# Couples launch legal challenge for recognition of humanist marriage in England and Wales



Two couples from the Midlands have initiated legal proceedings against the UK government, asserting that the absence of legal recognition for humanist marriage in England and Wales constitutes discrimination. This initiative follows a high court ruling made in 2020 that highlighted this lack of recognition as a discriminatory practice.

Terri O’Sullivan, 45, and Edd Berrill, 42, from Coventry, along with Nicole Shasha, 32, and Rory Booth, 32, from Leicester, are preparing to challenge the government's stance on marriage laws. O’Sullivan expressed her dismay by stating, "It’s insulting that we’ve got to try to prove our beliefs are valid to have them recognised." Highlighting the emotional significance of the matter, she elaborated, “To be able to stand in front of our friends and family and talk in a way that’s important to us, it means everything.”

O’Sullivan’s background is marked by her experience as a former Jehovah's Witness, a religion she left at the age of 21 following years of abuse which led to her becoming homeless. Her transition to humanism now represents a significant personal milestone. She remarked on how being a humanist provides her with a positive identity beyond merely being an atheist.

Shasha echoed the sentiments of their collective struggle, stating, “We’re the examples, but there’s going to be thousands of individuals like us.” Booth added that their actions are crucial for broader issues of fairness, asserting, “It’s about making sure that people are treated fairly no matter who they are. It’s not really just a humanist issue, it’s an issue of fair treatment for everyone.”

Currently, humanist marriages are not recognised under existing marriage laws in England and Wales. Couples desiring a ceremony led by a humanist celebrant are required to have a civil registration service as well. This contrasts with the legal recognition of humanist marriages in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as countries like New Zealand, Canada, and Australia. A considerable number of humanist ceremonies were conducted in Scotland in 2022, with reported figures of 9,140 ceremonies compared to 8,072 based on faiths or other belief systems.

O’Sullivan expressed frustration that the recognition is available in Scotland and Northern Ireland but not in England and Wales, stating, “It makes no sense that it’s perfectly fine in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but it’s just not here. There’s nothing really outlandish or bizarre about our views, they’re pretty common.” Berrill, who transitioned from Catholicism to atheism and has identified as a humanist for the past 15 years, emphasised the need for representation of non-religious individuals.

Shasha, who is a humanist celebrant, highlighted the community aspect of humanism by stating, “We run a community group much like many religious people do.” She expressed that the inclusion of humanist beliefs in their wedding would be a meaningful expression of who they are, labelling it “an equalities issue.”

The government is reported to be poised to announce plans to reform marriage laws later this year, which may include provisions for weddings at various venues based on recommendations from the Law Commission. However, there are concerns within the humanist community that any significant changes might take years to materialise. They are advocating for a more immediate legalisation of humanist ceremonies.

Andrew Copson, the chief executive of Humanists UK, has voiced his support for the couples’ legal action, stating that since 2013, each Labour Party leader has affirmed their support for legal humanist marriage, yet legislative action remains stalled. He remarked on the frustration felt by the couples involved, alluding to the societal need for recognition of humanist marriage rights. A spokesperson from the Ministry of Justice conveyed the government's commitment to carefully consider this issue, noting that a formal position would be announced in due course.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)