

Marriages in England and Wales QMI

Quality and methodology information for marriage statistics, detailing the strengths and limitations of the data, methods used and data uses and users.

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1 . Output information

National Statistic	
Survey name	Marriages in England and Wales
Frequency	Annual
How compiled	Based on third party data
Geographic coverage	England and Wales
Last revised	14 April 2020

2 . About this Quality and Methodology Information report

This quality and methodology report contains information on the quality characteristics of the data (including the European Statistical System five dimensions of quality) as well as the methods used to create it.

The information in this report will help you to:

- understand the strengths and limitations of the data
- learn about existing uses and users of the data
- understand the methods used to create the data
- help you to decide suitable uses for the data
- reduce the risk of misusing data

3 . Important points about marriage statistics

- Marriage statistics are derived from information recorded when marriages are registered as part of civil registration, a legal requirement; these data represent the best and most complete data source.
- Figures represent civil and religious marriages that took place in England and Wales only.
- [National Records of Scotland](#) (NRS) and [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) (NISRA) publish regular marriage statistics for their own countries, which are comparable with the Office for National Statistics figures.
- 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; our datasets provide statistics on both marriages of opposite-sex couples and marriages of same-sex couples.
- 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 in the datasets.

4 . Quality summary

Overview of marriages in England and Wales data

The registration of marriages taking place in England and Wales is a service carried out by the Local Registration Service in partnership with the General Register Office (GRO). Legally, a marriage is solemnised in either a civil or religious ceremony and is recorded in a register.

Final marriage statistics, which are required to be laid before Parliament, are currently published just over two years after the end of the reference year. Figures on marriages of same-sex couples are now included within our annual marriages release alongside figures on marriages of opposite-sex couples.

Our marriage statistics report annual figures for marriages that took place in England and Wales for a calendar year. The statistics are produced by:

- sex
- age
- type of marriage
- period of occurrence
- previous marital status and cohabitation status
- type of ceremony (civil or religious)
- religious denomination
- day and date of occurrence
- area of occurrence

Following the implementation of the [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#), the first marriages of same-sex couples took place on 29 March 2014. Civil partners have been able to convert their 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 in the datasets.

Annual marriage statistics for the UK and its constituent countries are published in the [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages dataset](#).

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

Uses and users of marriages in England and Wales data

Marriage statistics are used widely to inform policy development. For example:

- the [Government Equalities Office \(GEO\)](#) takes the lead on civil partnership policy and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality and uses data on the number of marriages of same-sex couples and civil partnerships formed and dissolved to inform policymaking; the GEO also monitor data on marriages for future policy considerations
- the [Department for Work and Pensions \(DWP\)](#) uses marriage data to feed into dynamic simulation models covering pension-age population to model pensioner incomes, as well as entitlement to state pensions and pension-age benefits; this involves modelling whole life courses, including the formation of partnerships (marriage, civil partnership and cohabitation) and dissolution of the same partnerships
- the [Government Actuary's Department \(GAD\)](#) has used marriage data to estimate the cost of requiring pension schemes to equalise benefits for same-sex partners with opposite-sex partners required under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013
- to inform and develop government policy and law, for example, regulations were passed in December 2019 to enable opposite-sex civil partnerships
- contributions to government [briefings](#) and debates

Other uses and users include:

- organisations such as [Eurostat](#) and the [United Nations Statistics Division](#); for example, these use our marriage statistics to monitor progress towards global indicators as part of the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#)
- organisations in the voluntary sector; these use our marriage statistics for comparison purposes and to support campaigns and often pass on our marriage statistics to their own users, for example, the [Marriage Foundation](#), hold an annual Marriage Week to promote stable relationships through marriage
- businesses involved in marriages or civil partnerships, such as hotels, catering businesses, bridal shops, wedding planners and civil partnership celebration planners; these use marriage and civil partnership statistics by area to assess their market share of business and for marketing and commercial planning
- religious groups and organisations such as the Church of England; these are also interested in marriage statistics by area and the number of religious marriages taking place each year
- lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law, as well as academics and researchers in demography and social sciences; these are often interested in marriage statistics

5 . Quality characteristics of the marriages in England and Wales data

Relevance

(The degree to which statistical outputs meet users' needs.)

Our annual marriages publication consists of a statistical bulletin that provides commentary on the latest statistics, and summary datasets that provide extensive time series for comparison. The time series is available on a comparable basis back to 1846 in some tables. In addition, we publish [explorable datasets](#), which can be used to obtain more detailed statistics for a particular calendar year.

From 2016, the format of our annual marriage publication changed (2012 data year onwards) to the current format. This was the result of [findings](#) of a [consultation](#) to understand user requirements.

Prior to 2016, a large number of data tables were published annually in the spring or summer accompanied by a statistical bulletin providing provisional figures for the latest data year. The data tables provided a summary of provisional marriage statistics for the latest data year and more detailed statistics for the previous year for which marriage figures had been finalised. Some tables provided historical data for comparison. Prior to the 2008 data year, final marriage statistics for England and Wales were published in the Annual Reference Volume [FM2: Marriage, divorce and adoption statistics](#).

Our marriage statistics do not include marriages to residents of England and Wales that took place abroad, while marriages that took place in England and Wales to non-residents are included.

Marriage statistics (including divorce and civil partnership formation and dissolution statistics also produced by ONS) are used widely to:

- report on social and demographic trends
- inform policy development and policy monitoring
- analyse and report on trends following policy change, for example, the uptake of marriages of same-sex couples and the impact on civil partnership formations
- inform policymakers about recent trends and policy impact such as determining the [percentage of marriages that end in divorce](#) and comparisons with civil partnership formations ([Civil Partnerships five years on \(PDF, 190KB\)](#))

More detail about the uses and users of marriages data can be found in Section 4 of this report.

Accuracy

(The degree of closeness between an estimate and the true value.)

The marriage statistics we publish use data taken directly from the copy of the entry in the marriage register and are based on details collected by the General Register Office (GRO) when a marriage is performed. The information in the marriage entry is largely supplied by the persons being married, who are responsible for its accuracy. Supplying false information may render them liable to prosecution for perjury, so the information supplied is generally believed to be correct. There is no routine statistical verification of the data, although editing checks are carried out to detect clerical, coding and keying errors. However, certain corrections subsequently come to light and are resolved by the GRO.

Marriage statistics by manner of solemnisation can be misleading as some religious marriages (such as Muslim and Sikh) can take place at unregistered premises. To be registered as a legal marriage the couple have a further marriage ceremony in a registry office or approved building. Such weddings are coded as civil marriages because only the civil marriage certificate is received. Given that marriage statistics can be misleading for some religions, since 2011 we have only published religious denominations under broad groupings.

Revisions of marriage statistics occur infrequently and have only taken place following revisions to the population estimates by marital status resulting in revised marriage rates. Tables contain footnotes to show if any rates have been recalculated since the last publication using revised population estimates.

Some couples choose to get married abroad. There is no legal requirement for those marriages of persons usually resident in England and Wales, but solemnised outside England and Wales, to be registered by the GRO. However, some overseas marriages are recorded with the overseas section at the GRO. These fall into two main types: marriages of armed forces personnel and marriages that take place in certain UK consuls (only 31 consuls have this facility).

It is possible to estimate the number of UK residents marrying abroad and the number of overseas residents marrying in the UK using data from the [International Passenger Survey \(IPS\)](#). These estimates are based on visits of less than 12 months and are derived from interviews conducted at the end of visits, where the main reason for visit was marriage. These estimates are based on a very small number of IPS interviews and so the standard errors on the estimates are correspondingly high. Further information on marriages taking place abroad can be found in the [Population Trends Report: Marriages abroad, 2002 to 2007 \(1815KB\)](#).

In 2017, an estimated 104,000 UK residents went abroad to get married and an estimated 8,000 overseas residents married in the UK. This represents an increase compared with 2016, when 73,000 UK residents were estimated to have married abroad, but a decrease from 17,000 overseas residents estimated to have married in the UK. The [Population trends report: marriages abroad, 2002 to 2007 \(1815KB\)](#) suggests that the vast majority (around 90%) of the marriages to UK residents estimated as taking place abroad are to residents of England and Wales, while only about half of people coming to the UK to get married do so in England and Wales.

Although the estimated number of marriages abroad is high, many users are interested in marriages taking place in England and Wales, for example, those involved in the “marriage business” such as wedding planners. However, users with an interest in social change may consider the numbers of marriages both abroad and in England and Wales.

Output quality trade-offs

(Trade-offs are the extent to which different dimensions of quality are balanced against each other.)

Each year, a number of marriages are not included in the published figures because we received the entries later than the date when the annual dataset was taken. This is because of delays in the submission of marriage entries by the clergy and registrars. Table 1 published in our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) shows the difference between the number of marriages stored on our database and the number included in our publications each year. Although this means some marriages are not included in the statistics, it is a compromise that must be taken to publish more timely data. We continue to work with the General Register Office (GRO) monitoring the receipt of marriage registrations.

Prior to the 2011 data year, if the age of one of the parties was not given, a value for that age based upon the other party's stated age was imputed. From the 2011 data year onwards, missing values for age at marriage have not been imputed. The small numbers of missing values over recent years mean that imputation adds no significant value to the dataset. Some records also contain missing values for area of occurrence and marital status, these variables are also not imputed. Published tables now include information on the small number of records for which this information is missing.

Coherence and comparability

(Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain, for example, geographic level.)

Our marriage statistics have always been produced using data collated by the GRO from entries in marriage registers. Methods and classifications for marriage statistics have remained similar for many years and time series data are available on a comparable basis back to 1837 in some tables.

International comparisons are simple for marriages as they are recognised across the UK and the world. We quality assure marriage data for England and Wales and also co-ordinate and publish statistics for the whole of the UK with breakdowns for each constituent country. Although both the [National Records of Scotland](#) (NRS) and [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) (NISRA) publish regular statistics for their own countries, collating all UK data together allows our users to compare data easily for each country.

Comparability is maximised by the following:

- marriage statistics published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), NRS and NISRA are all produced using date of marriage
- marriage statistics published by the ONS, NRS and NISRA cover all marriages that were registered as having taken place in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively, regardless of the usual residence of the parties involved
- ONS, NRS and NISRA marriage statistics do not include marriages of residents of England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland who go abroad to be married; only some of these marriages abroad come to the attention of the Registrar General through notification to consular authorities

We publish marriage rates using the unmarried population aged 16 years and over as the denominator (single, widowed and divorced persons obtained from the population estimates by marital status published by the respective statistics office). Similar marriage rates for Scotland are available up to 2008. NISRA do not produce marital status population estimates, so marriage rates for Northern Ireland are generally calculated using the population aged 16 years and over as the denominator.

There are no other marriage statistics produced using administrative data. Our marriage statistics are not directly comparable with census and household survey estimates of married people in England and Wales as they are estimates of the number of people married at a certain point in time rather than the number of marriages that took place during a particular year.

Accessibility and clarity

(Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the release details, illustrations and accompanying advice.)

Our recommended format for accessible content is a combination of HTML web pages for narrative, charts and graphs, with data being provided in usable formats such as CSV, Excel, and [NOMIS explorable datasets](#). The latter provides more detailed statistics for a particular calendar year. Our website also offers users the option to download the narrative in PDF format. In some instances, other software may be used, or may be available on request. Available formats for content published on our website, but not produced by us, or referenced on our website but stored elsewhere, may vary. For further information please contact Health.data@ons.gov.uk.

For information regarding conditions of access to data, please refer to the following links:

- [terms and conditions](#) (for data on the website)
- [accessibility](#)

Special extracts and tabulations of marriages data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and our [charging policy](#), where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to Vital Statistics Outputs Branch via email to Health.data@ons.gov.uk or by telephone on +44 (0)1329 444110. We also publish [user requested data](#).

Timeliness and punctuality

(Timeliness refers to the lapse of time between publication and the period to which the data refer. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.)

The annual release of marriage statistics is announced on the [GOV.UK release calendar](#) at least four weeks in advance.

Final figures are currently published just over two years after the end of the reference period and are required to be laid before Parliament.

The publication of provisional marriage statistics was discontinued in 2016 (for the 2013 data year onwards) to ensure value for money across our outputs. Provisional marriages statistics for data years 2008 to 2012 were published approximately one and half years after the reference period while statistics for the 2007 data year and earlier were published approximately one year after the reference period.

Users are happy with the data available on marriages given their high quality; however, the release of data is not considered to be timely. See the 'Output quality and trade-off' section for more detail on factors affecting the timeliness of marriage statistics.

The release of our marriage statistics has been delayed five times in recent years.

Delays and reasons for them

- 2012 – to allow for revisions to [population estimates by marital status](#) to be incorporated and the format of the release was changed to allow publication of explorable datasets.
- Provisional 2012 – to allow for a more detailed quality assurance of the 2011 final marriage statistics following the introduction of the GRO Registration Online system (RON) in January 2011.
- Provisional 2011 – to allow time for detailed quality assurance following the introduction of the GRO Registration Online system (RON).
- 2004 – to allow for known late notifications of entries in the marriage register by a small number of registration districts and to take account of revised marital status estimates.
- 2001 – to allow for the receipt and processing of late returns. Quality checks carried out on the marriage database during 2002 had suggested that the 2001 data were incomplete. Further investigation by the GRO confirmed that there were missing entries from several registration districts.

For more detail on related releases, the [GOV.UK release calendar](#) is available online and provides 12 months' advance notice of release dates. In the unlikely event of a change to the pre-announced release schedule, public attention will be drawn to the change and the reasons for the change will be explained fully at the same time, as set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Concepts and definitions

(Concepts and definitions describe the legislation governing the output and a description of the classifications used in the output.)

The existing provisions for the preliminaries to, and registration of, marriages and civil partnerships and the processing, reporting and analysis of relevant data appear in different legislations. This reflects the distinct and separate roles of the Registrar General for England and Wales and the UK Statistics Authority.

Information about the legislations by which the Registrar General and the UK Statistics Authority are guided is available in our [User guide to marriage statistics](#).

6 . Methods used to produce the marriages in England and Wales data

How we collect the data, main data sources and accuracy

Marriage statistics for England and Wales are based on information collected when a marriage is registered and entered in the marriage register. The majority of the details entered into the marriage registers are supplied by the bride and groom although some information is also provided by the person(s) solemnising and registering the marriage. All marriages registered within England and Wales are recorded on the web-based Registration Online system (RON) and forms a legal record.

There are two distinct procedures for the registration of marriages in England and Wales depending on whether it is a religious marriage solemnised according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England or the Church in Wales or it is another religious or civil marriage (which must be preceded by civil preliminaries, that is, a civil registration).

Civil marriages are entered onto RON by registrars within seven days of the marriage. The majority of religious marriages each year are in the Church of England or Church in Wales. Returns from churches continue to be in paper format. Local registrars co-ordinate the receipt of paper returns for these marriages, including issuing reminders to the churches in the month following the end of each quarter. The GRO, however, is very much reliant on the clergy in this respect. The information from the paper copies is entered onto RON at the GRO providing a means of issuing certified copies electronically and allowing statistical data to be extracted.

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 ONS); this directly affects the timing of statistical outputs. This may be because of several factors such as the closure of a building or change of incumbent.

Marriage registration records on RON are transferred daily to ONS and into our Life Events Continuity (LEC) database for statistical purposes. We perform regular receipt and diagnostic tests and liaise with the GRO to resolve any issues identified.

We also publish marriage rates for England and Wales (combined). The rate is the number of people marrying per 1,000 unmarried male and female population aged 16 years and over (unmarried means single, widowed and divorced). Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples and same-sex couples use the same denominator since population estimates by marital status are not available by sexual identity. [Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements](#) used in the rates are the latest available when the statistics are published.

How we process, analyse, quality assure and validate the data

Validation and quality assurance checks are conducted monthly on new marriage registrations received from the GRO via RON. Once marriage data are considered to be suitably complete for the data year, an annual extract is taken. Further quality assurance is conducted on this dataset and any anomalies queried with the GRO. Counts between years are compared and any large changes are investigated. Once all queries have been resolved and any necessary amendments made, the dataset is used to create the data tables for publication.

The majority of annual [marriage statistics for England and Wales](#) are counts taken from the datasets, but some information is not part of the basic data supplied, but is derived as follows:

- type of religious ceremony (denomination) is derived from the place of marriage, since 2011 this has been received on the marriage record
- civil marriage location type (approved premise or register office) is derived from the marriage venue
- a cohabitation indicator is also derived to show whether or not the bride and groom gave the same address at marriage

Up until 2011, the cohabitation indicator was based on whether the bride and groom gave the same address at marriage as we keyed this information. From 2011, the indicator is created using both the bride and groom's postcodes. Where the postcodes match, it is assumed that the bride and groom were cohabiting prior to marriage. Around 5% of marriage records are missing either one or both postcodes, consequently it is only possible to provide estimates of the percentage of couples cohabiting prior to marriage.

From 2011, we have used a look-up function to code records where previous marital status or denomination recorded on the marriage entry is equal to "other" when received. Where text fields providing further information show that the previous marital status or denomination should actually be coded to one of the existing values, the marital status code is amended.

7 . Other information

Assessment of user needs and perceptions

We welcome feedback on the content, format and relevance of our releases and encourage users to send feedback via email to Health.data@ons.gov.uk.

Feedback is requested with all emails sent by the customer service team within Vital Statistics Output Branch. Feedback is also received through our regular attendance at user group meetings and conferences.

A consultation to understand [user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics \(185.3KB\)](#) following the introduction of marriages of same-sex couples was published in October 2013. Information provided has been used to help us meet user needs as much as possible. A [summary of the responses to the consultation and future plan \(103.7KB\)](#) was also published.

Useful links

More data on [marriages in England and Wales](#) are available. Our [User guide to marriage statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to marriages.

Annual marriage figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in [Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#). [National Records of Scotland](#) provides marriage statistics for Scotland. [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) provides marriage statistics for Northern Ireland.

Further statistics on [divorces, civil partnership formations and civil partnership dissolutions](#) are available, together with data on [families and households](#).

[Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements](#) provide the estimated resident population by five-year age group, sex and marital status (single, married, civil partnered, divorced and widowed) for England and Wales.

For more information on administrative sources of data that the ONS uses to produce statistics (including a list of administrative sources), or that are available for use in the production of statistics in the future, and information on statistical techniques for using administrative data, please see the [Statement of Administrative Sources](#).