|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reference:** | Qualitative Research for Rajnaara Akhta's Nuffield Grant |
| **File name:** | FR-384-F |
| **Duration:** | 1 hour 36 mins |
| **Participants(s): (Initials) Name**  | 161163168162167165166164 |  |
| **Researcher(s): (Initials) Name**  | I | Interviewer |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **I** | … start by telling me about the last wedding ceremony that you conducted in England and Wales. Who would like to kick off with that? |
| **161** | I’m happy to kick off. I’m 161 and my dinner has just arrived. So, apologies in advance if I’m munching away whilst we are on. So, I am an Asian female celebrant and toast master. But fortunately, the last wedding that I did was not doing both roles. I have found myself caught out, having to feel like I’m doing both sometimes where things weren’t planned as well. But my last wedding, as a celebrant, was a multi-faith wedding from the bride’s side. She was Punjabi, so Asian descent. And the groom was Italian. So, we had a mixed … a multi-faith wedding, which had some Asian elements as well as some Italian elements. Family from both sides. We had live music and it actually was really lovely because we were able to bring together two cultures, two experiences. Italians have an immense, humungous, enormous feeling of love in everything they do and bringing that in with the subtle nuances of the Asian culture, of … love is there, but you don’t express it openly. So, that was quite an interesting one. But it went very well and I’m really excited and can’t wait to start getting back out there, fingers crossed, sooner rather than later.  |
| **163** | Hi. I’m 163. I was a registrar for ten years, but I’ve been a celebrant for the last three. My … I did a wedding recently, just before the current Lockdown with minimum guests, 15. We had been planning the wedding, obviously, for a long time, for a lot more people. But the bride decided to go ahead. It was at a registered premises, which is not unusual for me to work at registered premises, even though I’m not a registrar anymore. But it was slightly different because they had the registrars there on the same day, rather than going to register the marriage prior to the wedding day. I probably got away with a lot more than I would do in another area because it was my original registration area, so I worked with registrars that I already knew. So, we started the … I started the wedding ceremony in the wedding room, and we got past the ring exchange and then they went out to another room to do the legal bits and pieces with the registrars and then they came back. I announced them back in and they came in and we did a handfasting to complete. This was quite difficult as I wasn’t allowed to get too close to them, so I guided the bride’s mum through the handfasting process. So, I spoke, and she did the actual handfasting with the ribbons and so on. So, that was my last wedding. It was unusual to have the registrars there at the same time. But it worked on this occasion. It worked very well. |
| **I** | Thank you. Yeah, 168? |
| **168** | Mine is a little bit unusual. I was living in [country] until last March … March of last year. And I retrained to do the celebrant’s stuff here. I couldn’t believe that I couldn’t do the legal bit and found that really difficult [*164 nods].* But that’s … but I have done a wedding since I’ve been here. It has been my son’s and it was in his back garden and it was the day before it went from 30 down to the rule of 6. And it was a beautiful, beautiful sunny day. It was an absolutely amazing time and all COVID restrictions were taken into account. And the day after I went with them to the registrar and attended the registrar service … ceremony too. So, it was absolutely wonderful. But I’m more used to doing the whole thing … doing the legal bit too. And the weddings that I have booked, of course, have all been postponed. So, hopefully I will be doing those next year. And that’s the story of my last wedding. |
| **I** | Thank you. 162? |
| **162** | Just by way of background, I was Superintendent Registrar for 19 years and then made redundant and have been doing this since 2015 as an independent celebrant. My last ceremony … really small because it was during that period where we could do weddings but only small ones. This was always going to be a small wedding, but it was a same sex female couple at a little chapel in [town], overlooking the bay. Absolutely beautiful. Obviously, it’s a chapel, it’s not licensed for weddings and it’s not licensed by the churches either for weddings, although they do have occasional services there during the summer. It was absolutely gorgeous. I met with the couple via Zoom several times before we actually did the ceremony. So, we built up a real rapport. One of the ladies was from the Caribbean, had some Caribbean descent there so she wanted some extra pizzazz during the ceremony, which was lovely. We had some music, which was really special to her. They wanted a ring blessing, they wanted a handfasting, which again with these COVID secure days was quite interesting to do, but we managed to do it. I had wipes and all the rest of it; hand sanitiser and what have you. And the bride’s best friend … one of the bride’s best friends, came up and did the handfasting as she was in their bubble. So, we sort of talked through that. But it was really, really special and I think the thank you that I got afterwards was … the fact that it didn’t matter that it was during COVID. It was the fact that we had gained that rapport beforehand that’s, I think, one of the huge differences that I have now, as an independent celebrant, from when I was a Superintendent Registrar in that I didn’t always know my couples. You would just turn up on the day with the choices that they had made and that would be, sometimes, the first time that you had met them, when I was a registrar. Now, we usually meet them in person over a cup of tea, several times or by Zoom. Certainly, lots of phone calls. So, it’s a far more personal and involved process with them, which is, I think, far more rewarding.  |
| **I** | Thank you. 167? |
| **167** | Hi everyone. Yes, so my last one was also during COVID. It was just at the end of September before the 30 went down. It was a couple who tried twice before to have a legal marriage and that had gone by the by. They were one of the ones who didn’t go to Xanthe. So, they were pretty desperate by that time. So, they rejigged literally within about … it was less than 14 days, they decided to go ahead with myself as a celebrant. They hadn’t actually realised about celebrants. So, it was an education for them. We met the first weekend, basically once we had had a chat and we got to know each other very quickly. It was very personal. I was able to go and visit them in the garden at their house and chatted with them. We kept in contact over the phone and everything. Got to know the family, the dog, the little boy and so on and so forth. And then on the Tuesday, went over to the venue. I was quite stringent, actually, over the weekend. Before I had even met the couple, I did get in contact with the hotel and did push for all of the information that they had got on risk assessments and how … exactly what they were doing with their procedures *[168 nods]*. Put on my old Local Authority hat and basically got their risk assessment and then took it with me on the Tuesday when we had the dress rehearsal and went through it with them, with the hotel more than with the couple. But had discussed it with the couple. And it went extremely well on the Saturday. A lovely, lovely couple and I’m keeping in contact with them. So, that was … but it was my first one since February. So, I was … it was very exciting for me as well. Thank you. |
| **I** | 165? |
| **165** | I’ve been sitting here, trying desperately hard to remember my last ceremony. I don’t know about you ladies. This year I’ve done two renewal of vows ceremonies, no wedding ceremonies. I’m based in Wales and it’s been quite challenging. So, if I think about the last renewal of vows I did, then that was just across the border, so right on the border of England and Wales. So, we had all the time … English couple coming down, just wanted a renewal of vows for the two of them and their two children, myself and the photographer. So, we managed to stay within the rule of 6. We were outdoors. So, we were kind of … but all the time on the run-up to it, it was continually trying to work out whether I could leave Wales, whether she could come down from where she was living. Who could do what and who could do where and the rules were continually changing, so this was on the 30th October. So … and the rules tightened up again in England just a couple of days after that. We did a handfasting, so similar to what some of the other ladies have said. So, one of the daughters … the two daughters did the handfasting of their parents and then they had … they wore bound bracelets echoing the colours of the ribbons. So, they all had bracelets which they used as well. Yeah, a very interesting experience. Beautiful … oh, such a relief to do a ceremony. Such a relief to do a wedding-style ceremony, as opposed to a funeral, after all these months. And really personal. But very difficult to try and find a way … to try and keep abreast of everything that was going on. To try and find a way to make sure that they were safe, and I was safe, and everybody was staying within the restrictions and what we could do. |
| **I** | Thank you. 166? |
| **166** | My last actual wedding was … sorry, 166. I’m based in [county]. I was a registrar for [county] for 15 years and I am now going into my sixth year as a celebrant. My last wedding was actually on 29th February and the couple had booked me three years to the day, to make sure that they could do the 29th February and she had made the proposal, being the Leap Year. And so, everything was fine. Full numbers and absolutely everything. So, had they had to wait, it would have been, obviously, another four years before they would be going ahead. So, a pretty long time. It’s enough asking our couples to wait a year/18 months, but four years is a long while. But my last actual ceremony was a renewal of vows, like the one above. And the couple, on their first honeymoon, they went to Mexico and they saw a ceremony over their balcony taking place on a beach. And they made a vow to each other then, that on their wedding anniversary they would go out to a beach, with their children. And that’s what they had planned, and they were flying out to Turkey to do that. And then the restrictions came so that … you know, that when they came back, they would have to isolate, and they were both two self-employed people so that wasn’t an option. And they were really pulling their hair out and one of the family said, “why don’t you go to this venue” and recommended a venue where I’m a recommended supplier. And I had five days in which to turn it around. I went to the home and did social distance and everything with the couple and five days later we were there and held the ceremony with 15 people. And the two young children actually … they had brand-new rings. The two children actually did the exchange of rings with the couple, which was beautiful. We retold their love story … and very intimate family members. And they said how difficult it was to choose 15 people out of all of them … they had planned 70 people. Even to go over to Turkey with them, which was quite a lot of people to go over. And they actually did … I’ve just launched a brand-new product called Harmony Glass and they actually did the Harmony Glass experience where their two young children came forward and poured their chosen coloured glass crystals, so they were all able to bond with that. And they actually said afterwards that they would never, ever have been able to replicate that in Turkey and it was fate that brought us all together. And they just had a wonderful experience. And so, it’s lovely that I’ve had that October time, right from February. It’s a long, long while not to have a ceremony, isn’t it? Yeah. |
| **164** | Yes. Hi. I’m 164, not [*name of husband of 164*] and my last wedding was November last year. I’ve not done a single wedding this year. So, my next one is next April. So, I feel like I’m a bit of a new girl and yet I’ve been doing this for 6½ years. Every single one of my weddings postponed *[163 nods].* But the wedding … it was 30th November. It was in a licensed venue, a castle in [county], where I am. And it was my best friend’s wedding. So, it was really special. It was nice because the venue recommended me as the recommended supplier and she just played along with it and didn’t even tell them that we were best friends, and I was already booked. But their ceremony … because it was obviously prior to any of this year’s problems we’ve had … was 120 guests. So, it was all crammed into a lovely little ceremony room. Very traditional. My ceremonies tend to be mostly traditional with little tweaks. They had a unity candle ceremony. So, we had lots of candles around the whole of the castle and the Christmas Tree was up. And they then had their unity candle ceremony because both of them had been married before. So, they had the two children from the groom’s side and the two children … well, they were adults, from the bride’s side. And then they had a ballet dance performance from the two flower girls, who were her granddaughters, 4 and 6, up and down the aisle. They put on a little ballet show. And they had all written poems, and it was just really magical. And it’s probably the first wedding in 6½ years that my husband has attended, that wasn’t our own. He hates weddings *[163 and 168 smile]*. But my family were guests. So, it was really nice for them to actually see what I do. A bit of a surprise for them. So … but yeah, I’m missing weddings. Really missing them. *Throughout the first question and the participants’ answers, all are listening intently and nodding. 163 spends time looking at a screen [she later indicates that she is having internet issues]. 161 eats dinner and posts a message on chat “Apologies as having dinner at the same time.”* |
| **I** | I understand that this has been a very difficult year for people involved in weddings but thank you all for sharing those stories with us. So, just working through the rest of the questions - I won’t necessarily call on all of you in turn. Feel free to just chip in as you see fit. So, some of you obviously know the people you were marrying quite well. Others mentioned that you communicated with them. So, I just wanted to ask the others, is it usual to meet or communicate with the couple before the wedding ceremony? |
| **165** | Definitely *[Lots of nodding from participants]*. Just because there are so many ex-registrars … I’m an ex-registrar as well and it’s one of the major differences, that you form a relationship with your couple, and you get to know them in detail. In however much detail they want to tell you. Sometimes more than you need. Those relationships are really important, so it feels like you’re a member of the family that’s actually taking the ceremony. Like you know them really well. Because everything is, I’m presuming, the same for all the other ladies. Everything is about that couple. So, it’s not cut and paste. It’s not creating … just saying the same words that have been used over and over again. Everything is written for that couple.*[Both 161 and 163 physically raise hand to indicate they would like to speak]* |
| **I** | 163, I see you’ve raised your hand on that first, I think? |
| **163** | Yeah, I think it’s … I agree with everything that 165 just said but I think it’s important for everybody … *[163’s screen keeps freezing briefly but audio continues]* for lots of different reasons. I’ve had two examples that I’m thinking of that it was even more important that they got to know me *[163 may have prepared answers as she appears to be looking down and reading and has two examples ready]*. One was a Brazilian lady that spoke very little English and I met her and her fiancé at a wedding event. And she could understand me. She said she could not understand an awful lot of English spoken word, but she could understand me. So, the more … I got to see them a couple of times. So, the more she saw me, the more she got used to my voice and was able to really understand the whole wedding ceremony. And another example I was thinking of was a lady who was extraordinarily anxious, and they had actually booked the registrars at a registered premises. And she heard about me and asked me to go and talk to her. And I met with her probably … I did the usual meetings, but I met with her about three times for coffee … fortunately she lived locally to me … just because she was so anxious about the wedding that it was really important to her to know the person that was going to be standing at the end of the aisle when she got there. And was going to be doing this for them. So, it is great, and it is vitally important that we get to know them. But there are often other underlying factors as to why that’s important for the couple as well. |
| **I** | Thank you. I think … everyone has put their hands up! 161, then 162, I think in order. |
| **161** | So, I was just going to say I think it’s really important that we do meet the couples. I’m just going to focus it from my background now. What I found is, since becoming a celebrant, is that it was just never heard of in the Asian cultures, whenever I said I’m a celebrant they would look at me as though I was an alien. Because culturally, society, you were always … you were following what your grandparents, or your parents did. So, you either went to a Gurdwara or you had an Imam, or you had a Hindu priest or a Sri Lankan priest. And so, it was very religious focused. Whereas along came 161 saying, “well, actually, I can help you have a combination of both”. So, when I meet with the couple, I usually find I’m meeting the couple and the parents and the extended family and I almost have to go through this scenario of letting them know that what we’re doing is nothing … it’s not wrong, it’s not blasphemous. You’re not going to be told off by anyone. That we can actually have a combination. We can have it quite modern in the sense that the couple who might be a younger generation, who are not so religious, but we can still include some of the religious parts but in a … the translation would be more modern. So, for example, when you walk around the fire four times, the religious scriptures and the translation of the religious scriptures, we could actually use the walking around the fire four times for their vows. We could walk around four times and they could say their personal vows to each other. So, its kind of blending that. And I find that it’s usually the couple that are fine straight away, but I have to do a bit more meeting of the families to get them to understand, really, that it’s okay. And I think because they have got used to this idea of the religious and the registry that the concept of a celebrant … but saying that I’m (touch wood) very lucky and have had bookings and have loads as well for next year and the year after, which I’m absolutely blessed and honoured to have. But it’s not always an easy conversation and if I didn’t have the chance to meet them, I think it would be much harder for them to realise that I’m amazing and lovely and awesome and that, as a celebrant, we can give them everything they want! Thank you. |
| **162** | So, I think I would echo what both 161 and 163 have said in that I think the meeting is actually the building up of the trust that the couple have with you. Especially if they have an involved ceremony where they do want inter-faith, so whether it’s Hindu and Christian and Christian, Catholic and Methodist or they want some elements from each. And they need to trust you to deliver that *[167 nods]*. And I sort of … we’re making a new tradition of marriage for that couple in the guise of how they want, and how they see, their marriage and the important parts of their marriage ceremony to go. And if you don’t have that … if they don’t have that trust in you, then it would all fall apart, and it would become a bit of a mockery. So, I would like to think that yes, we have fun, and we have joyful moments, but equally we have those solemn moments when they’re saying their vows to each other. And I think that’s really important that we can mirror what it is what they want from that. But that trust and respect, I think, is built up by those meetings, that contact and being really able to get to the kernel of what it is that’s important for the couple about the ceremony, not what’s going to be imposed on them. |
| **I** | And 166, I think you wanted to come in? |
| **166** | Yeah, on average, bookings that come in for myself are about two years ahead and so therefore your relationship is starting at a very early stage and you’re building on that relationship all the way through. And so, all of my couples this year, on average, having already worked for two years with me *[167 & 163 nodding. 161 stands up quickly from her seat and stretches]*, you’re now talking about they’re going onto a third year and through all the trauma that the couples have been, they’ve actually … I’ve actually been a main contact for them to talk things through and make sure that they’re able to move to dates. And their stress and they just feel that you’ve built that trust, like [name] said, with them. And that you’re kind of seen as a knowledgeable expert in the field. So, they feel comforted by what you try and help them, and it’s been a very rocky road for all of us in trying to do that with our couples. I mean I’ve moved 20 couples from this year to next year. That’s a lot of couples that you’re balancing. And I … because of Zoom, I’ve made it a purpose to make sure that I’m still in touch with the couples. Because I’ve had some couples that have changed twice this year and then they’re going over to ’22 even from now. That’s a lot of relationship building that you have. Now, as a registrar background, you didn’t have any of that. It’s a total new concept you can actually build up with your couples. And every couple is unique and they’re choosing you to be that person they can relate to because of their uniqueness. You know, celebrants are equally unique in their way that they … people choose them for their personalities and the people that they are *[167 nods and raises hand to indicate she wants to add something]*. So … and you get a chance to build that relationship up.  |
| **I** | Yeah. 168, then 167. |
| **168** | Can I just say, it’s all about the couple and what you said … echoes that. That a registry ceremony … it’s all very nice but there are limitations on what they are able to do. And I think that, as a celebrant, you can focus on that couple and quite often, nowadays, it’s on their family and their children. They have children from different, maybe blended, families and they want to make them a big part of the ceremony. It’s very, very important to them. And I don’t think we can get past that. But it is all about them and has to be all about them. |
| **167** | Yes, what I was going to say was, because of this trust they have in you, they made a decision to have a celebrant and I’ve had, on a number of occasions, the woman or the man saying to me, “we’ve never done this before” *[168 laughs]*. And sometimes it makes me laugh to myself quietly, but they’ll say, “we’ve never done this before. We don’t know what to do. Can you take us through it?” So, they put their trust in you to take … to work them, to collaborate with them, to create. But, at the same time, they want you to help them to actually give them ideas. Not to tell them what to do or how to organise the day but sometimes I do get … they ask me things about that as well and say, “what’s the best time to have it? What … if we’re having this (and so on and so forth)”. So, that’s all part of it. So, that can be quite a big thing because you’re taking that on and saying to them, “this is what I think and then you’ve got to decide how you’re going to do it”. And the other thing I was going to say was, like 166 said, is keeping in contact with couples. Nearly all of mine are moved to next year, but one’s moved to ’22 and what I did was … right back in the first Lockdown, maybe not then but just after, I made a decision when they started one after the other, to start postponing … I got in contact with one of the biscuit makers that I know in my local network, and together we came up with a set of biscuits to give them as a present from me to say, “basically this is for you on the day that you would have had the ceremony. And this is a present from me. I’m thinking about you.” *[166 & 168 nod]* I don’t want to overdo it. There’s no need to go on the sad side. Let’s keep it positive. Love goes on. And we did that. We did one after the other as they carried on, like dominoes. But what also happened was a couple of them actually got married legally on that day and a couple of them didn’t tell me. They thought they had told me, and the biscuits turned up. So … but you know. And of course, as the celebrant, I hope that they will carry on and hold that date next year and have their big wedding ceremony then. So, that’s something that obviously as celebrants, we’re a little bit nervous about as people move further and further on. So, I thought I would just mention that. Thank you. |
| **I** | Thank you. I think that’s a nice segue to the next question. And 163 has already touched on this in terms of having an integrated ceremony, where there’s the registrars performing the legal part. But are the ceremonies that you perform normally part of a process towards a legally binding marriage? So, are these couples who have got married before, or are planning to go onto marry afterwards? Or are they … 162, I think was quickest off the mark there! |
| **162** | Yeah, I mean the majority of our couples, we advise them to do a statutory ceremony or as close to a statutory ceremony as they can find, that they can get, before the celebration. Basically, so you can publicly announce them as husband and wife at the end. So, the majority of our couples will marry beforehand and they will ask us for advice about that, which, as ex-registrars, we are happy to be kept up to date with all the legal bits and what have you. So, we would advise them on that. Some of our couples will marry afterwards. That’s fine. That’s their choice, when they can fit it in. And we do have the occasional couples who just want a commitment ceremony and who aren’t legally going to get married. And that’s fine. But we do advise them, at that point, that we will use slightly different language. So, we wouldn’t use “husband and wife” after that because we remember, as registrars, the sham marriages and the kerfuffles that used to be around there. But the majority of our couples, it’s a process. They will do the legal bit and then they will have their party. And echoing what 167 was saying, that some of our couples have already got married this year but are planning the big celebration this year. So, hopefully they will stay on board and go that way. |
| **I** | Thank you. I think 164 was next then? |
| **164** | Yes, thank you. I was really going to say what 162 has just said *[162 smiles]* in that of all the weddings that I’ve done, I think probably no more than two didn’t go ahead with the legal registration of marriage. I’ve had a few … very few actually, where they’ve done it afterwards. The majority do it beforehand. I’ve had one couple where they had a huge wedding coming up and the divorce papers hadn’t come through. So, obviously we’re very careful with the wording and you know … but the ceremony went ahead. They had spent an awful lot of money and they weren’t prepared to cancel it. But I’ve only had one couple that wanted a commitment ceremony as opposed to something that would lead or had already been a legal marriage. I had … one of my couples for this year, they were legally wed last year, and they were going to have their wedding ceremony on the anniversary of their day and that’s when they were going to announce it to all their family and friends, and they’ve got to wait another year now. So, it’s still going to be on the same day. I think they’ve let a few people know. They couldn’t keep it a secret any longer. But most of them … I’ve had some even when they’ve got married from university, where the end of their degree has come and maybe they’re from another country or one of the parties was from another country. So, they’ve done the legal marriage registration, but they’ve not told anybody for three or four years while they’ve saved up for a big wedding ceremony. So, yeah, the majority of people have a legal marriage at some point. |
| **I** | Yeah, 161 then 167. |
| **161** | Just to add on to what everyone has already said. What I found quite interesting and it’s no registrars or ex registrars who are on this call today was, where some of my couples wanted to have the registry marriage and then have the celebrant wedding on the same day, I don’t know if there’s a legal reason why … I found that the registrars said no and therefore my couples were almost forced to have it either before or afterwards. Whereas they had a lovely venue, and it was a licensed venue, but they just didn’t seem to like the idea … maybe they didn’t like me! But they didn’t like the idea of having it together, on the same day. So, I found it lovely that somebody mentioned earlier that they had both, where they got to the ring ceremony and then they went off. I thought that was lovely because I’m sure that we could all make it work. But I actually found that quite difficult with a few and then just had to come to terms with that’s what it was. And so, they had to make a choice to have it either before or after.  |
| **I** | Thank you. 167? |
| **167** | Which story to tell now? Yes, which one was it that I was going to say? Yeah, I’ve had the odd couple who didn’t get married until a long time after but that was a handfasting. A proper handfasting, which lasted about 45 minutes and that was very much talking about the couple getting together, committing to each other and being in love with each other. So, there wasn’t a lot of talk about anything being legally … wed before or anything. So, that was one of the things I was going say. After what 161 said just there, I did have one couple who wanted to have a handfasting, just as an element of their ceremony, and they were offered that by the registrars as part of the ceremony, by one registrar. And then another registrar said, “no, we can’t do that because that’s religious and that’s Pagan”. And that’s when I was taken on, to do that segment. So, there was actually … they had the registrars come to the venue, amazing venue, it was outdoor. They did their bit and then they left, got in the car … literally the car park was one-minute walk away from the ceremony. And then one of the family read a poem and then I was in the audience with my husband and then I walked up and carried on the ceremony and did the handfasting bit. So, it can work. But that was an interesting way … the other was I did it before the registrars, but literally minutes … literally minutes, in the same venue. Thought I would put that one in. Thank you. *[163’s video is intermittently turning off and on]* |
| **I** | Thank you. Anyone else like to add anything else on that? No? Just wanted to check that everyone had spoken who wanted to. So, if we move on to the next question, which, again, I think a few people have touched on in how you perceive your role in advising couples on the legal status of the ceremonies you conduct. Do you always make it clear to them that this doesn’t have legal status …? *As interviewer asks the question, all nod heads. 166 and 163 raise hands.* |
| **I** | I’m seeing lots of nodding going around. Yes, 166? |
| **166** | We’ve got lots of registrars … previous registrars, here and it’s something 162 touched on earlier on, is that we’re called upon, especially with our registration knowledge, to help the couple go and understand that process. Because a lot of couples’ beliefs is that if they go to the registrar beforehand, then they have to have the full ceremony room with… licensed for 30 to 40 people and pay £400/£500 and they’re not told about the Declaration. So, right through my celebrant journey, one of the key things has been to explain to the couples what the Declaration is and what they need to do. I’ve always had a very clearly, verbally and in my actual Terms & Conditions on my contract to say that it is not a legally binding ceremony. It’s very, very transparent and I think … you know, I think because we’ve had that background of many, many years of ceremony experience, I think you just tend to impart that. And couples do need it. And it will be the difference between whether you get the business, as a celebrant, or not sometimes. Because they just see it as just a huge … the registrars make it a huge minefield for the couples, when they’re comparing it to using a celebrant. On purpose. And it doesn’t have to be that. So, if you can time it so you can get to talk to the couples, be able to explain it clearly what it is that they need to do. And it is a simple procedure. And make it so. So, people understand whether it needs to be done before or afterwards. Then I think it makes it … the path, a lot easier for them.*While 166 talks, 161 moves away from the camera and returns back minutes later applying lip-balm or lipstick. A dog appears on her screen.* |
| **I** | Thank you. I think 163 had her hand up. Then 165. Then 164. |
| **163** | Yeah, I just wanted to add that … echo what 166 said there. That I live on the border of three counties here, and I’m known in [county] because that’s where I worked, and I was there for a long time. But there is another one of my local counties who really works very actively against celebrant weddings. And I’ve found myself the favoured person of one particular wedding venue because they’ve had so many issues with that registration service in terms of the service that they’re delivering. And in terms of what they’ve said to couples. And their complete inflexibility. So, I’ve found myself, on occasion, having to reiterate with couples, “this isn’t an illegal wedding as that particular registration service will say. Actually, there’s no such thing as an illegal wedding because there is no actual requirement to register the wedding in the marriage … in the wedding ceremony. In the same way that there’s no legal requirement to register a birth in a christening or a death in a funeral.” It is about that Declaration that 166 spoke about, which can easily be done separately. It’s not just that county. I’ve had a couple of … probably three or four of my couples, last year particularly, came back to me and said they had gone to their local Registry Office to book the Declaration or the short ceremony, as it’s often known as, and they had been told it didn’t exist. And I’ve had quite a job. On all three occasions they were people who knew me or knew of me or had been to a wedding that I had done. And so, they did trust that I was saying the right thing. But it’s … you know, for somebody … if they’ve never met me before, if they’ve got no idea who I was, it would be very easy for them to say, “well, the Registrar is telling me that this is an illegal wedding, so we’re not going to do it”. And I don’t know about anybody else, but I have sometimes had the occasion where I’ve signed couples up. I did one, actually, in the summer. She was adamant this is what she wanted. She talked about all the different things. We did a Zoom meeting and then her husband-to-be decided it wasn’t what he wanted. So, because it wasn’t right. So, lost that couple. I’m sure it’s happened to others as well. But there is … the point I was really making is, there is a battle with some of the registration services to actually get them to acknowledge that this is a perfectly normal way of getting married and that it’s legitimate and that they shouldn’t actually dismiss it in the way they do. That’s it … my soapbox! |
| **I** | Thank you. 165 and then 164. |
| **165** | That’s the point … trying to remember what you were going to say in the first place before all of that fantastic stuff. Yeah, I think it is … as a celebrant, it’s something that I think we’re all really clear with our couples about. But we don’t need to be clear with their guests about. I think it’s making that distinction. Because quite often couples will say, “I don’t want other people to think this isn’t … that I’m not legally married”. “Well, no, because you are legally married. You’ve already done your ceremony. You’ve done your legal … you’ve done the paperwork” and it’s separating out the two sides, if you like. So that couples understand that the one side is administrative, and the other side is their wedding day. So, they don’t have to merge to be the one. They can choose to do that, but they don’t have to merge to be the one. Myself, 25 years ago, when I got married, I had to have two separate ones because I couldn’t have a faith-based Buddhist ceremony legally. So, I had my legal ceremony, which happened to be done by a friend of my husband’s, so it was lovely. But actually, our wedding day is the one where we said vows in the way that we wanted to. So, at that point I didn’t realise that this was going to be the journey that I went on. But to be able to refer back … that this has gone on for a long time for people. Just so they’re comfortable. And yet all the time it’s a constant, constant thing because … similar to 163, living with many different counties around, some registration services are much more open, but an awful lot aren’t and will actively put couples off and say … and couples who have been told that they cannot do it. That they cannot have a celebrant at their ceremony. As if the registrars have got the right to do that. Or the power to do that *[lots of nodding from other participants]*.*161 is playing with her hair – perhaps struggling to sit still.* |
| **164** | Yeah, going on from that, some of them think they do and it’s really sad. I know in [county], in particular, there’s been a number of issues where one venue, in particular, have been threatened with having their license removed because they were recommending independent celebrants, as opposed to registrar-led ceremonies. So, they stopped. And couples are told that the £46 … that the basic Registration of Marriage doesn’t exist, but it is on their website. So, I found that it was better to … I mean I go in, when I’m talking to my couples at wedding fairs and on the telephone, to explain that they may well find that when they go to book the legal marriage registration that it’s a bit of an awkward conversation with the Registry Office and … but at the end of the day I’m running a business and I have to be professional and I make sure that it’s not a case of criticising the Registry Office. It’s a case of explaining to the couple that they may well have to fight for what it is that they actually want to do, which they shouldn’t have to do but unfortunately in [county]… and it just depends on who they get. There are some really lovely registrars that I’ve spoken to at wedding fairs and there are others that will pinch a leaflet and disappear and then tell people, “she’s not real, she’s fake”. And it doesn’t need to be like that. And that’s what we’re battling some of the time and that’s why couples are battling. So, I think as long as we’re honest … it’s in all my Terms & Conditions, it’s on my application … my booking form. It’s on my website. It’s a really big part of the conversation I have with my couples, to explain that what they’re having … and I try to sort of say to people … when people … one of the couples or maybe a parent are maybe a little bit unsure, as I think 163 mentioned earlier, you register a baby’s birth and then you have a christening. You register a death and then you have a funeral. So, you register your legal marriage and then you have a wedding ceremony. And I just try to sort of play on that as much as I can. And for me, it’s successful. But it’s very professional. I have to make sure that I’m covered because the last thing I would want, even if the GRO can’t do anything about it, but I would hate them to complain to one of my training organisations or my associations or whatever and say, “her behaviour is wrong” and I want to know that everything I do is above board. |
| **I** | Thank you all. So, you’ve mentioned different locations for weddings, some clearly are approved premises but I think people have mentioned some other locations as well. So, where would you say your ceremonies generally take place, or is there no general when it comes to your ceremonies? 167. |
| **167** | For the last year, not this year but last year, most of mine … most, not all of them, have been outdoors. So, I’ve done quite a few outdoor ones with [organisation]. Whether there’s actually a tepee or a marquee already there, but most of them have been outside of that. But not all of them. So … and sometimes actually in a forest. I’ve been in [place] Forest. I’ve been in … near [village] in what’s called a Scouts Field, but it was amazing, with trees around it. So, yeah. So, all sorts of different ones. I have been in registered … licensed ones. I go with what the couples want. It’s been more outdoor last year. Yeah.*162 raises hand to speak* |
| **I** | 162? |
| **162** | I’m [county], so we’ve got some amazing places. So, beaches are very popular, cliff tops, people’s gardens, lawns outside of approved venues. So, we’ve got good relations with a lot of approved venue owners who like to offer the celebrant-led ceremony. So, we can use places outside of the norm, within their venue, which gives them flexibility. So, if they’ve got some woodland or a nice lawn or a bit by a stream or a lake. So, really the majority of our ceremonies are outside. Perhaps, like 167 was saying, with a tepee or a marquee reception ready to go. So, that’s our fallback. But equally we had one couple who came down, just for themselves and two friends, on the beach. It rained. We had umbrellas. That’s what they wanted. So, we try to do whatever they want, wherever they want it. So, we really are pretty much outdoors for the majority of the time, which is lovely.*166 raises hand to speak. 161 is speaking to someone off camera and then looking down – perhaps checking mobile phone.* |
| **168** | I had a situation with … |
| **I** | Yeah, go, go. |
| **168** | I had a situation where … it was in [country], but it would work the same here, where I did a wedding on a beach and I said to the couple, “you must make sure you know what the tides are at the time you want it”. And I looked up the tides and it didn’t coincide with what she said. And I ended up … when I got the beach, I had to hoist up my dress and I was in the water pulling chairs out of the water, back onto the beach. Because they were just floating away. Fortunately, the groom’s dad turned up then and he was in the water with me. In [a country] weddings are often … they wear shorts. So, of course, he was okay coming into the water with me. But most of the weddings that I’ve managed to get since being here, being new to it in England I was looking for ways to find weddings and I’ve done a couple of shows, but I’ve been going to a couple of business groups. And at one of the groups, I met somebody whose niece has a venue that she can’t get licensed. It’s a marquee so it’s not a permanent structure. And so, she’s actually, “oh yes, I’ll have you” kind of thing. And so, it’s been great. I get most of her weddings now. I get all of her weddings, basically. So, that’s been very nice. In a marquee where she can’t get a license. It’s a nice marquee. |
| **I** | 166, I think you had your … |
| **166** | Yeah. I think it’s a plus side of being a celebrant in the fact that you can work with a lot of the licensed venues in offering … if they’ve got the foresight to work with you, if they have the capacity to extend their business areas into unlicensed parts. So, if they’ve got a conservatory that’s not licensed, or they’ve got a lawned area or whatever. I mean that’s a huge advantage to us because we can just go and hold the ceremony in these places. Last year … I tend to get contacted for, “we’ve hired a field for the weekend and where do we start, what do we do?” So, wellies on, I meet the couple in the middle of a field and just bring those ideas to fruition for them. They haven’t any idea where to start *[lots of nodding from other participants]* and that’s what it turns into. I had one by the side of a canal. The backup plan was we all went on a double decker bus and if it absolutely tipped it down then the ceremony was going to take place in the bus. I mean it’s just such a fantastic element that we have at our fingertips. To be able to offer couples, and businesses alike, if only they had the foresight to be able to work with what’s at their fingertips.  |
| **I** | Thank you. I’ve got 165 and then 161 and then 164. |
| **165** | Okay, so I think mountain tops, theatres, museums, restaurants, boats, licensed venues, obviously. Barns, yeah.  |
| **I** | Thank you. 161? |
| **161** | Apologies straight away *[161 is now trying to control two large dogs which are trying to sit on her. She sends them out of the room]*. The dogs are having a manic moment, in case you do hear them. Two very loud, big Akitas! So, I’ve been really fortunate, and I’ve had a scout camp. The couple had met through Scouts, so they wanted to have it on camp, and they had all the Scouts and the Girl Guides all dressed up and doing their things. It was very interesting. I learnt a lot. Back gardens, usually very rich billionaire-type back gardens, which have lands and lands and lands, which was absolutely amazing to do that when the sun sets. It was beautiful, it was absolutely gorgeous. So, I find it quite interesting that I find the unlicensed venues have actually given rise to be able to be that much more creative *[166 & 167 nod]*. Because the licensed venues are kind of four walls and maybe a stage or a manor house or something like that. So, I’ve had a combination of both, but I’ve absolutely loved having the non-normal, if that’s such a word, venue! |
| **I** | Thank you. 164, then 163. |
| **164** | Thank you. I had a look at my statistics earlier, before this call and I was trying to work out where I do most of my weddings. And 61% are in licensed venues of the last 122 I’ve done, 75 of those were at licensed venues, authorised. But, as I think 166 or somebody else said earlier, they are not always in the room that has been approved for legal marriages. One venue I had in particular have got four different rooms that are licensed but they have the most amazing backdrop that looks out across [place] and the sea, with fountains and a koi carp pond. No gazebo, nowhere to put a gazebo and they wouldn’t want to put a gazebo there. And I probably have done … I think practically all the ceremonies that they had out on that particular lawn, just because, having spoken to them, I gave them an opportunity. So, they never ever had to say no to a client ever again about where they stood and did their wedding. And that has brought in a lot of business. And 42 of my weddings have been woodland or unlicensed farms, pubs, smaller venues; people’s back gardens and that sort of thing. But interestingly, I was just quite surprised that the majority of my weddings are at venues that are licensed for a registrar-led wedding. And a lot of them are in the ceremony rooms as well but they just have that capacity to do different things or standing … there’s a patio at one of the Safari Parks that I do a lot of work at. And they have three arches at the start of the patio, so from the house leading out onto the patio. And one of those arches is the licensed area that the couple have to stand under. And half the guests can’t see them. The gazebo is so dark that the guests can’t see them. So, they don’t … they can face the other way, they can stand in front of the gazebo, they don’t have to be under the actual structure. So, it’s the same sort of areas that the registrars do it in, but done in a different way or facing a different direction. So … but yeah, most of mine are in authorised venues. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 163? *[Moderator seems a bit flat – looking tired].* |
| **163** | Yeah, the … out of all of those venues, the one thing that hasn’t been mentioned is village halls and I tend to do quite a lot in village halls here *[164, 165 & 167 nod]*. And I encourage it now. Because having had a couple of people do it and decorate the halls and have themed weddings. I did an amazing Forces themed wedding for two guys, two years ago, I think. It was amazing because they wrote and invited Dame Vera Lynn and she obviously declined coming, but she sent a signed photograph. So, it’s lovely to be able to achieve a very personalised venue at such a low cost for couples. I mean it’s not my cost, it’s their cost. But to encourage them that they don’t have to have a big package at a registered venue. That they can do this and make it even more personalised in those ways as well, with the décor and so on. These guys were fortunate, they were members of a drama group, so they did all the décor for them. But I’ve got … we’ve got some lovely village halls around here in Herefordshire, particularly. It is lovely that family get involved as well in the décor before the wedding. So, I thought it was worth mentioning those.*163 still has some trouble with her internet connection, so she spends much time looking at a screen to the side. At one point during this question she leaves the group but re-joins before the end of the question.* *All others look attentively, lots of nodding at all the venues mentioned.* |
| **I** | Okay. Thank you. So, have you seen a change in demand for these kinds of ceremonies in the last ten years and if so, what do you think the reasons might be? 163, do you want to start on that, and then 165? |
| **163** | Yeah, absolutely. I mean this is why I left being a registrar. Well, one of the reasons. I was seeing so many weddings where I was just doing the Declaration, just doing the short ceremony and people … they were saying to me, “we’re having our real wedding later. We’re in a marquee on auntie’s lawn (or whatever) later” [*164 nods]*. So, I saw it really probably for two or three years. I left the Registration Service three years ago and for the last two or three years of that I saw a gradual rise in this requirement. One of the reasons I think it’s happening is not … it’s partly to do with cost and wanting to do something that is more personal for them. But here, locally, in the three rural counties that I generally work, although I do work in others, it’s all because of lack of availability of required times and dates. They’ve cut … this was the other reason I left; was they’ve cut the registration staff to an absolute minimum, so it reduces the options for people to have a wedding at 2 o’clock. “No, we can’t do 2 o’clock. We can do 4 o’clock that day.” Which, you know, it’s two hours but it’s a massive difference in the tone of the wedding. And so, I’ve seen a huge … I’ve seen that rise in those two or three years and now, particularly in the one county where there’s a lot of difficulties with registrars anyway, the demand for me to do weddings over there was really quite astonishing. I don’t actually turn them down. I don’t push myself anymore because they just seem to come my way. |
| **I** | Thank you. 165, I think you were next? |
| **165** | I think definitely. Exactly what 163 was saying. I’ve been doing it for the last five years and I think part … added to that is a growing awareness, because obviously you look at how many of us there are now across the UK. There are hundreds of us. So, and of course we’re all talking about it. We’re all talking about options. So, increasingly people are coming to a ceremony and they’re seeing that you can do it differently and at the point they’re planning their ceremony, they want to have something different as well. And the number of times I’ve had conversations with couples … certainly when I got married everybody in my age group got married around the same time. So, you’re all going to each other’s weddings, aren’t you? And you’re hearing the same words being said, over and over again. And the point when the one person does something that is so drastically different, that realisation for everybody else is like, “oh my goodness me, there is another way” *[167 & 164 nod]*. So, I think we’re doing … we put a great deal of effort, all of us I’m sure, into talking about what we do and giving people options and choices so that they can then decide what is the right move for them. |
| **I** | 161, then 162 and then 167. |
| **161** | So, as a business I only started in September 2018. So, I’m just over two- and a-bit years old. Sounds so small. But if you had asked me three years ago, I didn’t know what a celebrant was. And in my communities, nobody spoke about a celebrant. It wasn’t … whether it wasn’t spoken about, didn’t know, hadn’t heard of, hadn’t been exposed to, don’t know the real answer to it but only know that once I had heard about the role of a celebrant *[lots of nodding from participants]* and thought I wished I had known seven years ago, when I got married, that I would actually have preferred to have had a celebrant wedding than having to sit under a Mandap for four hours. God bless the Mandap! It was lovely. There were 800 people there and I knew about 200 and that was it. The rest were people that parents had wanted to invite and the shebang that goes with that. But what I have noticed through my training and now actually being a celebrant and actually conducting wedding ceremonies and renewing the vows, etc., that the more I’m doing, whether it’s both couples being Asian or whether it’s multi-faith or whether it’s LGBTQ with an Asian element in there, the more people are talking about it. So, I now know there’s two of us. There’s me and a lady called [name]. Both [name] and I tend to be one of the first points of contact whenever there’s an Asian element. But it’s great because we know if can’t do it, we know we can reach out to many other celebrants and say, “oh, just add this bit in and it will be fine.” But it’s interesting that it’s only, I would say in the last year, minus COVID, that it’s talked about much more in the areas that I will socialise in or even the venues that I would go to. People knew about a toast master and they were happy to book me as a toast master but when I said celebrant, they were like, “what’s that?” And a lot of that I have to kind of say it’s been an education, it’s been awareness, it’s been literally launching myself into people’s groups going, “can I come and talk to you in your group? Can I come and talk …”. You know, just to let people know that there is the role of a celebrant and through doing that education there’s been that education there. But three years ago, no. |
| **I** | Thank you. 168? |
| **168** | I would say that it’s still there aren’t that many people who know what a celebrant does. I mean having done a couple of wedding shows and spoken to people, they say, “what do you do then?” and you kind of think, this is crazy coming from a place where the vast majority of weddings are conducted by independent celebrants and I’ve come to fairs where people don’t actually know what a celebrant is. Simply because you can’t do the legal bit and so people just think, “oh, we can get it all done in one go. We don’t have to have two separate ceremonies.” *[161 nods].*  So, I would say that I don’t really think there are … although you’re all saying how many weddings you’re getting and loads and loads and loads of weddings, so there must be people who do know what a celebrant is. But the vast majority of people who are coming through the wedding shows are saying, “what do you do? Oh, right. Oh, but it’s not legal?” and I find it really difficult to actually talk to people about it and tell them, “you have got to have two ceremonies if you … if I did your wedding, you would have to have another separate ceremony”. That’s my bit. |
| **I** | Thank you. 162, I think you were next? |
| **162** | Yeah, I would say certainly when we started, that first year and I would echo what you were saying, 168, the first year when we were doing wedding fairs people would just be going, “what? What?” We would spend our time explaining it. Now what we’re doing though, we’ve done a huge amount of networking and worked with venues, whether approved or not approved, in [county] and a lot of the venues now understand what a celebrant is. We’re lucky, I write for a couple of magazines and am always putting articles out. So that we’ve got a really good reputation. So, it does come and certainly we’ve … well, I suppose increased our numbers by about four-fold from 2015; that first year, to this year … well, it would have been this year. But the numbers were absolutely phenomenal. And next year is mad again, because we’ve postponed everybody from this year to next year and we’re getting next year’s couples coming on as well. So, I think people want that individualisation. They want to be able to do what they want to be able to do in the ceremony. So, if they want their Dad to do a Bible reading, because it’s an important part of getting him to be part of the wedding, whereas he wants them to marry in church … it’s that individual expression that people really enjoy with a celebrant-led wedding. Whether that’s inter-faith, no faith but just a bit of spirituality or a bit of fun. We’ve had a tie the knot ceremony where literally we have had two yacht ropes tied together and we’ve had bride’s side and groom’s side and it’s been like a tug of war. Which has just been fantastic. It’s a bit of fun, which as a registrar, there’s no way in the timings for my service I could ever have allowed that. But now I can and it’s great to actually talk to them about their vision and let them have their vision. And that then makes it meaningful for them and hopefully that gives them the cement that’s going to keep them together. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 167, you had your hand up? |
| **167** | We’ve had a lot of discussion now. *[seems to refer to notes – prepared answers]* I was going to say … at the start of this little bit, I was going today, for me, from 2017 when I started it was educate, educate, educate and now, COVID aside, I find with couples that come to me, not all of them but nearly all of them are actually coming to me and are already set up in their heads at least, to do a simple ceremony or, as we call it, 2 x 2. And that, for me, is a big step because when I was at wedding fairs … I don’t do them so much now because I don’t find … I’m always finding that my sort of people there, at the wedding … you know, just a short version of what I could say, and they are coming to me already prepped. What I find … this is a little aside, is, I find that it is the licensed venues that haven’t really got their head around all of this. My little story is the number of times that I’m in a licensed venue and they will bring in two tables *[163 laughs]*. And I will say to them … and it’s not happened the night before. I might have been there for a rehearsal. The tables weren’t there then, and we’ve talked about it. I’ve talked about it with the couple. The coordinator has come from the venue. We’ve all talked about how things are going to go and then the next day I’ve turned up, an hour, at least an hour before the ceremony and all of a sudden, these two tables … an extra table has turned up. And I’m saying to them … and either I’ve moved it myself or … if I can find somewhere, or … that’s the other thing, can you find somewhere … or, I’ve said to them, “actually I don’t need two tables. I’m not a registrar. This is not a marriage. This is a wedding ceremony.” And that, sometimes you have to talk to them about that. And they then say to me, this was the Hilton, back in February, in [city]. They said, “I didn’t realise what a celebrant did.” So, the education is still there. It is still needed but not, I think, personally for me, with my couples as much … I’m not saying 100%. Yeah, interesting. |
| **I** | 164? |
| **164** | I certainly agree with the education. I’ve got a venue in particular that just … she admits she just doesn’t get it. She says, “why would they want to do it twice?” I spent six years trying to educate her and it just won’t sink in. I get her vow renewals, but she won’t give me a single wedding there because she, personally, doesn’t get it. And the conversation I have with her and the conversation I have sometimes with parents is, “whose wedding is it? Because it’s not yours. It’s not mine. It’s not the venue’s”. But the comments about we’ve seen … obviously you lovely ladies that were registrars are now jumping across to the wonderful world of independents and I think that’s what is spreading the word, as much as anything else. Because when I started six years ago, and I did my research, there were four independent celebrants in my part of [county]. And now there are over 75. And you sort of think, “well, hang on. How did they hear about it?” They’ve either seen how wonderful and fabulous we all are, or they’ve just woken up one morning, as I did, and said, “that’s what I’m going to do”. And I didn’t even know what it was, and I just googled it. And I think couples are … they know what they want and one of the conversations I have with them is they choose who they want to marry, they choose where they want to live, they choose whether they want to have children or not, they choose what career they want, they choose where they’re going to get married. Do they actually want people telling them what vows they make to each other or do they want to be able to choose that as well? And nine times out of ten, the decision is made on that comment. And I think that they are learning and they’re very savvy. You know, everyone is internet-led now and google and Instagram and all the social media places that you can see it in, and they do their research. And it pops up more and more and more. We are still ten or twelve years behind New Zealand and Australia. That’s where it all started. We’re never going to be quite so … or not yet anyway. I think there’s just a lot of people that still have to learn about it. But, as 167 said, it is venues as much as the couples that need the educating. *As 164 is talking 163 switches video off and, shortly afterwards, on again. 162 looks tired – is wiping her eyes.* |
| **I** | Thank you all. So, 164, you talked about waking up one morning and deciding that’s what you wanted to do.  |
| **164** | Yeah. |
| **I** | Could I ask you all, why you think it’s important to conduct these ceremonies? |
| **164** | For me, personally, it’s just something that I love. I had a passion. I had a wedding dress shop for a number of years. I’ve been in the wedding industry in one form or another for thirty years. And it was just something that I wanted to do. I was married in church. I had a fantastic wedding ceremony, but it was exactly as the vicar told me it was going to be. My wedding was how my parents told me … well, not my parents, my parents-in-law, told me it was going to be. I was very young, and I just did it. And I did a vow renewal about three years ago and I think that’s when I suddenly realised why I loved it so much. Because the couple were renewing their vows after 40 years of marriage and she walked down the aisle, the bride, and she had a beautiful wedding dress and he was all suited and booted and when they came to their vows she just stood there and she said to him, “40 years ago I told you the vows that I was told I had to say. And today I’m making the vows that I want to say.” And there wasn’t a … everyone was, “oh my god, that’s so romantic” and her vows were almost identical to the ones she made in church, but they were different. They were just worded slightly differently. They came from the heart. They weren’t repeated. Very rarely do I do a parrot fashion, “repeat after me” style. They’re read off a card the majority of the time and the couples write it and I help them write it. And I just think that … I’m a bit of a little rebel. I’m not very … I’m lacking in confidence; I would never really argue with very many people I don’t know. But I fight for my couples to have the wedding ceremony that they want to have rather than the one that they’re told they have to have. And to me, I’ve been married 31 years and that is really important to me. That they get what they want and not what a relative wants. *All nod. 163 switches video off and, shortly afterwards, on again.* |
| **I** | Thank you. Anyone else want to … I see lots of nodding going on. 163? |
| **163** | Well, first of all I need to apologise for disappearing because I’m having all sorts of internet problems here. So, I missed your question. |
| **I** | It was just why you think it’s important to conduct these ceremonies. |
| **163** | Oh right, that one. Yeah. Well, for those reasons really, except that as … I suppose as a registrar and I’m sure my fellow ex-registrars here will echo, when you do 8 weddings on a Saturday and you’re using the same words for every couple and you get to the point where you don’t really even see the couple in front of you. I learned very quickly to really dislike the role of registrar, doing weddings. And although … and it was a … it’s not a cheap service that the registrars do. You know, for the couples it’s expensive to pay for two registrars, especially if it’s at a registered premises. But I always felt like I was really short-changing them. No matter how much we say we’ll try very hard to make every one personal and lovely and smile, by the time you’ve done No. 6 on a busy Saturday, it’s very hard actually to feel like you’re putting anything into it other than just reading the words. So, for me, I think it’s really important. It’s the best day of their lives, thus far, for many of them and it’s really important that I feel I am being part of their wedding and that I’m not just doing this in order to go onto the next one. And I make it an absolute rule now that I don’t do more than one wedding in a day. And I got talked out of it and actually did a baby naming and then a renewal of vows straight afterwards and really regretted it. Because I just felt, straight away, that I wasn’t … I hadn’t been able to be as much part of the second ceremony as I wanted to be. |
| **I** | Thank you. 165? |
| **165** | I think, for me, it’s about this is a day when the couple are making a commitment that is going to form the foundation of their future life together and everyone deserves to make those in a way that has meaning for them, rather than being … as has been said, rather than being told what should be … what that foundation should be. This is the future direction of their life, you know? Yes, we have great fun. Yes, we do things that can be … can involve lots of different people and doing lots of things that can’t be done but somebody said earlier on this evening that absolutely at the heart of what we do is a commitment. A heartfelt and a deeply felt commitment between these couples that want to do it in a way … making vows that they intend to fulfil. Not saying words that they just have to repeat. So, whether they’re repeating them on the day or however they’re actually doing the vows, their involvement and connection with the vows that they are making is so deep and that’s … that is forming the foundation *[lots of nodding from participants]*. They know that this day is the foundation of their life together. So, it’s not just a party and I think that’s a part of why there’s a greater awareness of what celebrant’s do, because there is that recognition or that change from being, “oh, actually it’s all about the party. Get the bit done at the Registry Office and then have your party, because that’s the most important thing.” So, people recognising that it’s looking at each other’s eyes and making those vows that have meaning for you, that forms your future life together. And if you spend the time putting in that time to make that right, so all of us together, so the couples and us working together to create that. And that they have the day that everybody feels part of, and the guests are recognising that yes, they’re there to enjoy the good bit of this fantastic, happy day but also, you’re making a commitment to support this couple when life gets a bit more difficult, because that’s reality. Then actually that is such a precious gift and that’s a day that you look back on when times are tougher, when you’re having your disagreements or Lockdown is getting all too much. And you pull on the vows that you made and say, “this is what we said we would do for each other”. That’s why it’s important. |
| **I** | Thank you. I’m conscious that time is pressing. 161, can you … |
| **161** | Yeah, 165, could you repeat that, because I think you’ve just done a script for all of us there, that we could use and put in our own little words?! What I was quickly going to say was I spent 20+ years as a public servant, rising through the ranks, doing what I was told to do, not always really believing in what I was being told to do, but did it because it was a job. It paid my bills, and it paid my mortgage. Fortunately I got to a place where I was able to leave and it was at that point, when I left, that I knew whatever I did next had to be something that was about me, my passions, my dreams. And I knew I loved being with people. I loved making people smile. I loved giving people choice, options. I was not a traditional Indian girl and I didn’t think anyone should have to be. They should have a choice on what they wanted. And that’s kind of how I fell into the toastmaster/celebrant, the events industry. And actually, I’m really glad that I did because by me doing that, I’ve now seen almost the number of doors that I’ve been able to open for others to actually have the ceremony of choice. To have anyone that they want to include, pets, dogs, handfasting, a sign ceremony, live music. All of that we can include, and I am sure my colleagues will agree with me here, there’s that inner smile at every ceremony. Whether you actually physically show it during the ceremony or as you go and sit in your car. There’s no way to explain that. Inner smile are the only words I can think of that would be anywhere closely related to it. And I am so, so glad that I am able to do that for people.  |
| **I** | Thank you. So, if I move on to the next question. I am slightly conscious of time. Have there been any changes in your role and the types of ceremonies you conduct since you started being a celebrant or … *All participants shake heads.*I’m seeing shakings of heads there. These are generic questions, so we put them to lots of different groups. So, some may just not … every group I see certain blank faces when they think, “oh, that question doesn’t really work for us”. And I’m getting the impression that you all have conducted a diversity of ceremonies throughout your time as celebrants? Great. We don’t need to spend any more time on that one then. So, the final question then is looking at the Law Commission’s proposals and I don’t know how familiar you are with its proposals? *[lots of nodding]* I’m seeing, again, lots of nods. So, you probably don’t need a summary from me on it. But I would like to invite you to give your view of the proposed reforms and whether you think it would make it easier for the types of ceremonies you perform to be legally binding. Yeah, 162, do you want to go first on that? |
| **162** | Yes. I mean for us I think it would be a game changer and I think probably for lots of independent celebrants it would be a game changer. Because we wouldn’t need that interaction with registration. Whether they’re being helpful or not helpful can determine whether the couple will stick with you or actually get forced by family pressure to have what is deemed to be the “real ceremony” with registration. So, for me, I would be delighted to be able to conduct the legal ceremonies *[lots of nodding and smiling from participants]* and I think the other proposal that I was really pleased to see was that the General Registry Office would be the overarching arbiter of independent celebrants rather than being agreed to by the Local Authorities and the Local Registration Service. So, I was really pleased to see that it would be an England & Wales wide approval process from that. But, yeah, a wholehearted yes from me. I think it would be absolutely amazing and I think our couples would really appreciate that ability to have everything all in one go but also have the flexibilities that an independent celebrant can offer, which registration and other forms of religious denominations can’t offer. So, we can be that mixed faith, we can be that way of them expressing their love for each other in a meaningful way that we can work with them to develop. So, yes from me. |
| **I** | Thank you. 165? |
| **165** | Yes! When it came out, I think we are all there going, “oh my goodness me!”. There’s part of me that is just holding itself in abeyance, if you like, because what I don’t want is for there to be restrictions placed on what we can do … because the legal side comes in and being something that we can do. I don’t want to be told that I now can’t do a ceremony up a mountain or I can’t include this unity ceremony or that or create new ones or do whatever, because we’re then doing the legal side. That would be the worst … in some ways the worst of all worlds because what we do offer, particularly as independents because anything goes, for most of us. We might have our own restrictions on what we’re prepared to do or not, but there is that whole focus on what’s right for the couple. I don’t want there to be something coming in through the back door and going, “you can do it legally now, but only if …”. You know? So, I’m not quite sure how it’s going to function. In my mind’s eye I had kind of always seen it as something more that happens on the Continent. So, you would go and do your legal signing at the Town Hall, so at the Registry Office, and then you have your wedding day wherever. So, in a church, in a … you know. That seemed the way that it may go but this … the way it seems, possibly, to go now, is much broader than that. So, very welcoming to it. Slightly concerned that there might be a caveat in there that binds our hands inappropriately. |
| **168** | I would agree with that. If limitations are put on … well, unreasonable limitations upon what we do, are put on it I think it’s just going back to the situation where they really haven’t got a choice and what I understand the Law Commission recommendations to be doing is to give the couples more choice. More choice about how they get married. If they don’t want a big ceremony, they don’t want the traditional stuff, the traditional vows are okay for them, then go for those traditional ways, go to the registrar, go to the church, go to … but, if they want more choice to do it their way, then I think they need all of the things that we can do for them. |
| **I** | I’m just scribbling down a few notes so I can pick up on a few points after the focus group has formally finished, if that’s okay. But … |
| **161** | I was just going to add in there that I totally with what’s just been said by 165 and 168. Being an ex-Public Servant and knowing how things can be lobbed in by the back door last minute, that was my nervousness because I, again, knowing that currently I can merge cultures and religion as well where I can do my explanations and my translations, I would hate to feel that I couldn’t do that because I didn’t have a priest hat on. Although, saying that, I am Brahmin, so maybe I could lob myself back in and do it that way. But what … I see some positives. If … touch wood, fingers crossed, this does go in our direction, which is very much … there is for couples, there is a financial side here where I think they will potentially save for money *[165 nods]*. So, I know, for example, some of my couples are doing the Registry, the wedding ceremony with me, then doing the Hindu ceremony and then doing a reception. So, that’s four events with X number of people there. So, there’s potentially a financial implication here. And the second opportunity, which I think is huge here, is something I think 164 said earlier, which is this whole thing around choice. We have choice through our whole lives. From … even as children we have a choice and it’s almost like the current legislation is holding back that choice. Whereas if the Law Commission and what it’s proposing goes through, we are opening that door to allow people to have that choice and I think that would be a fantastic thing for independent celebrants and our couples. |
| **167** | Can I say that I’ve been going through the questionnaire, the Law Commission questionnaire and it is a massive … I’ve had to go in and save and come out of it again, because some of the questions I think, “how do I know the answer to that one?” Some of them are very pertinent to us and I can’t remember, I should have written them down. Is it “proper” and “dignified” or something? Those two words, which have been brought up. As long as it’s proper and dignified. So … but remember, we’re talking about something that goes back to the 19th century and we’re here in the 21st century so, you know, whatever proper and dignified means in the 21st century. What that looks like. Because, obviously, we at the moment, doing a non-legal ceremony, can have alcohol drunk in the ceremony. And it’s not as part … and I could drink through a cocktail ceremony. So, would that … because there’s no alcohol allowed anywhere near a legal ceremony, those are the sort of things that just crop up … sort of make me think. But it’s something to think about. I would like it to happen, yes. And the consultation has got lots of very interesting suggestions in it. So, that’s what I wanted to say. It will be interesting to see what is the actual crux of proper and dignified. And then there’s, obviously, that sort of … me, also, Local Authority. That sort of aura of risk assessment, etc., about beaches and so on. So, that would be an interesting thing to see as well. Thank you. |
| **I** | Anybody else would like to come in on either the potential benefits or any problems that you see? I think people have flagged up a few already. |
| **164** | I think the only big concern, or a big concern is the authorisation or registration of independent celebrants. And how that’s going to work. As an example, I don’t have the NOCN Diploma in Marriage Celebrancy because when I became a celebrant, that NOCN wasn’t a thing. But that doesn’t mean that the 150 wedding ceremonies that I’ve carried out in the last five years haven’t been dignified and proper and all the other things that we do. So, I’m just curious, having gone through when I worked in the corporate industry of people being authorised based on a grandfathering system. That’s quite important, I think, to me as to whether the training organisations have an impact or an input. And then you have to look at the training organisations. There are some that are probably … this is probably a bit harsh but some genuine training organisations and some different training organisations where somebody has just created their own business. Are they going to be involved in the same way? Will they have the same impact. And yes, obviously, if the GRO are involved at the end, that could take an awful lot of … with the fact that there are so many celebrants in the role, how long will it take for everyone to be authorised? *[lots of nodding].* What sort of stages are there? Is it alphabetical? Is it on age? I could be retired before it all happens. So, those are the sorts of things, I suppose, with my Civil Service head I’m thinking, “oh, how is that going to actually work?” But, yeah, bring it on. I think it’s absolutely fantastic and I think that as 161 said, the financial impact … paying a lot of money for the registrars to come to the venue, for everyone to then disappear for an hour, to then come back and pay an awful lot of money for an independent celebrant. That is just … it’s not going to happen. They’re not going to have to split the ceremony. Because I think that’s the bit that’s unfair for couples, is the fact that they just cannot do it in one big go, with everybody working together. And I know that there are some sort of projects around the country where registrars are working with independent celebrants, but they are few and far between. And, at the moment, the reaction I find is that they are working against independent celebrants and doing everything they can … and it’s seen as a sort of … we’re competing as businesses against our own Local Council. So, I think if that can be removed and everybody works well together, then I think that’s only for the benefit of the couples at the end of the day. *168 is leaning into the camera to show she wants to speak* |
| **I** | Thank you. |
| **164** | And they can choose who they want, then, can’t they? Whether they like us or not. That’s their decision. Not who turns up on the day that they’ve never met. |
| **168** | I think it’s going to take a while, anyway. Because I did one of these forms with the Law Commission a few weeks ago. And asked the question, “how long is this going to take to go through Government?” It isn’t actually going to be presented until I think some time next year, probably the middle of next year. And I don’t think any action will be taken on it until certainly early the following year. So, another couple of years who knows what we will feel like we will want to do. So, maybe half of us are not celebrants by then? Half of us may have retired. Who knows? So, maybe too late … missed the boat. |
| **I** | So, a few of you have mentioned the impact on the couples or the types of couples whose weddings you conduct. Is there anything else anyone would like to say about that? Or about anything else about the proposals? Yes, 161? |
| **161** | I keep forgetting to unmute. There was one thing about the proposals that I didn’t quite understand and forgive me if I was doing speed reading and missed it. The risk assessment part. So, at the moment, you know you have your venues, licensed and they take responsibility for the risk assessment at the venue? So, if we were doing it at the top of a mountain … 165, I’m coming with you when you do that one … Scouts grounds, 163’s back garden or wherever it is, there was nothing in the proposal that was giving an indication where that responsibility may/might/should/could/would lie. Has anyone picked that up from the proposals or Rebecca, if you’ve got anything to help us with that? |
| **I** | I’m happy to pick that up once we’ve finished the focus group, if that’s okay. I will take my Nuffield hat off and put my Law Commission hat on briefly. |
| **161** | Thank you. |
| **I** | So, if anyone else would like to say anything about the proposals or about the marriage process, now’s your opportunity or forever hold your peace! 162? |
| **162** | I’m interested about the proposals for the notice, that it could be done online, which I think is a real step forward *[lots of nodding]*. I also think it’s good that they will have a personal interview. So, that’s all good. I do a little bit of work for our local benefice for the Church of England. I do a little bit of admin for them. And having been a Superintendent Registrar before and taking notices, and then looking at the Banns process, they’re just not comparable at all. In looking at forms, looking at requirements and … so, I suppose my feeling would be I would love to see civil preliminaries for all weddings so that they’re completely fair and even, across the board. Because it seemed to me, even when I was in registration, it always seemed to me that the Church of England couples could get away with murder. And having had a few policeman coming in about bigamous marriages that had occurred in Church of England churches, it’s strange how it was normally Church of England churches where they had Banns called, where that wasn’t actually … because they weren’t looking at divorce documents. They were taking people’s words for it. So, I just thought that was quite good. I am really pleased with the notice provision though. I think that’s much better. And to do it online, much more sensible than what’s happening at the moment. So, yeah, that was my six pence worth. |
| **I** | Thank you all so much for all of your very full and helpful responses to the many questions I’ve been firing at you for the last hour and a half. We really do appreciate you taking the time. I think we will formally close the focus group now if anybody does have to disappear …*161 puts both thumbs up. After the recording has stopped Rebecca goes over points raised regarding the proposed reforms and is energetic and animated when describing the evolution of the legislation – which all attendees stay on for and express interest in by nodding and gasping here and there! Following the focus group, Sharon received emails from attendees saying how much they appreciated having Rebecca there.* |

**1:34:08**