

# Divorces in England and Wales, 2011



Coverage: **England and Wales**  
Date: **20 December 2012**  
Geographical Area: **Country**  
Theme: **Population**

## Key findings

- The number of divorces in England and Wales in 2011 was 117,558, a decrease of 1.7% since 2010, when there were 119,589 divorces.
- In 2011, 10.8 people divorced per thousand married population compared with 12.9 in 2001.
- The number of divorces in 2011 was highest among men and women aged 40 to 44.
- Based on marriage, divorce and mortality statistics for 2010, it is estimated that the percentage of marriages ending in divorce is 42%, compared with 45% in 2005.

## Summary

This bulletin presents annual statistics on divorces that took place in England and Wales in 2011, following court orders. The statistics do not include divorces to couples usually resident in England and Wales which took place abroad.

A marriage may be either dissolved, following a petition for divorce and the granting of a decree absolute, or annulled, following a petition for nullity and the awarding of a decree of nullity. In this release, the term divorce includes both decrees absolute and decrees of nullity.

Divorce statistics are analysed by sex, age and marital status before marriage, duration of marriage, age at divorce, the number and age of children involved, and the grounds for divorce.

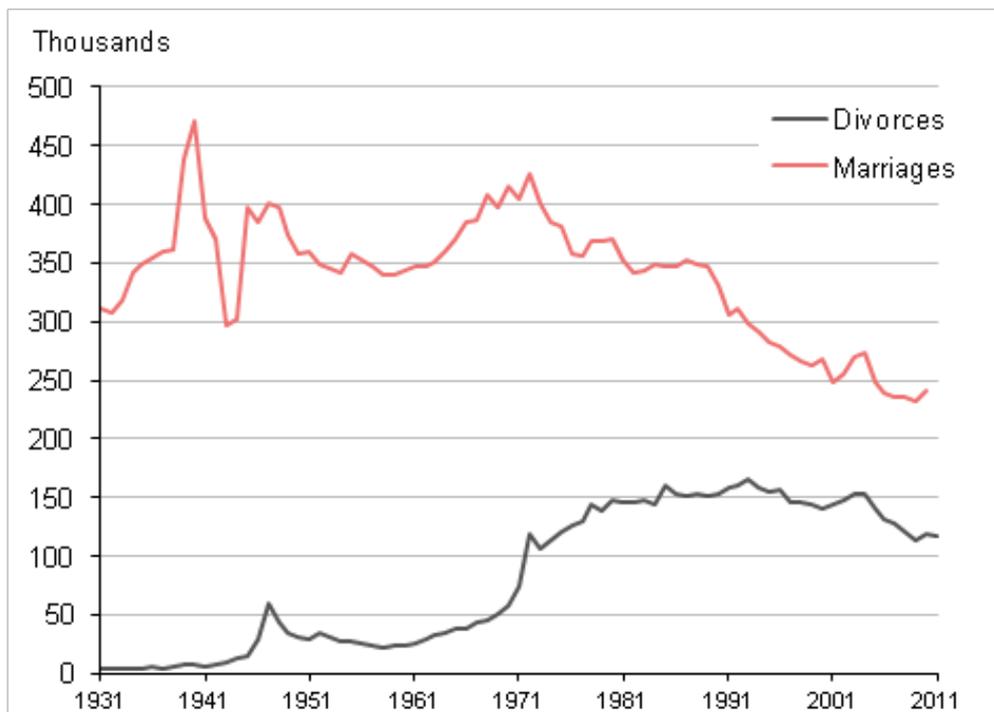
This is the first time that ONS has released 2011 divorce statistics for England and Wales.

## Number of divorces

In 2011 the number of divorces in England and Wales decreased by 1.7% to 117,558 compared with 119,589 in 2010. This continues the general decline in divorces since 2003 when there were 153,065. The fall in divorces is consistent with a decline in the number of marriages to 2009. The decrease in marriages to 2009 may be due to the increasing number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than enter into marriage ([Beaujouan and Bhrolcháin, 2011](#)) (283.5 Kb Pdf).

**Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces, 1931–2011**

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

### Notes:

1. Marriage figures for 2010 are provisional.

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Figure 1 shows the changing trend in the number of divorces since 1931, as well as changes in the number of marriages. The number of divorces generally increased between 1931 and 1990 as a result of changes in behaviour and attitudes.

The large increase in the late 1940s (following the end of the Second World War) is considered to be attributable to women's increased participation in the labour force which meant couples were no longer as financially dependent on each other. The large increase observed during the 1970s was

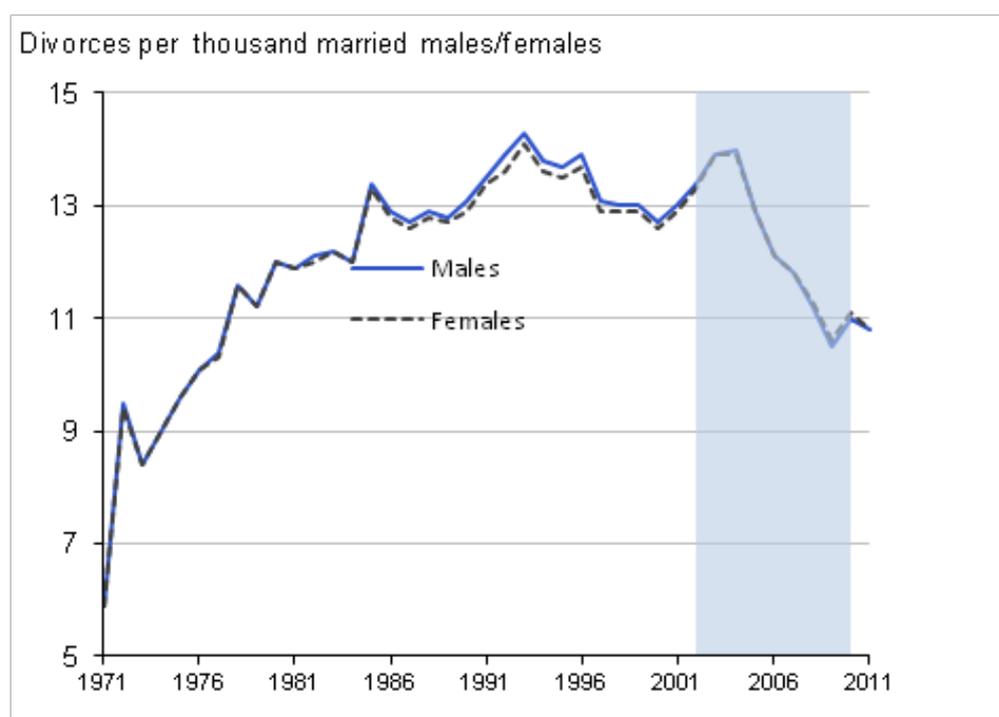
associated with the Divorce Reform Act 1969, which came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation.

## Divorce rates

In 2011, 10.8 people divorced per thousand married population, compared with 12.9 in 2001. Similar decreases in the male and female divorce rates have also taken place since 2001 (Figure 2). The male divorce rate decreased to 10.8 divorces per thousand married males, down from 13.0 in 2001. The female divorce rate reached 10.8 divorces per thousand married females, down from 12.9 in 2001.

**Figure 2: Divorce rates by sex, 1971–2011**

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

### Notes:

- Divorce rates for 2002–2010 are calculated using marital status population estimates based on the 2001 Census. Revisions to these estimates to take account of the 2011 Census are not currently planned. Divorce rates for 2011 are based on estimated 2011 marital status population estimates which use the mid-2011 population estimates based on the 2011 Census and the marital status distribution from the 2008-based marital status population projections for 2011. Consequently comparisons between rates for 2002–2010 and 2011 should be treated with caution due to the different census bases used. For more information see section titled 'Availability of Mid-2011 Population Estimates by Marital Status and the Calculation of Divorce Rates for 2011'.

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Changes in the size of the adult population who are married, and therefore at risk of divorce, will affect both the number of divorces and the divorce rate. The decrease in divorce rates in 2011 was driven by both a decrease in the number of divorces and an increase in the size of the married adult population. Changes in the size of the married population are determined by patterns of marriage, divorce, mortality and migration. Whilst the actual number of males and females getting married or divorced in a particular year is equal, the number of unmarried males and females in the population will differ, hence the different rates (see background note 3).

Marital status estimates based on the 2001 Census suggest that both the male and female divorce rate decreased between 2004 and 2011 with the exception of 2010 where rates increased. The increase in 2010 could have been associated with the economic climate following the 2008-09 recession. Two competing theories exist relating to the effect of an economic downturn on the number of partnerships dissolving.

One theory suggests that recession could contribute to a rise in partnership break-ups because of increased financial strain, changes in employment and related lifestyle changes. Social research in Britain has shown that unemployment and downturns in the housing market may be associated with family instability ([Vaitilingam, 2011](#)). In addition some individuals may believe they will get a more favourable divorce settlement if their income is currently low.

In contrast, an alternative theory suggests that partnerships would be less likely to dissolve in an unfavourable economic climate because of an increase in family solidarity during difficult times and the need to postpone marital break-ups until the economy, and the value of their home improves ([Bradford Wilcox, 2011](#)). Any impact of the recession on divorce is likely to vary across different sectors of society.

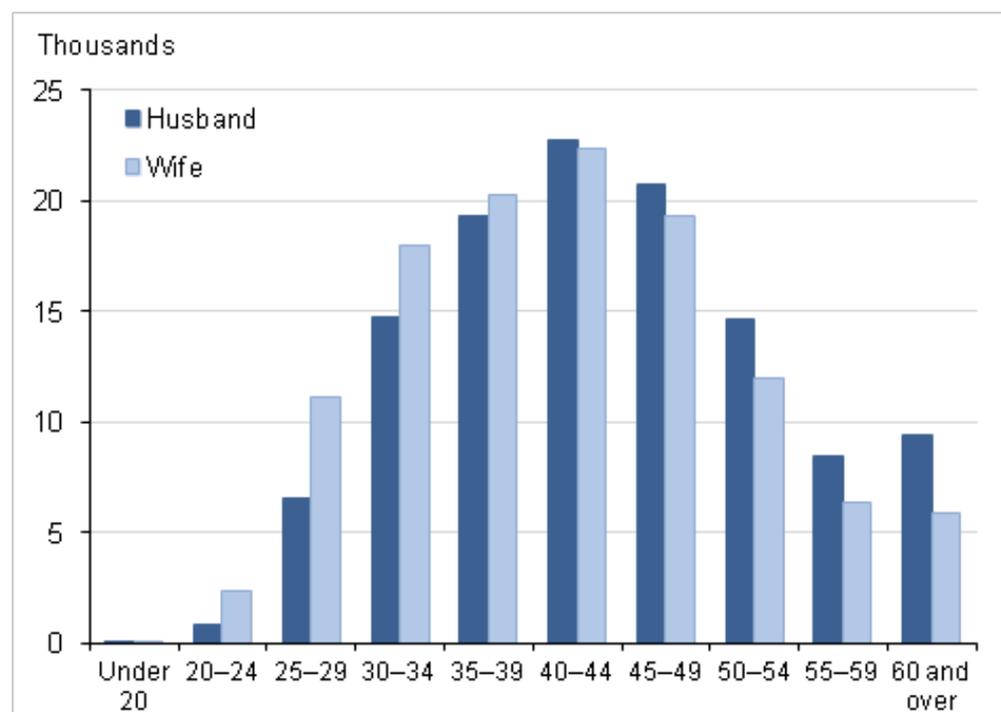
It is too early to say whether the decrease in divorces in 2011 will continue in 2012 or whether recent trends in divorce rates represent small fluctuations resulting from rates nearing some form of stabilisation. Recent trends could be consistent with the theory that recession is associated with an increased risk of divorce, but with a delayed impact ([Bradford Wilcox, 2011](#)), perhaps reflecting a couple's wait for an economic recovery to lift the value of their assets or the time lag between separation and obtaining a decree absolute. A similar trend can be seen during the previous recession in 1990-92, where divorce rates increased more markedly in 1993 than during the recession itself.

## Age at divorce

Figure 3 shows the age at divorce for men and women in 2011. At younger ages there were more women than men divorcing; however, at older ages more men than women divorced. This pattern reflects the differences seen in age at marriage of men and women (the provisional mean age for men marrying in 2010 was 36.2 years compared with 33.6 for women). In 2011, the number of divorces was highest among men and women aged 40 to 44.

**Figure 3: Number of divorces by age at divorce, 2011**

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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(26 Kb)

Compared with 2001, divorce rates in England and Wales are higher in 2011 for men and women aged 45 and above while divorce rates for men and women aged below 45 are lower for all age groups, with the exception of women aged 40 to 44 and for men aged under 20. (See tables 3a and 3b – [Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage \(301.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)).

Women in their late twenties had the highest divorce rates of all female age groups, with 23.9 females divorcing per thousand married women aged 25 to 29 in 2011. This continues the general pattern seen over the last two decades.

Similarly, men in their late twenties had the highest divorce rate in 2011 with 21.9 males divorcing per thousand married men aged 25 to 29. This continues the recent trend where men aged 25 to 29 had the highest divorce rate between 2006 and 2008; rates for men aged 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 were equal highest in 2009, and in 2010 rates for men aged 30 to 34 were highest. Over the last two decades, the divorce rate for men has been highest for those aged either 25 to 29 or 30 to 34.

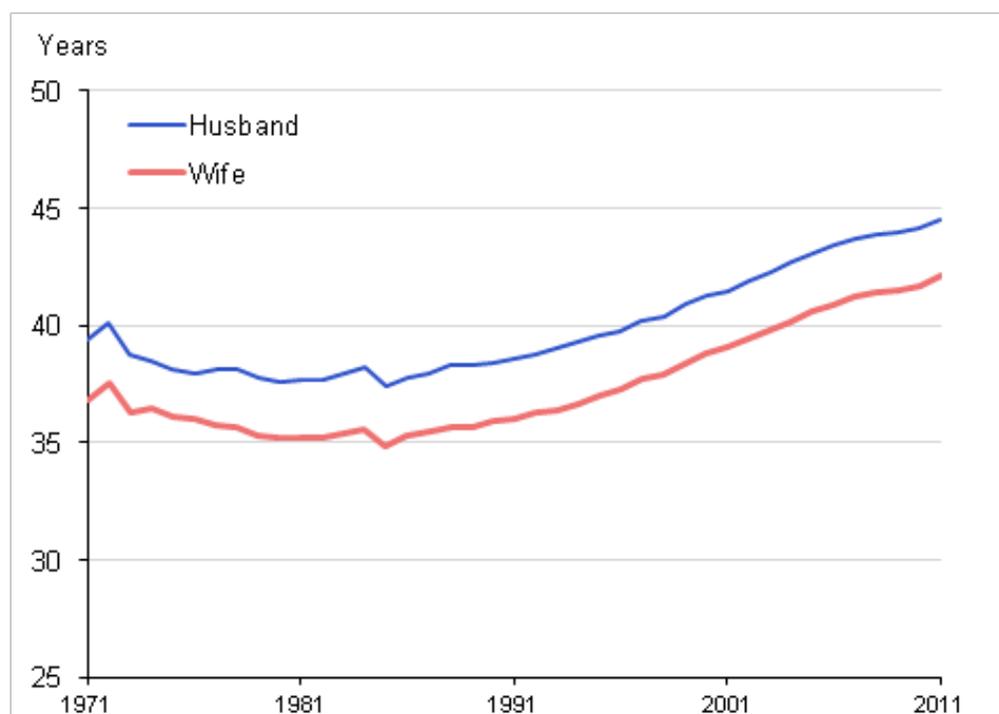
The average (mean) age at divorce increased slightly for both men and women in 2011 (Figure 4 and tables 2a and 2b – [Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage \(301.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)). The mean age for men divorcing was 44.5 years in 2011, an increase from 44.2 years in 2010. For women this increased from 41.7 years in 2010 to 42.1 years in 2011.

Following an initial rise between 1971 and 1972 the mean age at divorce generally declined for both males and females during the mid to late 1970s and generally remained stable in the early 1980s. Since 1985 the mean ages at divorce for men and women have increased, rising by 7.1 years for men and 7.2 years for women. The difference between the mean age of husband and wife at divorce has remained relatively unchanged over the last four decades, with a difference of around 2.5 years except for the years 1974 to 1976 when it was 2.0 years.

In 2011, 8.0% of males divorcing and 5.0% of females divorcing were aged 60 and over. This compares with 4.6% of males and 2.6% of females in 2001.

#### Figure 4: Average (mean) age at divorce of husband and wife, 1971–2011

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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(28 Kb)

#### Duration of marriage

The median duration of marriage (the median is the mid point of the distribution – see background note 6) for divorces granted in 2011 was 11.5 years, a small increase from 2010 (11.4 years), and also an increase from 10.9 years in 2001 (see table 4: [Age at marriage, duration of marriage and cohort analyses \(488 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)).

The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act replaced the discretionary time bar (minimum time interval between the date

of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce) of three years by an absolute time bar of one year. No petition can now be filed within the first year of marriage.

The median duration of marriage for divorces granted in 1984 was 10.1 years. Following the change in legislation the median duration of marriage fell to 8.9 years for divorces granted in 1985. Since this change, the median duration between marriage and divorce increased steadily up to 2005 but has remained relatively stable since.

## Marital status before marriage

In 2011, 20% of men and 19% of women divorcing had their previous marriage end in divorce. These proportions have almost doubled since 1980 when the comparable figures were 10% (see table 7: [Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before marriage \(301.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)).

In 2011, 70% of divorces were to couples where both parties were in their first marriage, while the remaining 30% were to couples where at least one of the parties had been divorced or widowed previously.

The percentage of couples divorcing where the marriage was the first for both parties has generally declined from the early 1970s to 2011. Over the same period however, the percentage of divorces where one or both parties were previously divorced has gradually increased.

## Fact proven at divorce

In 2011, of all decrees granted to one partner (rather than jointly to both), 66% were granted to the wife (see table 1: [Number of divorces, age at divorce and marital status before divorce \(301.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)). In over half (54%) of the cases where the divorce was granted to the wife, the husband's behaviour was the fact proven (see background note 7). Of the divorces granted to the husband, the most common facts proven were the wife's behaviour (36% of cases) and two years' separation with consent (32% of cases). Very few decrees (0.1%) were granted jointly to husband and wife.

## Children of divorced couples

Almost half (49%) of couples divorcing in 2011 had at least one child aged under 16 living in the family (see table 1: [Children of divorced couples \(108 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)). There were 100,760 children aged under 16 who were in families where the parents divorced in 2011, a decrease of 31% from 2001 when there were 146,914 children.

Over a fifth (21%) of the children in 2011 were under five and 64% were under 11. In 2011 there was an average of 1.76 children aged under 16 per divorcing couples with one or more children aged under 16. This compares with 1.85 in 2001. These changes may reflect the increasing proportion of children born to cohabiting, rather than married, couples (see reference table 2 in birth statistics package [Characteristics of Mother 1](#)).

## Proportion of marriages ending in divorce

It is estimated that the percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces occur in the first ten years of marriage (see table 2a – [Age at marriage, duration of marriage and cohort analyses \(488 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)).

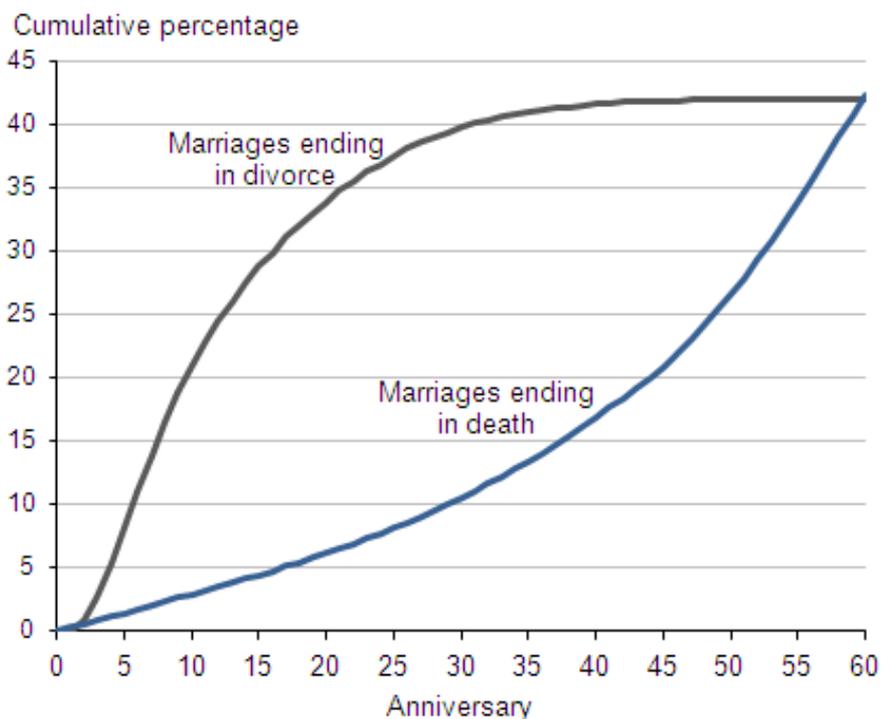
These figures have been derived by calculating the married population by duration of marriage for 2010. Mortality and divorce rates for 2010 are then applied to this population. See background note 10 for assumptions behind these calculations. More information on how these figures have been calculated is available in the [Divorces Metadata \(382.4 Kb Pdf\)](#).

Figure 5 illustrates the percentages of marriages ending in divorce or death, by each anniversary assuming that divorce and mortality rates remain unchanged from those in 2010 throughout the duration of the marriage. For example:

- 34% of marriages are expected to end in divorce by the 20th wedding anniversary,
- 6% of marriages are expected to end in the death of one partner by the 20th wedding anniversary,
- Therefore 60% of marriages are expected to survive to the 20th anniversary.
- The average marriage is expected to last for 32 years.

**Figure 5: Cumulative percentage of marriages ending in divorce or death by anniversary, 2010**

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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Figure 5 shows that the cumulative percentage of marriages ending in divorce increases more rapidly in the first 10 years of marriage than the 10 years after that. Once the 20th wedding anniversary is reached, the cumulative percentage increases less rapidly. Conversely, the cumulative percentage of marriages which end in the death of one partner increases less rapidly in the first 40 years of marriage than the 10 years after that. This is because mortality is greater at older ages, and so has more impact at longer durations of marriage.

Compared with figures from 2005 ([Wilson and Smallwood, 2008](#)) (244.2 Kb Pdf), the proportion of marriages ending in divorce has decreased from 45% in 2005 to 42% in 2010. This may be related to the following two factors:

- The age at first marriage has been increasing, and previous research has shown that those marrying at older ages have a lower risk of divorce ([Wilson and Smallwood, 2008](#)) (244.2 Kb Pdf).
- Cohabitation has increased in recent years. Cohabitation is often a precursor to marriage and may act to filter out weaker relationships from progressing to marriage ([Beaujouan and Bhrolcháin, 2011](#)) (283.5 Kb Pdf).

### Figure 6: Probability of divorce in interval to next anniversary, 2010

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

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Figure 6 shows that the probability of divorce by the next wedding anniversary rises rapidly in the first five years of marriage, so that between the fourth and eighth wedding anniversaries the probability of divorcing by the next anniversary is over 3%. After the eighth wedding anniversary, the probability of divorcing decreases from this peak, and by the 26th anniversary, the chance of divorcing by the next anniversary is less than 1%.

## Divorces in the UK

The number of divorces in the UK decreased by 1.9% in 2011 to 129,763 compared with 132,338 in 2010.

The number of divorces in Scotland fell by 2.8%, from 10,149 in 2010 to 9,862 in 2011. The number of divorces in Northern Ireland also decreased. In 2011, there were 2,343 divorces, 9.9% fewer than in 2010 when there were 2,600.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Population and Health Reference tables](#) (see 'Annual Time Series' table).

## Civil partnership dissolutions

Despite the decrease in divorces, the number of civil partnership dissolutions increased in 2011. However this is part of an upward trend given that this type of partnership is relatively new and therefore the numbers of people in civil partnerships is increasing.

Comparisons between civil partnership dissolutions and divorce statistics can be found in the article: [Civil Partnerships five years on \(190.1 Kb Pdf\)](#), which was published in Population Trends (Autumn 2011).

Further statistics on [civil partnership dissolutions](#) can be found on the ONS website.

## Availability of mid-2011 population estimates by marital status and the calculation of divorce rates for 2011

Mid-2011 population estimates by marital status are not currently scheduled for publication. These estimates would normally be used to calculate 2011 divorce rates.

Consequently, 2011 divorce rates are based on estimated 2011 marital status population estimates which use the mid-2011 population estimates based on the 2011 Census and the marital status distribution from the 2008-based marital status population projections for 2011. Analyses have shown that these estimates provide:

- a plausible marital status distribution for 2011,
- and a more plausible 2011 marital status distribution than the 2010 marital status estimates.

ONS will consider the future need for population estimates by marital status in their present form once results from the 2011 Census by marital status, age and sex are available. These results will be used to benchmark current methods and evaluate alternative sources of data on partnership status.

## **Population estimate revisions and their impact on divorce statistics for 2002-2010**

Population estimates for mid-2002 to mid-2010 are being revised to take account of the results of the 2011 Census to ensure a consistent time series over the decade. Revised population estimates for:

- England and Wales, mid-2002 to mid-2010 were published on 13 December 2012,
- and Subnational areas in England and Wales, mid-2002 to mid-2010 are due to be published in March-April 2013.

Revisions to population estimates by marital status for mid-2002 to mid-2010 are not currently planned. The marital status estimates used to calculate divorce rates for 2002-2008 are therefore not consistent with the latest mid-year population estimates. Consequently, any comparisons between rates for 2002-2010 and 2011 should be treated with caution due to the different census bases used. To enable comparisons over time, divorce rates in 2011 have been compared to those in 2001.

## **Users of divorce statistics**

ONS uses divorce statistics to:

- report on social and demographic trends,
- perform further analyses, for example comparing trends in divorce with civil partnership dissolutions,
- produce population estimates by marital status for England and Wales (currently under review and may be discontinued),
- and produce population projections by marital status for England and Wales (currently under review and may be discontinued).

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is one of the key users of divorce statistics and has responsibility for policy and legislation on divorces. Demographic information collected by MoJ is analysed and published by ONS and MoJ relies on these analyses to inform policy decisions.

Other government departments, for example the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE), also use divorce statistics. The demography unit at DWP uses the detailed divorce statistics to feed into statistical models for pensions and benefits. DfE have an interest in divorce statistics since family breakdown can impact on a child's well-being.

Organisations such as Eurostat and those in the voluntary sector use ONS divorce statistics for comparison purposes and also to support campaigns. These organisations often pass on ONS's divorce statistics to their own users.

Lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law, as well as academics and researchers in demography and social sciences, are often interested in divorce figures.

Queries on divorces by area are frequent, although ONS does not produce divorces by area of residence. This is because divorce data provided to ONS by the courts does not contain information on the area of residence of the parties. Information on the location of the court is available, but this is not a good indicator of where the parties lived either before or after separation, as the two parties may choose the court they wish to use and courts are not evenly spread around England and Wales.

## Further information

More data on [divorces in England and Wales](#) are available on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website.

[ONS divorces metadata \(382.4 Kb Pdf\)](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces.

The [ONS divorces QMI \(164.8 Kb Pdf\)](#) provides overview notes which pull together key qualitative information on the various dimensions of quality as well as providing a summary of methods used to compile the output.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Population and Health Reference tables](#).

National Records of Scotland provide [divorce statistics for Scotland](#).

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency provide [divorce statistics for Northern Ireland](#).

[Annual and quarterly divorce statistics](#) are also available from the Ministry of Justice.

Further statistics on [marriages, civil partnership and civil partnership dissolutions](#) are available on the ONS website, as are data on [families and households](#) which presents recent estimates of the number of families by type, people in families by type, and children in families by type.

[Population estimates by marital status](#) provide the estimated resident population by single year of age, sex and marital status (single, married, divorced, and widowed) for England and Wales.

## References

Beaujouan, E and Bhrolcháin, M (2011) [Cohabitation and marriage in Britain since the 1970s \(283.5 Kb Pdf\)](#), Population Trends 145.

Bradford Wilcox, W (2011) [The State of Our Unions, Marriage in America 2009](#), Money and Marriage, University of Virginia, The National Marriage Project.

Wilson, B and Smallwood, S (2008) [The proportion of marriages ending in divorce \(244.2 Kb Pdf\)](#), Population Trends 131.

Vaitilingham, R. (2011) [Recession Britain](#), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [Accessed 11 December 2012].

## Background notes

1. ONS divorce statistics are collated from D105 forms used to record decree absolutes. These paper forms are supplied to ONS for processing by the courts. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) also publishes a summary of divorce figures as part of their Judicial and Court Statistics. MoJ receives divorce data electronically from HM Court Service (HMCS) through the FamilyMan system.
2. The number of divorces as indicated by ONS and MoJ statistics, while similar, do not match exactly, and ONS and MoJ have published a joint [statement on differences](#) between these figures. For example, in 2011 the total ONS divorce figure was 117,558 compared with the MoJ figure of 119,610 a difference of 2,052 (1.7% ). The two sets of figures do not count precisely the same cases. For example:
  - ONS divorce figures include annulments while MoJ figures do not. The number of annulments in 2011 published by MoJ was 206.
  - Since 2007 divorce figures published by MoJ have included dissolutions of civil partnerships. These are not included in ONS figures. The number of civil partnership dissolutions in 2011 published by ONS was 624. Further information [civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions](#) can be found on the ONS website.

There are some other differences arising from the way the data are collected and processed. These include:

- differences in the number of late divorce records excluded from ONS and MoJ annual datasets,
- differences in the process to remove duplicate records,
- and differences between the number of records entered onto the FamilyMan system and the number of paper records received by ONS from courts.

ONS and MoJ have worked closely together over the past couple of years to reconcile the two sets of statistics as far as possible. Both departments have agreed that attempting to achieve yet closer reconciliation is not an immediate priority at the current time. This situation will be regularly reviewed in the future.

3. The male divorce rate is calculated by dividing the number of males divorcing in a particular year by the estimated number of married males aged 16 and over in that same year (taken from mid-year population estimates by marital status). Likewise, the female divorce rate is calculated by

dividing the number of females divorcing in a particular year by the estimated number of married females aged 16 and over in that same year.

4. The statistics do not take into account married couples who separate, but do not divorce.
5. The average (mean) ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing age structure of the population.
6. The median duration of marriage at divorce in this release is represented by the middle value when the data are arranged in increasing order. The median is used, rather than the mean, because the duration of marriage for divorces is not symmetrically distributed, therefore the median provides a more accurate reflection of this distribution. The mean would be affected by the relatively small number of divorces which take place when duration of marriage exceeds 15 years.
7. Fact proven at divorce; A petitioner must prove one or more of five facts (adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, and separation, either with or without consent of the respondent), in order to establish the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage.
8. The Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971. The Act, subsequently consolidated in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, made it possible for the first time for divorce to be petitioned for on the couple's separation.
9. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act made two changes. The first replaced the discretionary time bar (minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce) of three years by an absolute time bar of one year. No petition can now be filed within the first year of marriage. The second change meant the Act no longer required courts to try to place the divorced spouses in the financial position they would have enjoyed had the marriage not broken down.
10. Statistics on the proportion of marriages ending in divorce are based on several assumptions including:
  - divorce rates and mortality rates remain unchanged from 2010,
  - the married population by age and sex is accurately assigned to duration of marriage (a description of how this was done is provided in the [divorces metadata \(382.4 Kb Pdf\)](#)),
  - and people marry, divorce and die in the country where they usually live.

All these factors will affect the true percentages. For example, couples who live in England and Wales but who have married abroad in the last decade are not included in the marriage figures but may be included in the divorce figures, which could lead to over-estimation of the proportion of marriages ending in divorce.

These figures have been produced using marriage statistics, divorce and mortality rates for 2010. While divorce and mortality rates are currently available for 2011, 2011 statistics for marriages will not be available until Spring 2013.

11. Special extracts and tabulations of divorce data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and agreement of costs, where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to:

Vital Statistics Output Branch  
Life Events and Population Sources Division  
Office for National Statistics  
Segensworth Road  
Titchfield  
Fareham  
Hampshire PO15 5RR  
Tel: +44 (0)1329 444110

Email: [vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk)

The [ONS charging policy](#) is available on the ONS website.

12. We welcome feedback from users on the content, format and relevance of this release. The [Health and Life Events \(HLED\) User Engagement Strategy](#) is available to download from the ONS website. Please send feedback to the postal or e-mail address above.
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- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

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## Statistical contacts

Name	Phone	Department	Email
Elizabeth McLaren	+44 (0)1329 444110	Vital Statistics Outputs Branch	<a href="mailto:vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk">vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk</a>

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### Issuing Body:

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### Media Contact Details:

Telephone: 0845 604 1858  
(8.30am-5.30pm Weekdays)

Emergency out of hours (limited service): 07867 906553

Email:

[media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk)