

You may already be aware from the media or via social media over the weekend of 10/11 August 2019 that the way in which marriages are registered is set to change following the passing into law of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019 which, as well as providing for opposite-sex couples to be able to enter into civil partnerships, will allow for mother's names to be included in Marriage Registers as well as/in place of father's names. It also makes provision for significant changes in the way that marriages are registered.

Representatives of the Faculty Office and the Legal Offices of the Church of England and Church in Wales have been in discussion with the General Register Office (GRO) about the proposed changes which they are under pressure from Government Ministers to bring into effect as soon as possible – and despite their collective representations, although no firm date has yet been announced, it seems likely that changes will be brought in before the end of the year. A number of issues remain to be resolved including the provision of a workable secure system to produce the new documentation and time to train the 20,000+ clergy who are able to conduct weddings in both Churches.

In essence the proposals will replace Marriage Registers and Marriage Certificates (issued at the time of the wedding) with a Marriage Document which will be prepared by the officiating priest before the wedding. At the ceremony, the Marriage Document will be signed by the couple, their witnesses and the officiating priest (in much the same way as the Registers are currently). The significant difference is that the couple will then need to ensure that the Marriage Document is deposited at the local Register Office within 7 days of the date of the wedding and the local Superintendent Registrar will then record the details and issue the couple with a Marriage Certificate (for which there will be a fee). The couple can ask someone to lodge the Marriage Document on their behalf (as in many cases they will, of course, be on honeymoon!) but it is their responsibility, NOT the officiating minister's responsibility, to ensure that it is done.

As an interim measure, the Marriage Document will be available in a number of formats, including a manual format and a 'type and print' facility. The Regulations envisage that eventually there will be a secure online portal to which clergy will require access as there is provision for couples to be reminded by email from the General Register Office if they have not lodged the Document within the required period.

For marriages that currently take place by Superintendent Registrar's Certificates, the SRC will be replaced by a "Marriage Schedule" which will be produced by the Register Office taking Notice of the Marriage and that Schedule will then be signed by all the parties including the officiating priest once the marriage has taken place and, again, will have to be lodged with the Register Office within the same period.

Immediately following implementation, the existing marriage register books held in churches will need to be closed. The incumbent, or in a vacancy the Area/Rural Dean, will be responsible for closing the registers by striking through any unused entry spaces. One copy of the register will then need to be returned to the local Superintendent Registrar together with any unused marriage certificate stock. The other copy of the register is to be retained in the church until such time as it is to be deposited in the Diocesan Record Office.

There is a proposal that, in due course there will be a Register Book for marriages solemnized in Anglican churches in the same way as for baptisms, confirmations and burials. However that will be an internal matter for the CofE and nothing to do with the GRO and it will not be the legal record of marriages, nor will be certificates issued from it. The Legal Office will advise further on this in due course.

Before the new system goes live, some training will be provided by the GRO. However, it is unlikely that the GRO will have the resources to provide face-to-face training for all clergy and there will need to be a degree of co-operation with the dioceses. The GRO will however provide “awareness” (probably online and by mail-out) and a dedicated helpline available Monday – Saturday as well as a 24 hour emergency line. It is also intended to provide a printed aide-memoire to be placed in the vestry and which will include the emergency numbers and reminder of the new system. As regard training on the new system, it has been agreed that the Diocesan Registrars will be the most appropriate point of contact for the GRO to co-ordinate this and we will be in touch through the normal channels once the timetable is clearer.

These changes are significant, both for clergy and the couples, and it is essential that all clergy who conduct marriages are aware of them to ensure that the law is complied with and that couples’ marriages are validly conducted and properly registered. As further details become available we will post details on this website.

Diocesan Registry
14 August 2019