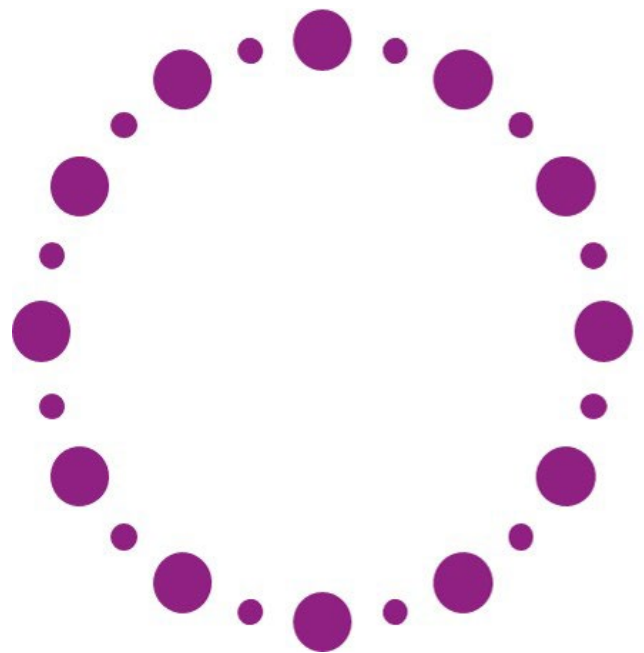


Main statistics for Northern Ireland

Statistical bulletin

Marital or civil partnership status & Household relationships (couples)

21 March 2023



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1. Introduction

On 21 March 2023, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) released further results from Census 2021, which was held on 21 March 2021. The statistics released provide a profile of the Northern Ireland population covering:

- **household relationships:** household composition, living arrangements, marital and civil partnership status and couple relationships within households
- **sexual orientation**
- **labour market:** economic status (e.g. in employment, unemployed, economically inactive), hours worked, industry and occupation
- **qualifications:** highest level of qualifications gained
- **place of work or study:** distance to place of work or study and method of travel
- **communal establishments:** establishments providing supervision of residential accommodation (e.g. student halls of residence, hospitals, care homes)
- **migration:** address one year before the census, and year of arrival for those born outside Northern Ireland

The information covers Northern Ireland and the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs).

This report relates to **household relationships** and covers the topics:

- **marital and civil partnership status;** and
- **household relationships (couples).**

For display purposes, figures are appropriately rounded but full figures are available in the [Census 2021 tables](#) on the NISRA website.

2. Key points

The key points relating to **marital or civil partnership status** are:

- There were 693,000 adults who were married or in a civil partnership in Census 2021. This made up 46% of our population aged 16 and over. In contrast 577,000 adults (38%) were single (never married/civil partnered).
- Due to changes both in the law and society, the marital status question has changed over time. Given this, longer-term figures are only broadly comparable. That said, in the last 50 years there has been a decline in the percentage of adults who were 'married' - down from 61% in 1971 to 46% in 2021, with a rise in the percentage who were 'single' - up from 31% in 1971 to 38% in 2021.
- Over the same time period the percentage of adults who were 'separated, widowed or divorced' has risen from 9% in 1971 to 16% in 2021. Indeed the number of divorced adults has risen from 3,000 in 1971 to over 90,000 in 2021.
- The long-term trend (1971-2021) is also mirrored over the last decade (2011-2021), with a marked fall in the percentage of the adult population who were 'married' and a rise in the 'single' population. This pattern is not unique to Northern Ireland and was also witnessed in the England & Wales census.

The key points relating to **household relationships (couples)** are:

- The census included household level questions on relationships between people living in the same household. The statistics presented in this report relate to those aged 16 and over in couple relationships within households.
- Of the adult population living in households, just over half lived as part of a couple within the household (53% or 794,000 people in a married, civil partnership or co-habiting couple). The remaining 695,000 adults (47%), did not live as part of a couple within the household.

- Of the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs), all except for Belfast and Derry City & Strabane had a majority of adults living in a couple within the household. This is in part driven by the fact that these two areas tend to attract younger people to study and work.

3. Marital or civil partnership status

The 2021 Census included a question on marital or civil partnership status asked of everyone aged 16 and over. The question presented is shown in Figure 1 (online) and Figure 2 (paper).

Figure 1: Census 2021 online questionnaire - marital or civil partnership status

What is your marital or civil partnership status?

- Single, never married and never in a civil partnership
- Married
- In a civil partnership
- Separated, but still legally married
- Separated, but still legally in a civil partnership
- Divorced
- Formerly in a civil partnership which is now legally dissolved
- Widowed
- Surviving partner from a civil partnership

Figure 2: Census 2021 paper questionnaire - marital or civil partnership status

4 What is your marital or civil partnership status?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Single (never married and never in a civil partnership) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Married | <input type="checkbox"/> In a civil partnership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separated, but still legally married | <input type="checkbox"/> Separated, but still legally in a civil partnership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced | <input type="checkbox"/> Formerly in a civil partnership which is now legally dissolved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed | <input type="checkbox"/> Surviving partner from a civil partnership |

3.1. Marital or civil partnership status – Census 2021

The headline results from the 2021 Census question on marital or civil partnership status are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Marital or civil partnership status (Census 2021)

Marital or civil partnership status	Population	Percent
Single (never married/civil partnered)	576,700	38.1%
Married	690,500	45.6%
In a civil partnership	2,700	0.2%
Separated [note 1]	57,300	3.8%
Divorced [note 1]	91,100	6.0%
Widowed [note 1]	96,400	6.4%
Population aged 16 and over	1,514,700	100.0%

[Note 1: These classifications include both the married and civil partnership equivalents. 'Separated' is 'separated (still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership)', 'divorced' is 'divorced or formerly in a civil partnership now dissolved' and 'widowed' is 'widowed or surviving partner from a civil partnership']

Table 1 shows just less than half of people aged 16 and over were 'married or in a civil partnership' (45.8%) or 693,200 adults. The second largest group is those people who were 'single (never married/civil partnered)'; this group made up 38.1% of our population or 576,700 adults.

3.2. Marital or civil partnership status – Census 2011 to Census 2021

The law in relation to marriage and civil partnership changed in the ten years to 2021. A summary of the changes in Northern Ireland is given below:

- civil partnership for opposite-sex couples became legal in late 2019;
- marriage for same-sex couples became legal in 2020; and
- in late 2020 a couple in a civil partnership could convert their status from civil partnership to marriage.

Notwithstanding this, the questions in the 2011 and 2021 Censuses on marital or civil partnership status are very similar. Therefore detailed comparisons can be made and the headline statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Marital or civil partnership status (Census 2011 and Census 2021)

Marital or civil partnership status	Census 2011	Percent	Census 2021	Percent
Single (never married/civil partnered)	517,400	36.1%	576,700	38.1%
Married	680,800	47.6%	690,500	45.6%
In a civil partnership	1,200	0.1%	2,700	0.2%
Separated [note 1]	56,900	4.0%	57,300	3.8%
Divorced [note 1]	78,100	5.5%	91,100	6.0%
Widowed [note 1]	97,100	6.8%	96,400	6.4%
Population aged 16 and over	1,431,500	100.0%	1,514,700	100.0%

[Note 1: These classifications include both the married and civil partnership equivalents. 'Separated' is 'separated (still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership)', 'divorced' is 'divorced or formerly in a civil partnership now dissolved' and 'widowed' is 'widowed or surviving partner from a civil partnership']

The figures show a rise from 2011 to 2021 in the percentage of people who were single (never married or never in a civil partnership) – up from 36.1% in 2011 to 38.1% in 2021. In contrast there has been a fall in the percentage of people who were in a marriage – down from 47.6% in 2011 to 45.6% in 2021.

These findings are in line with the results from [the England and Wales Census 2021](#).

3.3. Marital status – Census 1971 to Census 2021

The marital status question in the census has changed over the last six censuses. These changes have been driven by changes in the law, changes in society and by how marriage/relationships have changed over the last fifty years.

Given these changes, detailed comparisons over the longer term are limited –Table 3a and Table 3b include three classifications for the period 1971 to 2021. The classifications included are labelled as ‘single’, ‘married’ and ‘other status’. This is the combination of various response categories and full details are given in the [Annex](#). The figures therefore are only broadly comparable over time. Those presented here attempt to address these differences but are presented to show the longer term social change over the last fifty years.

Table 3a: Marital or civil partnership status [note1] (Census 1971 to 2021) - numbers

Year	Single	Married	Other status	Population aged 16 and over
1971	322,200	638,000	92,000	1,052,200
1981	323,800	644,600	100,300	1,068,700
1991	363,800	678,800	125,300	1,167,900
2001	426,200	658,100	202,900	1,287,200
2011	517,400	682,100	232,100	1,431,500
2021	576,700	693,300	244,800	1,514,700

[Note 1: The table combines various response categories across the last six censuses – more details on how the classifications have been combined are given in the Annex.]

Table 3b: Marital or civil partnership status [note1] (Census 1971 to 2021) - percentages

Year	Single	Married	Other status	Population aged 16 and over
1971	30.6%	60.6%	8.7%	100.0%
1981	30.3%	60.3%	9.4%	100.0%
1991	31.1%	58.1%	10.7%	100.0%
2001	33.1%	51.1%	15.8%	100.0%
2011	36.1%	47.6%	16.2%	100.0%
2021	38.1%	45.8%	16.2%	100.0%

[Note 1: The table combines various response categories across the last six censuses – more details on how the classifications have been combined are given in the Annex.]

Table 3a and Table 3b show a marked decline over the last fifty years in the percentage of people aged 16 and over who were ‘married’ – down from 60.6% in 1971 to 45.8% in 2021.

The tables also show a rise in the percentage of adults who were ‘single’ – up from 30.6% in 1971 to 38.1% in 2021. They also show a rise in the percentage of adults in ‘other statuses’ (typically this relates to separated, widowed and divorced adults) –

up from 8.7% in 1971 to 16.2% in 2021. Within this final group, a remarkable change is the increase in the number of people who were divorced – up from 3,000 adults recorded in the 1971 Census to over 90,000 adults recorded in the 2021 Census. This is a thirty fold increase in number over fifty years.

The rise in the 'single' population and the fall in the 'married' population here is in line with results from recent censuses in England and Wales. These figures mirror changes in society and specifically in personal relationships that has been witnessed over the last 50 years.

3.4. Marital and civil partnership status by Local Government District (Census 2021)

Statistics on ‘marital or civil partnership’ status across the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs) in Northern Ireland are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Percentage of population aged 16 and over by marital or civil partnership status by LGD (Census 2021)

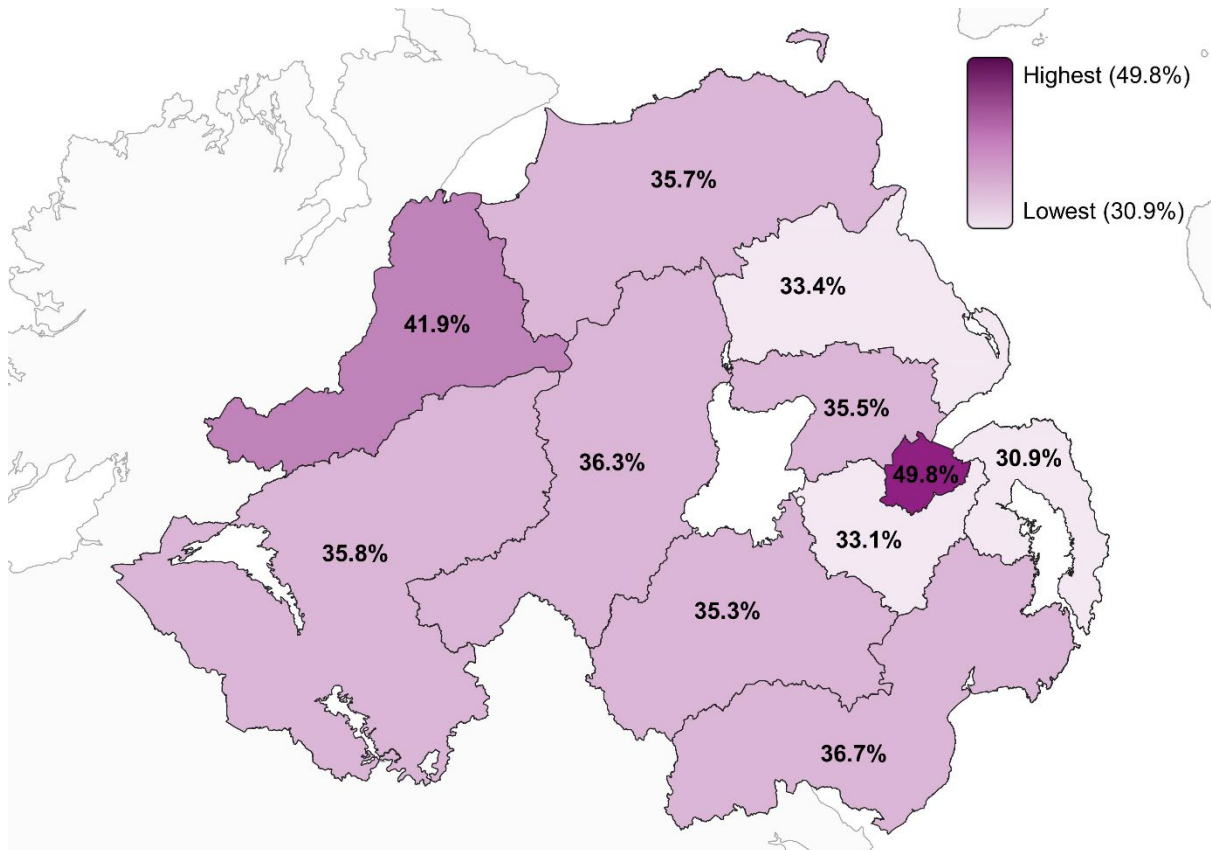
Geography	Population aged 16 and over	Single (never married/civil partnered)	Married/ In a Civil Partnership	Separated /Divorced [note 1]	Widowed [note 1]
Antrim & Newtownabbey	116,400	35.5%	47.9%	10.1%	6.4%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	170,400	35.3%	49.2%	9.4%	6.1%
Belfast	279,300	49.8%	33.2%	10.9%	6.1%
Causeway Coast & Glens	114,200	35.7%	47.9%	9.7%	6.7%
Derry City & Strabane	118,800	41.9%	41.2%	10.8%	6.1%
Fermanagh & Omagh	92,000	35.8%	49.3%	8.4%	6.6%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	118,900	33.1%	51.6%	9.1%	6.2%
Mid & East Antrim	113,100	33.4%	49.3%	10.4%	6.9%
Mid Ulster	115,700	36.3%	50.0%	7.8%	5.9%
Newry, Mourne & Down	142,000	36.7%	48.1%	8.9%	6.3%
Ards & North Down	134,000	30.9%	51.2%	10.7%	7.2%
Northern Ireland	1,514,700	38.1%	45.8%	9.8%	6.4%

[Note 1: These classifications include the married and civil partnership equivalents. ‘Separated’ is ‘separated (still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership)’, ‘divorced’ is ‘divorced or formerly in a civil partnership now dissolved’ and ‘widowed’ is ‘widowed or surviving partner from a civil partnership’]

The figures show that Belfast and Derry City & Strabane LGDs are markedly different from the other nine LGDs. In these two more urban LGDs, there were more ‘single’ adults than ‘married/civil partnership’ adults, while in the other nine LGDs the

converse is true. This is in part driven by the fact that the two urban areas concerned tend to attract larger numbers of younger people to study and work. The differences in the percentage of adults who were single are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Percentage of population aged 16 and over 'single (never married/civil partnered)' by LGD (Census 2021)



In contrast, LGDs that have an older demographic profile tend to have proportionately more widowed people. As an example, Ards & North Down LGD, which has the oldest demographic profile of all 11 LGDs, has the highest percentage of adults who were widowed, at 7.2%.

4. Couple relationships within households

The 2021 Census included ‘household level’ questions on the relationships between people in the household. This allowed every person in the household to describe their relationship (e.g. husband, wife, partner, son, daughter) with everyone else in the household.

The statistics below represent the number of people aged 16 and over who have indicated that they were living ‘in a couple’ with someone in the same household. Note these figures exclude people who live in communal establishments.

4.1. Couple relationships within households – Census 2021

Headline results on ‘couple relationships within households’ are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Couple relationships within households – population aged 16 and over living in households (Census 2021)

Relationship status (persons)	Population	Percent
Living in an opposite-sex couple	784,800	52.7%
Married/Civil Partnership	669,200	44.9%
Co-habiting	115,700	7.8%
Living in a same-sex couple	9,600	0.6%
Married/Civil Partnership	3,900	0.3%
Co-habiting	5,700	0.4%
Not living in a couple	694,600	46.6%
Single (never married/civil partnered)	467,000	31.4%
Married/Civil Partnership	14,100	0.9%
Separated [note 1]	49,900	3.4%
Divorced [note 1]	75,700	5.1%
Widowed [note 1]	87,900	5.9%
Population aged 16 and over living in households	1,489,000	100.0%

[Note 1: These classifications include both the married and civil partnership equivalents. ‘Separated’ is ‘separated (still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership)’, ‘divorced’ is ‘divorced or formerly in a civil partnership now dissolved’ and ‘widowed’ is ‘widowed or surviving partner from a civil partnership’]

Table 5 shows that over 50% of the adult population (53.3% or 794,400) living in households were living in a couple. The remaining 46.6% (694,600) of the adult population living in households were not living in a couple.

There were 9,600 adults (0.6%) living together in households in a same-sex couple (either married, civil partnered or co-habiting).

4.2. Couple relationships within households by Local Government District – Census 2021

Statistics on ‘couple relationships within households’ for the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs) are shown in Tables 6a & 6b.

Table 6a: Population aged 16 and over living in households by relationship status and LGD (Census 2021) - number

Geography	Population aged 16 and over living in households	Living in an opposite-sex couple	Living in a same-sex couple	Not living in a couple
Antrim & Newtownabbey	114,200	64,100	800	49,400
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	168,800	95,300	800	72,700
Belfast	270,200	111,100	3,100	156,100
Causeway Coast & Glens	112,200	61,300	400	50,500
Derry City & Strabane	117,400	54,200	700	62,400
Fermanagh & Omagh	90,800	49,400	400	41,000
Lisburn & Castlereagh	116,400	69,500	1,000	45,900
Mid & East Antrim	111,900	63,000	500	48,400
Mid Ulster	114,500	63,300	500	50,800
Newry, Mourne & Down	140,200	75,600	700	63,900
Ards & North Down	132,300	78,000	800	53,500
Northern Ireland	1,489,000	784,800	9,600	694,600

Table 6b: Population aged 16 and over living in households by relationship status and LGD (Census 2021) - percentage

Geography	Population aged 16 and over living in households	Living in an opposite-sex couple	Living in a same-sex couple	Not living in a couple
Antrim & Newtownabbey	114,200	56.1%	0.7%	43.2%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	168,800	56.5%	0.5%	43.1%
Belfast	270,200	41.1%	1.1%	57.7%
Causeway Coast & Glens	112,200	54.6%	0.4%	45.0%
Derry City & Strabane	117,400	46.2%	0.6%	53.2%
Fermanagh & Omagh	90,800	54.4%	0.4%	45.2%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	116,400	59.7%	0.8%	39.5%
Mid & East Antrim	111,900	56.3%	0.5%	43.2%
Mid Ulster	114,500	55.2%	0.4%	44.4%
Newry, Mourne & Down	140,200	53.9%	0.5%	45.6%
Ards & North Down	132,300	58.9%	0.6%	40.4%
Northern Ireland	1,489,000	52.7%	0.6%	46.6%

In line with the marital or civil partnership status, the figures show Belfast and Derry City & Strabane LGDs are different from the other nine LGDs. In these two more urban LGDs, there were more persons **not** living in a couple than living in a couple, while in the other nine areas the converse is true.

5. Associated outputs

Further [Census 2021 outputs on household relationships](#) are available to download from the NISRA website, they include:

- MS-A24 Number of dependent children – households;
- MS-A25 Household composition - usual residents;
- MS-A26 Household composition - households;
- MS-A27 Adult lifestage;
- MS-A28 Household lifestage;
- MS-A29 Living arrangements; and
- MS-A30 Marital and civil partnership status.

6. Further information

Census statistics are produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency free from political influence. In May 2022, following a full assessment, the United Kingdom Statistics Authority designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#) and the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). National Statistics status means that the statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

The census plays a fundamental role in the provision of official statistics – census data are used to inform key policies, plan key services and allocate public funds.

6.1. Quality of the results

The census data collection operation was supported by an independent [coverage survey](#). The coverage survey along with administrative data and information from the field operation were combined to allow statistical estimates to be made of the small percentage of people who did not make a return. The statistical estimates discussed here, as with all Census 2021 outputs, reflect the full population of Northern Ireland.

Further information on accuracy, coverage and imputation is provided on the NISRA website in the [Census 2021 quality assurance report \(PDF 275 KB\)](#).

Marital or civil partnership & relationship responses quality note

The census responses contained larger than expected numbers of individuals reporting to be in a civil partnership. Information from the relationship question on the census questionnaire suggested that some of these individual marital or civil partnership question responses were erroneous. Census Office used this relationship information to amend a small number of marital or civil partnership question responses where an inconsistency was clearly identified. This was only possible where people lived with their partner in the same household. Therefore only combined estimates for the marital or civil partnership status for the groups 'separated', 'divorced/dissolved', and 'widowed/surviving partners' are available.

Alongside this, the complexity of 'within household' living arrangements may mean that household relationship statistics do not in all cases match individual level marital or civil partnership statistics. Users should be aware of this when using these and other statistics from these two outputs.

6.2. Confidentiality

Census Office has taken steps to ensure that the confidentiality of respondents is fully protected. All published results from the census have been subject to statistical processes to ensure that individuals cannot be identified. For more information, please refer to the [statistical disclosure control methodology](#). These processes may result in very marginally different results between tables for the same statistic.

6.3. Comparability with previous censuses

The census is designed to provide the most accurate possible picture of the population on the day the census is taken. Whilst this report contains a small number of historical tables that give comparisons at the Northern Ireland level of some key statistics, users should be aware that comparisons may be affected by other differences, in particular, between the census questionnaires, impacts of issues of the day, etc.

As the last three censuses (2001, 2011 and 2021) were all adjusted for under-enumeration and reflect the Northern Ireland population on census day, this supports comparisons between those censuses.

6.4. Supporting material

A number of [supporting documents](#) are available on the census pages of the NISRA website. These documents describe the census methodology in more detail, the quality assurance processes applied, the paper questionnaire used in the census, and a full list of definitions and output classifications.

6.5. More details

Further information on the statistics provided in this publication can be obtained from Census Customer Services at:

Telephone:	028 9025 5156
Email:	census@nisra.gov.uk
Responsible Statistician:	Dr David Marshall

This report was made possible by the co-operation of the public in responding to the census, the commitment of the census field and headquarters staff, and the assistance of many other people and organisations throughout all aspects of the census. The Registrar General for Northern Ireland, who is responsible for the planning, conduct and reporting of the census, would like to thank all of those who contributed to the census.

6.6. Copyright

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Annex: Summary historical statistics from the marital or civil partnership question (1971 to 2021 Census)

The marital status question in the census has changed over the last six censuses. These changes have been driven by changes in the law, changes in society and by how marriage/relationships have changed over the last fifty years.

In terms of the census, a summary of the changes to the question is listed below:

- in the 1971 Census the marital status question had four response options 'single', 'married', 'divorced' and 'widowed';
- by the 1981 Census 're-married' was added as a further response option;
- in the 2001 Census 'separated' was added as a further response option; and
- in the 2011 and 2021 Censuses the marital status question was expanded to include both marriage and civil partnership – this change was driven by changes following the passing of the Civil Partnership Act (2004).

The following table shows how the various options have been combined to produce the summary statistics in this report in section 3.3.

Table A1: Summary of combination of marital or civil partnership options in this report (Census 1971 to Census 2021)

Census	“Single”	“Married”	“Other status”
1971	Single	Married	Divorced & Widowed
1981	Single	Married & Remarried	Divorced & Widowed
1991	Single	Married & Remarried	Divorced & Widowed
2001	Single (never married)	Married & Remarried	Divorced, Widowed & Separated
2011	Single (never married or never registered a same-sex civil partnership)	Married & In a registered same-sex civil partnership	Divorced, Widowed & Separated [note 1]
2021	Single (never married or never registered a civil partnership)	Married & In a civil partnership	Divorced, Widowed & Separated [note 1]

[Note 1: These classifications include both the married and civil partnership equivalents. ‘Separated’ is ‘separated (still legally married or still legally in a civil partnership)’, ‘divorced’ is ‘divorced or formerly in a civil partnership now dissolved’ and ‘widowed’ is ‘widowed or surviving partner from a civil partnership’]