



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

GUIDANCE

Guidance to local authorities and places of worship on solemnisation of marriages the forming of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies

Level 4 guidance to local authorities, approved premises and places of worship on the impact of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020 on solemnisation of marriages and the forming of civil partnerships and related wedding ceremonies.

First published: 7 July 2020

Last updated: 23 December 2020

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Relationship with the law governing marriage and civil partnership, including legal requirements in respect of Church in Wales (Anglican) marriages

Introduction

The **Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020** impose temporary restrictions on gatherings of people and the opening of businesses and premises in Wales. This has been done to control the spread of coronavirus in Wales and to help protect the public from the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Wales was placed in **Alert Level 4** from 6.00 pm on 19 December, this was in the light of the health advice pointing to the very serious risks posed by the new variant of coronavirus. This new variant poses a much greater risk of transmission and it is particularly important to take all steps available to avoid any risks of people being exposed to the virus or spreading the virus.

The general advice is that people should stay at home except for very limited purposes and not socially mix and that people they do not live with. Those who are in the clinically extremely vulnerable group should take extra precautions to minimise their contact with others.

The **Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 5) (Wales) Regulations 2020** allow places of worship and regulated premises which are permitted to remain open and which are licensed or approved, under Part 3 of the Marriage Act 1949, to conduct solemnisation of marriage, the formation of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies (as defined in regulation 57 of the Coronavirus Restrictions Regulations). This guidance relates to the ceremony itself in Alert Level 4.

The Regulations place a number of obligations on those responsible for these premises. The relevant person must:

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- Take all reasonable steps to ensure a 2 metre distance is maintained between households
- Take other reasonable measures to **minimise risk of exposure** to coronavirus
- Provide relevant information for those entering or **working at the premises** on how to minimise that risk

The Regulations also provide that households may only gather with others indoors where it is reasonably necessary for them to do so. Reasons to gather include attending a solemnisation of marriage, formation of a civil partnership or alternative wedding ceremony for those who; are a party to the marriage, civil partnership or wedding, those who are invited and those who are a carer for a person attending. Gatherings for these ceremonies are limited only by the capacity of the building itself, having addressed 2 meter physical distancing requirements and other mitigating actions. These ceremonies can take place in regulated public premises that are permitted to be open and which hold the necessary licence/approval. Private homes or their gardens are not included as permissible places for ceremonies under Alert Level 4 restrictions.

Many people will want to celebrate the occasion with reception or other forms of social gatherings with friends and family. In Alert Level 4 receptions are prohibited.

We must recognise that, globally, there have been many examples where 'wedding receptions' have been 'hotspots' for the spread of the disease. Tackling Coronavirus does not allow us to go further than ensuring those who, at this stage, want to marry, form a civil partnership or have an alternative wedding ceremony, can do so. The form that these ceremonies can take will inevitably be limited by the requirements of **social and physical distancing** they can be attended by invited guests who would witness the formation of the legal, and where relevant, spiritual partnership that marriage or civil partnership entails. The number able to attend will be depend on how many people the place of worship, approved premises or Register Office can accommodate safely, observing the **2 meter physical distancing requirements**.

It will be for places of worship and applicable approved premises themselves to assess whether they wish to open for such ceremonies and to consider the

necessary reasonable steps required to maintain physical distancing between members of different households during the ceremony. The Registration service provides a statutory service, and is able to facilitate marriage and civil partnerships since the easing of restrictions on gatherings for such purposes. However, it should be recognised that there may be circumstances where issues, such as numbers of staff who are self-isolating, may make it impractical to do so or may limit appointment availability.

Guests may attend the ceremony, but they should recognise that we are making a limited exception to the restrictions that have been imposed as a result of a public health emergency. The overarching advice, therefore, is that people must only attend an event if invited and that the reasonable excuse for gatherings that has been established to allow this, extends to attendance of the solemnisation of the marriage, formation of the civil partnership or alternative wedding ceremony.

The general guidance in Alert Level 4 is that people should stay at home except for very limited purposes and not socially mix and that people they do not live with. Those who are in the clinically extremely vulnerable group should take extra precautions to minimise their contact with others.

Aside from those involved in and facilitating the ceremony and carers, the only exception to the requirement to be invited would be those who attend to exercise their right to raise a reason against or lawful impediment to the marriage or civil partnership.

Aside from those involved in and facilitating the ceremony and carers, the only exception to the requirement to be invited would be those who attend to exercise their right to raise a reason against or lawful impediment to the marriage or civil partnership.

Legal requirements

This guidance does not replace guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers under the Regulations, in respect to all those who are subject to duties to take all reasonable measures to ensure 2 metres distance is kept between people in premises **and to take other reasonable measures to minimise the risk of**

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exposure to coronavirus.

Should any doubt arise between provisions in this guidance and the statutory guidance, the statutory guidance shall prevail. Additionally it should be noted that places of worship are permitted to open for communal worship and other ceremonies. Separate guidance ([guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus](#)) is available for these purposes.

The **Regulations** make provisions that apply to those responsible for a place of worship, approved premises or Register Office. They provide the legal basis on which places of worship and approved premises can open for marriage and civil partnership ceremonies. They do not require them to open.

Register Offices have not been required to close under the Regulations but the Regulations set out circumstances which amount to reasonable excuses under which people can gather within a building to take part in a ceremony, making their opening for these purposes practicable.

We would encourage Register Offices to put the necessary measures in place so that they can open to conduct ceremonies and administer the necessary processes to register the marriage or civil partnership, wherever reasonably practical to do so. We would also encourage Registrars to attend places of worship and approved premises to register a marriage or civil partnership, where their presence is required.

It is for those responsible for the venue to establish the protocols necessary to maintain a 2 metre distance between households and extended households and this should include establishing a relevant capacity which would form the basis on which guests can be invited for the ceremony. The only exception to invited guests or those party to the ceremony, including those with a role to play in facilitating the ceremony, would be anyone who attends for the purpose of raising a reason against or lawful impediment to the marriage.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of marriage or civil partnership, the two individuals forming the union should be considered as part of the same household even where they have previously lived in separate households. This may mean the couple form a new household or that one party becomes

absorbed into the others former household. Therefore, for the purposes of the ceremony, there is no requirement to maintain a two metre distance between the couple although other participants should be kept 2 metres apart wherever reasonably practical to do so.

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, which is used for religious ceremonies, collective prayer and worship, belief or similar gatherings, such as a church, gurdwara, mosque, temple, synagogue, prayer, meeting or related hall.

What does solemnisation of marriage, the formation of civil partnership or alternative wedding ceremony include?

The solemnisation of marriage and the formation of civil partnerships have a particular meaning in law which includes the process by which the legal basis of a marriage or civil partnership is established and registered. In a faith context these ceremonies often have religious aspects which are integral and are therefore enabled by the Regulations.

An alternative wedding ceremony is defined in regulation 57 as meaning a ceremony :

- i. based on a person’s faith or belief or lack of belief, to mark the union of two people, other than a ceremony for the purposes of solemnising a marriage or forming a civil partnership,
- ii. held in regulated premises, and
- iii. organised by a charitable, benevolent or philanthropic institution;

The common understanding of the term ‘wedding’ may include aspects which sit outside the legally recognised process. These aspects are differently enabled by the Regulations. The distinctions here are the same as those already established in practise and procedure for licensing. Wedding receptions are not permitted, in Alert Level 4.

Those who are in charge of the Register Office, approved premises or place of worship are requested to help participants understand the distinction when arranging a ceremony and should consider the necessary protocols to maintain it.

The Welsh Government's '[frequently asked questions](#)' about the [Regulations](#) is regularly updated to provide advice about what people and businesses can and cannot do during the outbreak.

Taking all reasonable measures to maintain 2 metre distance

In most circumstances people are expected to practice physical distancing measures put in place by the place of worship, approved premises or Register Office. This means maintaining a distance of 2 metres wherever practical. The distancing requirement does not include between members of the same household or a carer and the person assisted by the carer. Additionally, separate guidance makes it clear that it is not expected that children under 11 maintain physical distancing. Everyone should practise good hand and respiratory hygiene.

There may be certain aspects of the ceremony which would involve key participants breaching this 2 metre rule. Wherever possible alternative arrangements should be developed which maintain the 2 metre principle, for example rings might be cleaned and placed on a surface before being retrieved by a participant in the ceremony. However, there may be some aspects where the symbolism of the act is so integral to the meaning of the ceremony it may not be reasonably practical to maintain 2 metre distance. In those circumstances it will be important to consider the [appropriate hygiene measures necessary to minimise the opportunity to transmit infection](#). Where participants, of different households or extended households, are required to come within 2 metres of each other, or it cannot be avoided, then protection such as a [face covering](#) must be worn. The person leading the service and the couple themselves have specific exemption which are detailed below. Other PPE will only be needed if there is direct contact between non household individuals.

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The more space that can be kept between those attending will help reduce the risk of transmitting the virus. The fewer people who attend will also make it easier to manage the flow of people especially when entering and leaving the building and in corridors.

A maximum number who can attend

The most obvious means of taking all reasonable measures to maintain a 2 metre distance between persons present, is to limit the number who may attend. This means a distance of 2 metres between members of different households, not between each individual person who is a member of the same household. In defining the number of people that can reasonably attend whilst still adhering to 2 metres distancing, the total floor space as well as likely pinch points and busy areas should be taken into account (e.g. entrances, exits, corridors, aisles) to calculate capacity within each place of worship, approved premises or Register Office.

In practice, however, it may not be practicable to assess in advance how many people from the same household/ will be sitting together at any particular ceremony. We would therefore recommend that a figure should be calculated for each venue, based on the number that could reasonably be accommodated if every person sat 2 metres apart. This should, however, only be a guide and a degree of flexibility can be exercised based on the number invited from the same household/extended household who can sit together (which could enable more people to attend).

The maximum number who can attend will include those who are legally required to be in attendance such as the celebrant, authorised person and any registration officials. The couple and their witnesses will also be included in the maximum number. As the marriage, civil partnership or alternative wedding ceremony itself must take place indoors it is the capacity of the building or room (once physical distancing measures are taken into account) which will determine the size of the invitation list and therefore the numbers who can gather.

Requirement for those attending to be invited and

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travelling to the ceremony

A means of ensuring that the maximum number that can attend is observed is by limiting attendance only to those invited. The Regulations limits those who can attend a marriage civil partnership or alternative wedding to those party to the marriage, civil partnership or alternative wedding, those invited to the ceremony and to any carers of those attending. This should be implemented by informing those who are organising the ceremony that they must expressly invite those they wish to attend within the prescribed capacity, as determined by those responsible for the building.

Those attending from the same household should travel together and should not travel with others from different households. **Hired vehicles** should be used only where they are equipped to maintain COVID-19 secure environment.

Passengers should be limited to those from the same household or extended household and they should sit as far back from the driver as possible. General guidance on travel is available here: **Travelling safely (coronavirus): guidance for the public**.

There are no restrictions on travel within Wales to attend a wedding ceremony or reception, if permitted within the specific Alert Level. Invited guests may travel into Wales to attend a solemnisation of marriage, formation of civil partnership or alternative wedding ceremony. Those entering Wales for the purpose solely of attending such a ceremony may not remain in Wales outside of the ceremony itself, so should not stay overnight and avoid all unnecessary contacts whilst making their journey to and from the ceremony. Grounds to leave home, or travel to Wales, from other countries will depend on the regulations applicable in that country at the time. Those responsible for the venue, in which the wedding ceremony is taking place, should bring to the attention of the couple that any participant or guest who plans to travel into Wales should check the guidance that applies in their home country before attending. It is not the role of the venue organiser to police compliance with the law but they should not knowingly facilitate any event in which these rules are being flouted.

During the marriage ceremony, civil partnership

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formation or alternative wedding ceremony

Arrangements should be put in place to ensure that upon arrival at the venue those attending can maintain 2 metre distance and are not required to congregate in confined spaces indoors or outdoors. Those attending should then be shown to their seats in accordance with arrangements put in place in advance that ensure that all can maintain a 2 metre distance. Those attending should be advised not to touch, kiss or come into contact with any article which is shared amongst the attendees.

The more space that can be kept between those attending will help reduce the risk of transmitting the virus. The fewer people who attend will also make it easier to manage the flow of people especially when entering and leaving the building and in corridors.

Processes should be put in place to allow a suitable time to clean and disinfect the area in which a ceremony has taken place both before and after each ceremony, paying attention to frequently touched objects and surfaces.

Cleaning to an appropriate standard helps minimise the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). Frequent cleaning of all surfaces, especially those most frequently touched, should be undertaken. **Guidance on cleaning to the appropriate standard can be found here (on GOV.UK)**. The guidance describes the cleaning recommended, the appropriate disposal of materials, the cleaning of equipment and hard surfaces, and the personal protective equipment (PPE) that should be worn (where necessary).

Practicing **good hand hygiene** is important. Those attending should have access to soap and water to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds or access to hand sanitiser when entering and leaving the building and after coughing, sneezing, blowing their nose or being in a public area. Appropriate arrangements for the safe disposal of tissues and paper towels should be made. Soap and non-disposable towels should not be shared in any circumstances.

Hymn books and other shared items should be removed, making use of bespoke

order of service pamphlets if necessary. Collections should be arranged online rather than at the place of worship.

It is important also to limit the extent that people from different households congregate before and after the ceremony. Arrangements should be put in place to ensure that those attending can congratulate the couple and to greet family and friends as appropriate, while ensuring physical distance is maintained as they enter or exit.

Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

People should avoid playing music or other background noise at volumes that make normal conversations difficult particularly before and after the ceremony. This is because raised voices or shouting increase the potential risk of transmission through aerosol and droplets. Therefore spoken responses during marriages or civil partnerships should also be made in a lowered voice.

Where a band or recorded music is played it is advisable to stress to those in attendance the importance of avoiding singing and organisers should consider the impact of the volume or sustained length of music on the likelihood that people will converse with raised voices.

Activities such as communal singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided. This applies even if social distancing is being observed and face coverings are used.

The new variant of the virus poses a much greater risk of transmission and it is particularly important that all available steps are taken to avoid any risk of people being exposed to the virus or spreading the virus. In Alert Level 4 the safest option is to stay home and not socially mix at all and people who are clinically extremely vulnerable should take extra precautions to minimise their contact with others.

If singing or the playing of music is to happen it should be accompanied by clear messages that those not in an organised group of musicians or singers should

not join in. **Organised singing can be facilitated by establishing fixed groups of up to six people** who can remain consistent and rehearse and perform together, whilst generally maintaining physical distancing amongst themselves. These groups should prepare for participation in worship by ensuring they understand the importance of keeping volumes low. Only where physical distancing and other mitigations allow, a fixed team of six may perform with other fixed teams to create a larger group but action should be taken to create barriers to transmission between the fixed teams. This approach recognises that for organised groups interaction will be necessary outside the context of the act of worship (for example in rehearsal) and consistent teams of six will allow the whole team to isolate themselves should a positive COVID-19 test necessitate this. In this way, the mitigations that will still be necessary to reduce the chance of transmission to a congregation, will be more effective. If the physical distancing and other mitigations cannot be achieved in this circumstance, a larger group of this kind cannot be formed. All performers should be instructed in the use of planned mitigating actions and reminded of the role of volume in increasing transmission risk both for themselves and in creating a risk that congregations will sing, shout or chant at volume alongside the performance.

Wind instruments should not be played indoors. The decision whether to play an organ that requires air to be pushed through the mechanism should be based on a specific risk assessment and adherence with physical distancing, for example from the remainder of the congregation and avoiding use of a registrant, hand hygiene and cleaning guidance. The use of alternative instruments such as a piano, electronic keyboard or recorded music should be considered.

Ringling of bells, or similar, as part of the ceremony is permissible. The risk assessment should consider the number of people attending to peel the bells how they will enter and leave the building, room or bell tower; how they will maintain 2 meter distance between individual bell ringers and if this is not possible what other mitigations will be put in place; the protocols for hand hygiene while peeling the bells and how they will maintain physical distancing between other members of the congregation.

Any pre-requisite washing or ablution rituals should not be done at the venue but carried out prior to arrival. In the rare circumstances where this is not possible,

washing facilities at the venue should be used in line with the physical distancing requirements and hand washing and respiratory hygiene measures applied. People must not wash the body parts of others and where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body, this should take the form of small volumes splashed onto the body, but not the face. Full immersion must be avoided and others should remain well distanced to avoid the chance of also being splashed. All participants in the practise should thoroughly wash their hands before and after the ritual.

Handling objects

Touching or kissing devotional objects should be avoided. Where shared items are required for the ceremony, handling should be reduced as much as possible and hands should be washed before and after as should the objects after each individual contact. Barriers and clear signage should be put in place where necessary.

Prayer books and other re-usable or communal resources such as service sheets and prayer mats should be removed from use. Single use alternatives could be provided. Items owned by individual participants, such as a pen or prayer mats, should be removed by the participant after the event.

The distribution of food or drink (consumables) must be avoided except where they are integral to the ceremony. If it is necessary to handle consumables then those giving and receiving the item should wash their hands before and after exchange and avoid contact between the parties. As **2 metre distance** should be maintained where reasonable this could involve placing consumables on a table or similar procedure. Foodstuffs should be pre-wrapped and consumed only within individual households avoiding shared use of cutlery, crockery etc. Wherever possible ceremonial consumables should not be consumed at the time but taken away for later.

Face coverings

Face coverings must be worn by everyone over the age of 11 in indoor public

places. There are specific **exemptions** for individual circumstances.

Those leading the ceremony need not wear a face covering if it impractical to do so. However they should consider a range of other mitigations to ensure they can provide a barrier to transmission such as distancing, screens, visors and additional hygiene measures. Information about the use of face coverings can be found here: **face coverings - guidance for the public**.

The couple do not need to wear a face covering during; the walk down the aisle, the vows, the first kiss, and photos taken indoors. Information about the use of face coverings can be found here: **face coverings - guidance for the public**

Those responsible for the premises that allow access to members of the public may wish to also consult the **guidance on face coverings for employers** or managers of premises.

Those who can attend

In Alert Level 4 the general guidance is for people to stay at home except for limited purposes and not mix with other people. Those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should take extra precautions to minimise their contact with others.

Those experiencing **coronavirus symptoms** listed below should not attend:

- new continuous cough
- high temperature
- loss of or change to your normal sense of smell or taste (anosmia)

Those who have received a notification from NHS Wales Test, Trace, Protect that they need to self-isolate because they have tested positive for COVID-19 or been in close contact with someone who has tested positive, must not attend. Those who are from a **household that is self-isolating** must not attend.

The advice for those who are **extremely vulnerable, (formerly shielding)** or in an **increased risk group** continues to be that they should minimise their contact

with others for their personal protection. However, they may decide to attend despite the additional risk this poses to them and should be facilitated to do so. Actions to reduce the risk of infection could include:

- The parties to the marriage or civil partnership should advise other attendees where there is an extremely vulnerable person attending and reiterating the need to stay at home if they are unwell, and to be respectful of the extremely vulnerable person's need to avoid close contact at any point
- advising the extremely vulnerable person to travel to the venue via the safest route possible, preferably in a car by themselves, or with someone from their household
- Pre-screening questions prior to the ceremony taking place to ensure the couple and their guests are not **experiencing coronavirus symptoms**.
- Those responsible for the venues should provide clear advice and guidance to couples on the expected behaviour on the day of their ceremony **to keep everyone safe**.
- Officiants and Registrars have the right to suspend a ceremony if the couple or guests do not respect the measures put in place to ensure physical distancing, this being notified to the parties to the wedding or civil partnership in advance of the ceremony.

Participants who are **at increased risk** or **extremely vulnerable** should adhere to rigorous hand and respiratory hygiene and strict social distancing at all times but particularly whilst out of the home environment. Hand sanitiser or sanitising wipes should be used regularly whilst outside of the home. Attendees may choose, but are not required to, wear face coverings. **Information on the use of face coverings is available here**.

Broadcasting

The restrictions imposed on the solemnisation of marriage, formation of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies, due to Coronavirus restrictions, may be frustrating for those not able to attend due to restricted numbers or other reasons. Provision has been made in the Regulations to allow ceremonies to be broadcast online, and those who wish to do this should be helped to do so where reasonably practicable. Recordings may also be made.

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If this requires additional people to set up and operate equipment the number should be kept to an absolute minimum and should be included in the calculation of how many can use the building at any one time. They should also observe the [social distancing](#), hand and respiratory hygiene, [cleaning of equipment \(on GOV.UK\)](#), singing and playing musical instruments advice.

Similarly those organising a marriage or civil partnership may wish to facilitate congratulations and good luck messages to be paid by electronic communications or on social media. They may also be encouraged to arrange a further celebration of the marriage or civil partnership after the public health emergency has come to an end. Relevant equipment used for broadcasting or recording should be cleaned before and after the event.

Extent of the guidance

This guidance is prepared for places of worship, approved premises and Register Offices that are allowed to open for the purposes of solemnisation of marriages, formation of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies subject to any restrictions and prohibitions applied in Alert Level 4.

This guidance is prepared for both places of worship, approved premises and Register Offices as these settings are allowed to open for the purposes of solemnisation of marriages and formation of civil partnerships.

Guidance on the conduct of wedding receptions has been separately produced. The additional overarching WG [Visitor Economy guidance can be found here](#) and [UK Hospitality guidance Cymru guidance can be found here](#).

Test Trace and Protect

The [Welsh Government Test, Trace, Protect](#) strategy sets out the approach to tackling coronavirus, testing people with symptoms in the community, tracing those who have come into close contact with people who have tested positive for coronavirus and protecting family, friends and our community by self-isolating.

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Regulation 21 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 4) (Wales) Regulations 2020 requires **reasonable measures** to be taken to minimise the risk of exposure to coronavirus on premises open to the public and on any premises where work takes place, as well as to minimise the spread of coronavirus by those who have been on the premises

One reasonable measure is:

“ Collecting contact information from each person at the premises or, in relation to persons from the same household, from one of them, and retaining it for 21 days for the purpose of providing it to any of the following, upon their request

“1. the Welsh Ministers,
2. a contact tracer;

“ taking reasonable measures to ensure that such contact information is correct. ”

'Contact information', in relation to a person at the premises, means the person's name and information sufficient to enable the person to be contacted, to inform them that they may have been exposed to coronavirus at the premises (including a telephone number and the date and time at which the person was at the premises).

Whether this measure is one that is “reasonable” and is, therefore, one that must be taken depends on the extent to which people who don't know each other may interact on the premises and whether there is a risk of close interaction. More guidance **is provided here (keeping records of staff, customers, and visitors: test, trace, protect)**.

By adhering to these Regulations by undertaking **reasonable measures** to maintain records of staff, customers and visitors, and sharing these with the NHS Wales Test, Trace, Protect service when requested, you will help to identify people who may have been exposed to the virus and are asymptomatic (i.e. are not yet displaying **symptoms**). Containing outbreaks is crucial to reducing the spread of coronavirus, protecting the NHS in Wales and saving lives. This will

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support the country in returning to, and maintaining, a more normal way of life.

Relationship with the law governing marriage and civil partnership, including legal requirements in respect of Church in Wales (Anglican) marriages

Nothing in the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020 amends the law as it relates to marriage or civil partnership. All the requirements of notice, registration, and so on apply as normal. We would encourage Registrars to facilitate these processes wherever practicable. All marriages apart from Anglican ones, require civil preliminaries to be taken via registrars.

About this document

This document is a copy of the web page [Guidance to local authorities and places of worship on solemnisation of marriages the forming of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies](#) downloaded.

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