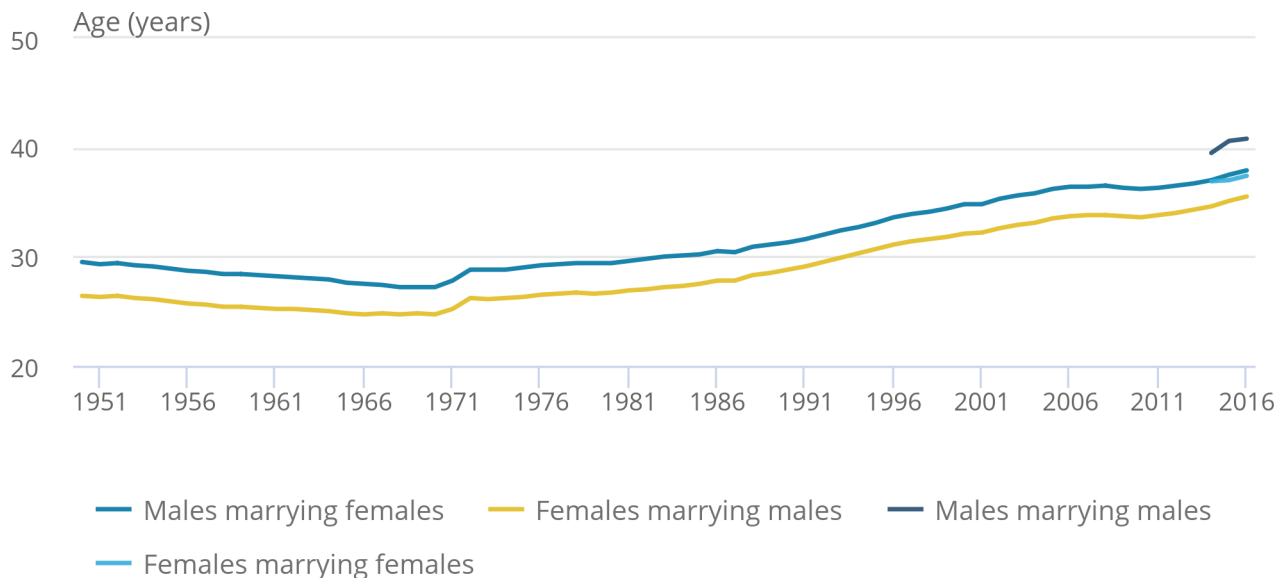
Looking at just first marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average age of single men was 33.4 years and for women was 31.5 years. Among same-sex couples marrying for the first time, the average ages of both single men and women were higher at 39.5 and 35.4 years respectively.

**Figure 2: The average age of marriage increased in 2016 for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples, continuing the long-term increase since the early 1970s**

Average age at marriage, England and Wales, 1950 to 2016

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Average age at marriage, England and Wales, 1950 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The first marriages of same-sex couples took place in England and Wales on 29 March 2014.
2. The average age has been calculated by excluding a very small number of records where the age of the party was not stated; our datasets report the number of records where the age has not been stated.

Among opposite-sex couples in 2016, more women than men married at ages under 30 years, whereas at ages 30 years and over, more men married. This pattern reflects that on average men tend to form relationships with women younger than themselves.

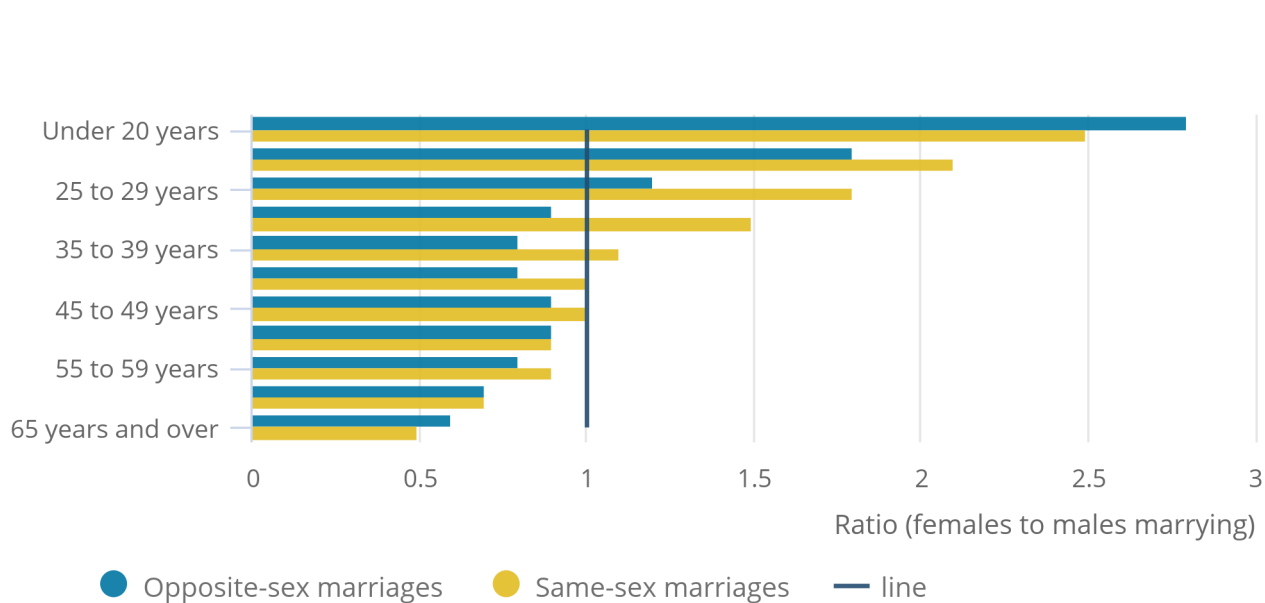
Among same-sex couples in 2016, more women than men married at ages under 50 years, whereas at ages 50 years and over, more men married. In 2013, prior to the introduction of marriages for same-sex couples, more women than men entered a civil partnership at ages under 40 years, while at ages 40 years and over, more men formed a civil partnership.

**Figure 3: More women than men married at younger ages for both opposite-sex and same-sex marriages, while more men than women married at older ages**

Ratio of females to males marrying, by type of marriage, England and Wales, 2016

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Ratio of females to males marrying, by type of marriage, England and Wales, 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

The proportion per thousand men and women who had ever married has been decreasing since the 1970s. For men born in 1987, 226 per thousand men had married by the age of 30 years, compared with 485 per thousand in 1967. For women born in 1987, 323 per thousand women had married by the age of 30 years, compared with 632 per thousand in 1967.

## 6 . Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples were generally greater at older ages

Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples in 2016 were generally higher at older ages when compared with the previous year. Higher rates were recorded among men aged 35 years and over and for women aged 20 to 29 years and aged 40 years and over.

In 2016, marriage rates for same-sex couples were higher among women than men at ages 20 to 44 years; while at ages 50 years and over, rates were higher among men.

In general, opposite-sex marriage rates among older people have been increasing over recent years and falling at younger ages. For more information see [Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#).

Marriage rates for men and women aged under 20 years have decreased the most since 2006 (50% for men and 61% for women). In contrast, marriage rates for men and women aged 65 years and over have increased the most over the same period (32% for men and 78% for women).

## 7 . Religious marriage ceremonies declined to a record low

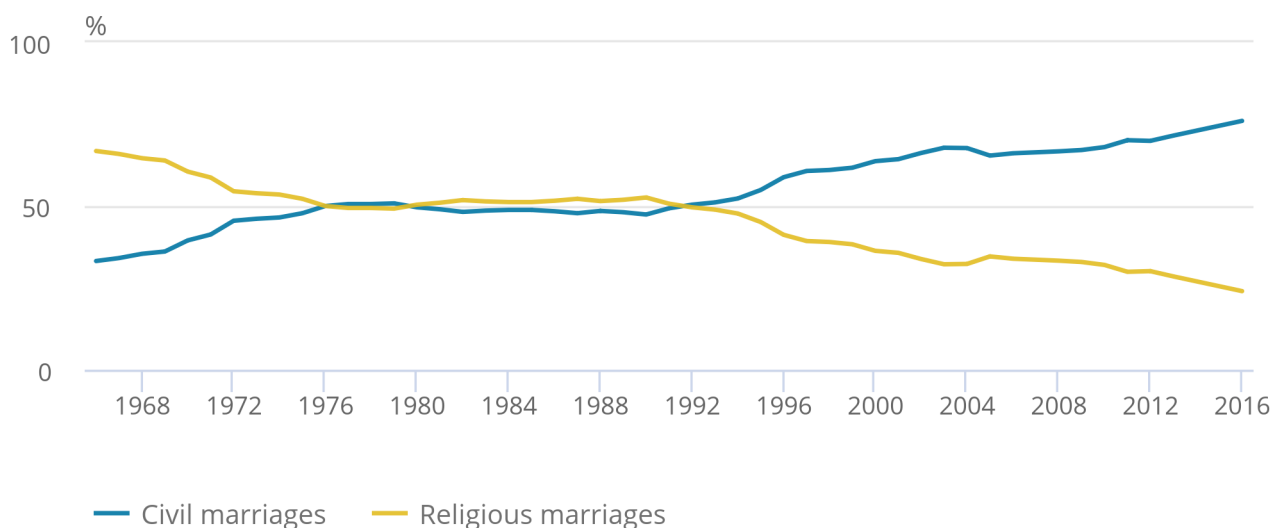
The number of religious marriages in 2016 reached the lowest level on record (60,069 marriages), falling by 4.1% from the previous year and by nearly a half (48%) from two decades ago (Figure 4). This is partly due to the long-term decline in the overall number of all marriages but also the rise in popularity of civil marriage ceremonies. In 2016, for the first time on record, there were more than three times as many civil marriage ceremonies as there were religious ceremonies.

**Figure 4: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992**

Percentage of civil and religious marriages, England and Wales, 1966 to 2016

### Figure 4: Civil marriage ceremonies have outnumbered religious ceremonies each year since 1992

Percentage of civil and religious marriages, England and Wales, 1966 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Figures for 2014, 2015 and 2016 include both opposite-sex and same-sex marriages.
2. Marriages of same-sex couples have been possible in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

Religious ceremonies accounted for one-quarter of marriages between opposite-sex couples and 0.9% of marriages between same-sex couples in 2016. Only 61 same-sex couples married through religious ceremonies in 2016.

The percentage of opposite-sex couples marrying through religious ceremonies has decreased steadily over time. In 1900, religious ceremonies accounted for 85% of all marriages, but by the late 1970s this had fallen to 50%. Since 1992, civil marriages have increasingly outnumbered religious marriages every year.

## **8 . More females than males married a partner of the same sex**

Marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible since 29 March 2014 so consequently, 2016 represents the second full year of data.

A total of 7,019 marriages were formed between same-sex couples in 2016, rising from 6,493 in 2015 and 4,850 in 2014 (although the figure for 2014 represents part of the year only). Of these, 44% were between male couples and 56% were between female couples, a pattern also seen in 2015 and 2014 (Figure 5). In contrast, our [statistics on civil partnerships](#) show that more than two-thirds (68%) of all civil partnerships formed in 2016 were between men.

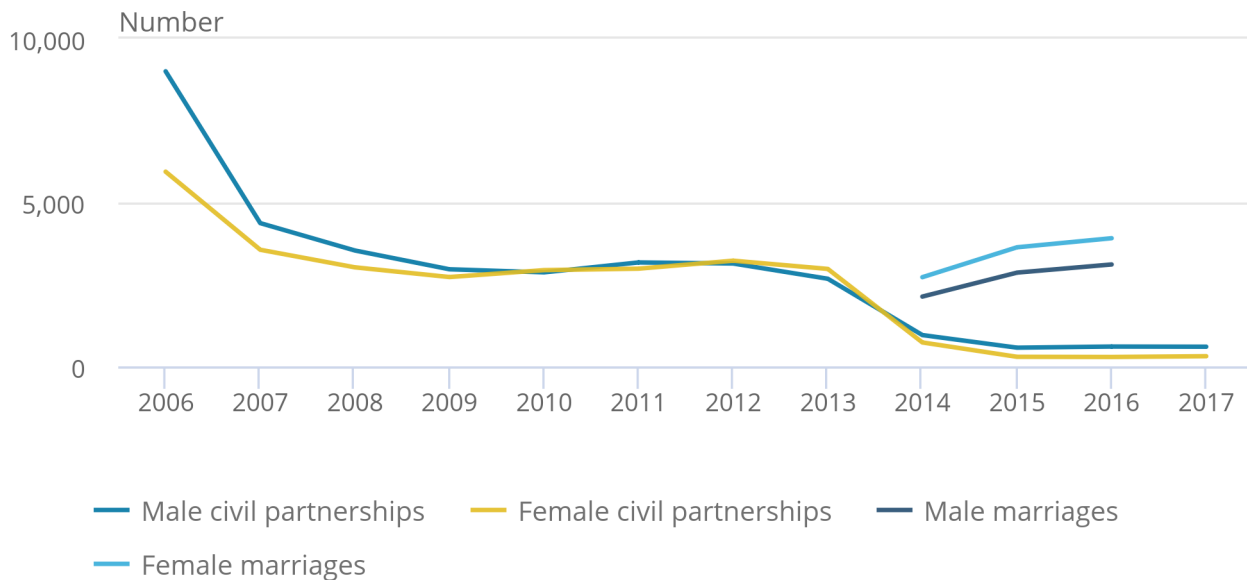


**Figure 5: Since the introduction of same-sex marriages in 2014, there have been more marriages among female same-sex couples each year than male same-sex couples**

Number of same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, England and Wales, 2006 to 2017

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Number of same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, England and Wales, 2006 to 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

Notes:

1. Following the introduction of the [Civil Partnership Act 2004](#), the first day that couples could form a civil partnership was 21 December 2005 in England and Wales.
2. Civil partnerships remain available to same-sex couples following the introduction of marriages for same-sex couples.
3. Marriages of same-sex couples have been possible in England and Wales from 29 March 2014.

## 9 . Same-sex couples were most likely to be forming their first legally recognised partnership

In 2016, similar proportions of men and women married a partner of the opposite sex for the first time (75% and 76% respectively). In comparison, 89% of men and 81% of women who married a partner of the same sex formed their first legally recognised partnership.

Two-thirds of marriages between opposite-sex couples in 2016 were the first marriage for both partners, unchanged since 2012; this percentage has increased steadily from a low of 58% in 2000. Among same-sex couples, 79% of marriages between males and 68% between females were the first legally recognised partnership for both partners.

## 10 . Markedly fewer couples converted their civil partnerships into a marriage in 2016

Following the introduction of the [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#), same-sex couples in a civil partnership have been able to convert their existing civil partnership into a marriage from 10 December 2014, if they so desired. Consequently, 2016 represents the second full year of data.

During 2016, there were 1,663 same-sex couples who converted their existing civil partnership into a marriage, which was 82% fewer than the previous year. Of the conversions in 2016, 53% were between male couples while 47% were between female couples.

Table 1: Number of same-sex civil partnerships converted to a marriage, England and Wales, 2014<sup>1</sup>, 2015 and 2016

Year	Percentage	
	All conversions	Female conversions
2016	1,663	46.8
2015	9,156	51.8
2014	2,411	48.4

Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

### Notes

1. Figures for 2014 relate to conversions which took place during the period 10 to 31 December 2014 only. [Back to table](#)

The low number of conversions in 2016 compared with 2015 may be because couples who wished to convert their existing civil partnership to a marriage chose to do so as soon as possible. Therefore, most conversions would have taken place in 2015, as this option was only made available towards the end of 2014. Furthermore, the waiving of the conversion fee for all conversions completed by 9 December 2015 may also have contributed to this.

## 11 . 30 July was the most popular day to get married in 2016

The most popular date to get married in 2016 was 30 July, with 4,742 weddings on this day, and the least popular day was Christmas Day with only two weddings.

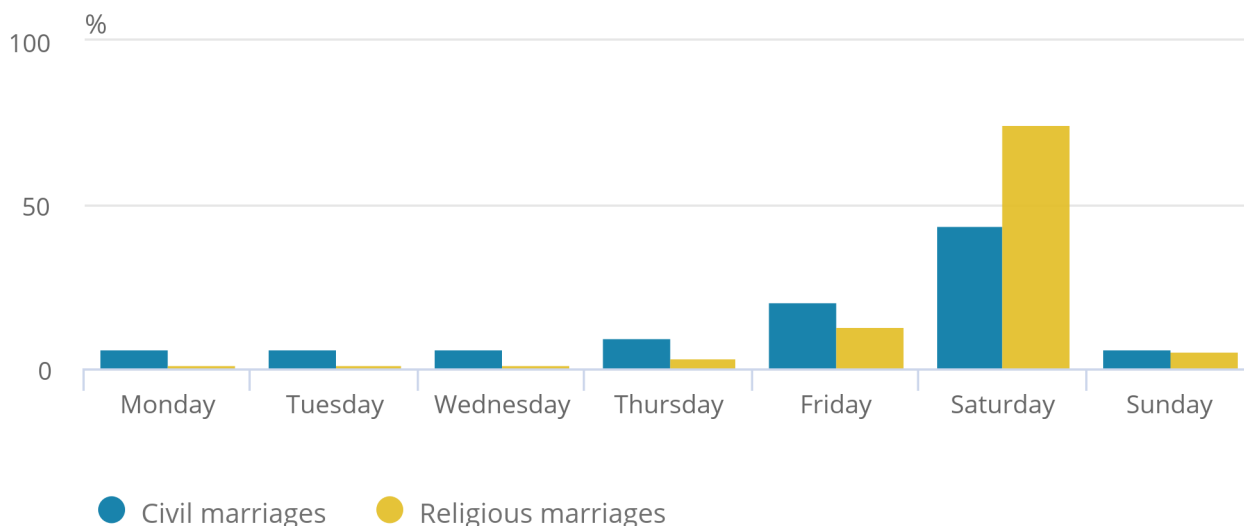
Saturday was the most popular day to get married and over half (51%) of all marriages took place on a Saturday in 2016. Nearly three-quarters of religious marriages (74%) took place on a Saturday compared with less than half (44%) of all civil ceremonies (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Most marriages took place on a Saturday but civil marriages were more likely to take place on a weekday compared to religious marriages**

Percentage of marriages by day of the week, England and Wales, 2016

Figure 6: Most marriages took place on a Saturday but civil marriages were more likely to take place on a weekday compared to religious marriages

Percentage of marriages by day of the week, England and Wales, 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Marriages in England and Wales

The most popular day to get married over the period 1996 to 2016 was 30 August, with an average of 1,609 weddings taking place on this day (Figure 7).

August was also the most popular month to get married over the period in England and Wales (with an average of 1,304 weddings per day), followed by September (1,075 weddings) and July (1,068 weddings). Apart from 13 August, every day in August had an average of over 1,000 weddings and 7 of the top 10 most popular dates to get married were in August.

Valentine’s Day (14 February) was the 10th most popular day to get married (1,405 marriages).

On average, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year’s Day were the least popular days to get married, not least because most registration offices and approved premises are not open on these days.

**Figure 7: August was most popular month to get married over the last two decades**

Average number of marriages per day, England and Wales, 1996 to 2016

## 12 . Links to related statistics

For more detailed marriage statistics see our [datasets](#), which provide a long time series, or our [explorable datasets](#), which provide detailed marriage statistics for 2001 to 2016.

The number of marriages and the marriage rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages release](#).

[Marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 and over](#) was published in July 2017 and discusses the pattern of changing relationships at older ages.

[Provisional figures on marriages of same-sex couples and the number of couples converting their civil partnership into a marriage](#) were published in October 2015.

[What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) shows that the estimated percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage.

Further statistics on [divorces](#), [civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available.

Special extracts and tabulations of marriage data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and the [ONS charging policy](#), where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to Vital Statistics Outputs Branch by email to [vsob@ons.gov.uk](mailto:vsob@ons.gov.uk) or by telephone on +44 (0)1329 444110. [User requested data](#) will be made publicly available.

## 13 . Quality and methodology

This is the first time that final marriage statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2016. The release provides final annual data.

It is currently only possible to publish final annual marriage statistics around 26 months after the end of the reference year. This is due to delays in the submission of marriage entries by the clergy and authorised persons. It is estimated that each year around 4% of religious marriage returns remain outstanding one year after the end of the reference period (this is based on marriage records received at the Office for National Statistics (ONS)); this directly affects the timing of statistical outputs. This may be due to a number of factors such as the closure of a building or change of incumbent.

An electronic system has been introduced to track returns from every building in which marriages may be solemnised. This provides data that enables the General Register Office (GRO) to identify potential outstanding returns and take targeted action via the local registrar. In addition, the GRO has also improved communications with all denominations via a regular newsletter, covering a range of topics including the importance of providing the timely return of copies of marriage records.

Marriage statistics are published once we consider the annual dataset is acceptably complete. Marriage records received after our annual dataset is taken are not included in published figures. Table 1 in our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) shows that the difference between the number of marriages stored on our database, and the number included in our publications each year, has been less than 0.5% since 2002. Although this means some marriages are not included in the statistics, it is a compromise that must be taken to publish as timely data as possible. We hope to improve the timeliness of marriage statistics in future years. We continue to work with GRO, monitoring the receipt of marriage registrations and sending out reminders where delays are identified.

Marriage statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes, most recently the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples.

The [Marriages Quality and Methodology Information report](#) contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data

Our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to marriages and includes a glossary of terms.

Marriage statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in the [Marriages Quality and Methodology Information report](#).

The [Revisions policy for population statistics \(including marriage statistics\)](#) is available.

The mean (average) ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing structure of the population by age, sex and marital status.