

AN EXPLORATION OF THE WORK OF WEDDING CELEBRANTS:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, INCLUDING CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BY STEPHANIE PYWELL

Acknowledgements

This independent research would not have been possible without the Wedding Celebrancy Commission's generous gift of £6,000 to The Open University, and the Faculty of Business and Law's funding to cover the remainder of the full economic cost of the project. I am very grateful to members of the advisory group, and to the pilot-testers – all of whose expertise ensured that the celebrants' survey was comprehensible, clear and relevant – and to the 517 celebrants who took the time to respond. The responsibility for any errors is entirely mine.

**Stephanie Pywell, Senior Lecturer in Law
The Open University*

*Stephanie.Pywell@open.ac.uk
26 April 2020*

Respondents and response rate

A short survey (the 'WCC survey') of the seven members of the Wedding Celebrancy Commission indicated that an email including a link to a longer survey (the 'celebrants' survey') was sent to 2,212 celebrants. The celebrants' survey was designed to be completed only by celebrants who had conducted at least one wedding celebration ceremony in England or Wales in 2019 ('eligible celebrants'). 517 responses were received, but 230 exited the survey immediately because they were non-eligible, leaving 287 (55.5%) responses from eligible celebrants.

Some celebrants received more than one copy of the email, but could answer the survey only once, meaning that some copies were surplus in the sense that they could not lead to responses. If the same percentage of surplus copies is assumed to apply to all 2,212 copies sent, then 1,754 individual celebrants would have received the link to the survey. This gives a best estimate for the response rate of 29.5% (517 out of 1,754).

It is probable that the celebrants' survey involved sampling errors, but, because an unknown number of celebrants act completely independently, there is no obvious way of reaching them. It is possible that celebrants who belong to professional organisations, who choose to be represented on the WCC, or who have received training from certain providers, have a different approach to their work from celebrants without any professional network. Similarly, eligible respondents may differ in some important respects from eligible non-respondents. The results therefore offer nothing more than an insight into the views and practices of respondents, and it cannot be assumed that the views and practices of eligible celebrants who did not receive the email, or who chose not to respond to it, would be similar.

The true response rate may be higher than this for two reasons. The first is that some respondents may have completed the survey after receiving one copy of the email, and then received further copies. This would reduce the number of individual celebrants who received any copies of the email. The second is that, among the individual celebrants who received any copies of the email, a higher percentage of non-respondents than respondents may have self-selected as ineligible, and so decided that it was not worth clicking on the link to the survey. This would reduce the presumed number of eligible respondents who received the email.

Findings from the WCC survey

The organisations that comprise the WCC were all formed during this century: the first, in 2002, was Civil Ceremonies Ltd, a training provider that reports ‘a big increase in the demand for training on our courses that offer a national qualification diploma’. The Fellowship of Professional Celebrants and Association of Independent Celebrants – the latter offers a free telephone counselling service to members who are suffering from stress – became the first membership organisations in 2007, followed in 2011 by the UK Society of Celebrants, in 2013 by the Fellowship of Independent Celebrants, and in 2018 by the Institute of Professional Celebrants.

The five membership organisations were asked about the cost of joining, and retaining, membership, with all answers being to the nearest £100. The Fellowship of Independent Celebrants has no joining fee, but an annual membership fee of around £100; membership and associated benefits are withdrawn from celebrants against whom complaints of failure to abide by its code of ethics are upheld after a thorough investigation. The other four membership organisations have joining fees of around £100. The annual cost for renewing membership is around £100 for the UK Society of Celebrants, and for the Institute of Professional Celebrants. It costs around £300 annually to remain a member of the Association of Independent Celebrants; the Fellowship of Professional Celebrants has no annual membership fee.

All respondents reported that they share information about changes in the law regarding marriage, and all five of the membership organisations share good practice with their members. Other services offered by the training provider and membership organisations are, in decreasing order of frequency: campaigning, continuing professional development/training, and networking (5 each); accreditation, initial training, insurance, and a sense of community (4 each); marketing opportunities, and members’ benefits and discounts (3 each).

This survey received a 100% response rate, and there is no reason to believe that it provided anything but accurate information about the six organisations, or the work of the WCC member who represents celebrants who are not associated with any organisation.

Growth in numbers of celebrants and ceremonies

No respondent reported practising before 2003. There was steady and significant growth in celebrant numbers in the decade from 2010–2019, and over half the respondents (154) began to practice in 2017–2019.

The numbers of ceremonies conducted by respondents are imprecise, with large margins for error. This is because wide spans of numbers were used for the relevant question, because it was very unclear what the numbers would be. It seems unarguable, however, that the numbers of wedding celebration ceremonies rose very significantly, and probably more than doubled, between 2015 and 2019. If the responses from the survey were applicable to the estimated 974 eligible recipients of the email, between 5,101 and 13,745 ceremonies would have been conducted in 2019, with a mid-range figure of 9,423.

Celebrants' motives, experience and training

Over half of respondents (158 out of 287) stated that their main reason for becoming a professional wedding celebrant was 'desire to provide person-centred ceremonies that reflect couples' beliefs, personalities and lifestyles'. The second most popular reason (68) was 'desire to use my creative skills to help people celebrate the major occasions in their lives as they wish'. The most common types of relevant experience were being a teacher, trainer or educator (144), or a celebrant for another type of occasion (116). The most commonly identified training providers were five of the six WCC member organisations; this may well be a result of the sampling method.

Celebrants' organisations

Unsurprisingly, the most commonly selected professional membership organisations to which respondents belong were five of the six WCC member organisations. Respondents' main reasons for belonging to membership organisations are continuing professional development/training (68), accreditation (52), initial training (48) and insurance (31). These four reasons, plus sharing good practice, a sense of community, and networking, also feature prominently in respondents' other reasons for belonging to professional membership organisations.

How celebrants present their services to clients

Celebrants use a variety of terms to describe what they do. The eight suggested options are presented here in decreasing order of popularity: wedding celebrations or wedding ceremonies (264), renewals of promises or renewals of vows (184), handfastings or handfasting ceremonies (151), weddings (140), commitment celebrations or commitment ceremonies (138), blessing or wedding blessings or marriage blessings (79), marriage celebrations or marriage ceremonies (72), and marriages (20).

The almost ubiquitous use of 'wedding celebrations or wedding ceremonies', and the use by almost half the respondents of the unqualified word 'weddings', is potentially problematic. 'Wed' is synonymous with 'marry', and thus means 'to take in marriage; to become the spouse of (a person) by participating in a prescribed ceremony or formal act'. 'Wedding' – a verb or gerund – is thus taking in marriage. Anecdotal evidence indicates that some celebrants think that 'the marriage is the legal bit; the wedding is the pretty bit'; this is incorrect, but does explain the widespread inclusion or use of the word 'wedding' to describe events that have no legal effect.

This use of technically inaccurate words is, however, mitigated by almost all respondents' disclosure to couples about the status of ceremonies that they conduct. All except five respondents indicated that they would always explain that the ceremonies that they conduct do not constitute legally binding marriage ceremonies. The great majority would always (259), usually (20), or sometimes (4) ask whether the couple have entered, or are planning to enter, into a legally binding marriage – which is a further reminder that the ceremony itself is not legally binding – but a much smaller number (50) would conduct a wedding celebration ceremony only for couples who were already married to each other, or who were planning to marry each other.

The WCC's *Professional Standards For Celebrants – Couples Ceremonies* include being aware of 'the legal issues surrounding couples ceremonies', knowing and understanding 'the legal requirements for a couples ceremony', and offering advice only 'where you are totally assured of the facts, the legality and professional expectations'. There is no mention of ensuring that couples are aware of the lack of legal status of a ceremony, and the consequences of this, so celebrants that do this are, to their credit, exceeding the WCC's requirements.

Where, how, and for how much, celebrants practise

There were no obviously significant patterns in the areas in which respondents conduct most ceremonies: 51 stated that they would do so anywhere in England or Wales with no concentration in any local authority area, and 100 of the 175 areas were not identified by any respondent. In general, most respondents practised primarily in English counties, and fewest in London boroughs.

The vast majority of respondents (262) operate as sole traders.

About three-quarters of respondents (215) would conduct only the lowest-risk type of ceremony suggested in the options: 'Any non-criminal content that is not obscene, violent or likely to give offence to one or more guests, and does not pose a health and safety risk'. Only 22 would include any content that the couple wished for.

About 85% of respondents had a standard fee for conducting a ceremony in July 2019. Some 93% of these reported a standard fee of £251–£750. Around 85% of the reported lowest and highest fees during 2019 also fell within this range. Nearly 70% of respondents (200) had conducted, or would, conduct, a wedding celebration ceremony for no fee, or for less than 75% of their usual fee, most commonly for compassionate reasons.

The couples who engage celebrants

A large majority of couples – between 80% and 90% – who had participated in wedding celebration ceremonies led by respondents were already married to each other at the time of their ceremonies, and most of the rest stated that they intended to marry each other. This means that most couples chose a respondent-led ceremony in addition to a wedding, rather than as an alternative to it.

So far as celebrants were aware, couples' reasons for choosing celebrant-led wedding celebration ceremonies were very diverse, with the desire for a person-centred or outdoor ceremony being the two most popular options. Couples who could not marry one another for legal reasons, and those who were denied the religious ceremony that they would have liked, constituted a small minority.

The question about the most unusual feature of wedding celebration ceremonies conducted by respondents yielded a very wide range of answers, with themes including times and settings, movement, costumes and rituals, religion, and the involvement of animals. Several responses to this question were explicit about respondents' enthusiasm for their role, and their desire to tailor their ceremonies to couples' exact requirements, even when this involved considerable research, or the suppression of respondents' own feelings.

Views on formalising the profession of wedding celebrancy

All except 13 respondents would like a statutory body – most popularly the WCC, changed by law into a statutory body – to become involved in the representation and/or regulation of their profession. The most popular option, favoured by 173 respondents, is for the WCC to be responsible for representation and regulation.

Almost all respondents would like the law to be changed so that they could conduct legally binding marriage ceremonies, but most opted for a qualified response that would leave them total, or a great deal of, freedom regarding the personalised elements of ceremonies. There is no clear majority in favour of a particular combination of methods for accrediting or authorising celebrants to conduct legally binding ceremonies, but many would be prepared to pay up to £500 for initial accreditation or authorisation, and up to £200 as an annual renewal fee.

Conclusions and recommendations

Respondents, their professional membership organisations, and the WCC present an image that is professional and altruistic. The fact that so many respondents had recently started to work as celebrants indicates that they are providing a service for which there is a growing demand, and it is reasonable to assume that some couples who opt for a celebrant-led ceremony do so because of a friend's recommendation, or because they have been impressed by someone else's ceremony.

The main concern about celebrants' work that arises from this project is that celebrants who are members of associations represented on the WCC are not required, as a condition of continuing membership, to make it clear to couples that a celebrant-led ceremony does not create a legally binding marriage. Although most respondents state that they do this, it would be reassuring if it were formally identified as an essential element of every initial meeting with a couple.

NOTE: *An earlier draft of this summary was sent to the WCC in March 2020. The section of the [Professional Standards For Celebrants – Couples Ceremonies](#) titled 'Advising on, and Managing Ceremony Choices' has subsequently been amended to state that celebrants must '[i]nform all couples clearly that the ceremony conducted does not create a legally binding marriage', and to identify the first element of their knowledge and understanding as '[t]he requirements for legally binding marriage.'*

The fact that most couples who chose a celebrant-led ceremony were already married, or were planning to marry, suggests that there is a desire for a relaxation of the constraints concerning the content of civil wedding ceremonies, and the venues in which such weddings can be conducted. This could be achieved by adopting an approach similar to that currently used for non-religious marriages in Scotland, where the person conducting the marriage and the couple can agree any non-religious premises as being 'an appropriate place' for the ceremony. Civil weddings in Scotland can include religious material, eating and drinking, and individualised ceremonies are encouraged.

I suggest that three elements within every ceremony would be needed to ensure that a legally binding marriage had been created with both parties' consent. First, each person could perform a simple act, such as taking the other's right hand in both of theirs, to confirm their wish to marry. Secondly, they could both indicate, with at least the word 'yes', that they took the other to be their spouse, at which point the person conducting the ceremony could declare that they were now married. Thirdly, they could both sign a declaration that they were married, so that the state had a formal record of their legal commitment to one another. Provided that ceremonies included all necessary legal formalities, there need be no legal constraints upon their other content.

One way of responding to the fact that the majority of respondents wish to be able to conduct legally binding marriages – subject to their remaining able to conduct ceremonies with few, or no, constraints – would be to institute a regulated system under which all celebrants could, but were not obliged to, undertake accredited training. Upon completion of this, they could be given a legally protected title such as 'Registered Celebrant', and apply to be registered as competent to conduct legally binding marriages. Celebrants who did not wish to create legally binding marriages could opt to undertake properly regulated training, upon completion of which they could acquire a different legally protected title, such as 'Accredited Celebrant', and apply to be registered as competent to conduct non-legally-binding ceremonies. A preliminary requirement could be to obtain the couple's signatures on a prescribed document confirming that they understood that they would not become a married couple as a result of the ceremony; this would enable Accredited Celebrants subsequently to refer to such ceremonies as 'weddings', 'wedding ceremonies' and 'marriage ceremonies' without any risk of leading one or both parties to misunderstand their marital status.

Celebrants who did not wish to be regulated could remain outside the law, as at present.

Such a scheme would require the creation of an overarching regulatory body, because Registered Celebrants' work would change individuals' legal rights and responsibilities. This is favoured by the vast majority of respondents, most of whom would willingly pay for the right to conduct legally binding marriage ceremonies.

Publications etc

I will write two academic articles based on this research. One has been accepted for *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, and will be published in June 2020. I intend to write and submit the second article to the same journal, in the hope that it will be published in September 2020.

In due course, the version(s) of the article(s) accepted by the publisher will be available in the open-access repository [Open Research Online](#).

I plan to present my findings at the virtual conference of the Society of Legal Scholars, which is scheduled to take place on 1–4 September 2020.