

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: yes
- Survey name: Marriages in England and Wales
- Frequency: annual
- How compiled: based on third party data
- Geographic coverage: England and Wales
- Last revised: 11 May 2023

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; civil marriages are those which are carried out at either a register office or approved premises by or in the presence of a registrar, and do not include any religious content.
- The [National Records of Scotland's \(NRS's\) marriage statistics](#) and the [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's \(NISRA's\) marriage statistics](#) are published regularly for their own countries, which are currently comparable with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures; from 27 February 2023 the minimum age of marriage and civil partnerships was raised to 18 years in England and Wales but remains at 16 years in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Marriages to residents of England and Wales that took place elsewhere 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 (which have been available in England and Wales since 21 December 2005) 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.
- Opposite-sex couples, who were first able to form a civil partnership in England and Wales on 31 December 2019, are currently unable to convert their civil partnership into a marriage.

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 takes place 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
- same-sex and opposite-sex marriages
- period of occurrence
- previous legal partnership status and cohabitation status
- type of ceremony (civil or religious)
- 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. Same-sex 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. Opposite-sex couples, who were first able to form a civil partnership in England and Wales on 31 December 2019, are currently unable to convert their civil partnership into a marriage.

Annual marriage statistics for the UK and its constituent countries are published in our [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 the Equality Act 2010, including on gender, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in government; marriage and civil partnership statistics are used to inform policymaking
- 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, data have been used to develop the [Marriage and Civil Partnership \(Minimum Age\) Act 2022](#) which increased the minimum age of marriage and civil partnerships to 18 years in England and Wales from 27 February 2023
- 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 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 \(PDF, 975KB\)](#); 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 1837 in some tables. In addition, we publish [explorable datasets](#), which can be used to obtain more detailed user-defined 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 datasets were published annually in the spring or summer accompanied by a statistical bulletin providing provisional figures for the latest data year. The datasets 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 [our Annual Reference Volume FM2: Marriage, divorce and adoption statistics](#).

Our marriage statistics do not include marriages to residents of England and Wales that took elsewhere, 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 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 GRO.

Marriage statistics by type of ceremony (either civil or religious) 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 notes 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 taking place outside England and Wales, to be registered by GRO. However, some overseas marriages are recorded with the overseas section at GRO. These fall into two main types: marriages of armed forces personnel and marriages that take place in UK consulates which offer a consular marriage service (there are around 30 consulates which have this facility). In total there are approximately 40 consulates which offer either a consular marriage, civil partnership or civil partnership to marriage conversion service, with a number of these offering more than one of these facilities.

It has been 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.

In 2019, an estimated 71,000 UK residents went abroad to get married and an estimated 7,000 overseas residents married in the UK. This represents a decrease compared with 2018, when 94,000 UK residents were estimated to have married abroad, and a decrease from 13,000 overseas residents estimated to have married in the UK. Comparable figures are not available for 2020 as the IPS was suspended from March 2020 as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The survey resumed in January 2021.

Our [Population trends report: marriages abroad, 2002 to 2007 \(PDF, 1,815KB\)](#) 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 authorised persons. 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 GRO monitoring the receipt of marriage registrations. We do not retrospectively update previously published statistics to include the late registrations received.

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 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.

The number and timing of both civil and religious marriages in England and Wales in 2020 were affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Measures that may have had an impact include:

- closure of hospitality venues
- lockdowns during which marriages were not permitted
- the closure of churches for public worship and suspension of face-to-face activities
- restrictions on the number of wedding guests
- rules around social distancing and the wearing of face masks

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 [NRS](#) and [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 ONS, NRS and NISRA are all produced using date of marriage
- marriage statistics published by 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 currently publish marriage rates for England and Wales using the unmarried population aged 16 years and over as the denominator (never married or civil partnered, widowed and divorced persons obtained from the population estimates by marital status published by ONS). Similar marriage rates for Scotland are available up to 2008. NISRA do not produce population estimates by marital status, 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. Following guidance from the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to improve digital accessibility of statistical spreadsheets, our published datasets for marriage statistics from the 2019 data year now incorporate and adhere to this guidance. This is to help improve the usability, accessibility and machine readability of our statistical spreadsheets.

For further information please contact pop.info@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 the Demographic Analysis Unit via email to pop.info@ons.gov.uk or by telephone on +44 1329 444661. 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.)

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 religious 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 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.

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, was less than 0.4% between 2002 and 2018. There was a higher difference for 2019 because of the closure of marriage registers, which prompted the return of a high number of long outstanding records (see our user guide for more information). 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 continue to work with GRO, monitoring the receipt of marriage registrations and sending out reminders where delays are identified.

We hope to improve the timeliness of publishing marriage statistics in the future following the introduction of the [Marriages, Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registration Etc.\) Act 2019](#) (which came into force on 4 May 2021). This has replaced the existing paper marriage register with an electronic registration system and is expected to reduce the delay in submission of religious marriage entries. We will monitor the receipt of marriage returns following this change with a view to making marriage statistics more timely.

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

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.

The release of our [marriage statistics](#) has been delayed in recent years because of the following reasons:

- there have been particular data quality concerns requiring a delay so that late notifications could be included
- to allow for more detailed quality assurance after the introduction of the GRO Registration Online system (RON) in January 2011
- reprioritisation of work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

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 couple marrying, although some information is also provided by the person(s) conducting and registering the marriage. All marriages registered within England and Wales are recorded on the web-based RON system and form 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 taking place 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 continued to be in paper format until May 2021. Local registrars co-ordinated the receipt of paper returns for these marriages, including issuing reminders to the churches in the month following the end of each quarter. GRO, however, are very much reliant on the clergy and authorised persons in this respect. The information from the paper copies was entered onto RON at 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 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 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 never married or civil partnered, widowed or divorced). The same denominator is used in the calculation of rates for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples as anybody who is unmarried can enter into either an opposite-sex or same-sex marriage. [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 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 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 datasets 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 couple gave the same address at marriage

Up until 2011, the cohabitation indicator was based on whether each partner gave the same address at marriage as we keyed this information. From 2011, the indicator is created using both partners' postcodes. Where the postcodes match, it is assumed that the couple were cohabiting prior to marriage. Around 4% 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 legal partnership status or denomination recorded on the marriage entry is equal to "other" when received. Where text fields providing further information show that the previous legal partnership 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 pop.info@ons.gov.uk.

Feedback is requested with all emails sent by the stakeholder engagement team and as part of the annual marriages publication and datasets released each year.

A consultation to understand [user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics \(Word, 185.3 KB\)](#) 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 \(PDF, 103.7KB\)](#) 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 [our Vital statistics in the UK: births, deaths and marriages](#). [NRS](#) provides marriage statistics for Scotland. [NISRA](#) 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 legal partnership status (never married or civil partnered, widowed or surviving civil partner and divorced persons or those previously in a civil partnership which has been dissolved) for England and Wales.

For more information on administrative sources of data that 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](#).