

# Relationships and gender identity

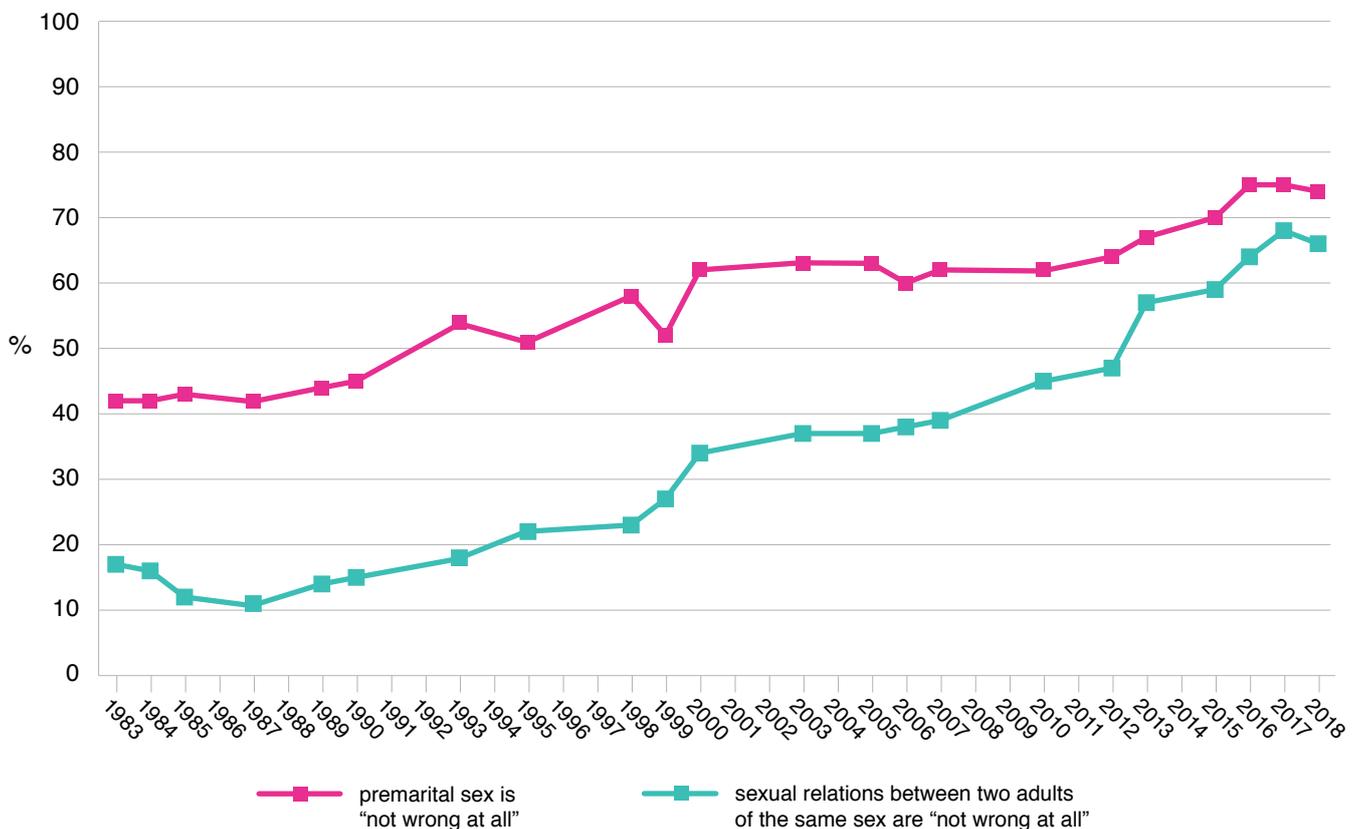
## Public attitudes within the context of legal reform

Since British Social Attitudes (BSA) began, we have seen major changes in public attitudes to sexual relationships as well as the legal frameworks that support them. Our attitudes to gender have also transformed, with a sustained shift away from support for traditional gender roles. In this chapter we explore attitudes towards one of the most recent reforms in this area: the extension of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. We also explore ‘common law marriage’: in a context where couples increasingly choose to live together without formalising their relationships, the question of legal protections for cohabiting partners is now moving up the political agenda. Finally, we look at attitudes to gender in the context of proposed legal reforms to the Gender Recognition Act, which would give transgender people the right to declare and define their own gender identity.

### Spotlight

The liberalisation in attitudes to sexual relationships observed since first recorded by BSA in the 1980s appears to be slowing down, perhaps reflecting the marked divides between the attitudes of religious and non-religious people in this sphere.

**Attitudes towards premarital sex and same-sex relationships, 1983-2018**



## Overview

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### Support for opposite-sex civil partnerships

**We find evidence of substantial public support for opposite-sex civil partnerships, coinciding with the announcement of their introduction in October 2018.**

- Two-thirds (65%) of the public support civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples, while less than one in ten (7%) oppose them.
  - Those who do not identify with a religion are more supportive of the idea that a man and woman should be able to have a civil partnership (73%), compared with those who do identify with a religion (34%-67%).
  - Around half (49%) of those with no formal education support civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples compared with seven in ten of those educated to degree level or above (71%).
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### Belief in the ‘common law marriage’ myth persists

**Around half of us believe that cohabiting couples have legal entitlements if their relationship breaks down.**

- Almost half (47%) of people believe common law marriage “definitely” or “probably” exists.
  - This is only a small drop since the question was asked in 2000, when 56% believed the myth.
  - Belief in common law marriage does not vary by marital status; around half of cohabiters subscribe to this myth, as do around half of those who are married or in civil partnerships.
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### Mixed messages about transgender people

**While the population are very keen not to be seen as personally prejudiced against transgender people, they are less clear that transphobia is always wrong.**

- 83% state they are “not prejudiced at all” towards transgender people, compared with just 15% who describe themselves as “very” or “a little” prejudiced.
  - However, around half of respondents (49%) view prejudice against transgender people as “always” wrong, compared with 6% who feel it is “rarely” or “never” wrong.
  - A minority (13%) agree that the process transgender people go through reflects “a very superficial and temporary” need, compared with 62% who disagree.
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## Introduction

One of the most marked changes in social attitudes since the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) began in 1983 has been the sustained liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual relationships and gender. Over this time period, we have seen attitudes to marriage change radically: while marriage remains an important social institution, our ideas about what marriage is, and who marriage is for, are almost unrecognisable. For instance, today three-quarters of us see nothing wrong with sex outside of marriage compared with 42% when BSA began, while two-thirds of us see nothing wrong in same-sex relationships, a considerable rise from 17% in 1983. Attitudes to traditional gender roles have also changed significantly over the same time period, with just 8% of us now supporting the idea that men should be breadwinners and women homemakers, the view of 42% of the public in 1984 (Attar Taylor and Scott, 2018). These changes have coincided with a sustained decline in religious belief and religious observance (as discussed in this year's Religion chapter), resulting in a weakening of the influence of religion on the public's attitudes to sexuality and personal relationships (Brown, 1992), and a residualisation of the religious, who continue to hold distinctive views in this sphere (Park and Rhead, 2013).

One of the most marked changes in social attitudes since the British Social Attitudes survey began in 1983 has been the sustained liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual relationships and gender

As attitudes to sexual relationships and gender have transformed we have embarked on a substantial programme of policy change, at times rushing to keep up with social norms, and at times (as with attitudes to same-sex relationships) appearing to accelerate the change<sup>1</sup>. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 provided for legal recognition of same-sex relationships, followed by the introduction of same-sex marriage in the Marriage Act 2013, and the extension of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples through the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Death Act 2019. Soon, both same and opposite-sex couples will be able to choose marriage or civil partnership on an equal basis and the debate is shifting toward the need to protect the rights of people in intimate relationships that lie outside of civil partnership or marriage. Changing attitudes to gender roles have been accompanied by a sustained programme of legislation starting with the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and extending to changes to parental leave (as discussed in this year's Women and Work chapter), all designed to protect women's rights and promote participation in the labour market while encouraging a more equal division of caring responsibilities. The current legislative focus is not only about equality between men and women, but about gender identity itself, and the rights of transgender people to declare and define their own identity, supported by the law.

<sup>1</sup> As illustrated in Figure 3 which maps public views about same-sex relationships against legislative change

In this chapter we examine attitudes to recent and current policy developments, starting with opposite-sex civil partnerships and the myth of common law marriage, and then exploring attitudes to transgender people in the context of proposals to make it less intrusive and bureaucratic for transgender people to achieve legal recognition of their gender. In doing so we consider whether the liberalising of attitudes continues to follow a consistent pattern. In particular we examine whether the liberalising trend is slowing, and whether the historical demographic basis of attitudes to sexual relationships and gender, where age, education and religious belief have all played a key role in shaping our views, continues to hold true today (Park and Rhead, 2013; Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017; Attar Taylor and Scott, 2018).

## Civil partnerships and cohabitation

As discussed above, recent decades have seen dramatic changes in the legal recognition of sexual relationships in Britain alongside major shifts in public attitudes. Not only has the public become more supportive of relationships outside of traditional marriage, it has also become more inclusive, with growing acceptance of same-sex relationships.

Today, people in opposite and same-sex relationships are able to marry, and soon both will be able to enter civil partnerships, with similar rights and protections for both institutions. Up until now, heterosexual couples have only had the option of formalising their relationship through marriage. In March 2019, the law was changed to extend civil partnerships (previously available only to same-sex couples) to opposite-sex couples in England and Wales, following a Supreme Court ruling that barring opposite-sex couples from forming civil partnerships was in breach of their human rights.

While the legal recognition of sexual partnerships has become more inclusive, the number of cohabiting couples (both opposite and same-sex) has risen substantially. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the number of cohabiting couples more than doubled from 1.5 million families in 1996 to 3.3 million families in 2017 (ONS, 2017). However, contrary to a popular misconception, cohabiting couples have no legal rights if the relationship breaks down, irrespective of how long they have been together or whether they have children. In light of the rising numbers of cohabitees and widespread belief in the common law marriage myth (see Barlow et al, 2008, for a full discussion and the earlier trends in attitudes; for the latest BSA figures see Phillips, 2019), recent years have seen calls, particularly from the legal profession and MPs, for a change in the law to give cohabiting couples a degree of legal protection (Fairbairn, 2018). In Scotland, while common law marriage still doesn't exist, the Family Law Act 2006 introduced a set of basic rights (not equal to those of couples who are married or in civil partnerships) to protect cohabiting couples in the event of relationship breakdown or bereavement (Scottish Executive, 2006).

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Meanwhile, though the status of the Cohabitation Rights Bill 2017–2019 remains unresolved, the UK Government last year said it would consider proposals for reform in this area of the law (Fairbairn, 2018).

Against the backdrop of recent and ongoing reforms to legal protections for cohabiting partners, this section examines the public's views and perceptions of these issues, which together paint a picture of public opinion about sexual relationships outside of the traditional form of marriage. We first explore attitudes towards civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples, examining the characteristics of those who support them. We then explore links between attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships and premarital sex, both of which represent sexual relationships that deviate from traditional marriage, and compare the demographic profile of attitudes towards each. This section ends by looking at the prevalence of the common law marriage myth, and whether belief in common law marriage varies across different groups in society.

### What are the public's attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships?

For the first time, BSA 2018 asked respondents about their views on the extension of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples (which was announced by the government at the end of the survey fieldwork period in October 2018):

*There are two ways that couples can obtain formal recognition of their relationship in law: marriage and civil partnership. At the moment, opposite-sex couples (a man and a woman) can get married. Same-sex couples (two women or two men) can choose to get married or to form a civil partnership.*

*How much do you agree or disagree that a man and a woman should be able to form a civil partnership, as an alternative to getting married?*

**Two-thirds “agree” or “agree strongly” that opposite-sex couples should be able to form a civil partnership as an alternative to getting married, while only 7% “disagree” or “disagree strongly”**

Two-thirds “agree” or “agree strongly” that opposite-sex couples should be able to form a civil partnership as an alternative to getting married, while only 7% “disagree” or “disagree strongly”. Without historical data on opposite-sex civil partnerships, it is not possible to determine trends in public opinion over time and assess whether attitudes have been influenced by political and legal decisions, or vice versa. We nonetheless now know that around the time the extension of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples was announced in October 2018, there was substantial support for this step among the adult population.

We now turn to look at the demographic breakdown of attitudes to opposite-sex civil partnerships. If we consider other attitudinal trends in relation to sexual relationships and marriage, we might expect to see marked differences of opinion by age group, with

older groups tending to be more conservative in their views than their younger counterparts. It is surprising then to find that attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships deviate from this norm, with no significant differences between different age categories in response to this question. As shown in Table 1, demographic divides do however emerge by education. While 71% of those with a degree-level qualification or above agree that opposite-sex couples should be able to form a civil partnership, support for this stance falls to just 49% among those with no formal educational qualifications. Interestingly, the difference is driven by uncertainty or neutrality rather than by opposition. Twenty-seven per cent of those with no formal educational qualifications say they “neither agree nor disagree”, perhaps reflecting the legalistic nature of the question, compared with just 14% of those with a degree-level qualification or above, while the same proportion in both groups (8%) disagree.

**Support for opposite-sex civil partnerships is highest among those who do not identify with a religion (73%), while those who do identify with a religion are less likely to support the idea**

Given the importance that many religions place on the institution of marriage, and the fact that the case for opposite-sex civil partnerships was grounded in the desire for a legal union without the history and associations of traditional marriage (Petter, 2018), it is reasonable to expect attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnership to vary by religious affiliation. Our findings verify this assumption and show that support for opposite-sex civil partnerships is highest among those who do not identify with a religion (73%), while those who do identify with a religion are less likely to support the idea. We see divides among the religious too, with Anglicans, Roman Catholics and others of the Christian faith being more supportive of opposite-sex civil partnership (67%, 59% and 58% respectively) than people who identify with religions other than Christianity (34%).

**Table 1 Attitudes to opposite-sex civil partnerships, by demographics**

		Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Unweighted base
<b>Highest educational qualification</b>					
Degree	%	71	14	8	640
Higher education below degree /A level	%	70	17	6	616
O level or equivalent/CSE	%	64	19	8	590
No qualification	%	49	27	8	427
<b>Marital status*</b>					
Married	%	64	19	8	1086
Living with a partner	%	71	14	5	187
Separated/divorced/dissolved same-sex civil partnership	%	68	21	6	319
Widowed/surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership	%	53	24	12	241
Single (never married/never in a civil partnership)	%	66	18	6	473
<b>Religion</b>					
Church of England/Anglican	%	67	17	9	374
Roman Catholic	%	59	24	8	167
Other Christian	%	58	23	12	420
Non-Christian	%	34	27	16	137
No religion	%	73	15	4	1206

\*Base size for those in same-sex civil partnerships is too small for this group to be presented

We might also anticipate that attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnership may vary by marital status, with support for extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples possibly reflecting respondents' own relationship status. However, there appears to be little consistent variance in attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships by marital status; while 71% of those who are cohabiting with their partner support opposite-sex civil partnership, so do around two-thirds of those who are separated, divorced or whose same-sex civil partnership has been dissolved, those who are single, and those who are married (although surviving partners from a marriage or civil partnership are significantly less likely to demonstrate support for the extension of civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples).

We know that the characteristics associated with attitudes to opposite-sex civil partnerships are also associated with each other. For example, more highly educated people are more likely to be married, and there is also a strong link between religious affiliation

and marriage. To assess which characteristics influence attitudes to opposite-sex civil partnerships once their relationships with each other are controlled for, we conducted logistic regression analysis for our measure of agreement with the view that opposite-sex couples ought to be able to enter into a civil partnership. In the first model, we included as our explanatory variables marital status, level of education and religious affiliation, along with sex and age. Our findings show that any association between support for opposite-sex civil partnerships and marital status is no longer present once its relationships with other demographic characteristics have been taken into account. However, level of education and religious affiliation remain associated with support for opposite-sex civil partnerships. Full details of the regression model are presented in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter.

### How do attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships and premarital sex compare?

As mentioned above, this is the first time attitudes to opposite-sex civil partnerships have been captured using BSA, and as such we cannot measure trends over time in relation to this issue, or explore the pattern of attitudes underpinning them. The question nonetheless remains: how have attitudes to marriage and relationships evolved such that a large proportion of the public support opposite-sex civil partnerships today? Given we have historical data on a range of attitudes relevant to sexual relationships and marriage, we ask if there is a link between support for civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples and other attitudes, in particular the view that premarital sex is not wrong, assuming that views on these two issues may be connected by a belief that there is a place for sexual relationships outside of traditional forms of marriage. And if there is a link between these attitudes, can the growing acceptance of premarital sex in recent decades be regarded as an indication of more liberal attitudes towards marriage, of which support for opposite-sex civil partnerships is the latest manifestation?

A first look at these two attitudes shows that seven in ten (71%) of those who think premarital sex is “not wrong at all” or “rarely wrong” also “agree” or “strongly agree” with opposite-sex civil partnerships. In order to test the link between attitudes to premarital sex and opposite-sex civil partnerships further, we re-ran the logistic regression analysis for our measure of support for opposite-sex civil partnerships, described above, adding views on premarital sex as an additional explanatory variable. Our findings show that the view that premarital sex is “not wrong at all” or “rarely wrong” remains positively associated with support for opposite-sex civil partnerships, even once its relationships with other demographic variables have been controlled for. In addition, religious affiliation and level of education remain associated with support for civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples. Full details of the regression model are presented in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter.

Having established a link between more accepting attitudes towards both premarital sex and opposite-sex civil partnerships, we now ask whether the pattern of findings by demographics will also be similar for these two sets of attitudes. Overall, we find that the pattern of attitudes toward premarital sexual relations is very similar to that observed in attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships, as described above, as shown in Table 2. Unlike the patterns in support for civil partnerships among opposite-sex couples however, we do find differences by age, whereby those aged 65 and over are less supportive of premarital sex than younger cohorts (74% compared with 79%-86%). It is worth noting that the difference in attitudes between those aged over 65 and their younger counterparts is a small one, perhaps reflecting that this cohort consists of large numbers of people who grew up in the wake of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and may therefore hold more liberal attitudes towards premarital sex.

**The pattern of attitudes toward premarital sexual relations is very similar to that observed in attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships**

The religious divides seen in attitudes towards opposite-sex civil partnerships hold true for attitudes to premarital sex. The vast majority (93%) of those who identify as non-religious consider premarital sex to be “rarely wrong” or “not wrong at all”, falling to 82% among those who identify as Anglican or Roman Catholic, 66% among those who identify as other Christian and 35% of those who are affiliated with non-Christian religious groups. Such clear religious divides in attitudes to premarital sex and opposite-sex civil partnerships are likely to reflect the importance many religions place upon the sanctity of marriage. Those cohabiting with a partner and who are separated or divorced are most likely to think premarital sex is “not wrong at all”, while expressing greater support for civil partnership for opposite-sex couples.

**Table 2 Attitudes to premarital sex and opposite-sex civil partnerships, by demographics**

	Premarital sex is “rarely wrong” or “not wrong at all” (%)	Unweighted base	“Agree” that “a man and a woman should be able to form a civil partnership” (%)	Unweighted base
<b>Age</b>				
18-24	86	159	63	133
25-34	80	370	70	291
35-44	79	475	66	348
45-54	86	474	64	382
55-64	86	485	66	414
65+	74	915	60	736
<b>Highest educational qualification</b>				
Degree	82	747	71	640
Higher education below degree/A level	86	752	70	616
O level or equivalent/CSE	84	711	64	590
No qualifications	69	620	49	427
<b>Marital status*</b>				
Married	77	1294	64	1086
Living with a partner	93	243	71	187
Separated/divorced/dissolved same-sex civil partnership	84	413	68	319
Widowed/surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership	68	313	53	241
Single (never married/never in a civil partnership)	86	313	66	473
<b>Religion</b>				
Church of England/Anglican	82	460	67	374
Roman Catholic	82	220	59	167
Other Christian	66	513	58	420
Non-Christian	35	194	34	137
No Religion	93	1485	73	1206

\*Base size for those in same-sex civil partnerships is too small for this group to be presented

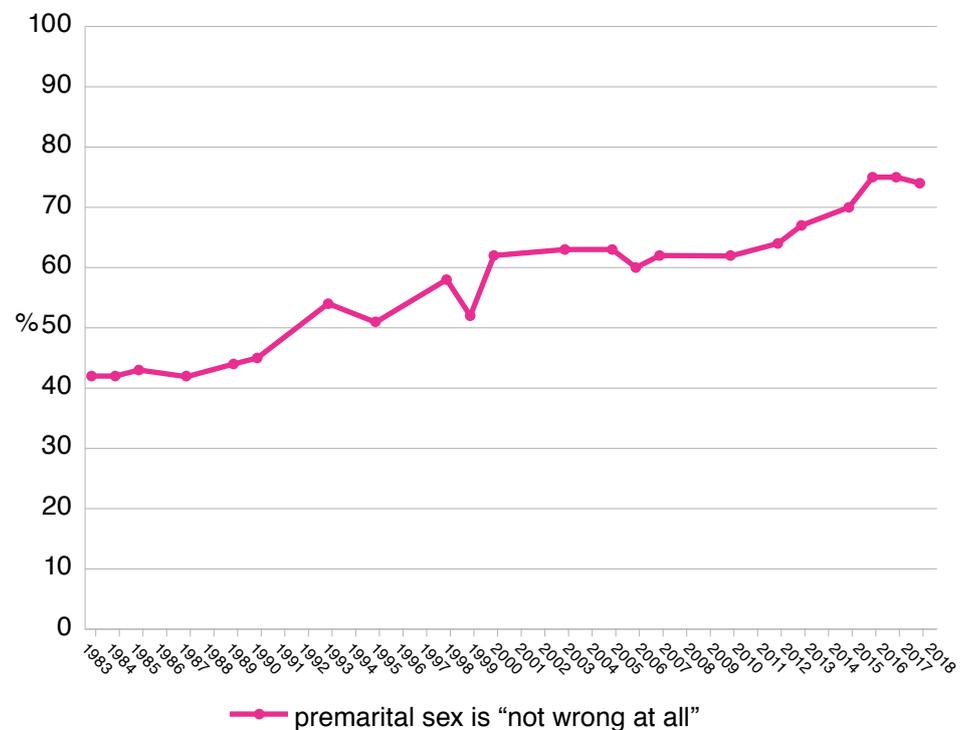
Since the 1980s, trends in attitudes towards premarital sex have liberalised considerably. As shown in Figure 1, when BSA began

in 1983, just over four in ten (42%) considered premarital sex to be “not wrong at all”, compared with around three-quarters today (74%). It should however be noted that this trend is showing signs of stabilising, with the proportion of people viewing premarital sex as “not wrong at all” having remained at around three-quarters over the last three years (see Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter).

Over this time we have seen a gradual liberalisation of once-conservative attitudes towards sex before marriage; the legal recognition of committed relationships through marriage; and of the idea that only opposite-sex couples should be allowed to have sexual relationships, either within or outside of the framework of marriage.

**When BSA began in 1983, just over four in ten (42%) considered premarital sex to be “not wrong at all”, compared with around three-quarters today (74%). It should however be noted that this trend is showing signs of stabilising**

Figure 1 Attitudes towards premarital sex, 1983-2018



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

The recent extension of civil partnerships will offer heterosexual couples the option of formalising their relationship in law without the religious or conservative connotations of marriage, and whatever their personal choices, two-thirds of the public support this form of legal union. Within the context of liberalising attitudes towards premarital sex and shifts away from more conservative concepts of sexual relationships and marriage, opposite-sex civil partnerships could be seen as the latest instalment in a more open-minded societal outlook on sex and relationships. Future BSA surveys offer a vehicle for monitoring the trajectory of these attitudes.

**Almost half of all participants (47%) believe unmarried couples who live together for some time either “definitely do” or “probably do” have a common law marriage. This represents only a small drop since the question was asked in 2000**

## Who believes in the common law marriage myth?

BSA 2018 measures the prevalence of belief in the ‘common law marriage’ myth. Respondents are asked if as far as they know, unmarried couples who live together for some time have a ‘common law marriage’, which gives them the same legal rights as married couples, with response options ranging from “definitely do” to “definitely do not”. Almost half of all participants (47%) believe unmarried couples who live together for some time either “definitely do” or “probably do” have a common law marriage. This represents only a small drop since the question was asked in 2000, when the equivalent figure stood at 56%.

We might expect people who know that common law marriage is a myth to be more supportive of opposite-sex civil partnership, on the basis that it offers legal protection to couples who do not wish to marry in the traditional way. However, our findings show that people are just as likely to support opposite-sex civil partnership whether or not they believe in common law marriage.

Belief in this myth does not vary by relationship or marital status. While 42%-49% of those who are married or in a civil partnership believe in common law marriage, so too do 49% of those who are living with a partner but are not in either a marriage or a civil partnership. This suggests that almost half of cohabiting couples in Britain wrongly believe themselves to be legally protected in case of relationship breakdown or bereavement.

With cohabitation representing the fastest-growing form of sexual relationship in England and Wales, these findings highlight the increasing policy relevance of this issue. Misconceptions about this myth can have severe consequences for people’s lives, as cohabitants risk significant financial hardship<sup>2</sup>. The introduction of opposite-sex civil partnerships offers an alternative to couples who wish to enter a legal partnership without forming a traditional marriage, however as almost half of cohabitants are unaware of their lack of legal protection, it is likely that many people will remain at risk (Barlow, 2019). As discussed above, the UK Government has announced that it is considering how to take forward proposals for introducing legal rights for cohabiting couples. Unless and until such reform takes place, the prevalence of the ‘common law marriage’ myth will remain a concern for policymakers.

**Almost half of cohabiting couples in Britain wrongly believe themselves to be legally protected in case of relationship breakdown or bereavement**

## Attitudes to transgender people

The 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA), considered ground-breaking at the time of its introduction<sup>3</sup>, allows transgender people

<sup>2</sup> Under the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006, which came into force in May 2006, cohabitants (opposite-sex and same-sex couples) may make limited claims against each other in the event of their relationship terminating or on the death of one cohabitant.

<sup>3</sup> When introduced, the GRA was the first statutory instrument to allow trans people to achieve legal recognition of their gender without undergoing medical sterilisation.

to legally change gender if they have a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, proof of having lived for at least two years in their acquired gender and the consent of their spouse (if married), among other requirements<sup>4</sup>. Over recent years, advocates have called for a move away from this model, which has been criticised for unnecessary medicalisation of transgender people and for reinforcing gender stereotypes (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016), as well as being expensive and bureaucratic. In response, in 2018 the UK Government brought forward a consultation on reforming the GRA “to make it less intrusive and bureaucratic for trans people to achieve legal recognition of their gender” (UK Government, 2018). Proposals that would make it easier for people to legally change their gender have been contested, particularly on the grounds of perceived impact on legal protections and single sex spaces for women.

BSA 2018 does not directly address the issue of legal gender recognition. Rather it poses a series of questions aimed at exploring how the public view transgender people and transphobia. In this section, we consider what these general attitudes to transgender people might mean in the context of proposed changes to the GRA, as well as the lived experience of transgender people more broadly. We also explore whether the demographic basis of attitudes to transgender people reflects that of attitudes towards same-sex relationships.

## How do people perceive the process of transitioning?

Since 2016, BSA has asked a series of questions about attitudes to transgender people, providing the following definition of transgender:

*People who are transgender have gone through all or part of a process (including thoughts or actions) to change the sex they were described as at birth to the gender they identify with, or intend to. This might include by changing their name, wearing different clothes, taking hormones or having gender reassignment surgery.*

Our first question explores the way in which the public view the process of transitioning, and in particular, the extent to which people agree or disagree that the process transgender people go through reflects “a very superficial and temporary” need:

*Thinking about the reasons why transgender people have gone through this process,*

*please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement ...*

*Most people who are transgender have gone through this process because of a very superficial and temporary need*

<sup>4</sup> Government Equalities Office (2018) Trans People in the UK, available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/721642/GEO-LGBT-factsheet.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721642/GEO-LGBT-factsheet.pdf)

A minority of the public “agree” or “strongly agree” with this statement (13%) compared with just over three-fifths of the population (62%) who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”. At face value, this suggests that the public view the drivers of transition as serious. However, it is important to note two things. Firstly, around one fifth of the population (21%) “neither agree nor disagree” with the statement<sup>5</sup>. Second, the statement represents an extreme position: that people transition because of a need that is both ‘superficial’ and ‘temporary’ in nature. It is of course possible for a person to believe that the drivers of transition are both significant and permanent, while also holding transphobic views about what those drivers are, and how society should view them.

### Is the public prejudiced towards transgender people?

We then ask two questions about prejudice towards transgender people. The first asks respondents to rate their own perceived level of prejudice.

*How would you describe yourself ...*

*... as very prejudiced against people who are transgender, a little prejudiced, or, not prejudiced at all?*

**More than four-fifths of the population (83%) state they are “not prejudiced at all” towards transgender people, compared with just 15% who describe themselves as “very” or “a little” prejudiced**

More than four-fifths of the population (83%) state they are “not prejudiced at all” towards transgender people, compared with just 15% who describe themselves as “very” or “a little” prejudiced. This is a striking finding given that levels of self-reported prejudice towards some other minoritised groups remain stubbornly high: in 2017, for example, data from the National Centre for Social Research’s Panel showed that more than four decades after the Race Relations Act of 1973, over a quarter of the population (26%) still describe themselves as “very” or “somewhat” racially prejudiced (Kelley et al, 2017).

We also ask respondents the following question:

*Do you think that prejudice against transgender people is always wrong, mostly wrong, sometimes wrong, rarely wrong or never wrong?*

Importantly, this question is part of a self-completion module, and so does not require people to tell their answers to an interviewer and is asked in this way to reduce the risk of respondents giving socially desirable responses.

Around half of the population (49%) view prejudice against transgender people as “always” wrong, compared with just 6% who feel it is “rarely” or “never” wrong. However, a significant proportion

<sup>5</sup> This is a complex question which some members of the public may feel ill-equipped to answer, therefore “neither agree nor disagree” may be a substitute for “don’t know” in some cases. For others, particularly taking into account social desirability bias, it may indicate ambivalence about the nature of transition.

have more mixed feelings, with around a third (34%) stating that prejudice against transgender people is only “mostly” or “sometimes” wrong. Taken together, this suggests that while the population are very keen to be seen as not personally transphobic, they are less clear that transphobia is always wrong. This more mixed view is consistent with previous BSA findings, where despite 82% of respondents describing themselves as ‘not at all prejudiced’ against transgender people, just four in ten supported the idea that a suitably qualified transgender person “definitely should” be employed as a police officer or a primary school teacher (43% and 41% respectively, Attar-Taylor and Swales 2017).

As noted, these questions do not directly address the question of reforms to make the legal gender recognition system easier. However, they do indicate that while the desire to be (or be seen as) not prejudiced towards transgender people is almost universal, tolerance of prejudice, and actual discrimination against transgender people, is more widespread, at least in some circumstances.

### How do attitudes towards same-sex relationships and transgender people compare?

Evidence suggests that liberal attitudes toward one topic or group tend to predict liberal attitudes toward others, and conversely prejudice in one area tends to be reflected by prejudice in other areas (Aosved and Long, 2006). Throughout the post-war period, social movements for LGBT equality have been increasingly visible in Britain, and increasingly successful in their advocacy. Though these movements have not always been trans-inclusive, it has nonetheless become commonplace in Britain to consider the experiences, needs, rights and contributions of sexual and gender minorities as interrelated, as use of the ‘LGBT’ acronym illustrates. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that public attitudes to transgender people may be reflective of attitudes to same-sex relationships, and to LGB people.

**People who express less negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships are also less likely to report being prejudiced towards transgender people**

To test this assumption, we ran two regression analyses – the first for our self-reported measure of prejudice towards transgender people and the second for our measure of agreement with the view that, “most people who are transgender have gone through this process because of a very superficial and temporary need”. In both models we included attitudes to sex between two adults of the same sex as an explanatory variable, along with age, level of education, religious affiliation and sex.

Even after controlling for these demographic characteristics, attitudes towards same-sex relationships remain associated with prejudice towards transgender people – with people who express less negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships also being less likely to report being prejudiced towards transgender people. Sex is the only other characteristic which remains associated with prejudice towards

transgender people, with women being less likely to self-report prejudice. Full details of the regression model are presented in Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter.

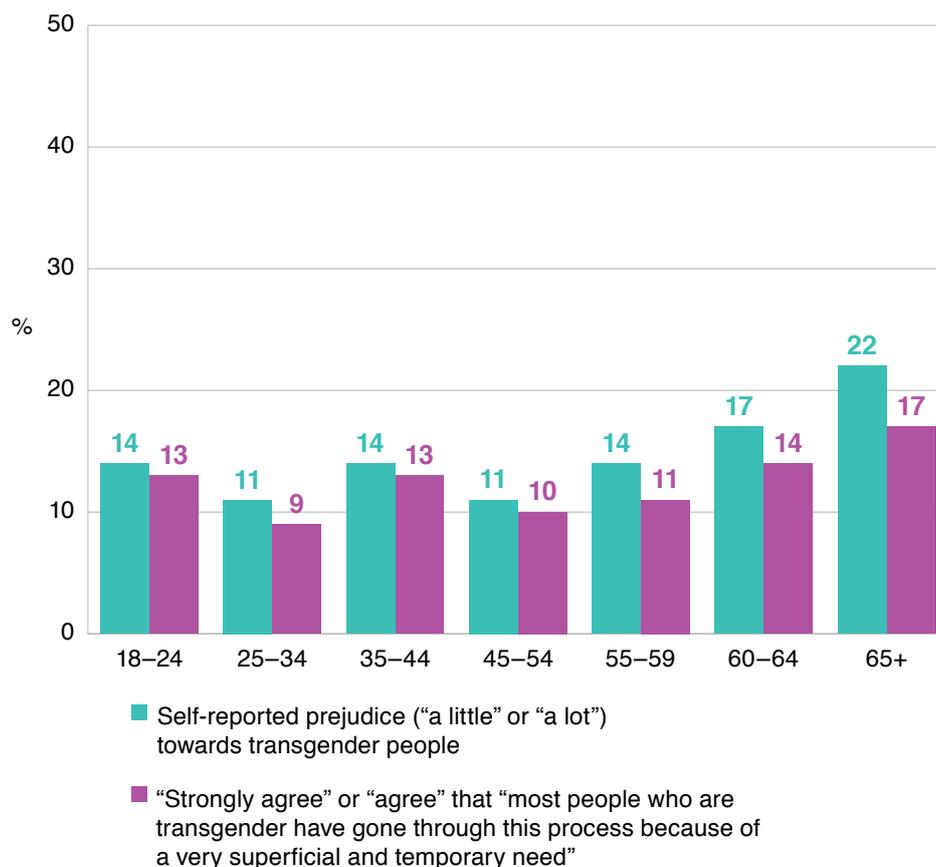
Attitudes to same-sex relationships also remain associated with the view that transgender people have gone through the process because of a very superficial and temporary need once demographic characteristics have been controlled for. Our analysis suggests that those who express the least negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships are the most likely to disagree that transgender people have gone through the process because of a very superficial and temporary need. In this instance however, sex, level of education and religious affiliation also remain significantly associated with attitudes towards transgender people, with women, those with a higher level of educational qualifications and those who do not affiliate with a non-Christian religion being more likely to disagree that transgender people have gone through the process because of a very superficial and temporary need. Full details of the regression model are presented in Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter.

Finally, we explore whether the demographic profile of attitudes to transgender people reflects that of attitudes towards same-sex relationships. Building on previous analysis of BSA (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017) we find that women, younger people, more highly educated people and the non-religious are all more likely to have positive attitudes to both transgender people and to same-sex relationships.

Younger people are less likely to agree that “most people who are transgender have gone through this process because of a very superficial and temporary need” and less likely to describe themselves as prejudiced against transgender people: 14% of those in the youngest age group indicate some level of prejudice compared with 22% of the oldest age group, while 54% of those in the youngest age group agree that prejudice is “always wrong” compared with 35% of those in the oldest age group.

**Women, younger people, more highly educated people and the non-religious are all more likely to have positive attitudes to both transgender people and to same-sex relationships**

Figure 2 Beliefs about transgender people, by age group



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

A gender difference in attitudes also emerges, with women more likely than men to say that prejudice towards transgender people is “always wrong”. This finding was also observed in BSA 34, which asked about how comfortable participants would be if a transgender person were using the same toilet as them: 72% of women said that they were “very” or “quite comfortable” with a transgender woman using a female toilet, compared with 64% of men who reported that they were “very” or “quite comfortable” with a transgender man using the male toilets (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017).

Higher levels of education are associated with more positive views of transgender people. Less than one in ten people with a degree level qualification (8%) agree that transgender people go through the process because of a “superficial and temporary need”, rising to around one in five (21%) of those without formal qualifications. Similarly, just 13% of the more highly educated group see themselves as prejudiced against transgender people, compared with 22% of those with no qualifications.

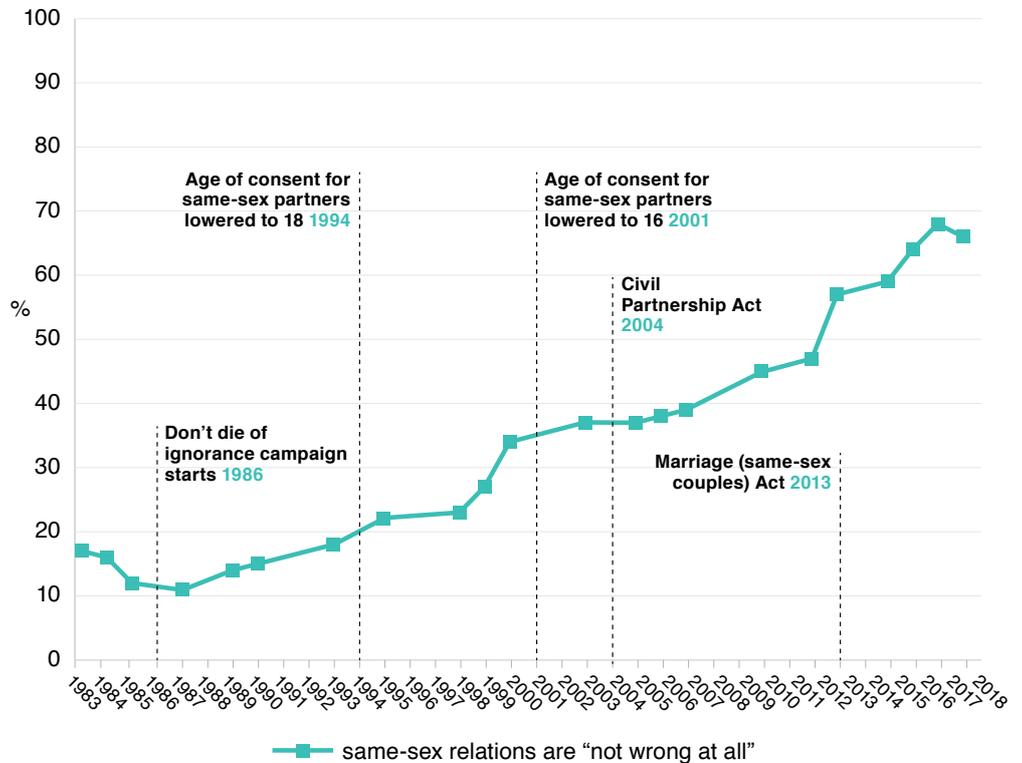
Similar differences in attitudes are observed by religious affiliation. Those with no religion (10%) are the least likely to agree that going through the process is because of a “superficial and temporary need” compared with 18% of other (non-Anglican or Roman Catholic) Christians and 18% of those belonging to a non-Christian

religion. Similarly, 12% of those without a religion report some level of prejudice toward transgender people, rising to between 16%-20% for Christians and 22% for those in non-Christian religions. An association between religious observance and attitudes towards transgender people is also present, with those who attend a religious service less than twice per year significantly less likely to say that transitions are due to a “superficial and temporary need” than those who attend one or more religious services per week.

### How have attitudes to LGBT people changed?

While we have only asked about attitudes to transgender people in the most recent years of BSA, we have been asking about people’s attitudes towards sex between two adults of the same sex since the survey began. The time series illustrated in Figure 3 on attitudes to same-sex relationships is one of the most striking examples of liberalisation that BSA has recorded. In 1983, fewer than one in five people said that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex were “not wrong at all”, compared with two-thirds now. This is not just a generational change: older people too have become more liberal in their views, and so have those without a religion.

Figure 3 Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are “not wrong at all”, 1983-2018



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

However, as with attitudes towards premarital sex, which we have seen follow a similar trajectory, this liberalisation of attitudes does appear to be slowing down. In the 30th BSA report, Park and Rhead

**In 1983, fewer than one in five people said that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex were “not wrong at all”, compared with two-thirds now**

predicted that the liberalisation observed between the 1980s and 2010s would continue but slow in pace (Park and Rhead, 2013). While the 34th report did not find any evidence of this (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017), this year's BSA data show that the liberalisation of attitudes does appear to have decelerated. The proportion stating that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are "not wrong at all" has now remained at around two-thirds (64%, 68% and 66%) for the past three years, indicating that while social norms have changed, there is a significant minority of the population who remain uncomfortable with same-sex relationships, and as such we may have reached a point of plateau.

What might the time series on same-sex relationships suggest about the future pattern of attitudes to transgender people, given the link between the two in the minds of the public? Firstly, it may be that attitudes to transgender people follow a similar trajectory, and thus the proportion of the public who feel that transphobia is sometimes justified, or who feel uncomfortable with transgender people working in public services, will steadily decline over time. Secondly, it may be that progressive policymaking, including reforming the GRA, could itself influence the public to adopt more positive attitudes, as the progressive journey towards marriage equality has for same-sex and opposite-sex relationships.

## Conclusions

**While we have a new and radically transformed set of social norms in the field of sexual relations and gender, we also have a significant minority who feel differently about these issues**

The changing legal framework for sexual relationships reflects a sustained process of liberalisation in public attitudes in this sphere. Indeed, given the prevalence of belief in the myth of common law marriage, and the growing rate of cohabitation in Britain, it seems reasonable to assume that this process of legal change will continue, bringing the law in England and Wales into line with that of Scotland by providing limited legal protections for cohabitantes. In contrast, the Gender Recognition Act consultation contains proposals that are grounded in a more liberal view of transgender people than that of the general public who, despite being very keen not to be seen as personally prejudiced, are less clear that prejudice against transgender people is on principle wrong. However, there is a clear link between attitudes to transgender people and attitudes to same-sex relationships, where we have again seen a sustained liberalising trend. Given this, it seems likely that attitudes to transgender people will continue to change in a way that increasingly supports the rights of transgender people to live freely and without experiencing discrimination.

However, it is important to note that our time series data appear to suggest that this process of liberalisation is slowing down. While we have a new and radically transformed set of social norms in the field of sexual relations and gender, we also have a significant minority who feel differently about these issues, and that minority may become increasingly focused on ensuring that socially conservative views and voices are reflected in public discussion of gender and relationships.

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## Appendix

Table A.1 Logistic regression model of agreement that opposite-sex civil partnerships should be available

	Odds ratio	Standard error	p value
<b>Marital status (married)</b>			
Living with a partner	1.20	0.28	0.45
Separated/Divorced/ Dissolved	1.21	0.23	0.33
Widowed	0.80	0.15	0.22
Single	1.20	0.21	0.30
<b>Sex (Male)</b>			
Female	0.81	0.10	0.10
<b>Age (18-24)</b>			
25-34	1.49	0.48	0.22
35-44	1.17	0.33	0.58
45-54	1.22	0.36	0.50
55-64	1.16	0.36	0.62
65+	1.09	0.34	0.78
<b>Highest education qualification (degree or higher)</b>			
A level or equivalent	0.86	0.15	0.38
O level or equivalent	*0.65	0.11	0.01
No qualification	**0.46	0.09	0.00
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>			
Church of England/Anglican	0.82	0.14	0.25
Roman Catholic	**0.52	0.12	0.00
Other Christian	**0.44	0.07	0.00
Non-Christian	**0.20	0.06	0.00
<b>Constant</b>	<b>**4.55</b>	<b>1.37</b>	<b>0.00</b>

*Unweighted base: 2083*

\*= significant at 95% level

\*\*= significant at 99% level

**Table A.2 Logistic regression model of agreement that opposite-sex civil partnerships should be available (2)**

	Odds ratio	Standard error	p value
<b>Views on premarital sex (always wrong)</b>			
Mostly wrong	2.01	1.04	0.18
Sometimes wrong	1.98	0.93	0.15
Rarely wrong	*2.59	1.18	0.04
Not wrong at all	**5.03	2.07	0.00
<b>Sex (Male)</b>			
Female	0.77	0.13	0.11
<b>Age (18-24)</b>			
25-34	1.96	0.73	0.07
35-44	1.63	0.55	0.15
45-54	1.49	0.55	0.29
55-64	1.67	0.64	0.18
65+	1.61	0.61	0.21
<b>Marital status (married)</b>			
Living with a partner	1.01	0.28	0.96
Separated/Divorced/ Dissolved	1.05	0.24	0.82
Widowed	0.81	0.20	0.39
Single	1.35	0.30	0.18
<b>Highest education qualification (degree or higher)</b>			
A level or equivalent	0.91	0.19	0.65
O level or equivalent	0.78	0.15	0.20
No qualification	0.62	0.16	0.06
<b>Religion (No religion)</b>			
Church of England/Anglican	1.01	0.21	0.96
Roman Catholic	*0.52	0.15	0.02
Other Christian	**0.49	0.09	0.00
Non-Christian	*0.42	0.15	0.02
<b>Constant</b>	0.72	0.39	0.54
Unweighted base: 1232			

\* = significant at 95% level

\*\* = significant at 99% level

The data on which Figure 1 is based are shown below.

**Table A.3 Views on premarital sexual relations, 1983-2018**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Premarital sexual relations “not wrong at all” (%)</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
1983	42	1761
1984	42	1675
1985	43	1804
1987	42	1437
1989	44	1513
1990	45	1397
1993	54	1484
1995	51	1172
1998	58	1075
1999	52	1052
2000	62	3426
2003	63	2139
2005	63	2102
2006	60	1093
2007	62	1030
2010	62	1081
2012	64	1103
2013	67	1097
2015	70	3245
2016	75	974
2017	75	3004
2018	74	2884

**Table A.4 Logistic regression model of self-reported prejudice towards transgender people**

	Odds ratio	Standard error	p value
<b>Views on same-sex relationships (always wrong)</b>			
Mostly wrong	0.91	0.20	0.67
Sometimes wrong	**2.07	0.47	0.00
Rarely wrong	**3.97	1.29	0.00
Not wrong at all	**9.12	1.87	0.00
<b>Sex (Male)</b>			
Female	**2.05	0.31	0.00
<b>Age (18-24)</b>			
25-34	1.24	0.46	0.57
35-44	1.14	0.41	0.71
45-54	1.20	0.43	0.61
55-64	1.03	0.34	0.93
65+	0.83	0.27	0.56
<b>Highest education qualification (degree or higher)</b>			
A level or equivalent	0.96	0.18	0.84
O level or equivalent	1.05	0.21	0.80
No qualification	0.84	0.17	0.38
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>			
Church of England/Anglican	1.06	0.19	0.76
Roman Catholic	0.85	0.21	0.49
Other Christian	1.03	0.22	0.89
Non-Christian	1.14	0.33	0.64
<b>Constant</b>	0.94	0.36	0.87

*Unweighted base: 2632*

\*= significant at 95% level

\*\*= significant at 99% level

**Table A.5 Logistic regression model of disagreement with the idea that transgender people had transitioned because of a “very superficial and temporary need”**

	Odds ratio	Standard error	p value
<b>Views on same-sex relationships (always wrong)</b>			
Mostly wrong	0.92	0.27	0.77
Sometimes wrong	0.67	0.18	0.13
Rarely wrong	1.57	0.43	0.10
Not wrong at all	**3.86	0.76	0.00
<b>Sex (Male)</b>			
Female	**1.61	0.17	0.00
<b>Age (18-24)</b>			
25-34	0.92	0.23	0.73
35-44	1.25	0.30	0.37
45-54	1.29	0.31	0.28
55-64	1.26	0.30	0.33
65+	0.99	0.23	0.98
<b>Highest education qualification (degree or higher)</b>			
A level or equivalent	**0.52	0.08	0.00
O level or equivalent	**0.32	0.05	0.00
No qualification	**0.23	0.04	0.00
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>			
Church of England/Anglican	0.80	0.13	0.17
Roman Catholic	1.08	0.24	0.72
Other Christian	0.80	0.12	0.16
Non-Christian	*0.53	0.13	0.01
<b>Constant</b>	1.36	0.41	0.30
<i>Unweighted base: 2574</i>			

\* = significant at 95% level

\*\* = significant at 99% level

The data on which Figure 2 is based are shown below.

**Table A.6 Views on transition process, by age**

<b>Age group</b>	<b>“Strongly agree” or “agree” that most people who are transgender have gone through this process because of a very superficial and temporary need (%)</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
18-24 years	13	159
25-34 years	9	370
35-44 years	13	475
45-54 years	10	474
55-59 years	11	244
60-64 years	14	241
65+ years	17	915

**Table A.7 Self-reported prejudice towards transgender people, by age**

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Self-reported prejudice (“a little” and “a lot”) towards transgender people %</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
18-24 years	14	159
25-34 years	11	370
35-44 years	14	475
45-54 years	11	474
55-59 years	14	244
60-64 years	17	241
65+ years	22	915

The data on which Figure 3 is based are shown below.

<b>Year</b>	<b>“Not wrong at all” (%)</b>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
1983	17	1761
1984	16	1675
1985	12	1804
1987	11	1437
1989	14	1513
1990	15	1397
1993	18	1484
1995	22	1172
1998	23	1075
1999	27	1052
2000	34	3426
2003	37	2139
2005	37	2102
2006	38	1093
2007	39	1030
2010	45	1081
2012	47	1103
2013	57	1097
2015	59	3245
2016	64	974
2017	68	3004
2018	66	2884

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