

Written evidence from UK House of Commons on its petitioning system

Background

I am pleased to contribute to the Standing Committee's inquiry into its environment and petitions functions. This evidence covers the traditional public (paper) petitioning system and the e-petitioning system which has been operated jointly by the UK Government and House of Commons since 2015 and is overseen by the House of Commons Petitions Committee.

Public petitions

Paper Petitions - History

The right of the subject to petition the Monarch for redress of personal grievances has a long history, having been recognised in the Magna Carta and restated in the Bill of Rights 1689.

The first known petitions to the Lords and to both Houses of Parliament date from the reign of Richard II (1377 to 1399) but the practice seems to have become more widespread from the reign of Henry IV (1399 to 1413) onwards.

During the 16th and early parts of the 17th centuries, petitions relating to issues of public policy became increasingly popular. As petitions during this time were taken before the start of debates, they were often used as a way of obstructing business. A Select Committee in 1832 was established to tackle this problem and the House agreed to introduce more stringent rules via standing orders.

In 1912-13 there were 10,221 petitions presented, this however fell dramatically in 1919 to 121. In 1939-40 only one petition was presented to the House.

In more recent times, the 2016-17 session saw 328 petitions presented, of which 296 were formally presented on the floor of the House of Commons. 308 petitions received a Government response. Statistics relating to public petitions from 1997-2017 can be found in section 1D of the House of Commons' Sessional Returns.¹

¹ See www.parliament.uk/business/publications/commons/sessional-returns/

Guidance for paper petitions

A paper petition (also known as a public petition) is a petition to the House of Commons presented by a Member of Parliament on behalf of constituents or other members of the public. The two resolutions from 1669 that describe the power to the House to receive petitions state “that is the inherent right of every commoner in England to prepare and present petitions to the House of Commons in case of grievance... that it is an undoubted right and privilege of the Commons to judge and determine touching the nature and matter of such petition, how far they are fit and unfit to be received”.

Only MPs can present paper petitions to the House of Commons, but they are not obliged to do so. Constituents can send petitions to any MP in the UK, they are not restricted to their local MP. There are rules a paper petition must comply with for it to be presented to the House of Commons. For example, signatures and addresses must be handwritten. Electronic signatures are not accepted for paper petitions, nor are email addresses collected.

A petition should be respectfully addressed to the House, should not contain disrespectful language to the Sovereign or offensive claims and should clearly state the origin of the signatories.

There should be a clear request or “prayer”, and this should be within the power of the House of Commons to grant. Hence the prayer paragraph reads “the petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government [...]”.

The *sub judice* resolution applies to public petitions as they are parliamentary proceedings; petitions may not include legal cases that are open in the UK courts. Members who have interests relating to their petition must disclose them to the Clerk of Petitions and an “R” is placed beside their name on the Order Paper.

Members of Parliament can present a paper petition via two methods:

- 1) Formal: An MP makes a short statement to explain who the petitioners are, the number of signatures the petition has, and what the petition is about. They then read out the request that the petition makes to the House of Commons. The petition itself is not debated.
- 2) Informal: A Member of Parliament can informally present the petition by putting it into the petitions bag behind the Speaker’s

Chair. If a Member presents a petition informally they cannot speak about the petition.

In both cases, after the petition is presented it will be printed in Hansard and the Votes and Proceedings.

The long 2017-19 session saw 458 public petitions presented, of which 350 were formally presented on the floor of the House of Commons. There were 392 Government responses.

Changes to the petition system

In 1993, the House agreed to some relaxation in the requirements for wording of petitions, as long as some basic requirements were fulfilled, as recommended by the Procedure Committee in 1992.² In 2004, the Select Committee on Modernisation recommended that the requirement for the top sheet of petitions to be handwritten should be removed.³

In 2007, the Procedure Committee recommended that petitions should be printed in Hansard and that “substantive” petitions should receive a response from the relevant government department, normally within two months.⁴

In 2010, the Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the “Wright Committee”) recommended to the House that petitions should be listed on the Order Paper on the day they are formally presented.⁵

Examples of mass paper petitions

Mass petitioning has long been a feature of the public petitions system. For example, the 1866 women's suffrage petition was the first mass petition for votes for women presented to Parliament. It was presented by John Stuart Mill MP on 7 June 1866.

In more recent times, from October to November 2016, 240 petitions relating to the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) campaign were presented *en masse* by Members to the House of Commons.

² House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Fourth Report, Session 1991–92, HC 286

³ House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, Fifth Report of Session 2003–04, [HC 1248](#)

⁴ House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, First Report of Session 2006–07, [HC 513](#)

⁵ House of Commons Reform Committee, First Report of Session 2008-09, [HC 1117](#); House of Commons Reform Committee, First Report of Session 2009-10, [HC 372](#)

The petition called for: “[...] a non-means tested bridging pension for women born on or after 6/4/1950 who are affected by the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts and compensate those at risk of losing up to around £45,000, to also give proper notification for any future changes.”

The Government gave a detailed response to the petition and explained it would not be revisiting the State Pension Age arrangements for these women. This has remained its position in response to debates in Parliament which have occurred on several occasions. The Government stated its approach to the matter was to support labour market participation for this group. The Government also noted that for those for whom work was not possible, there were disability and carers’ benefits.

In a report published on 15 March 2016, the Work and Pensions Select Committee said it had decided to explore further the option of allowing some women the option of drawing their State Pension early.

Other recent mass public petitions have included:

- a campaign on “Home Education – draft guidance and consultation” from June 2018. This was led by John Howell, MP for Henley. Petitions in the same terms were presented formally and informally by over 100 MPs and were supported by thousands of signatures across the UK.
- The Scottish National Party organised a mass petition presented by 18 MPs that focussed on local closures of Royal Bank of Scotland branches.
- Lucy Powell, MP for Manchester Central, organised a mass petition regarding "the future of maintained nursery schools". Petitions in the same terms were presented formally and informally from over 100 constituencies.

E-petitioning (www.petition.parliament.uk)

Differences between public petitions and e-petitions

Other than the format—electronic versus paper—there are four main procedural differences between the e-petitioning system and public petitions:

- E-petitioning allows members of the public to bring their concerns directly to the House of Commons, without requiring a Member of Parliament to bring them forward on their behalf;
- An e-petition is guaranteed a government response if it receives 10,000 signatures and consideration by the Petitions Committee for debate in Westminster Hall if it reaches 100,000 signatures;
- The rules around acceptable content are different. For example, e-petitions do not need to be “respectfully addressed”; and
- E-petitions require a minimum of six signatures before they can be opened. Petitioners are required to give their name and confirm they are a UK resident or British citizen.

The role of the Petitions Committee

A proposal for a collaborative UK Government and Parliament e-petitions system was put forward by the Procedure Committee in December 2014, following a Government-run system introduced in August 2011.⁶ The existing e-petitioning system was implemented following the 2015 general election. It runs in parallel to the existing paper petitioning system and is overseen by the Petitions Committee.

As with departmental select committees, the Petitions Committee consists of eleven backbench Members of the House of Commons. The Chair of the Committee is elected by the House in a secret ballot. Members of the Committee are elected internally by their party and then formally appointed by the House. The party composition of the Committee reflects the broader composition of the House. In the 2017–19 Parliament, five Members of the Committee (including the Chair) came from the Labour Party, five from the Conservative Party and one from the Scottish National Party (SNP).

The Petitions Committee formally considers all e-petitions and public petitions presented to the House. At the start of the 2017 Parliament, the Committee agreed the following objectives:

- The petitions system should be an effective way for petitioners to have their voices heard by Parliament and Government;

⁶ House of Commons Procedure Committee, Third Report of Session 2014–15, [HC 235](#)



- The petitions system should increase and enhance public engagement with Parliament and Government, especially among people from disengaged groups; and
- The petitions system should connect petitioners with parliamentary business and increase Parliament's awareness of petitioners' concerns.

The Petitions Committee determines which e-petitions will be debated in Westminster Hall and can take other actions, including:

- asking for more information in writing—from petitioners, the Government, or other relevant people or organisations;
- asking for more information in person [including formal oral evidence and at informal events]—from petitioners, the Government, or other relevant people or organisations. This might be in Parliament or somewhere else in the UK;
- writing to the Government or another public body to press for action on a petition;
- asking another parliamentary committee to look into the topic raised by a petition; and
- putting forward petitions for debate in the House of Commons.

The Committee has also chosen to launch inquiries into issues raised by petitions, for example where it considers the Government's responses to petitions and replies to debates to be inadequate and when the subject matter is not being examined elsewhere in Parliament.

Petitions Committee inquiries follow a similar process to inquiries held by other select committees, with calls for written evidence, a schedule or oral evidence and a report, to which the Government is expected to respond, at the end of the process. However, the Petitions Committee tends to place a much greater emphasis than other Committees on public participation and on new and innovative ways of gathering information and evidence. This can include round-table discussions, web threads, informal hearings and consultation events, in addition to formal written evidence and oral evidence heard in Westminster. Its

inquiries tend to much more “public-led” than those of other Committees (see annex A).

Since 2015, the Petitions Committee has inquired into *Funding for research into brain tumours*; *High heels and workplace dress codes*; *Online abuse and the experience of disabled people*; and *Fireworks*.⁷

Procedure for debates

Under the joint arrangements established by the Government and House of Commons in 2015, any e-petition receiving over 100,000 signatures is automatically referred to the Petitions Committee for consideration for a debate in Westminster Hall.

Debates in Westminster Hall take place on a neutral and unamendable motion that “This House has considered e-petition [number] relating to [subject]”. The Committee can group several petitions together in a single debate. Debate lasts for up to three hours.

The Petitions Committee works on a presumption that it will schedule a debate for petitions receiving over 100,000 signatures unless:

- The subject has recently been debated or is likely to be debated in the near future;
- The Committee (or another parliamentary or government body) has decided to pursue the issue in another way; or
- The subject is unsuitable for debate in Parliament.

The Committee can also put forward petitions for debate that have received fewer than 100,000 signatures when parliamentary time allows. When doing so, the Committee is mindful that minority groups may find it harder to meet the 100,000-signature threshold. Nine such petitions were debated in the 2017–19 Parliament. A good example is a petition calling for British Sign Language (BSL) to be included in the schools National Curriculum, which received 35,203 signatures (it is estimated that there are fewer than 90,000 deaf BSL users in the UK).

⁷ Petitions Committee, *Funding for research into brain tumours*, First Report of Session 2015-16, [HC 554](#); *High heels and workplace dress codes*, First Report of Session 2016-17, [HC 291](#); *Online abuse and the experience of disabled people*, First Report of Session 2017-19, [HC 759](#); *Fireworks*, First Report of Session 2019, [HC 103](#)

Public engagement activities

Debates on e-petitions are led by a Member of the Petitions Committee. Where time allows, and the subject is suitable, the Committee will engage with petitioners and the public before the debate. The Member leading the debate will often meet with the petitioner. It will sometimes, when time allows, hold an oral evidence hearing with the petitioner and other interested parties.

The Petitions Committee has experimented with different types of public engagement to inform the Westminster Hall debates on e-petitions. Public engagement activities have included:

- Surveys (both quantitative and qualitative);
- Web threads on the Parliament website;
- Discussions on existing forums, such as Mumsnet and Money Saving Expert;
- “Digital debates”, which include discussions between the public and MPs on Twitter and the House of Commons Facebook page;
- Informal evidence sessions with members of the public; and
- Round table discussions.

The Member of the Committee leading the debate may make use of the material gathered through the public engagement process when opening the debate. Summaries are sometimes also shared with the media (see annex B).

In addition to its work ahead of petitions debates, the Committee commissions and supports outreach work, raising awareness of the petitions system and provides training to members of the public and civil society groups on using the e-petitions system. For example, it recently ran a workshop with a disability rights group.

Public engagement with debates

Petitions debates in Westminster Hall are the most viewed (on parliamentlive.tv) and read (in Hansard) debates in the House of Commons. They have been the most viewed and read item of parliamentary business every week since the petitions system re-opened following the 2017 election.

The table below shows the ten most read online Hansard debate reports in 2019. The top nine most read debates were all debates on e-petitions:

	Debate Subject	Debate Type	Online Hansard Readership (unique page views)
1	Leaving the European Union	e-petition	331,030
2	Leaving the EU	e-petition	39,650
3	ISIS Members Returning to the UK	e-petition	36,590
4	BBC	e-petition	34,023
5	Prorogation of Parliament	e-petition	30,716
6	Bird Nesting Sites Protection	e-petition	17,017
7	Secondary School Opening Hours	e-petition	15,873
8	Leaving the European Union	e-petition	15,083
9	Cervical Cancer Smear Tests	e-petition	15,072
10	UK's Withdrawal from the European Union	Chamber debate	11,846

Links with other parliamentary business

The Petitions Committee has worked collaboratively with other Select Committees on inquiries relating to petitions, including with the Women

and Equalities Select Committee on workplace dresscodes⁸ and the Health Select Committee on meningitis B vaccination.⁹ Petitions have also supported and driven other Committee inquiries, such as the Health and Social Care Select Committee's work on access to cystic fibrosis treatments.¹⁰

Petitions provide a way for Parliament to engage members of the public with other parliamentary business. Informing petitioners of select committee inquiries that are relevant to a petition they have signed can significantly increase public engagement with committee inquiries. For example, over 8,000 people followed a link sent to petitioners to a web forum consultation hosted by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on devolution after leaving the European Union. This was 86% of the total number of people visiting the forum. Petitions that receive over 10,000 signatures are also highlighted to relevant departmental Select Committee, with any recent or ongoing relevant work being promoted to signatories.

Such engagement also has a qualitative effect, increasing the number of personal stories select committees hear about from people who have direct, day-to-day experience of issues. These people might otherwise be difficult to engage. For example, a Defence Committee inquiry received a significant number of submissions from serving and former Marines and Navy personnel—who the Committee had previously struggled to engage with—following an email to signatories to a petition on changes to the Royal Marines.

Popularity of e-petitioning in the UK

Since its establishment in 2015 the UK Parliament e-Petitions system has become the most popular parliamentary site of its type in the world.

In the 2017–19 Parliament 79,380 petitions were created. Of these, 33,580 reached the required six signatures to be moderated and 8,185 were opened. These e-petitions were signed more than 32 million times. The largest petition attracted over 6 million signatures.

The Government responded to 456 e-petitions and there were 73 debates in Westminster Hall.

⁸ Petitions Committee and Women and Equalities Committee, [Inquiry into High heels and workplace dress codes](#), Session 2016-17

⁹ Petitions Committee and Health Committee, [Inquiry into petition on Meningitis B vaccine](#), Session 2015-16

¹⁰ Health and Social Care Select Committee, [Inquiry into Availability of Orkambi on the NHS](#), Session 2017-19

In total, since the inception of the joint Government and Parliament system in 2015, over 22.9 million people have created or signed e-petitions on the site. This is more than 43% of the adult UK population.

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ANNEX A: CASE STUDY: CONSULTING ON DRAFT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Petitions Committee launched an inquiry into online abuse and the experience of disabled people, after e-petition 190627, [*Make online abuse a specific criminal offence and create a register of offenders*](#), received 221,914 signatures. The petition was started by a well-known TV personality, Katie Price, following the online abuse directed at her son, Harvey, who has complex disabilities.

The Committee specifically wanted to hear from disabled people themselves. The inquiry began with an informal session with disabled people to hear about their views and experiences, before moving to formal evidence sessions with Katie Price, disabled rights groups, the police and social media companies.

The Committee decided that it would consult with disabled people and other members of the public on a set of draft recommendations towards the end of the inquiry, before finalising its recommendations in a final report. Although there was scope for digital engagement, there were concerns that open online public engagement could encourage people to make public accusations of crimes or potentially direct abuse back on to the petitioner.

The Committee consulted on draft recommendations published in a Special Report, which was produced in Easy Read and Braille versions.¹¹ The Committee then held informal round table discussion events with disabled people in Scotland, Northern Ireland, north-east England, London and Wales to discuss the recommendations in detail and hear the views of disabled people. These consultation events encouraged public involvement, but reduced the potential risks associated with engaging online on such sensitive topics.

This was the first time a House of Commons Select Committee had consulted on draft recommendations before publishing a final report.

¹¹ Petitions Committee, *Online abuse and the experience of disabled people: draft recommendations for consultation*, First Special Report of Session 2017–19, [HC 1459](#)

ANNEX B: PRE-DEBATE ENGAGEMENT ON LATER SCHOOL STARTING TIMES

The Petitions Committee scheduled a debate after e-petition 229178, [School should start at 10am as teenagers are too tired](#), attracted 187,902 signatures.

The petition contained very little information or evidence about the effects of early school start times on teenagers. The Petitions Committee therefore wanted to find out more about young people's, parents' and teachers' experiences to ensure the debate focused on people's real-life concerns.

Committee staff designed an online survey, a link to which was emailed to people who had signed the petition. The survey was completed by 4,983 people in two days in the week preceding the debate.

A summary of survey responses identified six key themes:

- A body of academic research into teenagers' circadian rhythms that emphasised the benefits for teenagers of sleeping later in the morning;
- Effects of early starts on teenagers' mental health;
- Knock on effects on family life;
- Disproportionate effects on young people with illnesses and disabilities;
- Difficulties for teachers dealing with tired students in school; and
- Local transport problems.

A summary of the issues and research highlighted in the survey was circulated to the Member of the Petitions Committee leading the debate and to the media. This led to a broader and more interesting debate, which took account of people's everyday experiences, than might otherwise have been the case.¹² It also led to some informed reporting in the media before and after debate.¹³

¹² See HC Deb, 11 February 2019, [cols 245–60WH](#)

¹³ See, for example, "[MPs to debate late school starts for teenagers](#)", *BBC News*, 7 February 2019; "[Should teens start school later to boost concentration?](#)" *ITV News*, 11 February; "[Should high schools start at 10am to help tired teens? It has started a passionate debate](#)", *Manchester Evening News*, 12 February 2019