STATES OF JERSEY

HUMANIST AND OPEN-AIR MARRIAGES

Lodged au Greffe on 15th June 2015
by Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

(a) to agree, in principle, that celebrants approved by the Superintendent Registrar and accredited by the British Humanist Association (or by similar organisations whose principal or sole purpose is the advancement of a system of non-religious beliefs which relate to morality or ethics) should be permitted to solemnise marriages in Jersey;

(b) to agree, in principle, that the current legislation be amended to allow the solemnisation of marriages in the open air, including public spaces such as beaches; and

(c) to request the Chief Minister or Minister for Home Affairs, as appropriate, to bring forward for approval by the States the necessary draft legislation to give effect to the proposals.

DEPUTY L.M.C. DOUBLET OF ST. SAVIOUR

REPORT

The Council of Ministers are taking the opportunity to review our marriage laws following the equal marriage consultation. I want to add 2 further considerations which were not on the options paper: humanist weddings and open-air weddings. In terms of allowing humanist marriage this is a matter of equality and freedom of belief, and for open-air marriage it is simply sensible to consider it now while the laws are being worked on. This is an opportunity to really make Jersey's marriage laws the best they can be in terms of practicality, choice, fairness and opportunities for our economy.

Principle 1 – Legalise humanist weddings

Principle 2 – Legalise open-air weddings

Humanist Weddings

1. Summary

The proposal would allow humanist weddings to be recognised as legal marriages in Jersey, as they are in Scotland. In Scotland, the number of humanist weddings has increased sharply since legal recognition to over 3000 in each year, with many couples travelling from elsewhere in the UK to have a legally recognised humanist ceremony.

The recent consultation on equal marriage in Jersey found a significant amount of support for humanist marriage. Furthermore, the legal recognition of humanist weddings is in keeping with the principles expressed in the Chief Minister's response to the consultation, which called upon the States of Jersey to 'support marriage in all its forms'. Humanist marriages are distinct from civil ceremonies, and would grant humanist couples the same choice religious people have of a meaningful ceremony composed by a person who shares their values and approach to life. The legal recognition of humanist marriages would be just and fair, meeting genuine public demand and solidifying Jersey's reputation as a progressive, innovative jurisdiction.

2. History of equal marriage consultation

The States of Jersey's Equal Marriage and Partnership consultation was launched in 2014, attracting a response from roughly 1.5% of the population, and included a section on humanist marriages. It found that 54% of respondents were in favour of same-sex marriage, and 46% against. Half of respondents explicitly stated their support for humanist marriage, while many left it blank.

The responses in favour of both same-sex and humanist marriage put forth similar arguments for their stance: most believed that the law should treat all couples equally, saw marriage as a loving, long-term commitment and could see no impediment to different kinds of couples making the same declaration. This applied to, in the first instance, sexual orientation and, in the second, personal beliefs.

Some opposed making humanist marriage legal on the grounds that civil marriages already existed, displaying some confusion over the distinction between secular and humanist ceremonies. The options paper, published in November 2014, displayed some of this conflation, concluding that since couples 'can already marry via a civil ceremony in Jersey, or via a humanist ceremony in another jurisdiction that has already introduced humanist marriage' there was no need to introduce it into Jersey. This was despite the fact that Senator Gorst has declared that his aim was 'to uphold marriage for all couples, all families and for the wider community.'
(Source - http://www.gov.je/News/2014/Pages/EqualMarriageReport.aspx)

Following the consultation, a commitment has been made to bring forward legislation which will allow same-sex couples to get married in civil and religious ceremonies by the end of 2017, but there are no plans for humanist marriages to be made legal.

3. The present position in Scotland

The Registrar General for Scotland granted temporary authorisation to certain humanist celebrants to conduct legally recognised marriages in Scotland in 2005, under section 12 of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977. The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 broadened the "religious" category of marriage to "religious or belief" and so placed humanist bodies on the same footing as religious organisations in relation to the solemnisation of marriage.

The number of humanist weddings in Scotland has seen a sharp increase since it was legally recognised. In 2005, there were fewer than 100 humanist weddings, in 2009 this figure was 1,544 and in 2012 it rose to 3,052. The latest available statistics from Scotland's Registrar General show that, of 27,547 marriages in 2013, 3,185 were humanist. The number of humanist weddings has now overtaken the number of Roman Catholic marriages in Scotland, of which there were 1,582 in 2013. The rise of humanist marriages has come despite a consistent fall in the overall number of weddings since humanist marriage was made legal.

The increase in the number of humanist weddings has far outweighed the decline in civil weddings, and since direct 'switches' from church weddings to humanist ones are highly unlikely, it would seem that, without humanist weddings, the overall total would have fallen more sharply. Additionally, humanist weddings have helped maintain Scotland's marriage tourism market, as humanist celebrants report that up to

a quarter of the couples they marry travel from elsewhere in the UK to have a legally recognised humanist ceremony.

4. Other jurisdictions

In addition to Scotland, Ireland legalised humanist marriage in 2012. As a result, the number of humanist marriages there has increased rapidly from 209 in 2013, to 750 in 2014. Other jurisdictions which give legal recognition to humanist marriages include: Australia since 1973; New Zealand since 1976; Ontario, Canada; Norway since 2004; Iceland since 2013. In all nations they are popular and have contributed to increasing numbers of marriages.

5. The case for legal recognition for humanist weddings as marriages

a. It would be fair

Couples who wish to marry on Jersey have the option of a legal civil marriage. Religious couples also have the option of a legal marriage based on their deepest beliefs and values conducted by a person who shares those beliefs and values. But adherence to profound and life-shaping beliefs is not confined to those who profess a religion. Humanist weddings are deeply significant and moving occasions but at present they have no legal significance.

Since 2012, there have been 9 humanist weddings in Jersey, despite their lack of legal recognition. The evidence from Scotland suggests this number would drastically increase following its legalisation, both from humanist couples resident on the island and those travelling from elsewhere.

The legalisation of humanist marriage adheres to the same principles of equal treatment that impelled the Chief Minister to support same-sex marriage, which will directly benefit a similarly small number of people (an estimated 44). Moreover, the response to the Equal Marriage and Partnership consultation clearly stated that, regardless of the eventual number who benefit from reforms to marriage laws, 'all Islanders potentially benefit from living in a community which treats people with greater equality'. The legalisation of humanist marriage is concordant with these principles.

b. It would be popular

The consultation on equal marriage found that around half of respondents explicitly stated their support for the introduction of humanist marriage. The respondents saw recognition of humanist marriages as indicative of greater equality and acceptance of people's different philosophical beliefs.

In Scotland, the number of humanist marriages has increased from fewer than 100 to over 3000 per year since legal recognition. Polls in UK find widespread support for humanist marriage, with a YouGov poll finding four times as many people in England supported legal recognition of humanist marriage (53%) as opposed it (12%). An increasing number of English and Welsh couples have decided to travel to Scotland for a legally recognised ceremony.

In Jersey, it is already clear that non-religious ceremonies are more popular than religious ceremonies. In 2013 there were **341 civil wedding** ceremonies compared to

148 religious ones. Allowing humanist weddings would give more options to those couples who would like to have a meaningful, non-religious wedding ceremony.

c. There would be an economic benefit in the form of marriage tourism

The latest Jersey Tourism report notes that the UK remains the dominant source market for tourism to Jersey. It also points out that the UK tourism market is highly competitive and consumer choice constantly increasing.

The popularity of humanist marriage among couples England and Wales has seen many couples elect to travel to Scotland in order for their ceremony to be legally recognised. Humanist celebrants in Scotland report a large number of couples elect to hold their wedding outdoors in order to take advantage of the country's natural environments. Jersey's appeal as an outstanding natural environment with stunning heritage sites and excellent hotels and restaurants makes it ideally placed to attract non-residents who wish to hold their humanist ceremony on the island, and contribute to an increase in tourism from the UK.

d. It would be in keeping with Jersey's reputation as a progressive, innovative jurisdiction

Part of the justification given by the Jersey government for introducing same-sex marriage is to uphold Jersey's reputation as a progressive jurisdiction. Whilst introducing same-sex marriage is a welcome reform that maintains parity with reforms elsewhere in the UK, it does not go far enough. Scotland introduced humanist marriage a decade ago, while in Westminster the Law Commission has pledged to present its report into legalising humanist marriage by December. By withholding support for this reform, Jersey runs the risk of falling behind the rest of the UK.

e. Humanist weddings are excellent ceremonies of high quality

The British Humanist Association has been providing humanist ceremonies, principally funerals, for many decades. They set the highest store by the quality of the service they provide.

A rigorous selection process is carried out to choose those to be trained as celebrants. Training takes place in four stages and qualification is not automatic. Successful trainees are accredited as probationer celebrants subject to successful mentoring and observation.

Fully accredited celebrants are then monitored, insured and provided with support and continuing professional development. They are subject to a Code of Conduct and professional standards and competencies and regulated by a Quality Assurance Committee of elected celebrants and lay members.

All clients are asked anonymously to assess BHA ceremonies and 98% of respondents give the maximum rating of 5 out of 5 for satisfaction. The testimonies in Appendix 2 are only the tip of an iceberg.

e. It will increase the popularity of marriage

The States of Jersey's response to the consultation on Equal Marriage and Partnerships displays explicit support for marriage. After the legalisation of humanist marriage in Scotland, the number of humanist marriages has increased every year and in 2013 accounted for 10% of all Scottish marriages. Humanist marriages have increased despite a fall in the total number of marriages. If we are truly committed to supporting the institution of marriage, legalising humanist weddings is a logical implication of this commitment.

f. It will cause no harm

The introduction of legal humanist marriages will not affect anyone adversely; it will simply allow those couples who are increasingly choosing to have a humanist wedding to have this as their legal ceremony.

7. Addressing arguments made against the proposal

a. "There is no need to provide humanist marriages in Jersey, as couples can already marry via civil ceremonies."

Humanist marriages would give nonreligious people the same choice that religious people have of a meaningful ceremony composed by a person who shares their values and approach to life.

A humanist ceremony is therefore more than, and different to, a merely secular occasion. A humanist wedding is not just a register office wedding with added music and poetry readings: after all, the registrar, however sympathetic, may well not share humanist values and may even be personally opposed to Humanism.

b. "Humanism is not a belief system it is a philosophy, so while there is a need for a religious person to have certain religious aspects to their ceremony there are no such requirements that need to be met for humanism."

Humanism is a belief system that provides for its adherents answers to so-called 'ultimate questions' in much the same way as religions do for their followers, providing an approach to understanding the world and a framework for ethical judgement. It is not a negative response to religion but a positive belief system in its own right.

c. "In considering the extent to which law should be amended, it is important to recognise that there is a difference between providing all couples the means to marry and providing all couples the means to choose the manner in which they marry."

The law is not usually concerned with distinguishing between religious and non-religious beliefs. Indeed, the European Convention on Human Rights mandates protection for 'freedom of belief'. Humanists are followers of a non-religious belief that qualifies for the same legal treatment under human rights and equality and non-discrimination laws as any religion. To legalise humanist marriage is only to afford humanist couples the same right to a marriage ceremony reflecting their own life stance or belief system as are those who have religious faith. To not allow the increasing numbers of people who are adopting humanist beliefs and wish to be married in a ceremony that reflects this is a case of serious discrimination.

d. "Too few people will benefit from the change."

As well as the fact that there are indirect benefits for the larger population in engendering a more inclusive and tolerant outlook and in allowing couples from elsewhere to travel to Jersey for their marriage, the Council of Ministers' own response to the Equal Marriage and Partnership makes it abundantly clear that 'regardless of how many people benefit, however, it is legitimate to legislate in favour of minority groups, where it is in the interests of that group to do so and is not detrimental to the wider community.'

Additionally, all jurisdictions that have legally recognised humanist marriages have seen the number of couples requesting them increase to many times the number of requests prior to its recognition.

e. "Opening up marriage to non-religious beliefs would undermine the institution."

This is an offensive claim. Humanists place the highest value on marriage, as demonstrated by the testimonies of couples who have had humanist weddings, which are eloquent with the depth of meaning they find in the ceremonies. It is ludicrous to see humanist weddings as undermining marriage: indeed it is patent that humanist marriages are among the most carefully prepared and deeply felt of all. They represent the most solid sort of commitment that a couple could make to each other at the start of their life together – one based on their deepest shared beliefs.

There is potential for the Minister to include relevant safeguards in the proposed legislation (strongly endorsed by the BHA legal advisors as ECHR-compliant and justified on grounds of public policy) that will set high hurdles for any organisation wishing to be recognised by the Superintendent Registrar. There could be requirements for organisations to have been in existence for at least ten years, to be principally concerned with advancing or practising a non-religious belief, to have conducted ceremonies "rooted in" that belief already for at least five years, and to have in place written procedures for selecting, training and accrediting celebrants to conduct weddings of its own members. At present I believe the only organisations that would qualify would be humanist ones.

Open-air Weddings

Summary

The proposal would allow outdoor weddings to be conducted in Jersey, administered in such a way as the Minister believes to be practical. Similar jurisdictions such as Scotland and New Zealand already allow this very successfully as well as many other locations worldwide. Giving couples more freedom to marry in a location of their choosing will strengthen marriage in line with the Chief Minister's statements. There is potential for huge benefits to Jersey's economy in terms of marriage tourism.

History of marriage location legislation

In Jersey, a couple can be married in two types of location; they may have a religious wedding in a church/ other registered religious building, or a civil wedding at the

registry office/ other suitable registered premises approved by the Connétable of the Parish.

In 2001, the Tourism Committee lodged an amendment to the Marriage and Civil Status (Jersey) Law 2001 seeking to legalise open-air marriage. The amendment failed, and 2 main reasons were given during the debate; (1) That the location of a marriage needs to be clearly identifiable so that the public can access it to express objections if necessary, and (2) That marriage is a solemn occasion and if outdoor locations are used it could reduce the solemnity of marriage. I will address these points presently and demonstrate that other jurisdictions have successfully overcome these perceived barriers.

Position of other jurisdictions

Scotland and New Zealand are two places where a couple can get married at an outdoor location. Both places use a common-sense approach in their marriage legislation and procedures:

Scotland:

- Local councils must approve the location of a wedding in a similar way to other events.
- It must be a 'safe and dignified' place.
- When applying to register their marriage, a couple must identify a reasonably precise area at the location so that the registrar is satisfied they could be easily sought out on the day.

New Zealand:

- It is recommended an alternative location should be named on the marriage license in case of bad weather.
- If a different location needs to be used the registrar must be notified.
- For weddings on council-owned land, couples are advised to book a time and date with the local council and will be given a printed receipt.
- Council permission may be required for things such as marquees etc.

Both Scotland and New Zealand maintain a register of *approved celebrants,* rather than *approved premises* as we do in Jersey. This is a more common sense approach and places the responsibility on the celebrant to perform the required checks and procedures with regards to locations and otherwise. In New Zealand, celebrants must pass a rigorous interview process, are required to make sure the weddings they conduct are done so within all legal boundaries, and as an accountability measure must refresh their registration yearly.

The case for permitting the solemnisation of marriages in the open air

a. It would give couples more freedom and choice in how they marry and result in less people marrying off-island.

Deciding to get married is a major life decision and one which carries a lot of meaning for each couple. The popularity of the heritage sites such as Gorey Castle and

La Houge Bie for wedding ceremonies shows how important it is to many couples that they cement their union in a significant Jersey location. However, many locations that hold a special significance for islanders are off-limits for weddings because they are not covered by a roof. For example, many couples who enjoy an outdoor lifestyle together on our beautiful beaches are forced to travel to another country for their ideal beach wedding. Opening up our beaches and other locations would give Jersey couples the freedom and choice to celebrate at a far wider selection of locations, which have meaning for them.

b. It would strengthen the institution of marriage and possibly increase numbers of couples marrying.

This proposal could have a similar effect to the first in that it may increase numbers of marriage overall. This is in line with the stated desire to strengthen marriage following public consultation. If the process of marriage is more relevant and meaningful, including more flexibility of location, then more couples may choose marriage over cohabitation.

c. It would increase wedding tourism to the island.

At a time when we are trying to diversify our economy and find innovative ways to boost income, this proposition would definitely help. Tourism in Jersey is changing and developing and wedding tourism is one sector where there is capacity for growth. We have a real wealth of stunning locations that many couples would surely travel to our island to use for their wedding. This would benefit many business sectors including hotels, restaurants/caterers, photographers/videographers, bakers, florists, musicians and others. The average UK wedding spend just for venue, catering, photography, flowers, cake and entertainment is £12,412 (source: www.bridesmagazine.co.uk). This does not include money which would be spent on hotel accommodation and other spending in shops, restaurants etc. by guests who may choose to extend their stay in the island either side of the wedding date. So as well as reducing the numbers of Jersey couples who take their money elsewhere when they marry, we will surely gain income from those who perhaps live in the UK and see that their dream beach wedding is only a short plane ride away on Jersey.

Addressing arguments against the proposal

a. "It would inconvenience members of the public."

Regulations could allow for this through requirements to apply to the Connétable of the Parish where the outdoor venue is located (in a similar way that Constables must currently approve the 'approved premises' within their Parish). For private land, the usual laws will apply in terms of noise levels etc. For public land, the decisions will remain entirely in the hands of the States of Jersey/ Connétables as to what exact locations and times they will permit. This has not been a problem in Scotland – common sense prevails.

b. "Weddings must be open to the public and in an identifiable building/room."

Currently any marriage ceremony (either religious or civil) must be openly accessible to the public. This is to enable individuals to attend and state their objections if needs be (for example if one person is already married or to stop a forced marriage). This

would only be an issue for weddings on private land. In Scotland, this is overcome by individuals being able to report any concerns they have to the registrar in advance of the wedding, and the registrar would carry out the necessary checks on the identity of the couple and investigate the claim. If the claim is valid then the wedding will not be allowed. If the wedding has already taken place, it is nullified. Again, common sense prevails and straightforward procedures overcome any issues. It is possible, of course, that the Minister will decide to only allow for open-air weddings on public/accessible land, and this proposition does give scope to do that. In Scotland the location must be accurately described on the marriage application so as to be identifiable (e.g. '10 metres in front of Hotel X', or 'the West side of the beach level with Café Y'.) Incidentally, this is not likely to be an issue in Jersey as in the last 6 years there have been absolutely no valid objections made against any marriages.

c. "Marriage is a solemn occasion and should be performed inside a building."

This is a very subjective statement. What to one couple is solemn and sacred may be perceived as ridiculous by another. The couple who is part of a faith community, having been baptised and brought up in the faith, attending services regularly with family and friends – may indeed place great meaning on being married in their Church building. But what of couples who spend their weekends walking Jersey's cliff paths, reading a newspaper in one of our public parks, exploring the woods with their children, waking beloved pet dogs on the sand dunes or enjoying our coastal waters in a kayak? Humans are by nature, diverse and we find meaning in a wide range of things. An outdoor wedding can be just as solemn and special as a Church or hotel wedding and many couples may find an outdoor location to be the *most* significant and meaningful place for their ceremony. Once again, the 'common sense' Scottish requirements that outside wedding locations be 'safe and dignified' could be quite successfully applied in Jersey.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Pavan Dhaliwal and Andrew Copson from the British Humanist Association for all their advice and support and the Superintendent Registrar for her time in answering questions and providing facts and figures.

Financial and manpower implications

It is difficult to estimate the precise implications but the net cost is likely to be neutral at the very least and most likely beneficial to the States of Jersey and certainly to Jersey's economy as a whole. Fees could be levied on celebrants and locations at levels which the Minister deems appropriate. If anything there may be a decrease in manpower requirements over time as belief celebrants become accredited.

APPENDIX 1

Distinctive elements of a humanist marriage

Humanism is an ethical non-religious life stance. It counts fully as a religion or belief under the Human Rights Act and international human rights treaties.

Broadly speaking, a humanist is someone who:

- Makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals.
- Trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic).
- Believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Humanist marriages are distinct in the following ways:

1. The marriage is conducted by a celebrant who shares the beliefs and values of the couple.

2. The marriage is conducted by a celebrant who is part of the humanist community and spends time with the couple prior to the marriage itself, to know them better.

3. The marriage ceremony in general reflects specific humanist convictions e.g. that there is no supernatural side to this reality and that human beings in the here and now are the source of value and meaning – these are specific philosophical/(non)religious/belief elements.

4. Beyond the general reflection of humanist values that underlay each ceremony, the order of service is created in line with the specific beliefs and values of the couple. (This itself reflects a humanist conviction about the creation of meaning in human lives).

5. The marriage is conducted in a place that is of particular meaning or significance to the couple.

A humanist marriage is thus distinguishable from a civil marriage in that:

1. A civil marriage is conducted by a registrar who – quite properly – may be a follower of any religion or belief or indifferent to all religions or beliefs.

2. Their only contact with the couple may be the act of marrying them itself.

3. A civil marriage ceremony may be varied with poetry or music in some local authorities but runs to a prescribed form designed to be generic and not distinctive of any worldview.

4. A civil marriage may occur only in register offices and approved premises (or at home in case of serious illness).

A humanist marriage is distinguishable from a religious marriage in that humanism is a non-religious worldview not a religious one, but otherwise there are analogous features:

1. A religious marriage is conducted by one who shares the most fundamental beliefs and values of the couple.

2. A religious marriage is often conducted by one who already knows the couple but where it isn't, time is usually taken in advance to know them.

3. A religious marriage consists of a ceremony reflecting an underlying worldview.

4. A religious marriage is conducted in a place that is of particular meaning and significance to the couple (almost always a place of worship, though not always.)

In relation to '4', there is a weaker analogy since religious marriages follow a doctrinal formula rather than being individually created. However, even here there is an analogy in that both the humanist and religious formulations reflect fundamental philosophical approaches, albeit contrasting ones.

It was the analogies between a religious marriage and a humanist marriage that allowed the Registrar General in Scotland to make an ECHR compatible reading of the law there and authorise humanist celebrants to conduct legal marriages by construing 'religion' as 'religion or belief'.

APPENDIX 2

Testimonies from couples who have had humanist weddings

Philippa and Neil

"In the same way that a church marriage for a Christian couple is important, we wanted to get married in a setting that reflected our beliefs and things that are important to us. Having a humanist wedding allowed us to do this.

We were legally married by a registrar on the day before our humanist wedding ceremony. While the ceremony conducted by our humanist celebrant was moving, personal and memorable, the registrar ceremony felt clinical and rather too much like a 'one size fits all' option. That is why we feel that our wedding day was the day of our humanist ceremony, the day we got married and the anniversary we will celebrate hopefully for many years to come.

The register office procedure was something we had to do, not something we wanted to do. It would have been wonderful not to have to do this simply to satisfy the legal requirement as it meant nothing of significance to us and was an additional expense and inconvenience.

We remain in contact with our humanist celebrant and feel like he was an important part of our wedding day and will continue to be interested in our life as a married couple. How many people can say that about their registrar?"

Ali and Helen

"From the outset we found it difficult to understand how legally a humanist marriage can be any different to a church wedding or indeed one carried out by the state, especially when in Scotland it would be legal. We wanted to be married in a way that reflected our beliefs just like any person with a strong Christian background would. However with the current system we had to go through a 'legal' marriage to meet the archaic demands of the English marriage system. Humanists should not be marginalised, and neither should those of any other religious faith or background."

Hazel and Andy

"We wanted a personal non-religious ceremony which all of our friends and family could attend.

Having a humanist ceremony chimed with our beliefs and perspectives on life and most importantly gave us the freedom to design the ceremony we wanted. If our ceremony had been in Scotland, it would have been legal and our day would have been less complicated and less time pressured with no need to visit the register office in the morning, as we had to do. . . [A] family member commented that we weren't really getting 'married' in the humanist ceremony, but at the register office in the morning, which was frustrating for us as it was the humanist ceremony that was the most important".

Jonathan

"We were married in the eyes of the law on Wednesday 3rd August 2011 . . . and we were truly wed on Saturday 6th August. The humanist ceremony provided by Ros was perfect; the choir sang the songs we'd chosen, the main ceremony was indoors with our own words, readings and vows and then we moved outdoors for a hand-fasting ceremony as suggested by [the celebrant], which satisfied Eve's desire for an outdoor wedding. We had many devout Christians amongst our guests, several of whom made a point of telling us how much they had enjoyed the ceremony, particularly its openness, sincerity and the inclusion of a pause for personal reflection or prayer – I had wondered if some of them might question the validity or credibility of our ceremony, but the feedback was quite the opposite.

I think the saddest thing for me is that I have already had to give the date of our marriage on a couple of forms and each time I am reminded that the official records don't reflect our true wedding day; future genealogists will have no clue that we had a Humanist ceremony, nor that we actually married days after the legal record was made."

Lisa and Max

"We did not meet the registrar until the day of the wedding . . .; this service alone would not have made our day special enough for us. With respect to the Humanist celebration, we had met our celebrant twice before the wedding and had emailed back and forth many times to decide exactly what we wanted from the ceremony. We really felt that our celebrant had got to know us by the end of the preparation and this was really important for us and made the service feel like our service rather than a generic wedding service. I guess that a similar bond may form between priest and a couple wishing to be married in a religious ceremony; as we are non-religious, this was not an option for us.

We feel very strongly that every couple, religious or not, should be able to personalise their wedding to be most suitable for them – undoubtedly, this can only go on to strengthen a marriage.

For a non-religious couple to achieve this we feel a Humanist ceremony is really the only option and, as such, this form of marriage should be legally recognised."

Nadine and Eoghan

"For us, that day is our wedding anniversary and is indeed the date inscribed on our wedding rings.

But actually it's not our wedding anniversary; at least not in the eyes of the state. To be legally married we were required to visit a registry office where we did not have anything like as much freedom to choose words and music that would be special for us. It would also have been impossible to make our vows in front of all of our guests as registry offices generally can't accept that many people. We weren't prepared to take the … path that many other non-religious people take when marrying in a church, with everyone turning a polite blind eye to the nonbelieving elephant in the living room. Instead we had the pleasure of getting to know a celebrant who, in the course of preparing the wedding ceremony, was interested in learning more about us: our

history, our values and our hopes for the future. We had a moving and memorable wedding – we just wish it could have been legal."

Adam

"I got married twice in a week.

My first marriage was conducted by someone who had interviewed my wife and me twice, at length, before the wedding; who spent hours (and several emails) exploring the key elements of the spiritual connection we wished to celebrate during the ceremony; and who offered her own guidance when we requested it, based on her knowledge of us as individuals and as a couple.

My second wedding – to the same woman, I should hasten to add – happened 2 days later. It was conducted by an official who had met us for the first time minutes before, and was conducted with the polite efficiency of a market research interview.

My first wedding was conducted by a Humanist Celebrant; my second by a registrar. Needless to say, when I think of my wedding, and the vows I committed to, the second set I gave that week rarely cross my mind."

Jodie and Matt

"Our choice was based on us making a commitment to each other in front of our friends and family not in front of any deity or god so we wanted to be married in a place that reflected who we are.

This didn't include a church or registry office where our choice was religion or a cold unromantic setting.

Our wedding was a fantastic day, everyone who came still comments on how unique and beautiful it was. I'm so glad our celebrant . . . was able to help us create a day that truly represented who we are and what we wanted. My only regret is that we had to sign our legal paper work prior to the wedding so on paper my wedding day is not the same as the day I got married. I feel that it took away from the power and significance of the day . . . [it was] quite a sad part of what should be one of the happiest days of your life.

I can't speak highly enough of the humanist ways and beliefs and how respectful the whole process was."