

Nigel Dodds OBE MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

10 June 2016

Dear Mr Dodds

Re: European Union Referendum (Voter Registration) Regulations 2016

I am writing to clarify the Electoral Commission's position following your question in the above debate in the House of Commons yesterday. This includes giving the reasons why the Electoral Commission issued a media statement on Wednesday afternoon saying that the registration deadline would be extended in Northern Ireland as well as in Great Britain.

The Government was required to consult the Electoral Commission before laying the Order for approval by Parliament, and we received a draft of the Order on Wednesday afternoon following a number of discussions between officials. This draft included extending the deadline for Northern Ireland which we supported.

The Government's statement, issued at 3.18pm, said "Following discussions with the Electoral Commission and strong cross-party support expressed in the House of Commons, we will introduce secondary legislation to extend the deadline for voter registration until midnight tomorrow. Having taken the decision today, we think it is right to extend to midnight tomorrow (9 June) to allow people who have not yet registered time to get the message that registration is still open and get themselves registered." During the discussions with officials, we were clear that the amended deadline should relate to the United Kingdom.

We were content that the draft order on which the Electoral Commission was consulted would have provided the legislative basis for extending the deadline for registration applications across the whole of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We issued a media statement on that basis to encourage those eligible across the UK,

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including in Northern Ireland, to register to vote ahead of the new deadline.

Then, in the early evening on Wednesday, we were informed by Cabinet Office that the Order would apply only in Great Britain, not in Northern Ireland. We then contacted the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland about this change in the Government's position, along with local media.

Given the Commission's earlier media statement, I share your concern that this change in the Government's position caused confusion for voters seeking to register in Northern Ireland.

We asked the Government to explain why it decided not to introduce legislation to extend the deadline in Northern Ireland. In responding to your question during the debate yesterday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster noted that "there is not an online system in Northern Ireland, and therefore the thing we are correcting did not go wrong in Northern Ireland." He also highlighted that it was the view of the Northern Ireland Office that it would not have been sensible to extend this in Northern Ireland.

I am copying this letter to the Rt Hon. Oliver Letwin, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, to the Rt Hon. Theresa Villiers, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to Members of Parliament who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland, to the leaders of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, and to Graham Shields, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Claire Bassett
Chief Executive