









Committee would initially be responsible for deciding which e-petitions should be debated.

In May 2009, the Procedure Committee followed up its 2008 report with a further report on e-petitions that called for Government action on introducing an e-petitioning facility on the parliamentary website.<sup>4</sup>

Recommendations on greater public involvement with the proceedings of the House of Commons were contained in the report of the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons, chaired by Dr Tony Wright MP.<sup>5</sup> The Committee was established towards the end of the 2005 Parliament in the wake of the expenses crisis and amid calls for wider parliamentary and political reforms. The report's proposals to increase public participation and engagement included an e-petitions system. The House debated and approved the Wright Committee report on 22 February 2010. Recommending the report to the House the Leader of the House, Sir George Young, said:

Today we have a chance to move our agenda on from the expenses scandal to making the House work more effectively. We must make an early start on cutting the democratic deficit and restoring confidence in our political system.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 New Government petitions website and the Backbench Business Committee

The various committees' proposals were overtaken by a commitment by the 2010 Coalition Government to ensure that petitions to the Government securing 100,000 signatures would be eligible for debate in the House of Commons.

In 2011 the facility for online petitions to the Government moved to the DirectGov website. The then Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young, announced that petitions attracting more than 100,000 signatures would trigger consideration for debate in Parliament.<sup>7</sup> Most petitions reaching 10,000 signatures would receive a response from the Government.

The government e-petitions website was administered by the Cabinet Office and overseen by the Leader of the House who informed the Backbench Business Committee when a petition reached the 100,000 threshold. The Backbench Business Committee was established in 2010 and allocates time for debates on the basis of representation made by Members. The Committee is allocated 35 days for backbench business per parliamentary session, of which at least 27 must be taken on the floor of the House, as opposed to Westminster Hall. The process for

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<sup>4</sup> The [Commons Library briefing on proposals for an e-petitions system, SN04725 12 May 2010](#) provides details of the Procedure Committee's 2008 and 2009 reports and sums up the Government's responses to both reports. The briefing also looks at the e-petitions systems in Queensland, Australia, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

<sup>5</sup> Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09

<sup>6</sup> [HC Deb 22 Feb 2010 cc 51](#)

<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister's Office: [A new website that lets you petition the government online has gone live](#), 29 Jul 2011

## 6 Petitioning Parliament and Government

deciding which e-petitions were to be debated is set out in a flow chart published by the Committee.<sup>8</sup>

In September 2011 the Backbench Business Committee published a statement on e-petitions setting out their concerns that, without a formal process for referring petitions with more than 100,000 signatures for debate, petitions relied on being 'picked-up' by an MP who would need to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for time for debate.

The Committee was also concerned that time taken up by e-petitions was reducing the time available for backbench business, especially as some regular general debates, previously scheduled by the Government, have since 2010 used some of the time allotted for backbench business.<sup>9</sup>

In 2012 Catherine Bochel published a study of different UK petition systems and their use as a tool for public participation in elected representative institutions. She noted that the Coalition Government's e-petition system raised expectations by giving the impression that it was an easy way to influence Government policy. Describing the Coalition's e-petitions system as a hybrid system (the Government hosting the petition's website with the Backbench Business Committee deciding which petitions should be debated), introduced without consultation with the House, Bochel concluded that it did not do enough to address the concerns of petitioners, recommending:

A mechanism such a Petitions Committee to consider each petition on its merit and to make a decision about how to progress the petition, specific feedback on the petition topic, the opportunity to engage with the political system and to perhaps learn more about how it works, the opportunity for petitioner to receive advise or guidance on their petition before it is submitted, a low signature threshold, and the integration of the petitions system into the elected body of government within which it operates.<sup>10</sup>

Following recommendations by the Commons Procedure Committee,<sup>11</sup> the House agreed in July 2012 that the Business Committee should be able to arrange debates on e-petitions in Westminster Hall on Mondays on an experimental basis. This was extended to the end of the Parliament a year later. The Committee's report for 2010-12 noted that, of ten petitions which passed the 100,000 threshold, seven were debated in backbench time. The committee also scheduled debates on subjects raised by paper petitions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> e-Petitions and the Backbench Business Committee: [Flowchart](#) [pdf]

<sup>9</sup> Backbench Business Committee: [Statement on e-petitions](#), 7 Sep 2011

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Bochel, *Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66:4, October 2013, pp798–815 (Pub May 2012)

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Procedure Committee, [Debate on Government e-petitions in Westminster Hall](#), HC 1094, 22 Apr 2013

<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Backbench Business Committee, [Work of the Committee in Session 2010–12](#), Second Special Report of Session 2010–12, HC 1926 26 Apr 2012

## 1.3 Proposal for a collaborative e-petition system.

In 2013 the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee reviewed the impact of the Wright reforms and Committee concluded that e-petitions for consideration by Parliament should be hosted on the Parliament website and made the case for the establishment of a petitions committee.

The House debated and agreed a motion in May 2014 to establish a joint e-petitions system between the House of Commons and the Government to start in the 2015 Parliament:

“That this House supports the establishment, at the start of the next Parliament, of a collaborative e-petitions system, which enables members of the public to petition the House of Commons and press for action from Government; and calls on the Procedure Committee to work with the Government and other interested parties on the development of detailed proposals.”<sup>13</sup>

The report of the House of Commons Procedure Committee, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*,<sup>14</sup> set out detailed proposals for the operation of an e-petitions website, to be jointly owned by the House of Commons and the Government. The Procedure Committee recommended oversight of the joint e-petitions website and the traditional paper-based system of petitions by a Petitions Committee of the House of Commons.

On publication of the report, the Chair of the Procedure Committee, Charles Walker said:

“Our proposals will enable the House to respond more effectively to petitions than it does now. Setting up a committee of MPs to consider the petitions presented to the House, hear petitioners’ concerns and scrutinise the Government’s response to them is a fundamental part of the system we propose. This should also improve the information available to the public about what the House of Commons does and the many ways in which MPs can respond to the people’s concerns. I hope these changes will bring some real and welcome improvements both for the House of Commons and the petitioning public.”<sup>15</sup>

The Procedure Committee’s report was agreed by the House in February 2015.<sup>16</sup> and the joint e-petitions website was launched in July 2015.

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<sup>13</sup> [HC Deb 8 May 2014 cc356-7](#)

<sup>14</sup> Commons Procedure Committee, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*, HC 235 2014-15, 4 Dec 2014

<sup>15</sup> Commons Procedure Committee: [Procedure Committee publishes proposals](#), 4 Dec 2014

<sup>16</sup> [HC Deb 25 Jul 2015 cc247-256](#)

## 2. The collaborative e-petitions system and the Petitions Committee

The current petitions system includes a web interface, paper petitions and a Petitions Committee.

Before the e-petitions website could be launched, a new Petitions Committee was required to oversee the e-petitioning and paper petition systems and to liaise with the Government.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1 House of Commons Petitions Select Committee

The new Petitions Committee was established at the start of the 2015 Parliament under [Standing Order 145A](#), which determines the number of members of the Committee and its powers. The Committee comprises eleven MPs and reflects the party balance in the House of Commons, as with other select committees. The chair of the Committee is elected by the House in a secret ballot in accordance with paragraphs (2) to (14) of [Standing Order No 122B](#) to serve as Chair throughout the Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

Helen Jones was elected Chair on 18 June 2015. On her election, she said:

“With the brand new Petitions Committee we have a really exciting opportunity for the public to make sure their views are heard by MPs and Ministers. It will be an accessible way for people to see democracy in action and learn more about how it works.

I am looking forward to working with the rest of the Committee to find new and innovative ways—alongside some traditional methods—for us to engage with the concerns that people raise in petitions. When people sign a petition, they will also have an opportunity to learn more about the work that Parliament does on their behalf.”<sup>19</sup>

Once the remaining members of the committee were nominated by the House, the new joint petitions website was launched on 20 July 2015. On its launch, the Deputy Leader of the House, Dr Thérèse Coffey said:

“The new Petitions Committee builds on the reforms of the last Parliament to improve public engagement with politics. This is the first-time voters will be able to petition Parliament electronically through the Petitions Committee for action by the Government

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<sup>17</sup> Procedure Committee Third Report, [E-petitions: a collaborative system](#), 4 Dec 2014, HC 235 2014-15 (role of the Committee, para24)

<sup>18</sup> Commons Library briefing, [Select committees: election of chairs and members](#), 14 Jul 2017

<sup>19</sup> Petitions Committee: [Helen Jones elected as Chair](#), 18 Jun 2015



on topical issues that really matter to people – and we will listen to what they have to say.”<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2 E-petitions – how they work

British citizens and UK residents can petition Parliament and Government via the [petitions website](#). Petitions must call for a specific action from the UK Government or the House of Commons and be about something that the Government or the House of Commons is responsible for.

To start a petition, five supporting signatures are required in addition to the petitioner’s. If the petition complies with the [standards for petitions](#) and is accepted, the petition remains live for six months for signatures to be added via the petition’s website.

If a petition is rejected, committee staff set out the reason why in an online response published on the website. A common reason for rejecting petitions that are otherwise in order is that there is another live petition on the same topic. Multiple petitions on the same subject make it harder to attract a large number of signatures.

Once a petition has been accepted, the Committee may seek further information in writing or in person from the petitioners, the Government, other public bodies or relevant people’s organisations.

The Committee may refer the petition to another select committee although there is no obligation on the committee to act. The Petitions Committee is also able to carry out its own inquiries (see section 2.4 below).

Petitions reaching 10,000 signatures receive a response from the Government; Petitions reaching 100,000 signatures will be considered for debate in Parliament. There is no automatic provision for these petitions to be debated in Parliament but equally, the committee has the discretion to schedule a debate in Westminster Hall even if a petition does not reach the 100,000 threshold.

In deciding which petitions should be debated, the Committee takes into account how many people have signed the petition, the topicality of the issue raised, whether the issue has recently been debated in Parliament, and the breadth of interest among MPs.

The Committee is able to schedule debates in Westminster Hall<sup>21</sup> but should the Committee decide that the petition should be debated in the Commons Chamber, it needs to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for time on the floor of the House. The Committee’s criteria for recommending petitions for debate in Westminster Hall or in the Commons Chamber are set out on its website.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Petitions Committee: [New House of Commons and Government petitions website launched](#), 20 July 2015.

<sup>21</sup> The committee has the power, under [Standing Order No. 10 \(a\)](#), to determine debates in Westminster Hall on Monday afternoons

<sup>22</sup> Petitions Committee: [Working methods: How will the Committee decide which petitions will be debated?](#)

## Government responses to petitions

Every petition that reaches 10,000 signatures receives a response from the Government which is sent to all the signatories and published on the website.

The Petition Committee reviews all the responses and may ask for an improved response if it does not think the Government has responded adequately to the petitioners. For instance, on 20 March 2019, the Committee announced that they had received a disappointing response from the Government following an intensive inquiry into the irresponsible use of fireworks. The Chair, Catherine McKinnell, said:

“This is a disappointing response from the Government to our fireworks inquiry and, when normal business resumes, we will be pursuing this issue further.”<sup>23</sup>

A list of revised Government responses are noted in decisions of the Petitions Committee on 26 March 2020.<sup>24</sup>

Initially there was no set time by when a government department had to respond to petitions that reached 10,000 signatures. A few months into the operation of the website the then Chair of the Committee, Helen Jones, wrote to the Leader of the House, Chris Grayling, with suggested guidelines for government departments to respond within 14-21 days. The Leader responded that the time frames seemed reasonable although they may be more problematic during recesses.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.3 Paper petitions – how they work

There is no minimum number of signatures required for a paper petition. Petitions from an individual are valid so long as they contain a name and address.

Only Members of Parliament can present public petitions to the House of Commons, but they are under no obligation to do so. The presentation of a petition does not imply endorsement of the petition by the Member.

The rules for paper petitions remain largely unchanged except that, as recommended by the Procedure Committee in 2004, petitions are no longer formally referred to a departmental select committee but a copy of each petition is sent to the relevant committee at the same time as one is sent to the relevant Government department.<sup>26</sup>

The Committee also recommended removing the requirement for top sheet to be handwritten noting that an earlier Procedure Committee had recommended relaxing the rules regarding the wording of petitions in 1992.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Petitions Committee: [Petitions Committee disappointed by Government’s response on misuse of fireworks](#), 20 March 2020.s

<sup>24</sup> Petitions Committee: [Decisions of the Petitions Committee, Tuesday 26 March](#), 30 Mar 2020

<sup>25</sup> [Correspondence between the Chair of the Petition Committee and the Leader of the House \[pdf\]](#) Nov 2015

<sup>26</sup> Commons Procedure Committee, [Public Petitions](#), HC 1248 2003-04

<sup>27</sup> Commons Procedure Committee, [Public Petitions](#), HC 286 1991-92

Paper petitions can now be either handwritten or word processed and printed out. Petitioners are advised to contact the Clerk of Public Petitions, who can advise on drafting, before collecting signatures.<sup>28</sup>

There are two ways an MP can present a petition, formally or informally.

### **Formal presentation**

Petitions are presented immediately before the half hour adjournment debate at the end of each day's business in accordance with [Standing Order No 154](#).

The MP presenting the petition signs their name at the top, makes a short statement and reads out the petition before walking to the Table where the title of the petition is read out by the Clerk. The Members then places the petition in the petitions bag, just behind the Speaker's chair. There is no debate on the petition.

### **Informal presentation**

Members can submit a petition at any time the House is sitting, without presenting it on the floor of the House, by placing it in the petitions bag. There is no requirement for the Member to sign the petition and they therefore have the option of not being identified as having presented the petition in the Votes and Proceedings.

Whether presented formally or informally, all petitions are recorded in the Votes and Proceedings and the full text of the petition is printed in Hansard. The text of the petition is sent to the relevant Government department who respond to most petitions within two months (longer during recesses). The Government response is printed in Hansard.

There is no rule of the House of Commons preventing a Minister from presenting a petition, but it is very rare for a Minister to do so. Some Ministers have arranged for a Member of a neighbouring constituency to present a petition on their behalf.<sup>29</sup>

The Petitions Committee, which oversees both the paper petition and e-petition systems, can recommend further action on paper petitions.

The paper petition process is explained in detail on the [Parliament website: Ask your MP to present a petition](#). A brief overview of the historical development of paper petitions is provided in the [Commons Information Office Factsheet on public petitions](#).

Statistics on public (paper) petitions presented to the House of Commons or placed in the 'bag' since 1987-88 can be found in the Appendix.

## **2.4 The work of the Petitions Committee**

The Petitions Committee initially agreed a provisional set of working methods explaining how it would consider petitions and opened a consultation on its working methods in July 2015.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Parliament website: [Need help drafting a petition?](#)

<sup>29</sup> David Rutley on behalf of Edward Timpson [HC Deb 25 Apr 2017]

<sup>30</sup> Petitions Committee: [Petitions Committee working methods inquiry](#), 23 Jul 2015

## 12 Petitioning Parliament and Government

With the announcement of the general election on 8 June 2017, this inquiry was closed. Should a future Petitions Committee hold a similar inquiry, it may refer to the evidence already gathered. Written evidence submitted to this inquiry is published on the Committee's website.<sup>31</sup>

In November 2016 the [Petitions Committee published a report on its first year of operation](#). This explores how petitions work, how people had used the petitions site, the work of the Committee, its achievements to date and how petitions can be most effective.<sup>32</sup>

At the start of the 2017 Parliament the Committee reworked the rules for petitions and published them on the Petitions website: [Standards for petitions](#). The main change to the rules is that the Committee no longer accepts petitions calling for a vote of no confidence. The website explains:

"We can't accept petitions about appointments, which includes calling for Ministers to be sacked or for a vote of no confidence.

If you're concerned about a particular policy or decision that's the responsibility of Government or the House of Commons, you could start a petition about that.

We used to accept petitions that called for a vote of no confidence. However, the Petitions Committee can't schedule votes of no confidence. This was often frustrating and disappointing for petitioners. Petitions calling for action on policy are more likely to be an effective way of achieving the change you want.

In some instances, the Committee recognise that the 100,000 target may be hard to reach. In March 2018 a petition to make British Sign Language part of the national curriculum was debated, even though it only had 35,203 signatures. Later that year, it scheduled another debate on public holidays for Hindu and Muslim festivals, following petitions that attracted 11,853 and 52,451 signatures respectively. A petition on visitors' visas that reached 71,178 was scheduled for debate alongside another on visiting rights for parents of British citizens.

The Petitions website lists all petitions that have been scheduled for debate. This comprises, 39 in the 2015 Parliament and 62 in the 2017 Parliament.<sup>33</sup>

Petitions can also be 'tagged' (with the agreement of the sponsor of the debate) to a Commons debate on the same issue. This means that the petition is listed on the Commons Order Paper alongside that debate. A list of petitions that have been tagged is available on the [Petitions Committee website](#).

The 2019 [Commons Library Briefing Paper on petitions in the UK](#) provides statistics on the number of petitions and the geography of

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<sup>31</sup> Petitions Committee: [Petitions Committee working methods inquiry - publications](#)

<sup>32</sup> Houses of Parliament, [Your Petitions: A Year of Action, Petitions Committee July 2015 – July 2017](#), Nov 2016

<sup>33</sup> Petitions Committee, Actions on petitions: [Debates scheduled by the Petitions Committee](#), [Accessed 23 Sep 2019]

participation in petitioning. It also looks at trends in petitioning the UK Parliament and devolved institutions.

## 2015 Parliament

### Establishment of the Committee

The Chair of the Petitions Committee was elected on 18 June 2015 with the remaining members of the Committee nominated on 20 July 2015. Once the Committee was formally established, the new House of Commons and Government petitions website was launched.<sup>34</sup>

### Petitions in the 2015 Parliament

In the 2015 -2017 Parliament over 30,000 petitions were submitted, and 10,950 were accepted. The first petition to reach 100,000 signatures was a petition asking for a debate on a vote of no confidence in the Health Secretary the Right Hon Jeremy Hunt. The Committee scheduled a debate on the underlying issues behind the petition on 14 September 2015.<sup>35</sup>

42 debates were held on topics raised by e-petitions in the 2015 Parliament,<sup>36</sup> four of which were subject to enquiries by the Petitions Committee. The Committee held five inquiries (one on its working methods) shown below with links to the Committee's inquiry pages on the Parliament website.

Inquiries in the 2015 Parliament	Petition debated	Petition title
<a href="#">Funding for research into brain tumours</a>	<a href="#">HC Deb 18 April 2016 cc213-260WH</a>	Fund more research into brain tumours, the biggest cancer killer of under-40s
<a href="#">Meningitis B vaccine</a>	25 April 2016	Give the Meningitis B vaccine to ALL children, not just newborn babies
<a href="#">Grouse shooting</a>	31 October 2016	Ban driven grouse shooting
<a href="#">High heels and workplace dress codes</a>	6 March 2017	Make it illegal for a company to require women to wear high heels at work
<a href="#">Cost of car insurance for young people</a>	20 March 2017	Put a max of £1200 on car insurance for 18-25 year olds

The e-petitions website closed on 3 May 2017 when Parliament dissolved ahead of the 2017 General Election. After a general election, petitions from previous Parliaments cannot be re-opened and signatures

<sup>34</sup> Petitions Committee: [New House of Commons and Government petitions website launched](#), 20 Jul 2015

<sup>35</sup> Petitions Committee: [Contracts and conditions in the NHS and #WeNurses chat](#), 9 Sep 2019

<sup>36</sup> [Search Parliamentary Material](#) [Accessed 26 Mar 2020] Figure includes two debates on Opposition Motions and one Emergency Debate.

cannot be carried over. Petitioners need to start a new petition and collect new signatures.<sup>37</sup>

## 2017 Parliament

### Establishment of the Committee

Following the General Election on 8 June 2017, Helen Jones was re-elected chair of the Petitions Committee on 12 July 2017. On her re-election, Helen Jones said:

“The petitions site had to close when Parliament stopped unexpectedly for the general election. I know that this has been frustrating for many people. The site will open again once the new Petitions Committee is set up, so it’s essential that the Committee is established as soon as possible. This isn’t something that I can control, but I’ll be doing everything I can make sure that petitioners don’t have to wait longer than is absolutely necessary.”<sup>38</sup>

Although the Speaker used his powers under Standing Order No 1225 to shorten the two-week period between: a) the House agreeing the allocation of chairs between the parties and b) their election, remaining members of the Petitions Committee (as with other Select Committees) were not appointed until after the summer recess. Once the Committee was established, the Petitions website re-opened on 7 September 2017.

In evidence to the Commons Procedure Committee’s 2018 inquiry, *Establishing select committees in a new Parliament*, the Petitions Committee called for a reduction in the time taken to set up the Petitions Committee in a new Parliament to allow the Petitions website to reopen as quickly as possible.

Pointing to the time taken to establish committees at the start of the 2017 Parliament, the Committee said:

The long delay in reopening the site after the House returned in 2017 was therefore very disappointing, particularly for the public. It was very difficult to explain to prospective petitioners why there was such a long delay in setting up the Petitions Committee and re-opening the petitions site. It sent the message that Parliament was not interested in listening to the concerns of the public.<sup>39</sup>

### Petitions in the 2017 Parliament

Of the 7,996 petitions accepted during the 2017 Parliament, 430 received a government response after reaching the threshold of more than 10,000 signatures.

63 petitions, with more than 100,000 thousand signatures, were debated in Westminster Hall. Two petitions relating to animal welfare that had been scheduled for debate on 9 September 2019 were postponed due to the expected prorogation of Parliament that week.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Petitions website: Petitions and the General Election 2019

<sup>38</sup> Petitions Committee: [Helen Jones elected Chair](#), 15 Jul 2017

<sup>39</sup> Procedure Committee: [Establishing select committees in a new Parliament: Written evidence submitted by the Petitions Committee](#) (SCP 06)

<sup>40</sup> Petitions website: [e-petition 243448](#) and [e-petition 242239](#)

These were picked up and scheduled for debate by the Petitions Committee formed in the 2019 Parliament.

The Committee opened two new inquiries in the 2017 Parliament and followed up on two inquiries from the 2015 Parliament.

<b>Inquiries in the 2017 Parliament</b>	<b>Petition debated</b>	<b>Petition title</b>
<a href="#">Funding for research into brain tumours</a>	Follow-up	Fund more research into brain tumours, the biggest cancer killer of under-40s
<a href="#">Petition on the meningitis B vaccine</a>	Follow-up	Give the Meningitis B vaccine to ALL children, not just newborn babies
<a href="#">Fireworks</a>	Inquiry launched Feb 2019, no debate scheduled	Ban the sale of fireworks to the public. Displays for licenced venues only.
<a href="#">Online abuse and the experience of disabled people</a>	29 April 2019	Make online abuse a specific criminal offence and create a register of offenders

Parliament was dissolved on 6 November 2019 ahead of the 2019 General Election and the petitions website closed to new petitions.

## 2019 Parliament

### Establishment of the Committee

Elections for Chairs of Select Committees were held on 29 January 2019. And Catherine McKinnell elected as Chair of the Petitions Committee. Once the remaining Members were agreed by the House on 2 March 2020,<sup>41</sup> the Committee was formally established and the Petitions website re-opened. The Chair commented:

“I’m delighted that the UK Parliament and Government petitions website has now re-opened following the General Election. Since launching in 2015, over 23 million people have used the site to have their voice heard in Parliament. As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I look forward to supporting the public to raise awareness of their causes in Parliament and help bring about real change to communities across the UK.”<sup>42</sup>

### Petitions in the 2019 Parliament

Two petitions on animal welfare that had been scheduled for debate by the previous Petitions Committee were debated in March 2020.<sup>43</sup>

By Easter 2020, eleven petitions had gathered over 100,000 signatures, nine of which related to the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>41</sup> Petitions Committee, [Petitions Committee membership agreed](#), 2 March 2020

<sup>42</sup> Petitions Committee, [Parliament’s petitions website has re-opened](#), 2 March 2020

<sup>43</sup> [HC Deb 16 Mar 2020 cc283-254WH](#)

The Committee arranged an oral evidence session for 25 March 2020 with Ministers and Government officials to scrutinise the Government's response to the Coronavirus outbreak.

Debates in Westminster Hall were suspended on 19 March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic and therefore all debates scheduled by the Petitions Committee on petitions with more than 100,000 signatures were postponed. Catherine McKinnell said:

I know this will be disappointing for everyone who has started or signed a petition that's waiting to be debated. It's right that Parliament does everything it can to make sure it can balance its constitutional role and the protection of public health.

As the country continues to adjust to these challenging new times, people can still start and sign petitions on our website. I have written to the Speaker and the Government to urge them to find a way to make sure Petitions debates can continue in the Commons and Committees can continue to hold the Government to account.

Over 1.8 million people have signed petitions relating to the coronavirus outbreak, and the Committee will be questioning Ministers and Government officials on Wednesday [25/03/20] to scrutinise the Government's response as our nation continues to adapt and tackle this unprecedented pandemic.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the Government's decision to restrict movement, the House passed a temporary Order to allow select committee members to participate in proceedings by electronic means.<sup>45</sup>

The Petitions Committee amended their oral evidence session on 25 March, making it an online session and putting questions from the public to the Government about its response so far on coronavirus. Catherine McKinnell, said:

The Government has been responding to the Coronavirus outbreak for weeks, but as we now see a daily increase in the spread of the virus and fatalities across the nation, we also see a rise in the spread of concern and uncertainty.

With more than 1.8 million people signing parliamentary petitions about Coronavirus, the Petitions Committee will be putting questions from UK residents and British citizens to a panel of Ministers and senior Government officials, so together we can scrutinise the Government plans to tackle this unprecedented pandemic.<sup>46</sup>

The Committee made the video from the informal evidence session available on the Committee website the following day.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.5 Commentary and debate

In March 2016 the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, Dr Thérèse Coffey, stated the Government's commitment to increasing

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<sup>44</sup> Petitions Committee: [Petitions Committee debates postponed](#), 19 March 2020

<sup>45</sup> [Votes and Proceedings, 25 March 2020, item 11](#)

<sup>46</sup> Petitions Committee: [Petitions Committee to question Ministers on Government strategy with questions from the public](#), 18 Mar 2020 [Updated, no date]

<sup>47</sup> Petitions Committee: [Committee question Deputy Chief Medical Officer and Ministers on Coronavirus response](#), 26 March 2020



public engagement with Parliament, highlighting the work of the Petitions Committee:

The Government are committed to promoting public awareness of Parliament. Much has been achieved in this area in recent years, and this important work must continue. The Government particularly welcome the new e-petitions site, which has increased public engagement with Parliament since it was set up in July. The site collected 7 million signatures in its first six months, and to date 135 petitions have received a Government response and 19 petitions have been debated in Westminster Hall.<sup>48</sup>

Petitions can raise issues that may not be raised otherwise and act as a political safety valve by allowing people to express dissatisfaction with Government policy and decisions.

At the start of the 2017 Parliament, Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira considered the experience of the e-petitions system since its inception showing that they are an effective way of raising awareness or expressing discontent and examined the different roles performed by the e-petitions system.<sup>49</sup>

In 2019 Professor Leston-Bandeira looked at the roles of e-petitions in detail, concluding that although a very small number lead to specific action, their primary effect has been to facilitate greater public engagement with Parliament.<sup>50</sup>

Responding to concern over the security of the petitions website in March 2019, the Prime Minister responded:

Like the traditional paper petition system, we need to strike a balance in the e-petition system between allowing people to easily register their support for issues that are important to them while discouraging dishonesty. I have been assured that the Government Digital Service has been constantly monitoring signing patterns to check for fraudulent activity. I am sure she will understand that I cannot comment in more detail on the security measures that are taken, but petitions are subject to checks as part of due diligence.<sup>51</sup>

The work of the Petitions Committee was examined in an in-depth BBC article in July 2019. Through interviews with committee staff and petitioners, Jon Kelly highlighted the campaigns behind notable petitions, from their inception to debate in Parliament.<sup>52</sup>

During a debate scheduled by the Petitions Committee to consider e-petitions 269157 and 237487 relating to the [prorogation of Parliament](#) in September 2019 Paul Scully, a member of the Petitions Committee, emphasised the importance of petitions:

It is important that the Petitions Committee should always try to allow people to have their views aired. There is a reason why

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<sup>48</sup> HC Deb 3 Mar 2016 c1098

<sup>49</sup> LSE Blog, [What is the point of petitions in British politics](#), 7 Feb 2017; Constitution Unit blog, [Here we go again, the parliamentary petitions site has re-opened - what role can it play?](#) 26 Sep 2017

<sup>50</sup> Policy & Politics, [Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions](#), 16 Jul 2019

<sup>51</sup> [HC Deb 27 Mar 2019 cc](#)

<sup>52</sup>

## 18 Petitioning Parliament and Government

debates on petitions in Westminster Hall are some of the most read and watched debates: it is because we are talking about what people want us to talk about, rather than what we want to talk about.<sup>53</sup>

During the same debate, the effectiveness of petitions was raised by Tommy Sheppard:

I wonder if our procedures are effective and robust enough to deliver on the expectations of those who petition Parliament. [...]

I wonder how many people who sign such petitions understand that this is the place where their hopes and aspirations come to die on a wet Monday afternoon, in a Committee Room off the House of Commons Chamber, with 10 Members assembled who have no ability to advocate on behalf of the petitioners, or to influence, never mind change, Government policy. It is too late for this Parliament, but if I come back to this place in the future, I will seek changes to our procedures and how we deal with those who petition this Parliament. I do not think we treat them fairly enough.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> [HC Deb 9 Sep 2019 c191WH](#)

<sup>54</sup> [HC Deb 9 Sep 2019 cc219WH](#)

## 3. Devolved legislatures

### 3.1 Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament has a petitions system which incorporates online petitions and a [Public Petitions Committee](#). The Committee meets once a fortnight to consider petitions and to decide what action should be taken on admissible petitions.

The Online petitions system allows people to petition the Scottish Parliament on matters within the powers of the Scottish Parliament and on an issue of national policy or practice. The petition must not ask the Parliament to become involved in local or individual matters, or to intervene in a decision that should be taken by another organisation.

Both residents and non-residents can sign petitions and there is no threshold for the number of signatures required apart from the petitioner's. In a 2006 report commissioned for the Public Petitions Committee, Dr Christopher J. Carman noted that:

“There is no requirement that petitioners collect signatures in support of the petitions they submit. Indeed, there are no formal requirements that petitioners display any sort of broad public support for their petitions at all. This was a deliberate decision taken when establishing the petition procedures in order to maintain equal access for all individuals in petitioning the Parliament as signature requirements may discourage, and generally serve as an impediment to individuals living in rural environs from submitting petitions.”<sup>55</sup>

The Public Petition Committee held an inquiry into the public petitions process in 2009 and made a series of recommendations to improve the accessibility of, and public engagement with, the petitions process.<sup>56</sup>

In 2015 the Public Petitions Committee carried out a review of the Petitions Process.<sup>57</sup>

Standard for petitions are set out in the [Petitioning the Scottish Parliament 2019 \[pdf\]](#) which incorporates the text of the *Determination on proper form of petitions*.<sup>58</sup> Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament state:

Rule 15.4.2

A petition shall clearly indicate: (a) the name of the petitioner; (b) an address of the petitioner to which all communications concerning the petition should be sent; and (c) the name and address of any person supporting the petition.

Rule 15.5.1

A petition is admissible unless it: (a) does not comply with Rule 15.4.2 or is otherwise not in proper form; (aa) is frivolous; (ab)

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<sup>55</sup> [The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999 – 2006](#), Dr Christopher J Carman, SP Paper 654, 2006, SP Paper 654, 3.3 [Signatures as Support](#)

<sup>56</sup> Public Petitions Committee Report, [Inquiry into the public petitions process](#), SP Paper 300, 2009

<sup>57</sup> Public Petitions Committee: Review of the Petitions Process, SP Paper 859, Dec 2015

<sup>58</sup> Public Petitions Committee: [Determination on proper form of petitions](#), [pdf] Jun 2019

breaches any enactment or rule of law; (ac) refers to any matter in relation to which legal proceedings are active; (b) contains language which is offensive; (ba) fails to raise issues of national policy or practice; (c) requests the Parliament to do anything which the Parliament clearly has no power to do; or (d) is the same as, or in substantially similar terms to, a petition brought during the same session of the Parliament and which was closed less than a year earlier.<sup>59</sup>

A [petition template](#) can be provided by the petitions team for people who cannot access the online system. Once accepted, petitions are open to signatures for six weeks, after which the Public Petitions Committee consider the petition and decide on an appropriate course. This may include:

- getting information from the Scottish Government and other organisations;
- taking oral evidence on the petition from the Scottish Government, public bodies or other organisations;
- referring the petition to another committee of the Parliament;
- making recommendations for action by the Scottish Government;
- asking for time in the Chamber to allow the petition to be debated by the Parliament.<sup>60</sup>

Figures for the number of petitions accepted by the Scottish Parliament from 2000 to 2019 are available from [Scottish Parliament Statistics](#) and collated in the Commons Library Briefing Paper, Petitions in the UK. The paper also includes published data on numbers of signatures from 1999-2006 and for the 2016-17 and 2017-18 Scottish parliamentary sessions.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.2 Northern Ireland Assembly

In 2002 Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) began the practice of presenting public petitions on constituency related issues, the first of which was presented on 15 January 2002.<sup>62</sup>

The Northern Ireland Assembly website explains how public petitions are dealt with under [Standing Order 22](#):

If a Member wishes to present a public petition to the Assembly the proposal is considered by the Business Committee which decides whether and when it shall be taken. In practice the Member will make some brief introductory remarks about the content of the petition and the number of signatories before formally presenting it to the Speaker. The Speaker then arranges for the petition to be sent to the relevant Minister and copied to the Chairperson of the relevant statutory committee. The Minister will normally respond to Members or to the Speaker at some

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<sup>59</sup> Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament, [Chapter 15: Openness and Accessibility](#), Sep 2019

<sup>60</sup> Scottish Parliament: [Getting involved: Petitioning the Scottish Parliament \[pdf\]](#) Aug 2019

<sup>61</sup> Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP 8620, [Petitions in the UK](#), 11 July 2019

<sup>62</sup> NIA website: [History of the Assembly](#) (accessed 16 Sep 2019)

stage thereafter outlining what action is being taken on the issue.<sup>63</sup>

In 2014 the Procedures Committee undertook a review of the Public Petitions procedures to examine the effectiveness of current procedures and to consider whether a revised system of public petitions should be introduced to the Assembly. The Committee issued a call for evidence setting out its [Terms of Reference](#) with a closing date for submissions of 18 December 2014.<sup>64</sup> The Committee's report was published in February 2016 and recommended that the current process be retained with the addition of an e-petitions facility.<sup>65</sup> The NIA approved the recommendations of the report in March 2016.<sup>66</sup> The Assembly was suspended between January 2017 and January 2020 and no further progress has been reported.

### 3.3 Welsh Assembly

Paper petitions have been accepted by the Assembly since it was established in 1999. E-petitions were introduced in the third Assembly and the [Petitions Committee](#) established in June 2016 to consider all admissible petitions and what course of action to take.

The Welsh Assembly only considers petitions from Welsh residents or organisations with a base in Wales. The petition must be on a matter devolved to Wales that the National Assembly or the Welsh Government has the power to change. If the petition is signed by 50 people it will be considered by the Petitions Committee: if it reaches 5000 signatures, the Committee will consider it for debate in the Senedd. Actions the Committee might take include:

- Seeking further information from the Welsh Government, other decision makers or organisations that may have a view on, or interest in, the petition - for example, professional bodies, local authorities, health boards, trade unions or community groups
- Undertaking external visits
- Asking another Assembly committee to look at the petition
- Inviting petitioners, the Welsh Government and others, to attend a meeting of the Petitions Committee to answer Members' questions about the petition and the issues it raises
- Conducting a short inquiry into the issue
- Seeking time for a debate on the issue at a full meeting of the Assembly
- Closing the petition<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> NIA website: [Plenary Terms](#) (accessed 16 Sep 2019)

<sup>64</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly website: [Review of the Public Petition Procedures](#) (accessed 16 Sep 2019)

<sup>65</sup> NIA Committee on Procedures, [Review of Public Petitions Procedures](#) [pdf], NIA 305/11-16, 9 Feb 2019

<sup>66</sup> NIA Official Report, [Public Petitions Procedures: Review Report](#), 1 Mar 2016

<sup>67</sup> National Assembly for Wales: [The Role of the Petitions Committee](#) [accessed 12 Dec 2019]

## 22 Petitioning Parliament and Government

The Assembly's petitions website, [Petitions at the Assembly](#), provides guidance on the petitions process from start to finish. A leaflet entitled [Petitioning the Assembly](#) is also available.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> National Assembly for Wales: [How to petition the Assembly](#) [accessed 12 Dec 2019]

## 4. Appendix

### Public (paper) petitions presented to the House of Commons or placed in the 'bag' since 1987-88

Session	Total petitions presented	Formal presentation (floor of House)	Informal presentation (via the 'bag')	Petitions receiving govt observations (c)
1987-88 <sup>(b)</sup>	356	132	224	not available
1988-89	227	125	102	not available
1989-90	960	235	725	not available
1990-91	183	87	96	not available
1991-92 <sup>(a)</sup>	452	56	396	not available
1992-93 <sup>(b)</sup>	2651	137	2514	not available
1993-94	102	60	42	not available
1994-95	119	57	62	73
1995-96	77	49	28	39
1996-97 <sup>(a)</sup>	55	40	15	24
1997-98 <sup>(b)</sup>	99	73	26	51
1998-99	99	56	43	36
1999-2000	87	67	20	42
2000-01 <sup>(a)</sup>	35	28	7	22
2001-02 <sup>(b)</sup>	131	109	22	64
2002-03	220	194	26	178
2003-04	128	112	16	82
2004-05 <sup>(a)</sup>	51	44	7	38
2005-06 <sup>(b)</sup>	293	257	36	207
2006-07	161	142	19	112
2007-08	221	195	26	220 <sup>(d)</sup>
2008-09	123	111	12	97
2009-10 <sup>(a)</sup>	393	135	258	343
2010-12 <sup>(b)</sup>	187	159	28	176
2012-13	146	132	14	128
2013-14	175	137	38	163
2014-15	166	104	62	83
2015-16	165	143	22	173
2016-17	328	293	35	308
2017-19 <sup>(b)</sup>	458	350	108	392
2019 <sup>(a)</sup>	20	17	3	17 <sup>(e)</sup>

**Sources:** [Sessional Returns of the House of Commons](#)  
[Public Petitions](#), House of Commons Information Office Factsheet P7  
[Parliamentary Search](#)

**Notes:**

- (a) Short sessions [Oct 1991 to Mar 1992; Oct 1996 to Mar 1997; Dec 2000 to May 2001; Nov 2004 to Apr 2005; Nov 2009 to Apr 2010; Oct 2019 to Nov 2019]
- (b) Long sessions [Jun 1987 to Nov 1988; Apr 1992 to Oct 1993; May 1997 to Oct 1998; Jun 2001 to Nov 2002; May 2005 to Nov 2006; May 2010 to May 2012; Jun 2017 to Oct 2019]
- (c) Statistics on Government observations to petitions not available before 1994-95. These figures do not include petitions to which the departmental response has not yet been recorded.
- (d) Of these, 21 were replies to Petitions presented in earlier Sessions of Parliament.
- (e) Of these, 13 were replies to Petitions presented in earlier Sessions of Parliament.

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