

Statistical bulletin

# Divorces in England and Wales: 2017

Annual divorce numbers and rates, by duration of marriage, sex, age, previous marital status, and to whom granted and reason.



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# 1 . Main points

- There were 101,669 divorces of opposite-sex couples in England and Wales in 2017, a decrease of 4.9% compared with 2016, but similar to the number seen in 2015 (101,055).
- There were 338 divorces of same-sex couples in 2017, more than three times the number in 2016 (112 divorces); three-quarters (74%) of same-sex couples divorcing in 2017 were female.
- In 2017, there were 8.4 divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 years and over (divorce rates), representing the lowest divorce rates since 1973 and a 5.6% decrease from 2016.
- The divorce rate for opposite-sex couples was highest among men aged 45 to 49 years and women aged 40 to 44 years.
- The average (median) duration of marriage at the time of divorce was 12.2 years for opposite-sex couples; this matches the high last seen in 1972.
- Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for opposite-sex couples divorcing with 52% of wives and 37% of husbands petitioning on these grounds; it was also the most common reason for same-sex couples divorcing, accounting for 83% of divorces among women and 73% among men.

## 2 . Statistician's comment

“Divorce rates for opposite-sex couples in England and Wales are at their lowest level since 1973, which is around forty per cent lower than their peak in 1993. However, among older people rates are actually higher in 2017 than in 1993 – perhaps due to the fact we have an increasingly ageing population and people are getting married later in life.

“The number of divorces among same-sex couples more than trebled between 2016 and 2017 - although this is not surprising since marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since March 2014.”

Nicola Haines, Vital Statistics Outputs Branch, Office for National Statistics.

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## 3 . Things you need to know about this release

Important information for interpreting these divorce statistics:

- divorce statistics are derived from information recorded by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service during the divorce process
- figures represent both divorces and annulments that took place in England and Wales; [annulments](#) are where the marriage was not legally valid in the first place
- divorce statistics do not include married couples who separate but do not divorce
- divorces where the marriage took place abroad are included provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales
- marriages of same-sex couples first took place on 29 March 2014; the first divorces recorded between same-sex couples were in 2015
- civil partnership dissolutions are not included in our divorce statistics, they are reported separately in [Civil partnerships in England and Wales](#)

## **4 . The number of divorces of opposite-sex couples decreased in 2017 to a level similar to that seen in 2015**

In 2017, the number of divorces among opposite-sex couples in England and Wales decreased by 4.9% compared with 2016 to 101,669. This number was similar to that seen in 2015 (101,055) following a large fall of 9.1% in the number of divorces between 2014 and 2015. The number of divorces in 2017 was 34% lower than the most recent peak in divorce numbers seen in 2003 (Figure 1).

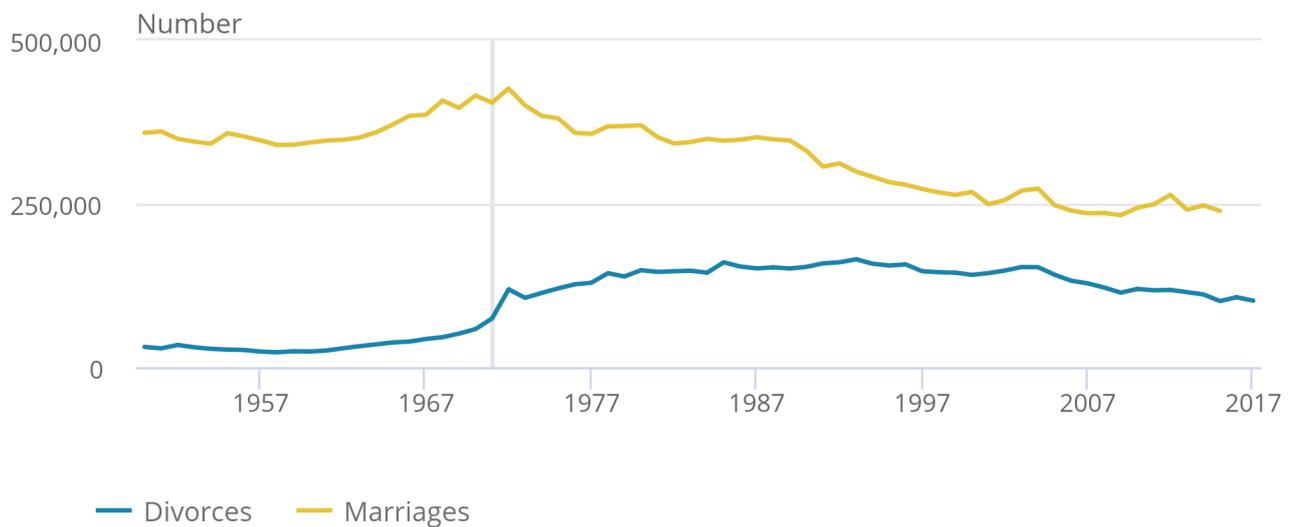
**Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2017**

England and Wales

Figure 1: Number of marriages and divorces of opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2017

Divorce Reform Act  
1969 effective from  
1 Jan 1971

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

The number of divorces fell between 2003 and 2009, consistent with a decline in the number of marriages over the same period; the decrease in marriages may be due to the [increasing number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than enter into marriage \(PDF, 283KB\)](#). Between 2009 and 2010, the number of divorces climbed by 4.9%. A period of relative stability then occurred between 2010 and 2012, followed by a decline in numbers between 2013 and 2015.

When considering changes in the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples, it is important to also take account of the size of the married population, since any changes in this will affect the number of divorces. In 2017, the number of divorces of opposite-sex couples per 1,000 married men and women aged 16 years and over (divorce rates) also decreased for both men and women to 8.4, compared with 8.9 in 2016. Divorce rates remain well below the most recent peaks in 2003 and 2004 (Figure 2). Information about how divorce rates are calculated is available in the Quality and methodology section.

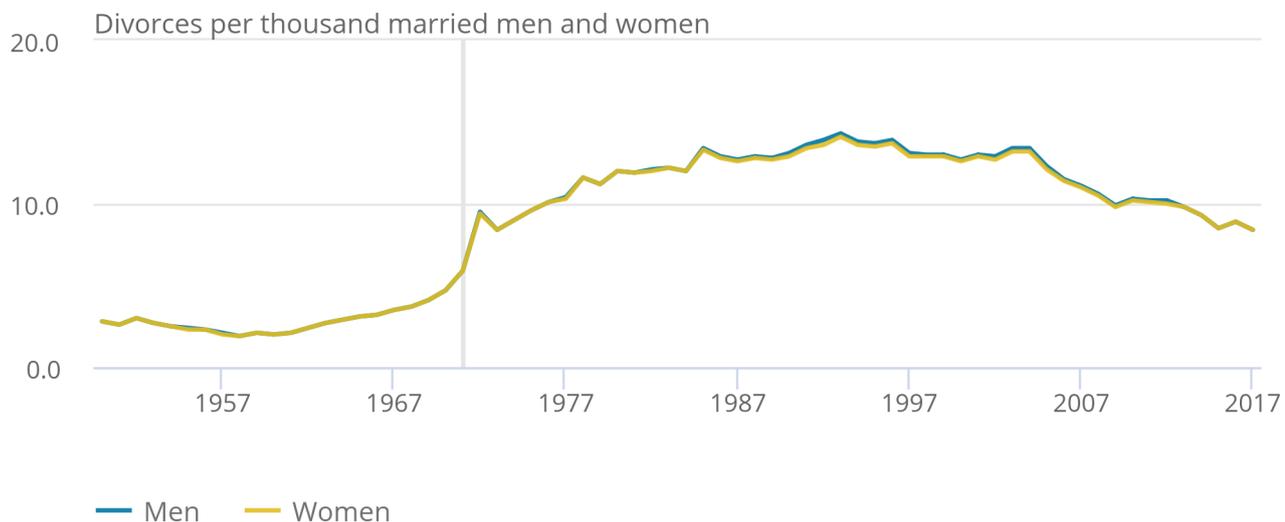
**Figure 2: Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2017**

England and Wales

Divorce Reform Act 1969 effective from 1 Jan 1971

# Figure 2: Rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples, 1950 to 2017

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Changes in behaviour and attitudes to divorce are considered to be an important factor behind the increase in divorce rates between the 1960s and the early 1990s. Also, the [Divorce Reform Act 1969](#) came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971, making it easier for couples to divorce upon separation – this caused a large increase in divorce rates in 1972.

Changes in attitudes to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or prior to marriage, particularly at younger ages, are likely to have been a factor affecting the general decrease in divorce rates since 2003; [levels of cohabitation](#) increased over this period while the married population declined.

## 5. Females accounted for majority of divorces among same-sex couples

In 2017, there were 338 divorces among same-sex couples in England and Wales – three times more than in the previous year, when there were 112. Almost three-quarters (74%) of these divorces were among female couples. Marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014.

The average (mean) age at divorce for same-sex couples who divorced in 2017 was 42.0 years for men and 38.3 years for women.

Unreasonable behaviour was the most common reason for divorce among same-sex couples, accounting for 73% of divorces among men and 83% of divorces among women. These percentages are lower than for 2016, when unreasonable behaviour accounted for 96% of divorces among men and 93% of divorces among women. Unreasonable behaviour within same-sex couples can include having a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex; legally adultery is only possible with someone of the opposite sex.

Divorce following separation for more than two years was more common in 2017 than previously for same-sex couples; 21% of divorces among men and 11% of divorces among women cited this as the reason for the divorce. This is largely a consequence of marriages among same-sex couples having been possible for three years.

The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for same-sex couples who divorced in 2017 was 3.5 years for men and 2.8 years for women. Although marriages of same-sex couples have only been possible in England and Wales since 29 March 2014, it was legal for same-sex couples to marry in certain other countries prior to this date, for example, [the Netherlands](#). Divorces relating to marriages that took place abroad are included in our figures, provided the marriage was legally recognised in the UK and one of the parties had a permanent home in England and Wales.

Additionally, same-sex couples have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage since 10 December 2014; if a civil partnership has been converted into a marriage, the duration of marriage is based on the date the civil partnership was formed rather than the date on which the civil partnership was converted into a marriage. Consequently the duration of marriage to divorce for same-sex couples can exceed the 29 March 2014 commencement date for marriages of same-sex couples.

## **6 . Unreasonable behaviour remained the most common reason for opposite-sex couples divorcing**

The majority of divorces of opposite-sex couples in 2017 were petitioned by the wife (62%). Between 1980 and 2000, this proportion had consistently been at or above 70%. The most common reason for divorce in 2017 was unreasonable behaviour, with 37% of all husbands and 52% of all wives petitioning for divorce on these grounds.

Unreasonable behaviour has consistently been the most common reason for wives petitioning for divorce since the late 1970s; previous to this, it was named “cruelty”. Unreasonable behaviour has only been the most common reason for husbands petitioning since 2006; in the 1980s and 1990s adultery was generally the most common reason for husbands petitioning, while between 1999 and 2005 it was separation of two years with consent.

## **7 . At what age are opposite-sex couples most likely to divorce?**

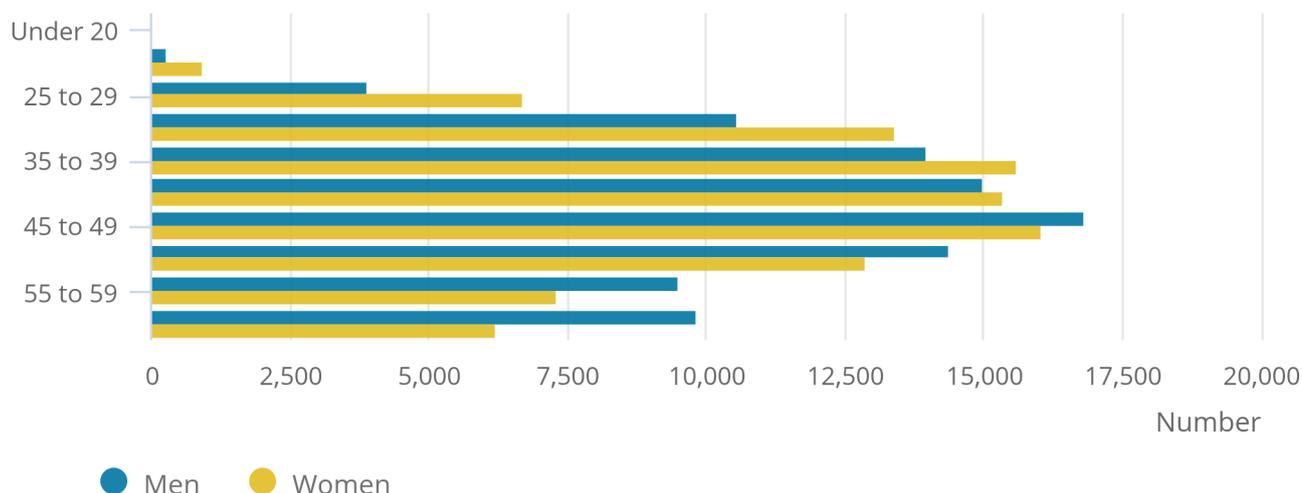
Among opposite-sex couples in 2017, more women than men divorced below the age of 45 years; at older ages, more men than women divorced. This pattern has remained unchanged since 2014 and reflects the fact that on average men marry women who are younger than themselves. The number of divorces was highest among both men and women aged 45 to 49 years (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, age of men and women divorcing, 2017**

England and Wales

Figure 3: Divorces of opposite-sex couples, age of men and women divorcing, 2017

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Figures by age will not sum to the total number of divorces because 7.2% of records have no age stated for men and 7.0% of records have no age stated for women.

The average (mean) age at divorce for opposite-sex couples in 2017 was 46.4 years for men and 43.9 years for women. This continues the year-on-year increases in the average age at divorce recorded since 1985, rising by nine years for both men and women.

[Age at marriage is considered to be closely linked to the risk of divorce](#) with those marrying in their teens and early twenties being at greater risk of divorce.

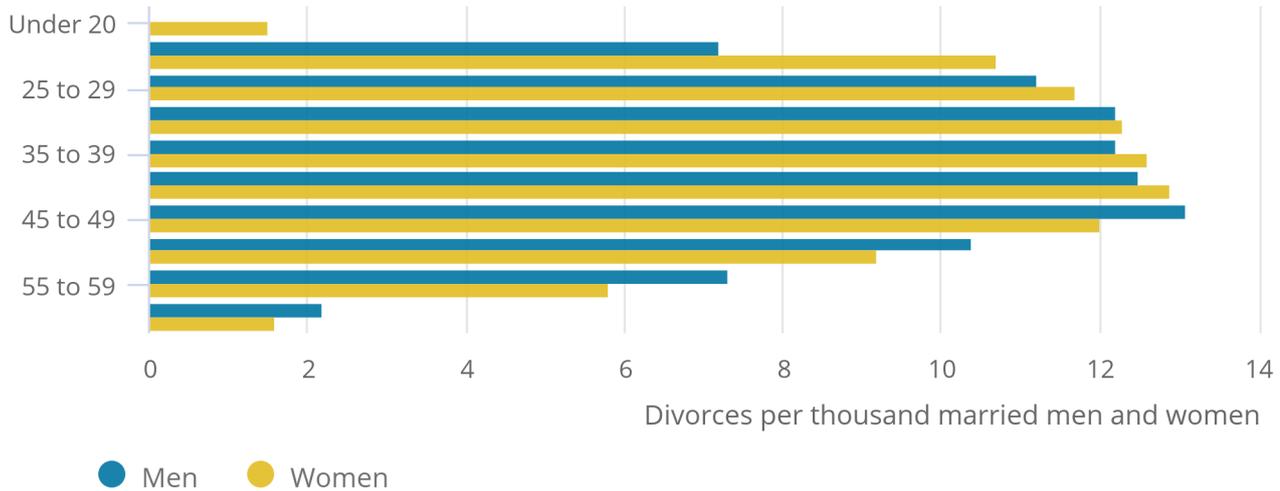
It is important to take account of the size of the married population within each age group since this will influence the number of divorces. Divorce rates among opposite-sex couples in 2017 show that divorces were most likely among men aged 45 to 49 years and women aged 40 to 44 years (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for men and women, 2017**

England and Wales

Figure 4: Divorces of opposite-sex couples: rates by age for men and women, 2017

England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Rates by age have been calculated excluding the records where age was not stated. In 2017, fewer than 3 men aged under 20 divorced; rates are not calculated when there are fewer than 3 divorces as rates based on such low numbers are susceptible to inaccurate interpretation.

Compared with 2016, divorce rates in 2017 for both men and women have decreased across every age group except for those aged 60 years and over where rates remained unchanged.

Compared with 2015, divorce rates in 2017 have increased for men aged 45 years and over and for women aged 50 years and over.

## 8 . Median duration of marriage among divorcing opposite-sex couples was 12 years

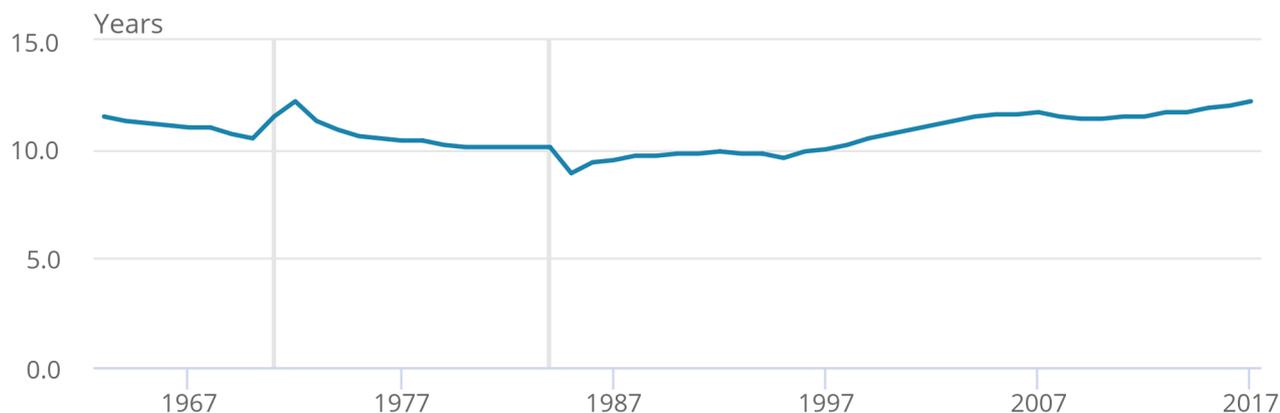
The median duration of marriage (the mid-point of all durations) for divorces granted to opposite-sex couples in 2017 was 12.2 years, increasing slightly from 12.0 in 2016. The 2017 value matches the historical high of 12.2 years seen over 40 years ago in 1972. There has been a very gradual increase in the median duration of marriages that end in divorce since 2009 when it was 11.4 years. Over the last 50 years, the median duration has remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 8.9 years and 12.2 years (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Median duration of marriages that end in divorce for opposite-sex couples, 1963 to 2017**

England and Wales

Divorce Reform Act 1969 effective from 1 Jan 1971

Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 effective from 12 Oct 1984



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 replaced the minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce from three years to one year, resulting in a fall in the median duration of marriage in 1985.

## 9 . What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has generally increased for those marrying between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. For example, 22% of marriages in 1970 had ended by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 33% of marriages in 1995 had ended after the same period of time. For those marrying since 2000, there is some evidence of decreases in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce. The proportion of men and women who had ever divorced has also declined over recent decades.

The cumulative percentages of marriages that end in divorce increase more rapidly in the first 10 years of marriage than the 10 years after that. Once the 20th wedding anniversary is reached, the cumulative percentages increase less rapidly.

[What percentage of marriages end in divorce?](#) shows that the estimated percentage of marriages ending in divorce (assuming 2010 divorce and mortality rates throughout the duration of marriage) is 42%. Around half of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage.

More explanations of these trends are available alongside the data.

## 10 . Links to related statistics

Our divorce [datasets](#) provide the main divorce statistics over time, with some figures available back to 1858. Our [explorable dataset](#), provides detailed divorce statistics for 2009 to 2017.

The number of divorces and the divorce rate for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Vital statistics: population and health reference tables](#).

Further statistics on [marriages](#), [civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#), [families and households](#), and [population estimates by marital status](#) are available. We also have [explorable datasets](#) for marriages and a visual story about [marriage and divorce on the rise at 65 years and over](#).

Special extracts and tabulations of divorces data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and the [ONS charging policy](#), where appropriate). Enquiries should be made to Vital Statistics Outputs Branch by email to [vsob@ons.gov.uk](mailto:vsob@ons.gov.uk) or telephone: +44 (0)1329 444110. [User requested data](#) will be published.

## 11 . Quality and methodology

This is the first time that divorce statistics for England and Wales have been published for 2017; the release provides final annual data.

We previously aimed to publish annual divorce statistics around 12 to 13 months after the end of the reference period. From the 2015 data year, we moved to a monthly receipt of electronic divorce data for quality assurance. These data were received three months after the month end enabling more timely publications than previously possible. From the 2018 data year, data are now received 15 days after the end of the month. A series of checks are performed on the data received and any queries addressed. The final annual dataset is due to be received three months after the year end.

Divorce statistics are compiled to enable the analysis of social and demographic trends. They are also used for considering and monitoring policy changes.

Our [Divorces quality and methodology information](#) contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users
- how the output was created

Our [User guide to divorce statistics](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces and includes a glossary of terms.

Divorce statistics are comparable between countries within the UK; more information on comparability is contained in our [Divorces quality and methodology information](#).

The [Revisions policy for population statistics \(including divorce statistics\)](#) is available.

The average (mean) ages presented in this release have not been standardised for age and therefore do not take account of the changing structure of the male and female population by age and marital status.

[Population estimates by marital status](#) only provide the total married population disaggregated for same-sex and opposite-sex couples; such figures are not available by age-group. For this reason, divorce rates for both same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples have been calculated using the married population by age-group, which includes both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

While the actual number of males and females in opposite-sex couples getting divorced in a particular year is equal, the number of married males and females can differ because one partner could live away, either overseas or in a communal establishment such as a care home or prison. For this reason, divorce rates for males and females can differ for a particular year.