

Electronic Petitions and The Scottish Parliament

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1 Context

The Consultative Steering Group document (ISBN 0 11 496125 5) stated that The Scottish Parliament should aspire to use all forms of ICT “innovatively and appropriately” to support its three principles of openness, accessibility and participation. The International Teledemocracy Centre wishes to work with the Scottish Parliament to facilitate and achieve these aims.

The Centre was established by Napier University in August 1999 in partnership with BT Scotland. Its remit is to research and apply advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance and support the democratic decision-making process. Specifically, its objectives include:

- to promote the application of ICT by governments worldwide in order that elected members and supporting staff can conduct their business more effectively and efficiently;
- to demonstrate how ICT can contribute to more openness and accessibility in government;
- to encourage and assist the public, voluntary organisations and business to participate in government through the utilisation of ICT.

To achieve these objectives the Centre:

- is putting in place an ambitious research agenda in technology driven democratic inclusion - teledemocracy
- is developing an e-democracy toolkit to act as a show-case of teledemocracy applications to start to demonstrate the potential benefits of the use of ICT to support the democratic process.

The first component of this toolkit is a electronic petitioning system called “E-Petitioner” which is described in section 2 of this report.

In order to demonstrate and assess both the functionality and the benefits of such tools it is important to gain practical use of them in realistic situations. WWF Scotland is supporting electronic petitioning by being the first user of the electronic petitioning tool. Their petition relates to the National Parks Bill.

In November the Public Petitions Committee issued guidelines on how to submit a petition. These guidelines relate to both paper and electronic petitions. In December the PPC agreed to allow the electronic petition sponsored by the WWF to be the first electronic petition to collect signatures electronically. This is a special arrangement between the International Teledemocracy Centre and the Public Petitions Committee and will allow the PPC and the Centre to evaluate the use and civic impact of electronic petitioning in Scotland.

2 E-Petitioner

E-Petitioner is a web-based electronic petitioning tool with the functionality to create a petition; to view/sign a petition; to add background information, to join discussion forum; to submit a petition.

In designing the system a number of key “democratic” requirements were important to the Centre. It was important to ensure that the petitioning process was as transparent as possible whilst remaining within the data protection standards. It was important that people were adequately informed about the petition issues and therefore could better decide whether to support the petition or not. Participation was important and achieved by incorporating a mechanism for users not only to add their support for the petition but also to comment on it – negatively or positively. At this point in time, accessibility and security were important but conflicting issues. It was difficult to meet both requirements fully as the mechanisms to put security checking in place ran counter to providing access to as many people as possible. E-Petitioner stresses the accessibility requirement so that there should be no access restrictions. Lastly, the design should be modular enough to allow for future requirements such as mechanisms to allow better analysis of the petition statistics. A straightforward example is sorting by postcode to enable the MSPs to better appreciate the support for the petition from their constituents.

Given the above requirements the detailed functionality of E-Petitioner is:

- the petitioner can *create* the petition on-line, giving the text of the petition and the address of the petitioner to which all communications concerning the petition should be sent;
- additionally the petitioner can add on-line *background information* to provide rationale for the petition and to better inform those reading the petition;
- persons wishing to support the petition can *add their names and addresses* on-line;
- additionally persons wishing to *raise any issues* about the petition can do so on-line through the integrated, on-line discussion forum;
- the *discussion forum* is available for anyone to read or send comments to whether they support the petition or not;
- persons wishing to add their names or enter the discussion *do not require an email account*, they can do so from any internet access point - public kiosk, cyber café, community centre, home, etc;
- with regard to *petition statistics*, the number of persons supporting the petition is automatically updated along with the names and areas/countries, this information is available for anyone to view;
- full names and addresses are filed for use with, and only with, the petition (unless consent for other use is given by the person adding their name and address) ensuring *data protection* requirements are adhered to;
- *duplicate names and addresses* are automatically removed;
- *checking names and addresses* is performed prior to submission of the petition;
- the petitioner can *submit* the petition with names and addresses electronically and/or can produce a paper version of the petition for submission;
- the format for the submitted petition *adheres to the PPC guidelines*.

The purpose of the electronic petitioning system on the Centre’s web site is three-fold. Firstly, it gives people an opportunity to look at, and importantly try out, what such a system offers. Secondly it allows people to comment on particular issues that are of concern to them regarding electronic petitioning. Thirdly it hosts “live” petitions - petitions that are valid, will be submitted to the relevant authority and where individuals can add their name and address on-line if they support the petition. The petition sponsored by the WWF is the first example of such a “live” petition.

3 Electronic Petition Evaluation

The WWF National Parks petition is the first electronic petition for the Scottish Parliament therefore it is difficult to draw many conclusions from it. However, it was originally thought that electronic petitioning might let the internet run wild and thousands of frivolous names and addresses would be collected. So far, this one evaluation has shown this is not the case. The opposite could be argued, instead of having a pen thrust in your hand on your doorstep and asked to “sign here”, you now need to be much more committed to the petition cause. You have to: boot up your PC, log onto the internet, search the net for the site and then sign. In this way the names and addresses being gathered could arguably be considered a more realistic representation of those supporting the petition cause.

4 Security

There is the issue of how can the public and the Parliament “trust” the new technology. How much security and authentication of names and addresses is necessary for electronic petitions? This is an important question to address. It would be easy to say that it should match the level currently available for paper-based petitions but that then raises the issue of what level of security checking is actually used for paper-based names and addresses other than manually reading the often illegible handwriting. On the other hand there is always the temptation to say that everything must be checked thoroughly, which is the case for electronic voting but not necessarily for names and addresses on petitions.

The E-petitioner tool, as stated in section 3, had to choose between wide accessibility and restrictive security issues. It elected to ensure accessibility. Types of straightforward checking that could be made are:

- Checking post codes, but the implications for supporters outside the UK need to be considered;
- Automatically editing out spurious names commonly used on paper petitions, such as Mickey Mouse, Bart Simpson and other fictional characters;
- Incorporating a registration process - requiring potential supporters to register, for example, issuing usernames/passwords through emails, but this would mean all those without an email address could not support the petition, which at this point of time would be highly restrictive.

5 Outstanding Issues and the Way Forward

The Marine National Parks petition raised by WWF Scotland using e-petitioner has demonstrated that electronic petitions are possible and will not necessarily create a large number of frivolous names and addresses. E-petitioner has allowed the WWF to better inform the public about their cause for marine national parks. It has also allowed them to better understand the concerns the public has about them. However, it is important not to draw too many conclusions from this one example of electronic petitioning but rather use it to inform a wider trial on electronic petitioning.

E-petitioner has generated interest from a number of organisations in this form of on-line petitioning of the Scottish Parliament.

However, E-Petitioner contains a number of, so far, unresolved issues which need further consideration. These issues are:

- What level of authentication of names and address is appropriate for petitions submitted to the Scottish Parliament?
- Given the agreed level of authentication how can this be effectively and efficiently incorporated into electronic petitioning?

- What level of checking of petition content is necessary to support the petitioner in ensuring that an admissible petition is submitted to the PPC?
- What type and level of support could be provided to the PPC to process electronically submitted petitions?

All these issues are of importance to the ITC and the PPC and need the e-petitioner to be further used on “live” petitions in order to ascertain the appropriate way forward at this time.

The International Teledemocracy Centre would like to work with the Public Petitions Committee to ensure the requirements of the public wishing to petition the parliament electronically are met whilst also ensuring the Parliament has confidence in the integrity of the electronic petitioning system.

In December 1999 the Scottish Executive set up a ministerial task force on “Digital Scotland” to ensure that Scotland is a leading digital society. The task force is focusing on six key areas, two of which are “social inclusion” and “public services” - including the consultation process. The results of electronic petitioning trails are directly relevant to the work of these sub-groups. Finally, one of the themes of the campaign for a Scottish Parliament was to replace Westminster with a new more participatory form of democracy. Allowing third party hosted electronic petitions is one way of moving this forward.