# Northern Ireland error leaves two heterosexual couples not legally married after civil partnership conversions



Two heterosexual couples in Northern Ireland have been informed that their marriages are legally invalid due to a legislative oversight that only recognised the conversion of civil partnerships for same-sex couples. The revelation has prompted apologies from officials at both the General Register Office Northern Ireland (GRONI) and the respective councils involved, leaving the couples grappling with the unsettling news that they are not legally married despite the passage of time since their conversions.

The issue emerged as two couples sought to convert their civil partnerships into marriages under legislation implemented five years ago, primarily aimed at enabling same-sex couples to marry. This legislative change led to a marked increase in same-sex marriages, beginning with the landmark wedding of Robyn Peoples and Sharni Edwards in February 2020. Since then, over 400 civil partnerships have been successfully converted, making the recent missteps particularly concerning.

The Department of Finance has acknowledged that the conversions of the couples' civil partnerships were “completed incorrectly.” Their civil partnerships remain valid, but the couples have been left in a precarious situation. Statements from officials indicate that serious efforts are underway to engage with the affected parties, with promises of support as well as firm apologies for the distress caused.

According to Ciara Brolly, a family law solicitor, the legal distinctions between marriage and civil partnerships are largely minimal; both offer similar rights concerning financial matters, property, and inheritance. However, in a region where the historical context of civil rights plays a significant role, the emotional and psychological impact of this legislative failure is deeper. As noted by SDLP councillor Doire Finn, the situation has been described as shocking, and the psychological toll on the couples involved is palpable, leading to calls for systemic changes to prevent future errors.

This incident underscores a period of significant evolution in marriage laws in Northern Ireland, where same-sex marriage was only legalised in January 2020, following decades of societal and political advocacy. Prior to this change, same-sex couples were effectively barred from marrying, a situation that contrasted starkly with the rest of the UK, where same-sex marriage had been legalised earlier. The historic Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 paved the way for these legal changes, but this recent error highlights the ongoing challenges in ensuring that legislative frameworks accurately reflect intended protections for all couples.

As the affected couples navigate this unexpected and distressing revelation, the local governments and legal bodies must engage with sensitivity, recognising the personal dimension of what might appear to be a mere bureaucratic error. The commitment to rectify such issues is essential, not just for the couples involved, but for the integrity of the civil rights framework within Northern Ireland.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-51086276), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-the-law-in-northern-ireland-updated-information)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54646915)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49204480), [[7]](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8646/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/two-northern-ireland-couples-have-discovered-they-are-not-legally-married-because-they-are-heterosexual-6KRQ2RGC4ZDQTB3CY46GV5BIRA/> - Two heterosexual couples in Northern Ireland were informed that their marriages were invalid due to a legislative error. The legislation intended to convert civil partnerships into marriages was initially designed for same-sex couples, leading to the invalidation of these opposite-sex couples' marriages. The Department of Finance acknowledged the mistake and apologised to the affected couples, stating that the civil partnerships remained valid and that the General Register Office and council officials were sorry for the error.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-51086276> - Same-sex marriage became legally recognised in Northern Ireland on 13 January 2020. From that date, same-sex couples could register to marry, with the first ceremonies taking place in February. However, couples already in civil partnerships were not initially able to convert them into marriages. The Northern Ireland Office planned to consult on this issue later in the year, and heterosexual couples were also permitted to enter into civil partnerships from that date.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49204480> - As of August 2019, same-sex marriage remained illegal in Northern Ireland, despite being legalised in the rest of the UK. No same-sex couple was legally recognised as married within Northern Ireland, even if they were married elsewhere in the UK. Marriage laws are devolved, meaning each UK jurisdiction sets its own laws on the subject. The Northern Ireland Assembly had not passed any legislation on this matter since its collapse in January 2017.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54646915> - The UK government announced that same-sex couples in Northern Ireland would soon be able to convert their civil partnerships into marriages. The new laws were set to come into force on 7 December 2020, following a six-week public consultation. The regulations provided a three-year window for couples to convert their existing civil partnerships into marriages, with fees waived during the first year. Opposite-sex couples would also be able to convert their marriages into civil partnerships.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-the-law-in-northern-ireland-updated-information> - The UK government updated the public on changes to the law in Northern Ireland, following the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. The Act required regulations to be made in areas including same-sex marriage and opposite-sex civil partnerships. From 13 January 2020, same-sex civil marriage and opposite-sex civil partnerships became legal in Northern Ireland. Couples could give notice of their intention to form a same-sex civil marriage or opposite-sex civil partnership, with a minimum of 28 days’ notice required before ceremonies could take place.
7. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8646/> - This briefing paper provides an overview of the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. It details the legislative process, including the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, which received Royal Assent on 24 July 2019. The Act required the UK government to extend same-sex marriage and opposite-sex civil partnerships to Northern Ireland by 13 January 2020. The paper also discusses the implications of these changes and the current position regarding marriage and civil partnership laws in Northern Ireland.