

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT POSTPONEMENT OF LOCAL ELECTIONS
(NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2023

Monday 20 February 2023

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Friday 24 February 2023

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: SIR GRAHAM BRADY

- | | |
|---|---|
| † Afolami, Bim (<i>Hitchin and Harpenden</i>) (Con) | † Grundy, James (<i>Leigh</i>) (Con) |
| † Anderson, Lee (<i>Ashfield</i>) (Con) | † Hunt, Tom (<i>Ipswich</i>) (Con) |
| † Antoniazzi, Tonia (<i>Gower</i>) (Lab) | † Kruger, Danny (<i>Devizes</i>) (Con) |
| † Baker, Mr Steve (<i>Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office</i>) | † Langan, Robert (<i>High Peak</i>) (Con) |
| † Carter, Andy (<i>Warrington South</i>) (Con) | † McDonald, Andy (<i>Middlesbrough</i>) (Lab) |
| Cruddas, Jon (<i>Dagenham and Rainham</i>) (Lab) | † Mills, Nigel (<i>Amber Valley</i>) (Con) |
| De Cordova, Marsha (<i>Battersea</i>) (Lab) | Osamor, Kate (<i>Edmonton</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| Dixon, Samantha (<i>City of Chester</i>) (Lab) | Chloe Smith, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Drummond, Mrs Flick (<i>Meon Valley</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |
| † Elmore, Chris (<i>Ogmore</i>) (Lab) | |

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 20 February 2023

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

Draft Postponement of Local Elections (Northern Ireland) Order 2023

6 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Postponement of Local Elections (Northern Ireland) Order 2023.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. The draft order will allow for a short postponement of local elections in Northern Ireland to allow for their smooth running, ensuring that the count does not clash with the forthcoming coronation.

I should set out the background to the proposal to postpone these important elections by two weeks, from 4 to 18 May. The local council elections for Northern Ireland are currently scheduled to take place on Thursday 4 May, with counting and the declaration of results spanning 5 and 6 May. As the Committee knows, the coronation of the King will take place on 6 May. Statute requires that local elections in Northern Ireland be held on the first Thursday in May every four years. All 462 seats across all 11 local councils are contested.

The elections are run using the single transferable vote system, which allows electors to state as many preferences as there are candidates. Each of the 11 councils is broken down into at least five district electoral areas, all of which require a separate count, making local elections by far the largest electoral event undertaken in Northern Ireland, with a commensurately complex and time-consuming manual count.

Based on all previous local election counts in Northern Ireland, the time required for the count and verification means that it would continue well into coronation day on 6 May. The chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland has advised that even if as many as possible of the counts were held concurrently and counting hours were extended into the early hours of the morning, it would not be possible to conclude the count process in advance of coronation day. It is important that all those who wish to celebrate the coronation can do so, and it is not feasible for local councils to run celebratory events and a single transferable vote count over the same weekend.

Both the chief electoral officer and the Electoral Commission have raised concerns that it will not be possible to secure sufficient staff over the coronation weekend to safely deliver the count if the election takes

place on 4 May. In addition, concerns have been raised about the possible cost of casual staff over the bank holiday weekend of the coronation. It is anticipated that councils would have to pay significantly higher hourly rates in an attempt to secure sufficient staff.

The draft order will therefore allow for a short delay of two weeks to avoid these issues. It will ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland who wishes to celebrate the coronation can do so. It is important that both events can take place successfully; the order is intended to safeguard that.

We informed councils, political parties, the Electoral Commission and the chief electoral officer of our plans to change the date of the election and all were supportive of the short postponement. Hon. Members may wonder why postponement is needed for Northern Ireland but not for England, where there are also local elections to be held on 4 May; it is because of the STV system and the much more complicated count process that follows from it. There are no planned elections in Scotland or Wales.

I hope hon. Members will agree that ensuring the smooth and effective running of local elections is a priority for the democratic process and that the draft order will allow that, while allowing all those who wish to do so to celebrate the coronation. I hope that the House will therefore support the order. I commend it to the Committee.

6.4 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Graham. Extraordinary events call for flexibility, even with election dates. With that in mind, the Opposition offer our support to the draft order, which will move the date of the local elections in Northern Ireland.

Along with the parties in Northern Ireland, we recognise the administrative challenge of counting the ballots over the coronation weekend. In the light of the current political situation in Northern Ireland, already stressed public officials are under increased pressure to ensure the provision of essential services. The additional efforts being made by workers across the public sector should be recognised, and it is those same workers who will be managing every aspect of local elections, from nomination processes to counting the ballots. These workers certainly deserve to enjoy their extended weekend, courtesy of the bank holiday. As anyone who has ever been involved in an STV ballot will tell you, it does not lend itself to relaxation.

We support the draft order and are hopeful that local authority elections will not be the only ones held in Northern Ireland this year.

Question put and agreed to.

6.5 pm

Committee rose.