



**e-Petitions**

**Submission to the House of Commons Procedure  
Committee**

**from the International Teledemocracy Centre**

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**International Teledemocracy Centre  
Napier University  
10 Colinton Road  
Edinburgh EH10 5DT**

## Introduction

Through its work with governments, parliaments and NGOs across the globe, the International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) has established an international reputation as a research centre that combines software engineering applications with political and sociological analysis to investigate how ICTs can enhance and support the democratic decision-making processes.

For almost a decade, ITC has been involved with the design and management of electronic petition systems for organisations at different levels of the political hierarchy: since 1999, at devolved government level with The Scottish Parliament; since 2004, at Local Authority level with the Royal Borough of Kingston and Bristol City Council; and since 2005, at national level with the German Bundestag. Our e-petitions research and innovation continues with current projects involving the Province of Flevoland in the Netherlands, and interactive television petitioning with Sheffield City Council.

The Committee's Report into Public Petitions and Early Motions<sup>1</sup> includes accounts of meetings with those involved in e-petitions in The Scottish Parliament and the German Bundestag. Added to this, a good account of The Scottish Parliament's e-petitions system and its integration into parliamentary processes is included in the submission to this inquiry from the Hansard Society. So, we will not describe these systems again. However, we are happy to answer questions about all the e-petitions systems we have designed so far, especially in terms of adjustments or new functions added to align them more closely to government processes.

Evaluation of feedback from the use of these systems has mostly been positive—both from the authority and petitioners. This applies to our own research and others<sup>2</sup>. These positive factors include:

- Extending opportunities for engagement with the democratic process: for example by extending opportunities to sign to a national level.
- Increasing the transparency of interactions between citizens and parliament, as the stages are recorded and publicly available.
- Giving people more time to consider the petition before signing, especially if the petition is supported by background information and a deliberative discussion forum.
- The data from those raising and signing the petition (and contributing to any discussion) can provide insights into the distribution and depth of feeling surrounding the issues raised.

Though these advantages apply specifically to e-petitions, many of our recommendations concern the processes by which petitions are dealt with and apply equally to paper petitions. Evaluation suggests that it is the processes associated with petitioning and e-petitioning which govern the public's reactions.

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<sup>1</sup> published on 22 May as HC 513

<sup>2</sup> A selection of references are included at the end of the submission.

## Recommendations

### 1. The parliament should provide an e-petitions system on its website

We strongly recommend that the Parliament provides an e-petitioning system on its own website, for reasons of transparency and public confidence. It should be clear that the Parliament endorses the system, while not necessarily agreeing with each petition.

- This ensures that all petitions, including supporting information and information about their progress and outcomes, is available in one place.
- It enables Parliament to take some control over petitions posted; for example to ensure that they fall under the Parliament's remit.
- It gives the public confidence in the legitimacy of the petitions, especially once information about the progress of submitted petitions is included.
- It provides a space to clarify and record the responsibilities of the petitioner, the Parliament and its Members, so that public expectations are realistic.
- This information should include an agreed list of reasons for rejecting potential petitions, including information about who performs this task and how to appeal.
- This information should clearly indicate where processes will differ from those used as part of the Number 10 ePetitions system.

### 2. The direct involvement of Members of Parliament

Establishing a strong relationship between individual Members of Parliament and individual petitions has the potential to become one of the strengths of the system. It reflects similar practices elsewhere:

- Bristol City Council and the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames both use petitioning systems, including e-petitions, where many petitions are initiated by councillors prompted by their constituents' concerns.
- In Scotland, the petitioners are encouraged to contact their MSPs prior to submitting a petition.

There are also specific advantages to specifying a link between Members and petitions:

- It retains the representative role of Members.
- It follows the method employed by paper petitions.
- It enables Members to control the e-petitions posted, in order to avoid petitions outside the parliament's remit, offensive content and duplication. It could also enable Members to control of the number of e-petitions, to keep the process active and sustainable.
- It encourages Members to ensure the petition is processed according to best practice.

However, some aspects of this link are more problematic:

- If Members and their staff are to coordinate all the process involved, from assessing the legitimacy of potential e-petitions to recording feedback on outcomes of submitted petitions, this will add a considerable burden of diverse tasks to their workload. To effectively perform this range of tasks, support and coordination at a parliamentary level is advised. Coordination is essential to avoid duplication of petitions, as well as limit duplication of effort. This would also ensure a more even quality of engagement for the

citizens involved. In The Scottish Parliament, these tasks are performed by the Public Petitions Committee.

- The availability and preferences of Members also needs to be considered. Citizens should not be dissuaded from starting e-petitions because their representative is known to oppose the issue or has a busy ministerial position.
- E-Petitions by their nature operate at a national (or even international) level, whereas representation is defined at a local level.

### **3. The establishment of a Petitions Committee**

ITC therefore feels that, a coordinating body is essential to support Members' involvement with petitions, including e-petitions, not just in terms of assisting Members, but to create an even and sustainable process that the public can have confidence in. We feel that some sort of Petitions Committee is the logical answer.

This body could perform the following essential tasks for a successful e-petition system:

- Supporting Members in their agreed roles.
- Management of public expectations.
- Providing guidance on the submission of petitions and explaining the petitioning process.
- Filtering potential petitions to ensure that they are admissible (within the agreed terms) and duplication is avoided.
- Moderating the public list of signatures.
- Supporting the progress of the petition, as necessary, until a resolution is reached and recording this process.
- Moderation of petition discussion if this is included.

### **4. Signatures**

The e-petitions systems supplied by ITC use a series of mechanisms to check signatures to avoid the automatic addition of lists of names. These checks do not affect the public appearance of signatures, but give a "confidence rating" which is available to those administrating the system. The systems also include a facility for administrators to remove signatures which refer to obviously fictional characters (like Donald Duck) or may cause offence.

However, e-petitions are little more reliable than paper petitions in ensuring that all signatures are valid. As such, we advise that each petition is taken on its own merit, as in the Scottish system, rather than its influence being dependent on the number of signatures. This also draws on lessons learned from the Number 10 pilot, where the volume of signatures tends to reflect the petitions level of publicity, rather than a meaningful level of public sympathy. In practice this publicity could gather support for a petitions based on a false premise<sup>3</sup>.

### **5. Fostering Deliberation**

The ITC e-petitioning systems all include discussion fora. Each petition automatically has its own discussion. This increases opportunities for public engagement and the quality of that engagement. The discussions provide somewhere for people to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.numberten.gov.uk/output/Page11051.asp>

consider the petition, to disagree with it or to present their own experience in support or otherwise. This gives Parliament, especially the Member presenting the petition, a fuller picture of the public's relationship with the issue.

It might also be useful to provide a public space where the petitioning process overall could be discussed. This could prove a useful resource both to petitioners and the parliament.

The petitions system could use the technology of the parliament's e-consultation system<sup>4</sup> to increase usability and reduce costs, though the fora would not appear in the same part of the website, as they are for different purposes.

## **6. Evaluation**

ITC recommend that an evaluation plan is created as an integral part of taking on any e-petitioning process. Evaluation mechanisms should be included in any technical specification. (For example an evaluation questionnaire, as used in the ITC e-petitions systems). The e-petitions system and processes surrounding it should be independently evaluated. This process should begin within a year of the system's launch.

## **Resource Implications**

Some of the tasks involved in processing an e-petition are supported by computers, however, there are implications for human resources. The tasks we list under our recommendations for the establishment of a Petitions Committee reflects our experience with The Scottish Parliament system.

## **Summary**

- We recommend that the Parliament pilots or establishes an e-petitions system as part of its own website.
- We feel that Members could play a variety of useful roles in an e-petitions system.
- We recommend that the Parliament ensures processes surrounding petitions are consistent, transparent and adequately resourced.
- We feel that the best way to manage an extended petitions process is through a Petitions Committee.
- We recommend that petitions are considered on their merit, rather than according to the number of signatures.
- We feel that deliberative discussion can play a valuable role in the e-petitioning process.
- We acknowledge that this system will require extra resources, but these should not be prohibitive.
- We feel that the resources given to the e-petitioning process will be more than rewarded by an improvement in citizen engagement and trust in the Parliament.
- We fully endorse the Hansard Society's submission and recommendations.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://forums.parliament.uk/>

## References

Adams, N. J., Macintosh, A., and Johnston, J. (2005); 'e-Petitioning: Enabling Ground-up Participation'; *Challenges of Expanding Internet: E-Commerce, E-Business and E-Government*; Matohisa Funabashi and Adam Grzech (eds); 5th IFIP Conference on e-Commerce, E-Business and E-Government (I3E'2005); October 26-28 2005, Poznan, Poland, pp 265-279

Carman, C.J. (2007); *Modelling Petitioner Engagement with the Scottish Parliament's Petitions System: Procedural Fairness and Participatory Democracy*; Working paper presented at 2007 meeting 'Elections, Public Opinion & Parties' study group of the Political Studies Association, Bristol 2007.

ICELE (2007); *Effective petitioning – the internet way*, Bristol City Council; Bristol 2007. Available from <http://stores.lulu.com/icele>

The Scottish Parliament's *How to submit a public petition* which includes guidance on admissibility:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/publicInfo/htsapp/LeafletIndex.htm>

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[http://itc.napier.ac.uk/ITC/Documents/eDemocracy\\_from\\_the\\_Top\\_Down\\_ODPM\\_2005.pdf](http://itc.napier.ac.uk/ITC/Documents/eDemocracy_from_the_Top_Down_ODPM_2005.pdf)

## Contact

For further information, please contact *Kathy Buckner*

Director

International Teledemocracy Centre/Centre for Social Informatics

School of Computing

Napier University

Merchiston Campus

Edinburgh

EH10 5DT

Tel: 0131 455 2775

Fax: 0131 455 2727

email: [k.buckner@napier.ac.uk](mailto:k.buckner@napier.ac.uk)