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Dear Ray,

During the debate on 23 March on the Local Election (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020 you raised a number of points about which I undertook to respond to in writing.

You asked why the measure to remove the requirement to have home addresses printed on ballot papers had not been brought forward before. The reality is that electoral law in Northern Ireland is different from that in Great Britain and separate legislation was required. While it is unfortunate this was not able to be put before Parliament earlier it is our intention that the measures in the draft Order be in force in time for the next set of local elections which are not due until 2023.

In relation to the number of individuals that will be affected by the way names are presented on the ballot paper it is very difficult to estimate what the impact will be. The draft provides that all names will be in a standard font and for the vast majority of candidates that will mean a capitalized first letter of each part of a name and the remainder of the name in lower case. However, there are cases where it is usual to see an additional upper case letter in name, for example in McKenzie. Additionally there are a number of Irish names, such as Ó hOisín which do not easily lend themselves to being presented in uniformly upper case letters. It is right to allow the flexibility to print these names in a way that both respects the individual's right to have their name spelled correctly but also ties in with the way the voting public would usually see that name written so the candidate can be easily and correctly identified.

You also asked how many councils in Northern Ireland might make use of the flexibility to use their precise name on the ballot paper. There are 11 district councils in Northern Ireland. Following the restructuring of local government in 2014 four councils retained the word 'District' in their official title with the remaining councils adopting the descriptor of 'Borough Council' or in some cases 'City Council'. During the local council elections in 2019 it became apparent that the existing law did not provide the necessary flexibility to allow councils to be described on the ballot papers as anything other than district councils. These provisions will allow councils to be described at elections by the title they are commonly known by.

I also undertook to respond to a number of questions you raised during the debate on the draft Representation of the People (Electronic Communications and Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020.

In relation to possible savings to be made by allowing people to register for the purpose of canvass using the online service you asked if those savings might be used to encourage greater registration from traditionally under-registered groups. You may wish to be aware of a number of innovative initiatives that will be developed over the coming years, as digital registration becomes more efficient, to target such groups. These include working with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to add registering to vote online to the school curriculum to encourage young people to register. The Chief Electoral Officer is engaged with a number of organisations, including universities, the Housing Executive and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (which is responsible for oversight of residential accommodation for elderly residents) to find ways of improving registration rates in traditionally harder to reach groups. The Electoral Office has also seconded a member of staff from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to assist with the identification of properties and areas of under registration.

Finally, in relation to the re-laying of this instrument, an issue arose when the Welsh and Scottish Governments made parallel changes to the Representation of the People Act 1983 in respect of canvass for Welsh and Scottish local elections. Those changes came into effect after this instrument was originally laid and were incompatible with that draft. The re-laid SI contains a small change to the drafting that achieves precisely the same effect as the original in respect of Northern Ireland elections but accommodates the changes made in respect of Welsh and Scottish local elections. A technical explanation of this point is set out in paragraphs 3.1 and 7.9 of the Explanatory Memorandum. I can also reassure you that despite the pro-forma document reference number (“DExEU/EM/7-2018.2”) at the bottom of the Explanatory Memorandum, which appears on the explanatory memoranda for most UK Government statutory instruments, the drafting was done by the Northern Ireland Office.

I am copying this letter to Lord Rennard and will place a copy in the Library of the House.

*My best wishes*  
*James*

**VISCOUNT YOUNGER OF LECKIE**