

Gay couples to be allowed to 'wed' in churches by the end of the year

- **45 per cent of Brits believe homosexual marriages should not be allowed**

By [Steve Doughty](#)



Equalities Minister, Lynne Featherstone confirmed a scheme is intended to be in place by the end of the year

Churches will be allowed to stage civil partnership ceremonies for same-sex couples, the Equalities Minister said yesterday.

Lynne Featherstone promised that by the end of the year vicars will be able to apply to have their churches approved for partnership ceremonies, which are currently only allowed to be secular.

But the Church of England said it had no intention of opening its own churches for same-sex

couples to register or bless their partnerships.

Christian critics, however, said reluctant churches would be pressured or driven by the courts to offer civil partnerships despite assurances from ministers that no church will be forced to accept them. Miss Featherstone said the reforms to civil partnership law were part of the Coalition's drive for gay equality and to guarantee freedom of religion for everyone.

In a written statement, she said: 'The Government is committed to removing the legal barrier to civil partnerships being registered on the religious premises of those faith groups who choose to allow this to happen.'

The move to allow civil partnerships in churches comes in advance of a Government consultation on full gay marriage, promised for next spring. David Cameron announced his support for gay marriage at the Tory conference last month.

Andrea Minichiello Williams of the pressure group Christian Concern said the changes would 'In no way are there sufficient protections for those who object on the grounds of conscience to providing this service,' she said.

'Churches will inevitably be coerced into performing these ceremonies, and those that don't will be vilified and sued. Nobody will seriously believe the Government's assurances to the contrary, given the way in which previous assurances on civil partnerships have been shattered.

'With the Prime Minister also backing plans to introduce full homosexual marriage soon, the church at large needs to wake up very fast, or else church leaders who believe that marriage is between a man and a woman may well lose their liberty to continue acting according to that belief, and may be forced in the future to resign their positions.'