

Number of marriages falls to lowest level on record

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The number of people getting married in England and Wales has fallen to the lowest number on record. A 10 per cent drop was announced in provisional results from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with 244,710 weddings taking place in 2005. The slump reverses a three-year trend of the number of weddings increasing.

In an attempt to prevent "sham marriages", the Home Office tightened laws in February 2005 to stop non-Europeans using marriage as a way to stay in Britain. The ONS said it was unclear how the Home Office policy change had affected the statistics, but the numbers suggest that the brief rise in weddings may have been provoked by "green card" marriages.

London, which has a large proportion of its population born outside Europe, saw one of the most dramatic falls in wedding numbers, with a 35 per cent decrease between 2004 and 2005. The ONS said tighter laws could have caused the decline. "Clearly the change in the law is one possible factor," it said. It also noted that the number of weddings taking place in specially designated register offices - compulsory for those born outside the EU - had declined.

But the ONS stressed that the new legislation did not "wholly" explain the change, which it says is largely a return to the general trend of decline since 1973. They put this gradual change down to "delay in marriage and more cohabitation". The national statisticians pointed out that, in 1851, there were 27 married couples for every single person, compared to just 12 in 2005.

The ONS also showed that the proportion of couples opting for religious weddings continued to decline, resulting for the first time in a higher number of ceremonies in "approved premises" than in religious buildings. There were 84,400 religious services in 2005, compared to 88,710 weddings taking place in places such as hotels and stately homes.

The first figures for the number of gay couples who took civil partnership vows under the new law were also released yesterday. In all, 18,059 civil partnerships were formed in the year to December 2006.