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| **I** | So I’d like to invite each of you just to kick off by telling us about the last wedding ceremony that you conducted in England and Wales. What type of ceremony it was and where it was. Who would like to go first? |
| **174** | I don’t mind going first. |
| **I** | Okay, thank you. |
| **174** | Okay, my name is 174 and I live down in the [town] area. I’m an ex-Lecturer of Psychology and decided to come out of teaching to follow on with my celebrant work and put some more effort into it because I love it. I love writing the ceremonies. The last ceremony that I did was a year ago June gone. It’s been quite a while, obviously, due to COVID. It was a renewal of vows. It was in a hotel which was right on the seafront, on the coast of the south of the UK. A beautiful location and it was a Sand ceremony *[172 smiles knowingly]* and obviously I think the … it was about half an hour in length and beautiful. It involved the children, so it was a very beautiful ceremony. No legal aspects to it of course, because the couple were already married. Very light-hearted. A lot of people there. So, it was fantastic. It was a really nice day and beautiful weather as well for it, because there are some nice grounds in that hotel. So, perfect location. |
| **I** | Thank you. Who would like to go next? |
| **171** | I’m happy to go next. |
| **I** | Yeah. 171, up in my top left-hand corner. |
| **171** | My name is 171. I’m an independent celebrant. I was a registrar for 12 years before that. So, I’ve got both hats on sometimes. I don’t do legal weddings anymore. I just do independent ceremonies. My last wedding was on Wednesday, 18th March of this year, which was literally about 48 hours before we were all completely locked down. It was meant to be at the weekend. We dragged it forward. It was for 120 people at [name of venue] Barn in the [area]. The lovely thing about that wedding, and it really does have a big umbrella about what we’re talking about today, was it was for a couple. The bride’s father was a Nigerian Pastor, but she wasn’t religious. But as an independent celebrant I was able to bring the religious elements in to please her family, which she wanted included. And I was able to include all the personal and lovely bespoke elements *[172 nods]* that independent celebrants bring. So, even though I’m not a religious celebrant, I was able to cover everybody there and make sure that the couple’s wishes were completely catered for, which was a really lovely thing to do. I don’t think we were ... we managed not to be COVID super spreaders, even though we were only 48 hours before the Lockdown. And it was a great day. That was my last wedding. |
| **I** | Thank you. So, yes … |
| **175** | Right, I’m 175. I’m a Humanist celebrant, Humanist UK Accredited Celebrant based in the South East and my last wedding was on August 31st, which is the only one I’ve managed to do this year. And it was in an apple orchard in [county]… in [county], which is not a usual wedding venue. It’s a campsite and apple and cider making place, because the couple are very seriously into beer and cider *[176 nods and smiles]* and so that was their choice. It was outside, under an apple tree. The couple, he was English, she was American, had been together for some time and partly because of COVID, there were about 20 guests plus 2 dogs actually there. And there were about 10 guests on Zoom, on an iPad, on the table, who contributed fully … even did readings and so on. We got the speakers working. So, it was a very nice hybrid between a face-to-face wedding and a Zoom wedding. Obviously, not legal. They were going to get legally married at some point when they could get a cheap booking with the registry office, which is not easy. And it was absolutely delightful. And it ended up … both had children from previous relationships and it ended with them making commitments to those children as well as making their commitments to each other.*173 is eating* |
| **I** | Thank you. Yeah, 172? |
| **172** | Hello. Yes, my last wedding was on September 5th this year, which was really lucky. It was the only one of my weddings to go ahead this year. Like 174, I was in education, so I was a Senco and I left two years ago to do this. And it was lovely because the couple had booked originally two full days in a wood. We were going to have a festival wedding and it was going to be glamorous glamping with the handfasting as the final part of it. What they did, very cleverly, when they realised, they decided they still wanted to go ahead. They cut their guest list down to 30, which was the legal amount, and what they were then able to do was they spent the money they would have spent on the glamping to make their back garden absolutely beautiful. They made arrangements with their next-door neighbour, so their next-door neighbour knocked their fence down so that 30 people could spread between 2, which made it even safer. And to protect them still further, the children did the handfasting routine rather than me. Normally I would tie it, but the children did it, which was lovely because it involved them as well. And it was lovely. And even though the neighbours did call the police on them *[some of the participants smile]*, it was found to be legal and they were fine. Absolutely fine. And, again, no superspreading afterwards. And yes, as we’ve already said, as a Humanist and as an independent celebrant, we were able to involve religion and religious aspects as they wanted, rather than them having to go down a certain route, which made it even more special. Thank you. Oh, and it was on Zoom too, which 175 very cleverly … well, we had it on Zoom and 30 people watched on Zoom as well. Thank you. |
| **I** | Thank you. 173? |
| **173** | Hello. I’m 173 and I’m fuelled by coffee currently, so hopefully it should all go okay! My last wedding was this year. It was my only in-person wedding that I did. This year I did a couple online, which was an amazing experience and actually something to be really treasured. But, yes, I’m based in [city]. I’m based in [city] and this was at [venue] in [city]. And it involved a ring exchange that was COVID secure. This was in the last weekend where you could have 30 guests, rather than 15 and we didn’t have to shunt that to make that work. It just was dumb luck. And also, we had a modified handfasting in the same way as 172 was saying and we managed to do it within the bubble. So, they did all the touching and I just pointed from afar and it all worked out. It was gorgeous, as everyone’s are gorgeous. We are all here because we think that weddings, like this, are necessary and beautiful and important. And I just feel really lucky to have been able to do it because, honestly, we are just grabbing all the crumbs of weddings that we can do in 2020.*As 173 is speaking, the video of 177 is switched off and later on again.* |
| **I** | 176? |
| **176** | My last wedding was this August, and it was in the family home, which it has to be said was quite large, in the middle of the countryside in [county]. So, the guests assembled in the kitchen garden and then moved through to formal gardens where they were socially separated with box hedges. So, there was a maximum of 30 people, rather a lot of dogs. And, otherwise, it was a perfect COVID ceremony. Socially distanced, lovely. The bridegroom was a retired war reporter so bomb-proof. It all went very well. Mainly because of the couple. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 178? |
| **178** | Thank you. Hello everyone. My name is 178. I’m a Humanist celebrant up in [town] in [county]. My last wedding was in September, a week before Lockdown happened. So, the couple were initially going to have a very, very large wedding for about 120 people and then when the COVID regulations came in, they said … they completely rethought their ideas, and they brought the guest list down to 30 and it was a huge relief for them because they realised that they had been railroaded into having this massive wedding with all the magazines and the peer pressure from everybody else. So, when they got down to their guest list of 30, they decided to engage a celebrant, which was me, instead and they had it outdoors in the beautiful weather at a very, very posh hotel in [county], which had just made its beautiful outdoor garden for the 2020 Season; spent millions of pounds on it and I think that was the first one and the only one that they’ve managed to do this year. So, it was lovely. It was very simple. It was just a ring exchange. There were no fancy rituals, but we had the love story as you would and everything else that goes with a normal Humanist wedding. So, it was lovely, and the couple then went onto go back into the hotel and have a very intimate meal with all sorts of other things like magicians and socially distanced pub quiz and stuff like that, that they wouldn’t normally have done. So, they were really, really pleased with how it turned out. Can I also say I’m really, really sorry but I’m going to have to leave at quarter past 11 today because I’ve got a funeral to go to. |
| **I** | Okay, thank you for letting me know and if there’s anything you desperately want to tell us before you go, do flag that up. |
| **178** | Thank you. |
| **I** | And 177? |
| **177** | Thank you. I’m 177. I’m a Humanist celebrant based in [city]. My last wedding was back in May. It was a Zoom wedding, and it was a couple who were due to get married in a local theatre, which had closed because of COVID. And they postponed it to next year but then contacted me to say, “actually we would really like to do something on the day that we were due to get married because, in our head, that’s our wedding day”. So, they got married at home, via Zoom *[173 nods]*, and they still had their entrance. So, they put a vinyl on, they had their entrance, they had a poem that the groom had written. They had a reading from a favourite book the bride did. They are a blended family, so they had the groom’s daughter and the bride’s daughter do a handfasting. And then the bride’s son was looking after the rings … he has Autism, so we had to leave a bit of time to see whether he was going to come up to be on camera and do the rings, which in the end he didn’t want to do but I had already written enough time into the script to let him decide. And then we ended with their first dance, so everyone got to see their first dance on Zoom. And afterwards they went into their garden and had some socially distanced photographs with the cake and champagne, and we were all in a Facebook group together, so we were all sharing pictures of us in our finery and toasting the couple and things like that. So, even though it wasn’t what they had planned, that to them is their wedding and then next year, hopefully, if the theatres open in May, that will be like a Part 2/vow renewal.*As 177 is speaking, 173 is nodding vigorously.* |
| **I** | Thank you all for sharing those stories with us. I won’t necessarily call on everybody to answer every question, but I think it’s really useful to know at the start the types of ceremonies that each of you conduct. So, with future questions if you want to … if you don’t necessarily want to say things, you can just nod and Tania will be noting that, along with all other reactions. So, it will still be recorded. So, next question is whether it’s usual to meet or communicate with the couple before the wedding. *[Two participants start speaking at same time].* Yes, 172, do you want to start? |
| **172** | Me? Go first, that’s fine.  |
| **178** | No, you carry on, carry on.  |
| **172** | We’re probably going to say the same thing. That’s one of the things that I love about this most because, actually, the moment they make their first booking or whether you meet them at a wedding fair or online or through one of the directories, or through your website, however they meet you, you get to know them really well. And rather than the registrar weddings … no offence to registrars, that I’ve been to, where they literally meet them on the day for 20 minutes … it’s never the same people you meet when you make your arrangements. It’s lovely because you have the first chats and nowadays it’s on Zoom, but it may be in person. You get to ask questions; you get to know their love story. You may talk to other members of the family. You may involve surprises or little things they don’t know about or you may involve different family members. But it’s all about getting to know them and the relationship which can last from anything from a month, in some short cases, to two years, when you’re booking far ahead. That building is part of the skill and the pleasure of being a celebrant. I think it’s one of the strongest bonds you can make, and it makes the day special for everyone because you’re so involved with the family. It’s not about me. It’s about them. So, they don’t know me, I know about them. But it’s their relationship with me and how we design the ceremony. Sorry, I’ll shut up now.*As 172 is speaking, 174 is nodding.* |
| **I** | Thank you. 174, did you want to come in there? |
| **174** | Well, I think 172 covered it really well, to be quite honest. It’s one of my favourite times as well and I think it … just to add a little bit extra there. It helps me write something so personalised towards the couple, that the ceremony will be for. And it’s a fantastic time. And the more you … like 172 said, the more you get to know them, the more you can personalise that and make it special. There’s just something so wonderful … it’s just a beautiful exciting time really and you get really caught up in it all and come up with all these different things and help them choose. And I often find that a lot of couples don’t always know what’s available to them and there’s just so many beautiful additional parts you can add to ceremonies that make it special and involve the children and it is a wonderful experience that. That initial bit.*As 174 is speaking, 172 is nodding.* |
| **I** | 173? |
| **173** | I would just like to add that 172, you said that you know all about them, which is absolutely true. You know, I kind of bathe in everything. But that they don’t know about you. Well, I don’t know, my couples know loads about me as well because we end up being friends. So, you know. *[173 is assertive in voicing her different perspective – speaking loudly and clearly direct into screen]* They do, they know about me too and then we hang our years afterwards. Which is actually a real privilege because we align in loads of ways and yeah, it’s a wonderful way to meet people. It’s great to be professionally nosy! |
| **172** | I think it’s personal taste and I don’t mean that they don’t know who I am or where I’m from, I just mean that it’s not about me, it’s about them. I think I phrased it clumsily. *[172 is smiling but looks tense/defensive]* I think I meant to say it’s not about me, it’s about them. So, whatever I personally believe is not what we have, it’s their views and what they want that I give them, rather than anything I think they should have. But you’re quite right. Yes, of course, we do get to know each other. |
| **173** | I think actually it’s worth putting in at that point that that’s probably the main difference between independent celebrants and Humanist celebrants and I’ve got to say that I am an Accredited Humanist UK Celebrant. [*The Humanist celebrants are all looking into screen while the other two independent celebrants are looking away from screen suggesting they do not want to be drawn into discussion*]. The thing is, is that alignment of the system of belief that we have is part of the reason that I was chosen in the first place. So, there is that idea and that’s the … |
| **172** | Yeah. And although I am a member of Humanist UK, I chose not to be a Humanist UK celebrant because in the future I value all faiths and I now value all faiths that come to me. So, it’s a very interesting point. With my personal faith beliefs, I’m not what’s important. And I agree, that’s a very important point and I completely agree with what you’re saying. *As 172 is speaking, 174 is nodding.* |
| **I** | I’ve got 175 and then 177, then 178. 175, you’re still muted I think. |
| **175** | When I looked at your list of questions, I found that one really peculiar in a way because for Humanist celebrants there wouldn’t be a wedding if we didn’t get to know people in advance. It’s entirely about them. There is no set Humanist wedding. I was once rung up on a Saturday morning when actually I was out of the country, by a hotel venue near us who were desperate because they had just discovered that the groom hadn’t got the necessary paperwork and they needed a celebrant then, for the afternoon. I mean I was out of the country, but I thought I couldn’t … what would I do? You know? I don’t know them. How could I possibly do that? So, there isn’t a set established ceremony. It’s always about the couple. The thing I forgot to mention about the one I did most recently … I mentioned they were drinkers, to get a good socially distanced ritual, they did a drinking ritual, and they ordered a very special bottle of beer from Sweden. So, it’s finding those little things that, as somebody said, wouldn’t necessarily occur to the couple, but you can say, “ah, what about this?”*172 nods.* |
| **I** | I should have also said at the start that these are obviously generic questions because we’re talking to a range of different people who conduct weddings. And some of them resonate more with some groups than with others. Some people look at those questions and think, “why are you asking us that?” |
| **175** | I’m not being critical. I’m just saying I found it quite an odd question, from my point of view. |
| **I** | Thank you. 177? |
| **177** | Sorry, I had to find the mute button there. So, I was going to respond to the question but then also build on what 173 and 172 were talking about. The communication can start way before they’re even deciding whether they want a celebrant. So, it might be that they’ve come to you with frequently asked questions and then you have an introductory meeting and then they might decide to book you. Then there’s the planning, there’s emails backwards and forwards. They get to see all the edits and things. So, it’s not like a one-off communication and it’s not even after they’ve just booked you. It’s a long process *[173 nods]*. And yeah, I was just agreeing with 173, with the … with my clients tend to know … obviously there’s a professional boundary, but they tend to know quite a bit about me and they’re the things that they book me on, so they know things about what I do outside of my ceremonies. My job, my other volunteering jobs. They might know that I’ve got a son. You know, and we talk about all kinds of different things and it’s those values that align. And it’s not that Humanist celebrants don’t value other faiths, because we do, *At the mention of humanists valuing other faiths, 173 mouths the words “thank you”. 172 smiles but it looks awkward – as if she is expecting to be ‘ganged up against’.*it’s just that there is a difference between what we would include in terms of a religious line and I think what comes across in the communication is the choice, giving the couples the choice. So, if they want to go with 172 because she’s a Humanist but also because she can bring in other elements, that’s their choice. And I think that comes across in the communication and that’s something that’s really important. Not just whether are you available, how much do you cost? It’s the other bits and pieces that make us “us” and that’s why they pick us through our websites and whatnot.*172, 173 and 175 nod.* |
| **I** | I’ve got 178, then 173, then 171. |
| **178** | I think 177 has just said a lot of what I was going to say actually! So … but I would also add to the whole communication and relationship scenario that not only do we get to know them before their wedding and all the way through their wedding process, I am sure that a lot … 173, 177, 172 whoever else … if we use social media, we connect with them on social media beforehand. *At the mention of social media, 173 nods and points at camera to emphasize the point.*And then afterwards, for some years afterwards probably, we’re commenting on each other’s posts, keeping in touch through social media. So, it’s a relationship that’s ongoing. You don’t just cut off at the wedding. You really build that relationship with them because you like them, and they like you and you know so much. And you get to know so much intimate detail about them. You know, they’re trusting you with their most intimate heartfelt thoughts about life and love and all the rest of things and challenges that they have been through and all kinds of things that they wouldn’t even discuss usually between themselves but we eek it out of them during the planning process so we can get those stories. And so, you do develop this really strong bond with them.*[172 is moving around a lot in her seat suggesting frustration with her point about focus on couple being used to provoke debate re differences between Humanist and Independent celebrants?]* |
| **I** | Thank you. 173? |
| **173** | Yeah, I mean that’s ultimately the privilege that we have actually. We’re all curators of the vulnerability, aren’t we? Because when you get married and when I got married, I’m also a performer as well. When I got married in 2012 and I had a Humanist ceremony, I was actually more nervous than any kind of thousand gigs that I had ever done before. Because it was real; it was me. And it was me opening my ribcage *[173 gestures ripping open her chest with her hands and facial expressions]* and exposing my beating heart and saying truthful words and authentic words and yeah, so you need somebody there. You need your cheerleader, and you need your head girl, and you need your mummy figure. Almost, you know, it’s like a mixture of all those things. *At the mention of “cheerleader”, 172, 175, and 177 nod.*To curate your intimacy, to curate your feelings, to give the ultimate shit *[176 and 175 smile]* about how beautiful love is and commitment is. And to celebrate that relationship on that day in front of all their important people. Sorry about saying a rude word! |
| **I** | I am sure the transcribers will cope. |
| **173** | [Laughs] But, you know, we’re just really, really lucky to be able to do that and I think in a way celebrants show their vulnerability too. You know? I definitely cry in ceremonies, in a very professional way of course! And laugh and we’re all humans together and we’re all saying things we believe in and the authenticity and the belief in what you’re saying at the time, it’s the whole point. And it’s the point that couples and us don’t just choose a civil ceremony because we want to believe in everything we’re saying. |
| **I** | Okay. I’ve got 171, then 175 and then I think we should probably move onto the next question. |
| **171** | Yeah, so I agree. I get vetted before somebody books and why should I not? Because this is such an important part of their life. And the wedding ceremonies that I’ve done when people haven’t checked me out, either face-to-face or via Zoom nowadays and I’m already booked, and they’ve paid a deposit. I find that really strange. I welcome it but I do find it really strange and I agree with the follow-up … you know, I’ve been in the position where I’ve married a couple together and then a year down the line, I sadly did the groom’s funeral ceremony. *At mention of funeral, 172, 175 and 177 nod.*But they wanted somebody that they knew. They wanted somebody that they could trust. *[172 is nodding a lot – perhaps to demonstrate that she is not on a different page].* They wanted somebody that they had vetted. As a registrar I used to go out and I used to have a piece of paper. And I used to note people’s names and they had ticked boxes and it was so impersonal. And it didn’t reflect the couple and also it was so unfair with the cost of the wedding that they were paying for with the registration service. *At mention of registrar fee, 173 nods and points, 174 and 172 nod.*I don’t know anybody else’s fees but mine are reflective of the registration service, yet the service that we offer are poles apart. We … you know, we really get to know these people. They get to trust us. They choose us because they like us. Our face fits in their ceremony and that we’re able to offer exactly what they want and we’re able to offer information or hints and tips and answer their queries in a way that the registration service can’t. So, the communication and throughout those years of planning, or even a couple of months of planning, is so important. |
| **I** | 175? |
| **175** | So, I just wanted to follow up on that thing about the long-term relationship. I may have named all three children of the couple … the very first couple I married. And when I left after No. 3, Mum said, “oh 175, we won’t see you again because we’re not planning to have any more!” And that kind of thing is just so important, the relationship with the couple that then become the family is absolutely crucial. *[173 again uses finger to point and show agreement]* |
| **I** | Thank you all. That’s been really helpful. So, 175, you mentioned previously that the couple whose wedding you conducted, were going on to get married. So, I just wanted to ask everybody is it… are the ceremonies you conduct usually part of a process towards a legally binding marriage? So, are these … |
| **175** | …Shall I come in first, because that was my comment? Not often but not necessarily. Some people really do not want a formal legal marriage, for one reason or another. I did a very interesting ceremony for a couple from France who didn’t want … who couldn’t at that time enter into a legal ceremony. Again, I did one for a couple who the registrar rang up on a Wednesday before the ceremony on the Saturday and said, “I’m sorry, your papers haven’t come through from Pakistan. We can’t do your wedding.” So, those kinds of issues arise. On the whole, people are also getting legally married. Sometimes before, sometimes afterwards. I have had couples where the registrars have been quite unpleasant with them about the order in which those things are done and said, “oh, we can’t do it after you’ve had a Humanist ceremony (or whatever)” *[173 and 178 nod]* and clearly a lot of pressure to persuade people to have full ceremonies at the register office or whatever it is rather than the cheapo £50 at 9 o’clock on a Tuesday morning. So, it varies but I would say the majority of my clients are usually getting legally married at some point.*173, 174, 178 nod. 176 raises hand. 172 raises hand as 177 speaks next.* |
| **I** | I’ve got 177, then 176. |
| **177** | Yeah, just to agree with 175 in that most of my couples will get married either before or after the Humanist ceremony. And that bit is not really the bit that’s important to them, even … they’re just doing it for the law basically. And then there are couples who maybe their divorce papers haven’t come through from someone else or they got married in Australia but wanted to have another ceremony here. So, it’s still part of the legal process but not … I don’t want to say a normal process, but not what you would expect with having a Humanist ceremony and then just going to the registrar. Sometimes there’s some of the bits and pieces. I also had a couple who the groom was Sikh, and the bride was Hindu, and they weren’t allowed to get married in the Sikh Temple. So, they wanted a Humanist ceremony because values still aligned even though it wasn’t a religious ceremony and there was lots of scope for a bespoke ceremony and something that they could have that wasn’t just 15 minutes down the registry office. As it happened, the wedding didn’t go ahead because of COVID and all that kind of stuff. But it was all planned out and yeah … so, it’s part of the legal process but not necessarily they always do this and then this.*173, 172, 178 nod.* |
| **I** | 176? |
| **176** | I would endorse that. I find Humanist marriages are often neutral ground for religiously observant families. So, you might have observing Muslims on one side of the room and hard-drinking cradle Catholics on the other side, but because it’s not religious territory they can both join in the wedding ceremony. The wedding I did in August, the couple couldn’t get married legally because all the registry offices were closed. So, that is a problem. I have been asked to do weddings that were deliberately not legal. One woman rang up and said would I do a wedding for her. She was 70. For her and her partner. And I asked about the legals and she said, “no, I don’t want a legal wedding. I will lose my widow’s pension.” *[173 holds her hands to either side of her face to express fake shock and humour].* She then discovered that I had conducted her partner’s previous partner’s funeral the year before and thought she might be better going with another celebrant. But it’s a curious world we inhabit.*At mention of window’s pension, 172, 173, 175, 177 nod.*  |
| **I** | 172 and then 171. |
| **172** | Right, just to say that, yes, either my couples get married in the registrar’s office, which is before, which is the handfasting or after, or I’m doing a couple which are at [venue] in [county], where the couple are having the registrar first and then the registrar is leaving and then I’m going to come in and conduct the wedding part. So, the legal part … they can either have that separately … sometimes families say, “we’ll have that in another room and then we’ll come in”. And sometimes they want everyone to witness it. Because it is important. So, I think people have been surprised, actually, in the past by their feelings when they got legally married. A friend of mine from the other side, when I was just a guest, she was having a religious wedding in a church, but it wasn’t a Church of England church, so she couldn’t have a legal marriage there. So, she … myself and her parents came to her wedding and afterwards she said, “do you know what? Although this isn’t in the sight of God and although I don’t believe it to be a marriage in the sight of God and I’ll live separately from my husband until that moment, it meant something to actually see our names there and know we’re legally married.” So, for a lot of my couples, as an independent, it is a part of … I’m always saying, “well, you can have a jeans and T-shirt wedding or a small wedding”, and often they say, “we do value that part”. So, I think it’s worth noting that actually often couples, even though it’s not what they see as the wedding, they do value that legal part as well. And obviously it would be lovely to include both in a ceremony and be able to do the wedding legally as well. So, that’s just me.  |
| **I** | I’ve got 171, 175, then 173. |
| **171** | I’m usually part of the process, but like somebody said earlier, sometimes not. Usually, I come afterwards. I know the registrar office likes us to come after the ceremony although legally it makes absolutely zero difference. There have been occasions when I have been asked if I can pretend to legally marry them, which obviously we can’t do. But we can, for all intents and purposes, do everything apart from say, “I now legally pronounce you husband and wife”. *172, 173, 175 nod.*So, I have been put in the position where they said, “look, they don’t know we’re not legally married. We’re going off to the registry office …”. Especially at the moment we’re getting this issue. “We’re going off to the registry office with two witnesses in a few months’ time. But this is our big wedding. Can you pretend to legally marry us?” And I have to explain that no, we can’t. But we can, to all intents and purposes, do everything else. You know, and actually it’s a much nicer, flowery, really bespoke part of the ceremony that we provide, that they love anyway. So, yeah, part of the process, but sometimes those lines do become blurred and as a registrar … an ex-registrar, the fact that independents and Humanist celebrants can’t do those legal bits seems absolutely ludicrous, but the issue is financial for the County Councils. *At mention of ludicrous, 177, 172, 173, 178 nod.*They make a huge profit out of their registration services. If they lose their registration big weddings, which they can pay up to £900 for, they are going to lose a huge amount of money and they’re going to kick back and they’re not going to want us doing that legal part. |
| **173** | That’s the elephant.*175 nods.* |
| **171** | Yeah. |
| **173** | In the whole Law Commission thing that’s the elephant and it’s because Councils are notoriously under-funded and have been for the last ten years, but we won’t go into that. |
| **I** | 175? |
| **175** | This relates to … goes back to what 172 was saying about the importance of the legal moment. I have done one legal wedding in Scotland, because as a Humanist UK Accredited Celebrant you can then do ceremonies in Scotland *173 puts thumbs up]*. And it was absolutely magical to be able to do that, to have them signing that piece of paper, which actually represented the legality in that moment, was just incredible. And that’s why I am so passionate about legal Humanist weddings. Because I have experience doing it. It was lovely.*At mention of magical [in Scotland], 172 and 173 nod.* |
| **I** | Thank you all. 176, you mentioned asking I think the 70-year-old about whether she wanted to … whether she was going to get legally married I think? |
| **176** | Yes. Part of process, when are you doing your registry office and that proved rather difficult this summer. |
| **I** | But I just wanted to ask everybody how you see your role in advising couples as to legal status? Is it something you always raise? 173, I think you’re first there. |
| **173** | Yeah, I usually talk about it. And I talk about it from a pragmatic point of view usually. *178, 172, 175, 176 and 177 nod to agree that they all advise re legal status.*Because, actually, a lot of my couples want to know how to do it as cheaply as possible. Because of what 171 was saying because other than your Tuesday morning 9 o’clock must do the statutory ceremony because it’s a human right to offer an affordable wedding, they don’t know how to access that. And usually, it’s a bit hidden behind a door that says, “Beware of the Leopard!” So, you have to be able to educate your couples on the fact that there is something for £49/£56 at [city] Council and you have to be a little bit aware of your rights to go and say, “this is something I want to do”. Also, for example, my couples … often I say, “you know, you don’t have to exchange your rings in that statutory ceremony. If you want to save that moment for your Humanist wedding *[178 and 172 nod]*, that will make it all the more special and all the more real in that symbolic, gestural, cultural way that a ring exchange is. Because a ring exchange is not legal, it’s just lovely and usual in Western society.” So, you know, advice like that and just making sure that couples know that it is fine to get married afterwards if you can’t find room before. Although I kind of prefer the registry office to be before me, because then I’m the last and I’m the best! |
| **172** | Can I say as well, I think that when we’re talking about celebrants and what we do, probably everyone here who’s ever been to a wedding fair, one of the first questions you get asked is, “what is a celebrant, and can you marry me legally?” And that’s such a common part of being asked. *At the mention of wedding fair, 173 nods.*Whenever you … it was the first question I was asked at my first ever wedding fair. And I think that that’s something that couples do get very confused by. And it’s very confusing for them because they see the wedding as all that stuff and the legal side of it is filling something in. They don’t understand why we can’t do both and so it is a very common question. And I think that how I would put it, is exactly how 173 and other people have said, which is we advise them on the legal side. *[172 explicitly agrees with participant with whom disagreed earlier]* I give them information on how they can get married cheaply or in a registry office and I explain that I can’t, at any point, legally marry them, which is what 171 was saying. Because that is very important. I’m not allowed to use words like “marry” and “I pronounce you” but I can say, “I can present the bride and groom” and I can say, “I am joining together” in the wedding ceremony. I just can’t say, “married” and “marriage”. So, knowing those legal things, I explain that … when I’m talking to my couples, I explain terminology as well. I’m always very clear on what I can and can’t say.*171 and 177 raise hand.* |
| **I** | 177, do you have your hand up again? |
| **177** | Yeah, sorry, I was just going to add that some of my couples don’t even know what the process is. Whether … they don’t even know how to give notice. *[172 and 173 nod].* They say they’ve googled it but then, obviously, when you google stuff, there’s a mountain of information that’s not necessarily related to what you need to know. And the [city] Council website is quite confusing. You end up clicking through quite a few pages and options and things. So, yeah, some of the couples it’s not even clear to them where to start the process. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 171? |
| **171** | When you go in and give your notice … I’m talking about two registration services that I’ve worked for, so I’m not talking about nationwide. But I know for a fact that registrars actively dissuade couples from using celebrants. *[172, 173, 175 and 177 nod. 174 and 178 quietly listening – passive body language].* I’ve heard and I’ve seen registrars in the process of talking to a couple when a couple will say, “we’re getting married on so-and-so. We need to give our notice, blah-blah-blah”. “Oh, where are you getting married?” “Oh no, we’re having a celebrant, so we just want a statutory wedding.” I’ve heard registrars saying, “you don’t want to do that. Why are you doing that? We do the whole thing.” So, I’ve heard registrars actively dissuading couples. Plus, on the websites for … and I’ve looked at so many registration service websites for the different County Councils. The statutory wedding is usually either on a different page or way, way down and the process is so complicated. Like 177 was saying, it’s so complicated that by the time a couple are booking a venue, they think they have to have a registrar there. County Councils have got it sewn up as far as that goes. They really withhold … I think they actively withhold information. And I’ve seen them actively dissuading couples from having independent, Humanist or civil celebrants. I think that’s a shame. That’s probably morally and ethically very wrong.*175 raises hand* |
|  | And they also call their celebrants, celebrants now. So, I applied for one before I became a celebrant. And they now call you a celebrant when you’re conducting the service. |
| **173** | Just a very quick little thing. The last wedding that I did in September, that I told you about in [city], that couple went to [council] Registrars because [the venue] is a civilly registered ceremony, and this was … their original wedding was going to be in April in 2020 and of course it got shunted. And [council] tried, with both hands, for about ten minutes to get them to just say, “well, you should just book … just in case” and it’s like just in case what? Just in case you run me over before the ceremony. I mean …. What? Happily, my couple knew that… they are card carrying Humanists. They wanted a Humanist celebrant. They were very firm in their convictions. But if they were less firm in their convictions and they weren’t really sure, they could quite easily have been dissuaded. And it’s definitely a thing. Definitely 171 is 100% right and it’s not on. But it’s because of the elephant. |
| **171** | And it’s also [*inaudible 00:42:32*] It is quite a common thing that a registrar would sit down and ask why, which is way beyond their remit. But it’s not an uncommon thing to happen. |
| **173** | Yeah. But they were shocked. My couple were shocked, and they came back and told on them to me. They were like, “I can’t believe that they tried so hard to persuade me. It was really … we were totally … we were flabbergasted by it.” |
| **175** | I’ve had that too and also, I have been told by not one, but two venues, I don’t know how common this is, that registrars have implied that they really shouldn’t use celebrants if they are a registered venue *[173 opens mouth wide to suggest shock then puts thumbs up]*. And being quite heavy about it. |
| **172** | I actually lost a wedding in the summer to that. The venue was told by the … the family wanted to get married legally and then process over a bridge onto an island where I would then marry them. And the registrar flatly refused to conduct the ceremony if I was involved. And I lost the wedding. And the venue stopped talking to me. And that was … it was actually booked. So, they hadn’t paid the deposit, but they were devastated. But they wanted that wedding, and they couldn’t have it if I was involved. *173 pulls a face to indicate shock.*So, I’m just saying that what everyone here is saying. I’m not anti-registrars. I’ve got friends who are ex-registrars. I’ve got nothing against them but there are some very underhand tactics going on and if you could make £650 three or four times in a day, as they do on a Saturday in [county], and they pay the registrars time and a half. 35 quid a wedding, you would do it too because they’re cash strapped and I was a teacher, so I know how cash strapped they are. Anyway, I’ll shut up. Sorry, I just wanted to add my little penny’s worth. *[self-depreciating tone suggesting continued fear of unacceptance within group]* Because that was really annoying. |
| **I** | So, you all mentioned conducting weddings in different places. Could you say where your ceremonies generally take place or is there no “general” for you? *178 and 177 raise hand*177? |
| **177** | Most of my ceremonies are outdoors. They’re usually at a venue that is already licensed. Just because they’re usually set up with staff and catering and already have an order of things and an experience. So, that tends to be where couples go for. Or it’s a venue that has some meaning to the couple *[176 and 173 nod]*. So, like the first wedding I did, it was a pub that they always used to end up when they went for a nice walk. And we had it outside or there are some venues that have a license but obviously it’s only a room, not the venue. So, the couple might want … [city venue] was one where the licensed bit is inside, but the couple wanted the ceremony outside. As it happened it rained, so we ended up inside. But they wanted their ceremony outside, but at that venue. So, yeah, it tends to be outdoors for my ceremonies anyway. |
| **I** | Thank you. 175? |
| **175** | Yes, mine also tend to be outdoors, in the summer at any rate. Actually, I would say the majority of the ones I do aren’t in registered venues *[177 smiles]*. I think the way I pitch myself attracts people who want to do it in venues that are very meaningful to them. As they have chosen a Humanist ceremony because that’s meaningful to them. And that sort of goes together. So, outdoors, yes. Lots of back gardens. Sometimes, as somebody mentioned, knocked through to the neighbours to make room. Beaches, clifftops, I’ve done all sort of unconventional venues. Occasionally I get booked for the grand … the big hotel, but it’s not that often.*174 raises hand* |
| **I** | 174 first and then I’ve got a queue. |
| **174** | I just had to unmute myself. I think it’s just carrying on from what a couple of the others have just said. I think the thing is about being an independent … well, a celebrant, is that the couples that we marry have that choice *[lots of nodding from participants]*. A lot of the ones that do get conducted are in non-registered places because people can get married where they want to get married. I think 175 said, on top of a mountain, on a boat, on the beach, in the forest, in the woods. You’ve got so much choice and people are so varied in what they want that they can kind of go all out and have it anywhere. So, as a celebrant we can find ourselves in any situation. Some very strange ones as well, to be quite honest. And I think that’s the good thing about it, is the choice.*At the mention of ‘very strange ones’, 172, 173, 175 and 177 nod.* |
| **I** | Thank you. I’ve got 178, 176 and then 172. |
| **178** | My ceremonies tend to be all over the place. So, they’re in licensed very, very posh hotels, they’re in barns, they’re in village halls, they’re in hired B&B type … big posh houses where you can go and 30 of you stay overnight for the weekend and they have the whole wedding that goes over a weekend. I’ve done them in all sorts of places, in tepees. A lot of the time it’s in a hotel or a pub and if it’s the summer you have the choice of going outside if the weather is nice and I always go, “what’s your Plan B if it’s not?” *[177 and 172 nod].* And so, they book a room in the hotel, if it’s going to be in a hotel, where you know you’re going to be safe to do the ceremony and nobody is going to get wet. But you’ve got that choice as a celebrant to take it out into the garden, which registrars don’t have, obviously, unless there’s a big structure there that you have to sit under. So, again, it’s a choice but my couples always have their ceremony because they want the personalisation and it’s not … doesn’t tend to be because they want it in that barn, especially … yes, they fall in love with the barn, but they’re wanting the ceremony because of the ceremony rather than where it’s going to be *[174 nods]*. |
| **I** | Thank you. 176? |
| **176** | Most of mine … most of the ones I really like are outdoors. I mean there the odd high-end ones with private security and NDA’s but … I live in [county]. When the farmers have taken their hay, put up a couple of Yurts and have weddings in them. That’s my ideal. *[172 and 173 smile].*  And some of them are deeply personal. There’s one just down the road from me where the couple got married under an Oak tree in their father’s field. That’s where the family namings are held now and they’re always held outdoors, regardless of the weather and I really love them. |
| **172** | I was just going to say my favourite one was [historic site]. I took part in a handfasting in [historic site] for a couple, one of whom was very seriously ill, and they couldn’t wait until COVID was over to commit to each other. Back gardens … I like small weddings, I have to say. *[173 smiles – it feels as if tension is lifting/commonality is being found between these two participants who disagreed at start].* I’m quite unusual in that. So, I market small weddings. Not…. before COVID, you know, I like back garden weddings. I do back garden funerals, I do back garden … wherever, woodlands, outdoors. That’s one of the attractions for me because if I was getting married, I would be barefoot in a field with my feet in the earth and my hands in nature and that’s me. And I think that’s why now I offer more Pagan-style. But that’s why, that’s what we love about it. I think everyone here would say they don’t want to do boring. They want to do something that’s meaningful and what attracts my couples is that link to the outdoors, to nature, but also to the words we say. But … yeah. |
| **I** | 171, then 175. |
| **171** | Yeah, one thing that I’m getting more and more … as people are becoming more and more aware of celebrants and what they do … my first enquiries quite often at the moment … usually they used to be, “we’ve already got a venue. We’ve got a date. We’ve got a venue.” More and more now, I’m getting couples who are enquiring about my availability over a certain period because they’re saying, “we haven’t chosen a venue yet. Can you explain the process?” [*172, 175 nod. 173 puts thumbs up].*And when I explain the process, that they don’t have to use a licensed venue. That they can use anywhere. And there are venues. There are very nice venues as well that aren’t licensed specifically for Humanist or civil celebrants. They are usually cheaper and plus a lot more couples are going for these venues. But a lot more couples are getting in contact with me beforehand … before they’ve booked a venue, saying, “please explain the process. Where can we get married?” And so, I’m seeing a lot more people enquiring about me before they’ve booked the venue. |
| **175** | Yeah, 171 has covered a lot of what I was going to say. If I get in at that early stage, I will also explain to people that it’s a lot cheaper not to use a registered venue. That there are all sorts of things they can do to reduce that ridiculous average cost of a wedding. £30,000 … think what else they could be spending that money on. So, talking about using gardens. Talking about getting their guests each to bring a dish for the reception. All that kind of thing. But you know, yes, I think there are an increasing number of people who are contacting us earlier and that’s fantastic.*172, 173, 174, 178 nod.* |
| **I** | And 177, did you want to come in with anything there? |
| **177** | Yes. I just wanted to add in that in [county] there’s venues that now are aware of celebrant weddings and pitching themselves as wedding venues but not licensed. So, places like [venue], which is … it was an old church that’s been redone now, and it is an events and weddings venue, but they’re not licensed. And they are very pro celebrant ceremonies. Not just Humanist ceremonies but celebrants’ ceremonies. Things like breweries where they have a massive empty space with just benches where people go for a drink. They’re now saying that they’ve got this massive space you can have a wedding. But obviously they’re not licensed. So, yeah, I just wanted to add that there are some new types of venues coming. *[178 nods]**173 raises hand.* |
| **I** | Thank you. And 173? |
| **173** | Yeah, that’s just one sentence and it kind of leaks into your next question about the idea of the knowledge of celebrant ceremonies and how personalised and how flexible they can be. It’s not only leaking to the couples, but therefore leaking to venues as well. And I’ve definitely seen this in [city]. There are venues that used to be City venues that … for example, there’s one in [district] called [venue name] and they’ve always marketed themselves as a reception venue. And now they’ve knocked down an adjacent railway arch and they’re building a ceremony area. But they don’t intend to be civilly registered because they know that they can use celebrants. And [venue name] in [county]. It’s the same. They never intend to get civilly registered because they’ve made a fairy wood grotto for the ceremonies but deliberately move to the barn for the reception. They have no need to be civilly registered anymore. Because they know this exists and they’re just educating their clients that come and see the beautiful photos and they say, “guys, get a statutory ceremony. Here’s our celebrant list.” It’s great *[lots of nodding from participants]*. |
| **I** | You’ve done the segue into the next question for me, which is whether you have seen a change in demand over the last ten years. |
| **171** | Definitely, absolutely. *173 and 176 raise hand.*When I joined the Registration Service, I didn’t even know what independent celebrants were and we … you slowly started to hear about them and then by the time I had left the Registration Service and decided to go independent, it was still not a very common thing or a very well-known thing, civil celebrants or Humanist celebrants. And I’ve seen … I think COVID has helped us insomuch as registration officers haven’t been available. They have actually … I know some couples have been told, “we can’t come and do your date anymore.” Or “we can’t do the date that your wedding has been postponed to. There are independent celebrants out there”, and that is from registration officers, but that’s a very, very new thing. So, yeah, I think COVID has spurred our business on anyway. But I think there’s been a very definite rise over the last few years.*172 and 178 nod.* |
| **I** | Anyone else like to comment on that? I see various nods. Yeah, 173, 174 and 176. |
| **173** | Yeah, I suppose I want to say that it’s a nice version of COVID19. You know? It’s very infectious. Because most of the couples that I get, I would say 80% of the couples I get come to me and they say, “the reason that we’ve chosen a Humanist ceremony is because we went to one. And we went to one and our minds were blown. And we were like why is everyone not doing this? This is amazing. This is exactly what we want.” And they’ve stored it away. They’ve squirrelled it into their heads and as soon as they became engaged, both of them said … it’s weird that it’s a both of them thing. And I don’t know if that is because they are Humanists and it was a … you know, it was like a tick box thing that it occurs to them that they want that belief system. And … but yes, it’s always a conversation I have originally. They say, “we saw a couple in Scotland. We saw legal ones. We some in Ireland. Our best friend had a Humanist ceremony last year and we cried, and we laughed, and we want one.” So, yeah, it’s infectious, in a nice way. So, it makes sense that it ekes over everywhere. I also feel that because they are legal in Scotland and they are very, very popular in Scotland, Humanist ceremonies, more popular than any other form of ceremony to do, and increasingly so. I think people just know about them more because you can have them and that’s how it works. The more you see, the more you have. |
| **I** | Thank you. 174? |
| **174** | Right, okay. I’m going to kind of go the other way. I find that the majority of people that I speak to, even down to family members … when I started out on this venture and I might not be as experienced as others because I’ve only been doing it for three years and I was teaching full time during that time as well. So, I’m reasonably new. I’ve only done a handful of ceremonies. But I find that people not only don’t know what’s available to them and where they can get married and are astounded by all these lovely places they can choose from. That, at the wedding … at the time of giving the wedding, my own included, because I got married last year myself, and knew my rights and what I could get away with and what I could do. People come up to me and say, “oh my god, that was so beautiful. I’ve never seen a Sand ceremony, or I’ve never seen a Pebble ceremony and I’ve never seen this” and it kind of … I find that people don’t really know what’s out there and what celebrants do. So, I think that people … they know they can have a celebrant, but they just don’t know what’s available to them. That’s basically what I’m finding but then, like I say, I am reasonably new. I’ve only been on the scene for a couple of years. |
| **I** | Thank you. 176, then 177. |
| **176** | I just want to echo what 175 was saying, that the success of legal weddings, legal Humanist weddings in Scotland I think has fed into the attraction down south. The problem is when you get enquiries from couples who live in Scotland but want to get married in England and get very cross when they find out they have to go to a bloody registry office! It’s … I think Scotland’s wedding industry now is completely different.*173 and 175 nod.* |
| **I** | Thank you. 177? |
| **177** | I have forgotten what I was going to say! Just remind me what the question was?  |
| **I** | Whether you had seen a change in demand … |
| **177** | Oh yeah. So, I got married in 2013 at a hotel venue and there was not even a mention of celebrants. The venue was like, “this is what you do. You go to see the Registrar da-te-da-te-da.” And I think, as more venues are becoming more aware of celebrants, that’s helping a little bit. But I also think the popularity of Humanist funerals … so, whenever I go anywhere and do a ceremony or do a store, one of the first things that people say to me is, “oh, I went to a Humanist funeral and it was really nice. Tell me about the other ceremonies and that kind of thing.” So, I sort of agree with 174 in that sometimes people are kind of aware that there’s something different going on but not necessarily aware exactly of what a celebrant is and what we do. But there’s definitely an increase in demand, simply because I think because of the awareness. The marketing as well. Things like the campaigns in Northern Ireland that Humanist UK have been doing. So, Northern Ireland now legally recognises Humanist ceremonies. *At the mention of NI legally recognised ceremonies, 172 and 173 nod. 172 raises hand, 171 looks tired and holds her head in her hands.*Jersey, Guernsey and every time there’s a box ticked, it’s … like 173 says, it pings in someone’s mind that, “oh, yeah. I will file that away.” But I definitely think it comes from the other ceremony types as well. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 172? |
| **172** | I think it’s really important to address the Humanist/independent celebrant question when we talk about whether things are more popular. As a funeral celebrant I often get told, “we don’t want a religious funeral. We want a Humanist. We don’t want a religious wedding. We want a Humanist.” I think what’s really important is that it doesn’t just become all about a battle between independent celebrants and Humanists UK … and Humanist celebrants. Because that’s so not what we’re about and actually there must be a place for couples like the couples that I work with, who want elements of religion. I’m not having a go … I am a Humanist, okay? I am a Member of Humanist UK. I have a certificate in Humanism. I am not having a pop at Humanist UK. I totally disagree with them on this, but I am not having a pop. What I would say is, it’s really important that we don’t just get divided into you have to have a registrar office wedding, which is civil, or you can have a Humanist wedding, which again, unless someone else says the words, is non-religious. And I think it’s really important that we educate everyone. Now, what I’m finding is that I have a battle sometimes to explain what an independent celebrant is, compared to a Humanist celebrant. And not denigrating either. If someone wants a purely Humanist ceremony, then they need to know that. But I think it would be really detrimental if we only go down the Humanist UK or Humanist weddings as the only alternative to a registry office wedding. Because that wouldn’t necessarily include everyone who wants that kind of wedding. I’m sorry if that’s not the time to say it, but I think it’s really important. Because there’s lots of Humanists on here and I’m sympathetic but I have to make the point that independent celebrants are also, under the Wedding Celebrancy Commission, wanting to be legally able to wed because we believe in what we offer as well. |
| **I** | I’ve got 171 and 173 and 177.  |
| **171** | I absolutely agree. It’s about giving people choice. If you railroad people into saying you’ve got this choice or this choice, they’re going to take one of those choices. If you say, this is your choice and it’s a lot, lot bigger than you will ever need but you will find what you want and what fulfils you, as a couple, and fulfils you … whatever your religious needs are, whatever your personal needs are, whatever your personal belief. And most people aren’t card carrying members of Humanist UK in the huge population of England. Most of them aren’t. So, why should they have a Humanist UK wedding if there is another option? If they want to have a Humanist UK wedding – amazing. They are wonderful, wonderful ceremonies. But they should also have the choice of independent celebrants as well because there are so many independent celebrants out there that are going to not be able to work, will lose their business and won’t be seen and that’s a real, real shame if it all goes under the Humanist UK umbrella, which it’s done in other parts of the country. *178 looks distracted – looking off screen and talking to someone in her house* |
| **I** | Okay. I want to let other people have their say but, obviously, the debate is perhaps slightly outside of the questions we’re asking here. But, 173, did you want to come in on that? |
| **173** | Yeah. I mean I guess the whole thing about that … obviously everybody in the room is passionate about giving personal ceremonies and we are all here because we really, really care about giving couples personal, memorable, gorgeous ceremonies that mean something to them. But I think the reason that HUK ceremonies are legal in Scotland and other ones aren’t is because Humanists UK is a company … a charity that is accountable. You know? It has a complaints procedure, it has peer review, it has certified training that costs a lot of money because it is very extended and I feel, personally, that if independent celebrants had something that existed for decades that was the same kind of umbrella that had a complaints procedure, that had a network, that had peer review, that had all of that, to herd the cats as it were … |
| **171** | We do…. |
| **172** | No, but you see, I am registered. I’m registered and trained, and it cost me a lot of money. |
| **173** | No, I understand that and that’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is these things have to be similar. We all know that technically speaking you can set up to be a celebrant just by getting a nice video and a website and go for it. And we all make our decisions. All of us here are training and qualified and registered but that doesn’t mean that everybody out there is, and we’ve already said that a lot of couples are uninformed about what they can have. And therefore, it just has to be better regulated and that’s the reason that Humanists UK has more advantages in that because it’s just simply been around for longer. It’s been around for 100+ years and that’s not our fault. It’s not anything that we’re doing to be arseholes, it’s a belief system that’s been around for decades and that’s why. So …*178 is frantically waving her arms around* |
| **172** | I think celebrancy has been going in this country since the … |
| **178** | Sorry everyone, I’ve got to go. |
| **I** | Thank you, 178. |
| **178** | Can I just say, independent celebrants, you’ve got way more celebrants than HUK has got in the country and you do way more ceremonies than we do. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you will be absolutely fine. But I’ve got to go. I’m really sorry, but good luck. If you need any more answers to any more questions just ping me an email and I will reply by email.*178 leaves zoom meeting.* |
| **I** | Thank you for joining us, 178. So, I can see that 177 and 175 want to come in. As I say, I don’t want this to turn into a big debate about the relative merits of Humanist and Independent ceremonies but equally I don’t want to close down discussion if people do want to make a quick point. 177. |
| **177** | Yeah, I was just going to say I don’t think it’s appropriate in this discussion to be saying Humanist celebrants versus independents. We are all here to inform the research. Some of what 173 was saying I’ve addressed in Question 11, so it probably will come up again. But I just wanted to say in regard to what 172 was saying that the proposals do include independent celebrants as well as Humanist celebrants. *[Refers to written notes].* It says if the Government decides to admit them, that the scheme would enable weddings from independent celebrants as well as Humanist celebrants and most Humanist celebrants would agree that there is a need for independent celebrants as well as Humanist celebrants because there’s people who don’t want a Humanist ceremony. So, it’s not really … this research isn’t about that and … but there is scope in the proposals for independents *[172 puts thumbs up, 173, 174 nod].* |
| **I** | Thank you, 177. Yes, and we will come onto those in a moment. 175, did you want to … |
| **175** | Yeah, just to say I don’t think it should be polarised either but the point about Humanist ceremonies is Humanism is a recognised belief system. So, it’s not a question of choosing your celebrant, it’s a Human Rights issue. If people are Humanist, they should be able to have a legal Humanist ceremony like a legal Catholic ceremony or Church of England ceremony. So, that’s the point. It doesn’t say the other forms of … it’s not to say we shouldn’t have other forms of ceremony; we’re simply saying Humanism should be recognised … Humanism is a belief system and therefore Humanist ceremonies are a Human Right *[174, 172, 17 nod, 173 puts thumbs up]*. But I welcome choice and diversity. |
| **I** | Okay. Can I take you onto the next question, which I think you very much answered, in some ways, in everything you’ve said so far. But I just wanted to ask it explicitly in case there’s other points you want to make, which is why you think it’s important to conduct these ceremonies. 174 is waving at me. Sorry. |
| **174** | I think I’m going to tie in a little bit with the last question as well here. I think it’s extremely important and I’m quite sure everyone is going to agree with me here, and I’ve got to give you an example from my own experience. I’m Pagan and I have been since I was a teenager. I’m 52 now and a handfasting, a legal handfasting would have meant the entire world to me. I first got married in church and I’ve since got married again last year, like so many of us do unfortunately. And I had my handfasting. That ceremony, that I wrote myself as well, by the way, that was performed by members of my grove. I’m a Druid. I can’t explain to you how important it was to me to get married in a handfasting. It meant more to me … it was almost as if I was pledging myself to my religion and my beliefs as well as to my husband. And it’s … it was such an incredible day. I give myself goosebumps just thinking about it. And I think, because of these reasons, it is highly important that people do have these choices and can get married in any way, in any religion, with any belief system that they choose to do. Because I think 173 mentioned it earlier, people want … they’re expressing their love, they’re opening their hearts to you and to their partners and to their family and friends. And they want to do it in that way that is gripping to them, not … when I look back at my previous wedding, my church wedding and I’m not disrespecting any Christian religion or the church but, as beautiful as it was, it didn’t have that oomph behind it and I think that’s what … if people have got that freedom, it’s going to make the world of difference.*172 and 173 nod.* |
| **I** | 177, then 173, then 172. |
| **177** | I actually wrote some notes down, if you don’t mind me reading them out. That’s easier. So, I wrote down the Government is saying that the needs of non-religious people are met because civil ceremonies are available, which is not true. Their needs are not met. Humanist ceremonies are about celebrating life and the couple, sharing the couples’ story, their dreams and aspirations. They are written based on what values are most important to that couple. There’s freedom of choice, which is not available in a civil ceremony like the venue, the celebrant, the order and the length of the ceremony, the symbolic actions and it’s a ceremony that is written collaboratively. So, the couple have full input, full control over edits, which again is not available in a civil ceremony. My couples celebrate the Humanist ceremony date as their anniversary, not the day of their legal civil one and if civil ceremonies really addressed our needs, the needs of non-religious people, 1) the dates of both would be equally important and 2) people wouldn’t opt for a Humanist ceremony in the first place. And that’s agreeing there with 174 in that her Paganism is something that was really important in her ceremony and for a Humanist ceremony it’s the Humanism as well. It’s the being able to have your values recognised as part of your wedding ceremony and your declaration of commitment. So, yeah, that’s why I think it’s important to have that.  |
| **I** | Thank you. 173? |
| **173** | Yeah, I think I have … I could go on for an hour, as you might possibly guess. But I’m just going to narrow it down to two points. 1) words matter. Authentic words matter and what you say on probably what is one of the most important days of your life, you have to believe everything. Like you were saying about your church service, you know? It’s beautiful but you’re still slightly crossing your fingers or being a passive observer to some of those words, because you do not believe in them. When you believe in something wholeheartedly and that is not spiritual necessarily or … you know, whatever it is and for me, personally, as a bride, I wanted that Humanist ceremony. We booked that before we booked our venue. Same thing as you were saying earlier, 171. It was the primary consideration for us. And … because words matter. They matter. And that’s the end of it. *171 leaves screen view but keeps camera on. She returns and raises hand. As does 172.*Authenticity and truth matter on your wedding day. You’ve got to hear something you believe in and you’ve got to say something you believe in. And then the second thing that I’m looking down and cribbing with is yeah … of course. *Looks at written notes.* Sorry, this is kind of 1a), so it’s kind of attached. When we first got in contact with our Humanist celebrant in 2012, we said jokingly that we were romantic Atheists. Because the idea that a civil ceremony is enough when you have a heart full of joy and poetry and glory and you know, it just seems a bit rude to say that all the beautiful language is not necessary for the likes of you. You know? What’s going on there? That’s just craziness. I’m a musician as well. Having beautiful music was important to me and a composer friend of mine set some words by Andrew Motion and they had metaphorical spirituality references in them that were clearly metaphor and weren’t at all religious. But they wouldn’t have been allowed in a civil ceremony. But that means so much. It’s the ultimate. It was the ultimate for us and it was the most beautiful thing because we’re humans and we need it. I can’t even remember my second point now because I’m thinking about my wedding. So, I might come back later. |
| **I** | Thank you for that anyway. 172 and then 171. |
| **172** | I completely agree with everything that 173 and 177 have said, so there you go, that’s a first for the day! *[all participants smile or laugh]* All I wanted to say was when I was inside the Stone Circle taking part in handfasting, I went into that stone circle an atheist and I came out spiritually awoken and that happened to me and I was helping perform the ceremony. And I think that is what is so important, the power of words. That actually the people that were there, were there and were able to express something. It wasn’t deeply Pagan, it was spiritual. There’s nothing for spirituality in any of the current wedding things. You can be non-religious, or you can be whatever. But actually, spiritual rather than religious is not catered for. And I completely agree. That’s what the passion is. You have to be able to believe. You have to be able to say, “yes I believe that the stars and the moons are aligning for me today because I love this person and I’m passionate about them and I want to be able to say the words that are in my heart. And if that mentions God then that’s fine. And if it mentions a deity that no-one has ever heard of, that’s fine. It doesn’t matter because that’s my belief and my faith.” And that is why most of us here are independent or Humanist celebrants because we know that that matters. Exactly what … I think 177 put it beautifully and 173 has just added to it. So, that’s my two pennies. |
| **I** | Thank you. 171? |
| **171** | I’m going to go slightly away from what other people have said. I cater for the [area] and I also cater for [county], where I also have a house. And there are areas in [that county], which are the most deprived … some of the most deprived in the country, in [part of that county] and things like that. And some couples that get in contact with me simply can’t afford the venues, the whole shebang. And the words are actually less important to them. They want the ritual. The words aren’t quite as important. The feeling isn’t quite as important. They want the event, they want the ritual and the financial aspect of what we do, I think, is really important. We are so much more affordable because we do perform ceremonies in fields, in people’s back gardens where they haven’t had to pay what’s the minimum spend venue level thing that they have to go into, which is sometimes running into the tens of thousands before they even add the caterers or the musicians and things like that. Let alone the registrars. So, for me, it’s also the financial aspect. Up in the [area] where people are going to spend £30,000/£40,000 fine … they’re not going to consider the financial aspect so much. But some of the places down here in [county], there is a real financial aspect. And these people have a right to get married. And it doesn’t matter that they don’t want the bells and the whistles and … some of these people, they actually don’t like standing up and saying things in front of people. They really do want me to floor manage and take this ritual for them and perform this ritual for them in front of their family and friends. And I think making it more affordable is a service that is … that we really offer … all of us really, really offer and I think that’s invaluable *[Lots of nodding from participants]*.*172 turns off camera an misses Q8.* |
| **I** | Thank you all. So, I’m conscious of time and I do want to get on to the Law Commission proposals. Can I just ask if there’s been any change in your own roles or the types of ceremonies you conduct over the last ten years? *All shake heads.*Lots of shaking of heads. Sorry, 171? |
| **171** | Apart from registration to independents … |
| **I** | Yes, yes. But as a celebrant [*inaudible 01:20:34*]. Okay. Great. So, I think you’re all aware of the Law Commission proposals. I don’t need to summarise them for you. So, would the proposed reforms make it easier for the types of ceremonies you perform to be legally binding, is the question we have. I don’t know … I can see nods. I don’t know if anyone wants to speak about that specifically? *173 and 175 raise hands*173? |
| **173** | Of course! It will be amazing. I think it would be all of our dreams, to be honest. And I think that it would be the dream of very many couples who maybe don’t even get as far as getting in contact with us. Because I am aware … rumour mills, etc., that there are couples who did opt for civil ceremonies who say, “well, we would have done it, but you know, we had to choose and, in the end, we liked the idea of having one ceremony where it happened, and it was legal. And then it was more expensive, and it was all just a little bit of a hassle.” So, it was easier just to go with the single thing and of course they are always encouraged by the registrars as well, to just go simple, easy, bish-bash-bosh. None of this question from your grandma about, “is that the real wedding, June?” You know. It’s done. And so, of course, we would then have that and then there would be no … I don’t know … compromise. There would be no compromise. It would be legally recognised, which also says essentially the Government approves of us. Because, at the moment, it feels like the Government are saying we’re not real and we’re not authentic and we’re not needed. And we’re not necessary and Heaven forefend, we’re not viable. And that’s just not true. The amount of couples that choose us already and they have to jump through these hoops and they still choose us. That shows how needed and necessary we are. And … it’s ridiculous. The end! *172, 175, 174 nod.* |
| **I** | Okay. I’ve got 175 and 177 waiting to come in. I did also want to check if 176 wanted to say anything because I know he has to go.*176 shakes head to indicate nothing to add.* |
| **175** | The only problem with the Law Commission proposals, as I see it, is the timetable. It’s already been agreed in the High Court that legal … the Human … legal Humanist weddings should be our legal right. Unfortunately, it has then got mixed up with the Law Commission. It would be really great if .. whatever the other proposals are, Humanist marriage could be agreed straight away, like it should have been for years, like it is in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Jersey and coming in Guernsey. It’s … yeah, that’s the only problem. Otherwise, it’s fine.*173 and 174 nod.*  |
| **I** | 177? |
| **177** | I was just going to say … what was I going to say? Sorry, I keep doing this. Oh yeah, I have an example where a couple has just cancelled their Humanist wedding because the groom’s mother-in-law has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. So, because that’s not going to be legal, they are now cancelling the Humanist ceremony and going for a quick civil ceremony, like 173 said, bish-bash-bosh. Whereas, if Humanist ceremonies were legally binding, they would have brought that forward and celebrated it with a more meaningful ceremony. And, as it is, we don’t get to do that. I would have loved to have done a really meaningful ceremony with them and got mother-in-law involved and stuff. But, yeah, because it’s not legal, they just cancelled and a quick civil ceremony. *172 raises hand* |
| **I** | Thank you. Okay. 172, do you want to come in? |
| **172** | Just quickly to say that the WCC welcome the Law Review and the celebrants, like me, who have been following it with interest and have taken part in the deliberations and have attended the legal side of it and I wasn’t one of them unfortunately … I was doing a funeral. We all welcome that because actually the more celebrant weddings that are freed to be legal, the more happy brides we’ve got. And I think the point made earlier on that actually the money side of it is the biggest problem for Government, because they will then have to fund the Local Authorities and Local Authorities make a lot of money out of doing it, not just from the registrars themselves but from the licensing process, which, as 171 has hit on before, I do know of threats to withdrawn licenses. It might be difficult to renew your license if you continue to have celebrant weddings. That has been reported in celebrant circles before, as threats made by registrars or on their behalf. So, what I would say is if all registered, qualified celebrants and that’s the difference, not unqualified, not unregistered, no-one wants that. Qualified, registered, legally insured and monitored celebrants are put forward as being able to conduct weddings, then you will have happy couples throughout the land. And other venues will also be free to hold them. I’m currently a celebrant for a cave. And a friend of mine is a celebrant for a nuclear bunker. *[176, 171 and 173 smile].* So, there are so many wonderful decommissioned places. We do … the WCC, the Wedding Celebrancy Commission, have been putting forward and trying to be heard in this debate and all agree that this is a good thing and that actually the legal side of it looks effective and suitable. No-one wants it to be a battle between types of celebrant. We just want to go forward with all celebrants. But, yes, there should be, and it’s indicated in the information … there should be strong, legal surroundings and should be monitored and it should have a very good structure. And most reputable training bodies are putting that in place, and they are also raising their training standards from certificate to diploma and they are registering them nationally in order to make sure that when this happens, it’s a legal transition that’s easy and everyone will be accountable. |
| **I** | Thank you. And 174, do you want to come in there? |
| **174** | Just very quickly … I won’t keep this long. I just want to say one thing, equality. Because, as a Pagan, sometimes I almost felt a bit discriminated against and I think these reforms are going to be brilliant if this can go ahead. Because it’s equality. What we’ve got at the moment is outdated. It’s just about being equal. |
| **I** | 173? |
| **173** | I realised I look like … |
| **176** | *Is waving.* I have to leave, guys. Nice to see you all. |
| **I** | Thank you very much 176.*176 leaves zoom meeting.* |
| **173** | Yeah. This is … yes, it is. The thing that I see a lot and I feel is the prevailing wind in England and Wales at the moment and actually the UK, is that we are in the main a secular society. The majority of people are non-religious in some way. But the difficulty in a post religious society in this way is that culture and religion is still quite velcro’d together. And I often deal with the blurred lines between cultural significance and cultural qualities and gestures in a ceremony that matters with families throughout the ages *[177, 174 and 175 nod]*. And actually, what people believe. Because there are people who are culturally Jewish, and they do want to have Jewish cultural gestures in their wedding ceremony but that doesn’t mean that they believe in God. It means that this is part of their heritage and this is part of their cultural observance and respect towards their families. But it doesn’t mean that it’s actually religious. So, I find that kind of thing quite interesting and something to talk about as well. Because it feeds into the old-fashioned nature of how our current wedding system is at the moment. In that, for example, a civil ceremony is … you know, you can’t have Robbie Williams Angels. You know? That kind of thing. It’s absolutely 100% down. Whereas there is so much cultural heritage in society that means something sentimentally to people but actually isn’t affixed to believing in a god or gods. And it should, and can be, recognised without it being an act of worship, which is what I do. And have done. |
| **I** | I’ve got 171, then 177 I think in that order. |
| **171** | As far as the Law Commission’s comments go, I would, for me it’s … I think the main idea is … for me, would be to license the person who’s undertaking the ceremony, not the place. At the moment, the venue is licensed. The person has the authority to perform a legal ceremony. The registrar has the authority, but they don’t have a license. I think in other countries you train, or you get your license and I think if we were licensed … I think if we all had to be under an umbrella where we were insured, where we had ... where we were answerable, I think we would be in a better place than the registration service. The registration service, they send out celebrants nowadays, as 172 was saying. They don’t send out registrars. They send out casual celebrants who are on an incredibly low wage, who have probably two days of training. [*172 and 173 nod].* But if we were under a stricter umbrella, yet we were able to offer a far more financially affordable package than the registrars do, that’s only got to be a Human Right that’s been long, long waiting to happen.  |
| **I** | Thank you. And 177? |
| **177** | Yeah, I was going to say similar to 171. So, the issue for me would be around a standard of quality and training level and accountability. So, for example, as a Humanist celebrant we have our interviews and then we have training and assessments. Then we have a probationary period where we’re observed. We have peer reviews. We have to log all our ceremonies. We have to provide evidence of professional development. We’ve got the network meetings, the celebrant conference, the celebrant forums that we’re on and, as 171 was saying, if it was that the person was licensed, rather than a venue, all of that would come under the same thing, the insurance, the DBS checks and things that we all have to do. And then the quality would be there. The other thing I wrote down was that the process at the minute is just perceived as extra paperwork and extra fees and it’s complicated and all of that kind of stuff. Whereas if it was the person that was licensed, again, some of that would be made easier and that was … and, as 175 said, the timeline. That’s a concern. My main concern when I was thinking about the questions was about quality and accountability. |
| **172** | Very quickly, equality absolutely. 174 hit the nail on the head for me. Equality. The equality of belief, the equality of faith. That’s not there. There’s no equality. Only Church of England can marry legally. Every other faith in the country has to have a registrar there or a registrar in a setting. That’s it. That’s not equality. That means that Hindu weddings have to take place with a registrar present, which denigrates their faith. The only way to make sure that we are able, is to allow people who are celebrating, who are legally marrying people, to be the people that the people place their faith in. So, I would also say that in some ways it’s too narrow because an Imam can’t marry someone. They can only conduct the service, while a registrar does the legal marrying in the background. And Roman Catholics can’t. Other faiths other than Church of England can’t. That’s not equality and it’s totally old-fashioned in this world. I would say also that many people have beliefs, which aren’t based on a religious outline, so it may not be that they have a faith, but they most definitely have beliefs. And if they have those beliefs, like Pagan, or spiritual or a belief in Sky Fairies … I don’t care what the belief is, they should be allowed to marry in that tradition. So, I would agree with what everyone has said, and I would say that many training bodies do have all those legal things in place as well. I certainly have to go through that with the FIOC and I would say that that’s very important that that is recognised and brought up to a standard because I agree, you should have a DBS check, you shouldn’t just be unlicensed, that’s not right for anyone.*173 and 174 nod.* |
| **I** | 173? |
| **173** | I mean, me, personally, what I would like is the French system where you all marry civilly in one way and then you all go and do whatever means the most in the other way. But, of course, we will never have that because the Queen is the Head of the Church, which is a confusing and bizarre situation in 2020. I don’t mean the Pandemic year; I just mean modern day. And it’s still a very confusing situation for a first world country to be in, that the monarch, well it’s confusing to have a monarch, but we won’t go there!  |
| **I** | That raises slightly wider issues! *[Participants laugh]* |
| **173** | No, no, I don’t expect you to fix that, but you know, maybe next time?! But the fact that the Church of England puts bishops in the House of Lords. The fact that there are prayers, Christian prayers, at the start of Parliament. You know? The rule of law and the ruling of the country is inextricably linked with one religion that is a minority religion in this country. No matter what David Cameron said. And this would be a way forward. I mean I wish that the French system could happen because that would be equitable. But I guess it can’t because that would mean unpicking too many stitches. |
| **I** | Can I ask you if there are any problems that you see with the Law Commission proposals that you want to flag up? I know 175 has already mentioned the timescale. 171? |
| **171** | I think and I’m not going onto the polarised points of view or anything. But I think the definition between a Humanist and an independent celebrant must be addressed because otherwise people are paying money to Humanist UK through their celebrant. So, they do have to realise that there is another choice. But … and also, the wording maybe like the person is licensed, a celebrant is licensed rather than a venue is licensed. It would … because a lot of these people that will be listening to your proposals and things don’t have a clue what we do. And actually, the laws, the registration service laws are so outdated. I mean some of them were made over 150 years ago. There’s such a maze to see your way through. You don’t actually understand them in the first place. So, actually putting it in a really, really simple language that the person is … the celebrant is licensed, and the venue is not, which makes them … in four words, would actually make them realise what the situation is now and what it could be.*177 video-sharing stops briefly.* |
| **I** | Thank you. 173 and then 175. |
| **173** | Worth possibly mentioning that because Humanists run their ceremonies under a belief system, which we do, it has been proposed that Humanist celebrants would have some sort of pay cap, because we shouldn’t be charging more than is reasonable, which … I don’t charge more than is reasonable anyway. I work like crazy. But apparently independent celebrants should be allowed to charge for profit. Because independent celebrants don’t do it for belief reasons, they do it just to make money. I think that’s equally a little bit rude to independent celebrants as well as to Humanist celebrants. Because you do it for the belief, you know? It’s been so nice to be in this forum and to hear the passion and the glory of all of you here and I think we’re all on the same side and that’s the whole point of the whole thing. So, it seems rather odd to me that just because I am under a distinct belief system and am accredited with that belief system, that my mortgage apparently doesn’t require to be paid in the same way as an independent celebrant. It seems like an odd distinction to make and is being rude to independent celebrants as much because you’re not just hired hands. You’re not just saying anything you want for money. That’s like an actor, you know. You’re putting your heart and soul in it in the same way and therefore we should all be paid properly for the amount of hours and work that we do, which we’ve detailed ad nausea for two hours now, saying that we spend hours upon hours pouring our absolute soul into these couples and there we are.*177 adds in chat: “Just to clarify, couples don’t pay money to Humanists UK. Most celebrants are sole traders but we pay a fee to Humanists UK to be accredited.”* |
| **I** | 175, then 172. |
| **175** | Two things. I think the point about the person is important because standards are important, and I do think … it’s not a debate about one versus the other but the standards … the rigour of the training and the CPD and all the rest of it has been said again and again and I just think that’s so important. And if there’s an organisation, like Humanists UK, that can offer it on people’s behalf, that obviously makes things simpler; if there isn’t, yes, you probably have to get licensed individuals. However, the new thing … we haven’t really mentioned anywhere, oh it’s a funny word for me to use, but the solemnity of the process. That you are actually being there to conduct something that is a commitment between two people that is vitally important and is hopefully for life. And that is very, very important. I don’t want to see it move in a direction where we have Las Vegas type … you know, Elvis imitator weddings and that kind of thing. I think, for me, that’s a stage too far. *[174 and 172 nod].* I’m all for choice but I’m actually for choice in the context of these being key rituals. And I’m then talking about all kinds of ceremony. Key rituals that are crucial to people’s lives and I do think there has to be a degree of … shall I use … dignity involved.*At the mention of solemnity 172, 173 and 177 nod.* |
| **I** | Thank you. 172, then 173. |
| **172** | I just wanted to say that I agree with 173. that was something that struck me from reading the Law Commission point. I thought, “hang on, that’s basically implying that independent celebrants do it for the money”. And so, I agree with that point. I think it’s very true. And it was something that struck me. So, I think it’s very important that it’s made clear that if you are making your living, you have a right to charge for what you charge. Most celebrants charge about the same amount. Some, like David Abel, charges £4,000 for a wedding and people want to pay him that. Others charge a lot less. I charge £300 for a handfasting because …*173 and 174 and 177 nod.* |
| **173** | I’m going to go to that website right now! |
| **172** | That’s what I mean. So, what I’m saying is that most celebrants, especially in this part of [county]… sorry, of [county], charge around about £500 for a ceremony and they do at least 8 to 10 to 12 to 14 hours of work for that. So, when you work it out, a bit like when I do funerals, £200 and then I do about 8 hours work on it. So, the fact is that you’re doing it for pleasure … you might be doing it to live, which I earn my living this way. But I’m certainly not doing it to make a profit. I would question that wedding venues need to charge £20,000 for 6 hours work, but there you go. That’s my own view. But I would agree that the wording there is slightly clumsy and it’s something I picked up on as well as 173. |
| **173** | Oh, I’m sure I was just going to say something to just shock the whole world, but I can’t remember because I was just enjoying listening to 172! *[further explicit peace-making/reconciliation between the two participants who disagreed at start].* Sorry. |
| **I** | That’s fine, that’s fine. Don’t worry. The final question then is really how you think the proposals might impact on the process of getting married, the types of couples’ weddings you conduct. But I think you’ve really answered that with what you’ve said. If anyone wants to add anything to that, please do so. Yes, 173? |
| **173** | I remembered what I was going to say. It’s going to rock everyone’s world. No, there is proof from Scotland that legal Humanist weddings and Humanist weddings in general are more long lived than civil ceremonies. Because the process that you go through, the personal process is pretty much like an extended wedding therapy relationship assessment. So, people that opt for these bespoke personal ceremonies, in whatever hue they come, are usually more committed to each other and are really thinking it through before they get married. So, I love this, you’re all nodding in the same way, I love it! *174, 175, 172 and 177 nod.*So, I think, in a way, the dignity and the sanctity of marriage, if one even wants to go to that word, will be greater served by bespoke ceremonies being legalised. Because, actually, it will stop quickie civil ceremonies that people just do on a whim or possibly even … I don’t know, the idea of fraudulent ceremonies. It would stop that because we will be meeting them for six months plus and discussing them and their marriage and their commitment together and it would actually … if you’re going to go full Tory … it would make the whole country more based on marriage and commitment and that family values. *171 lifts hand to signal recognition.* That kind of thing. So, actually, I think it would look for more meaningful and more beautiful connections between society as a whole. That’s quite a big statement.*172 raises hand.* |
| **I** | 172? |
| **172** | Just very quickly towards the end … I belong to … I don’t know if anyone here went to Celebrantopia, which was a gib celebrant training thing. It goes all over … there’s celebrants from Australia, where it’s legal, America, where it’s legal and they’ve been doing it for decades … so, while we may not have independent celebrants in England … this experience … independent celebrants in Australia, America, Canada … all over the world. Not just … there are Humanists as well, but independents, which is where it started. The independent movement started in Australia. That is the evidence there. They conduct weddings all the time, so the conversations that I have had with them, they’re based on legal … they’ve been doing it for decades. So, it is … there is a model for this. It’s not just a case of it has to be one faith or another or one type or another. There is a model for this all over the world, outside of England. And we are like a little old-fashioned thing that is just not got up with it. I mean we’ve been watching American movies for decades where they get married in someone’s garden and looking at it and going, “really, how weird!” And now people are looking at it and going, “I want to do that. I want to get married on top of something.” So, what I would say is there is a model, we could work to it. It is working in other countries and it is a broad church in the … small ‘c’ conservative meaning of the word, as in all faiths, all beliefs are allowed to it, but however, in America they can just... *171 raises hand* |
| **173** | ….I guess I would have a slight issue with, say, I don’t know, my sister, who I love very much, like a sister. I wouldn’t want her to just grab a *[inaudible 1:47:38]*  off the internet. |
| **172** | I was about to say, I would perhaps take my model from Australia where they are trained and registered, celebrancy began there. Wedding celebrancy began in Australia. It began in one particular part of Australia and it’s legal there. It came from a Governor who couldn’t find a proper wedding for his own family. He couldn’t find a funeral. So, it comes from there. So, I would say that whereas in America it’s grab ‘em and have ‘em, in Australia there’s a very good working model where people are trained, licensed and CPD’s built in. |
| **I** | I’m conscious we’ve overrun a little bit. 171, I saw you had your hand up. |
| **171** | I think one thing that might be brought up when this all goes through, if it does go through as law, is the fact that certain people, and especially certain people in Government, would suggest that sham marriage laws and false marriage laws may be circumvented by using a celebrant *[173 rolls eyes suggesting recognised frustration]* but in fact, probably not. Because if I’m sitting down with somebody, as a registrar I used to spend probably 5 minutes with the couple and I would literally look at their legal paperwork, which you can falsify and I did undertake sham marriages, which were busted by the Immigration Authorities, which was fun. But if I’m sitting down with somebody for three hours, plus I’ve met them on Zoom, plus I’m emailing them, plus I have follow-ups, I could very much more easily work out whether there was a bride who was maybe being forced into the situation or whether it was a completely sham marriage, than I could if I was a registrar spending five minutes with them.*All nod, thumbs up from 172 and 173.* |
| **I** | Thank you. Any final points anyone would like to make about the proposals, or about … anything about the process of getting married? Last chance, otherwise, hold your peace! 173? |
| **173** | I just think everyone is lovely in here and thank you very much. |
| **175** | Yes, it’s been a really good couple of hours. |
| **172** | I’ve really enjoyed hearing everyone’s points of view. |
| **174** | It’s been fantastic. You’re great. You’re all great. Very entertaining as well. |
| **1:50:18** |  |

*Following the focus group, an email was sent to 178 to give her an opportunity to contribute to questions she missed from leaving early. This was her response:*

Re the proposals:

11) a) Civil Preliminaries - yes I think the proposals makes perfect sense.

b) Types of ceremony - yes, I believe that humanist and independent celebrants should be allowed to conduct legally recognised wedding ceremonies. In the first instance, I believe that humanists are being discriminated against by not being allowed to have a meaningful wedding ceremony in a place that holds meaning to them, with a celebrant who shares their beliefs. I believe that this should be addressed in line with your recommendations. Quite a lot of our wedding ceremonies are outdoors and i feel that this is an important choice. Weddings should be allowed to take place outdoors, in homes, gardens and in other locations that are deemed appropriate or meaningful by the couple for them and their guests. I think that it should be the celebrant - not the location - that should be licensed to conduct legally recognised weddings.

c) Ceremony words - yes, I believe that couples should be able to say vows that are meaningful to them rather than just saying vows that are prescribed. Humanist ceremonies can take different forms in terms of vows - so as well as formerly committing to love, support and be with each other for the rest of their lives - come what may - and exchanging rings, or doing any other ritual they choose, couples can say vows to their children / each other’s children within the ceremony, and they may have other special commitments to make. Humanist ceremonies are non-religious, and celebrants have to be humanist in belief in order to train with Humanists UK and conduct Humanist UK accredited ceremonies. This means that the celebrant will never ask the couple or their guests to participate in any collective act of worship - eg a prayer. However, if someone they ask to contribute to the ceremony (eg a family member or close friend) chooses to say or sing something with religious reference because it’s traditional or sentimental for reasons other than religion, or if a contributor feels that they should bestow on the couple some sort of blessing and this is pre-agreed with the couple, then this is often (but not always) allowed by the celebrant (personal choice). We are all non-religious in terms of our beliefs. But humanists can identify as agnostic as well as atheist. And we also conduct non-religious, humanist ceremonies for couples with mixed religions, where they share humanist values. So yes, your proposal looks good.

12) I do believe that humanist celebrants should be able to conduct legally recognised weddings. This would make it a much more complete process for our couples, who want a fantastic, memorable, meaningful wedding ceremony that totally reflects them - but that is recognised legally, without having to partake in the legal ceremony separately. A wedding ceremony normally takes me about 3 days of work - in terms of planning, meeting with the couple, lots of communication backwards and forwards throughout the process, the paperwork, the booking forms etc, the writing of the script (which usually takes me around 1.5 days), getting the script approved and doing any amends, guiding the couple with anything they need help with, printing everything out including all readings and the presentation copy of the script and then the delivery of the wedding ceremony itself. We really do put an awful lot of effort into each and every one - they are all completely bespoke - and it’s an absolute privilege to be a celebrant at such an important time in someone’s life.

It seems very unfair and discriminatory that our ceremonies are not yet legally recognised when Christian (and other religious) weddings are when the main difference is whether we believe in a god or not, or follow a religion. Humanists UK run an extremely tight ship in terms of our training, our CPD and quality control of our ceremonies. Our training is very thorough and lengthy and each discipline (weddings, funerals and naming) is held completely separately (unlike most independent training, when all disciplines are covered together). Once we are trained, we become part of a supportive network of accredited celebrants who help and advise each other all the time.

We are regularly peer reviewed and have to undertake a lot of additional training each year in order to continue to practise. And it’s not just the training or the belief in humanism itself that’s important to us. It’s all the work that Humanists UK do behind the scenes in terms of its campaigning for human rights, fairness and equality that we have belief in. That’s what we buy into when we train as celebrants. The network, the belief system and the support and guidance of each other and Head Office when we need it. We all work independently as sole traders, but we give a proportion of our fees to HUK each quarter to help upkeep the network, because we see its value.

*An email was also sent to participant 172 to check how she felt the session had gone and to offer a de-brief with researcher. This is her response:*

Thank you, how very kind of you to email me. I am ok, thank you, It was interesting to talk to Humanist Celebrants, because there is, as you will have realised, a lot of division between the two types of celebrants, with strong feelings running deep. For me, and for many other independent celebrants, this is a fight for our right to exist, because if the powerful political lobby of the Humanist UK business gets its way, only Humanist UK celebrants will be able to conduct legal marriages, and many wedding celebrants will lose their businesses. Although at times yesterday I did feel slightly beleaguered and outnumbered, it also didn't upset me too much, because I can understand how strongly they hold their beliefs, as I hold my own inclusion-ist view point. On a personal note, which I did not disclose, I am mainly a funeral celebrant, which I love, and is my passion. I do weddings as well and enjoy them, so I did have a place there, but my livelihood is not on the line as it is for other celebrants. I am glad I was able to explain my own view that if ALL qualified Celebrants are allowed to wed, then this would seem fair, and the WCC did try to set this up. However currently it is the HUK lobby who are being heard in parliament and so it is a very emotive subject as you can imagine.

I am glad my passion came through but hopefully not too much of my temper or ego, it really was a privilege to be heard and to have a chance to hear others. I know that other groups you have had have been much less contentious and far more unified, but this is a very important issue for the Law commission to address, so it was great to be able to address it in this way. I hope you will be able to use the data you have gathered, and thank you so much for including me, and also for checking in, that is very kind.