



BRIEFING PAPER

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e-Petitions

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Summary

The House of Commons debated proposals for a collaborative system of e-petitions on 24 February 2015. The House agreed to proposals contained in the Procedure Committee's report, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*, designed to bring together the Government's e-petitions website, administered by the Office of the Leader of the House, and the House of Commons paper petitions system onto one platform.

The new collaborative system is overseen by a new Petitions Committee. The joint e-petitions website went live on 20 July 2015.

The Government's e-petitions website was re-launched on 4 August 2011 in response to recommendations made at the end of the 2005 Parliament by the Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons (the Wright Committee) to "make the Commons matter more, increase its vitality and rebalance its relationship with the executive, and to give the public a greater voice in parliamentary proceedings."

The Coalition Government committed to ensuring that petitions securing 100,000 signatures would be eligible for debate in the House of Commons. Time for debating e-petitions was to come from the 35 days allocated to the newly created Backbench Business Committee if a Member was willing to sponsor the petition.

In January 2012, the Procedure Committee reported on e-petitions. It welcomed the Government's initiative in principle but noted some practical problems over debating e-petitions and in relation to public understanding. Its recommendation that the Backbench Business Committee should be able to arrange debates on e-petitions in Westminster Hall on Mondays was agreed by the House on an experimental basis in July 2012 and extended until the end of the current Parliament in July 2013.

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee reviewed the Wright Committee reforms in July 2013. It reiterated some concerns on public expectations about e-petitions and recommended that the House should agree the principal features of a new system for public petitions.

1. Background

1.1 Report of the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons

The Select Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons (the Wright Committee) was asked to consider, among other issues, how the public could initiate debates and proceedings in the House. In its summary the Committee outlined its conclusions on “public involvement”:

The Committee calls for the primary focus of the House’s overall agenda for engagement with the public to be shifted towards actively assisting a greater degree of public participation.

It calls for urgent discussions on the currently stalled process of introducing an e-petitions system, and for the Procedure Committee to become for a trial period a Procedure and Petitions Committee, dealing with petitions submitted under existing rules. It recommends a number of changes designed to give presentation of petitions greater significance in the House’s proceedings, including the possibility of a debate. The Committee also calls for the working up of a scheme for identifying a monthly backbench Motion suitable for debate, alongside the existing Early Day Motions.

The report looks at the prospects for some form of “agenda initiative” which might enable the public to ensure that a given issue is debated in the House. It calls for the House to commission an investigation of the practicalities of such a procedure at national level, drawing on local and international experience, and concludes that the opportunities should be seized for nourishing representative democracy by the exploration of other democratic possibilities.

It concludes that opening up the process of legislation and giving the public a real opportunity to influence the content of draft laws should be a priority in the new Parliament.¹

The Committee made the following recommendations which related to ways in which the public could engage in the legislative process; that petitions could be used to help the public initiate proceedings; and that petitioners could be made more aware of proceedings in the House:

Public Participation

41. There are varying views about the prospects for greater public participation. But none of these doubts should rule out making further and better opportunities available for public participation and engagement. The primary focus of the House’s overall agenda for engagement with the public must now be shifted beyond the giving of information towards actively assisting the achievement of a greater degree of public participation. (Paragraph 230-232)

Legislation

42. Opening up the process of legislation and giving a real opportunity to the public to influence the content of draft laws

¹ Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, [Rebuilding the House](#), 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, Summary

should be a priority for consideration in the next Parliament. That is an issue for the House and not for Government. (Paragraph 276)

Agenda initiative

43. We recommend that the House commission an investigation of the practicalities of applying at a national level the procedures applied to local authorities for "petitions requiring debate", drawing on local and international experience, including the appropriate thresholds to be applied. (Paragraph 286)

e-Petitions

44. We recommend urgent discussions among all those involved in the e-petitions scheme, with a view to bringing to the House in the early part of 2010 a costed scheme which enjoys the support of the Member bodies engaged: that is, the Finance and Services and Procedure Committees, and the House of Commons Commission. (Paragraph 254)

[...]

Debate

47. We recommend a trial in 2009-10 in advance of e-petitions of debates on petitions, subject to the presentation of petitions of sufficient significance. (Paragraph 264)

Information for petitioners

48. We recommend that the House authorities ensure that petitioners are informed of recent relevant House proceedings. (Paragraph 265)

Proceedings in House

49. It would give petitions a slightly enhanced status if notice was required and when given if it appeared on the House's Order Paper at the appropriate place. We consider that it would be more dignified if, as is the case with Bills presented to the House by backbench Members, the front sheet of the petition was taken to the Table, and an appropriate announcement read by the Clerk. (Paragraphs 266-267)²

The House debated the Wright Committee report on 22 February 2010, and approved the recommendations above.³ In doing so, it welcomed work that had already been undertaken by the House authorities in preparation of the House agreeing the recommendations. The House also considered that "there should be a trial of debates on public petitions in Westminster Hall in the next Session of Parliament, subject to the presentation of petitions of sufficient significance".⁴ (This did not happen.)

The work that was being undertaken was described by Nick Harvey, who answered questions on behalf of the House of Commons Commission, earlier in February 2010:

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission if he will make a statement on steps taken by staff of the House in taking forward work arising from the recommendations and conclusions

² *Ibid*, Chapter 6

³ HC Deb 22 February 2010 c131

⁴ *Ibid*[in response to Recommendation 47]

of the House of Commons Reform Committee in its First Report of Session 2008-09, *Rebuilding the House*, HC 1117. [316600]

Nick Harvey: Upon publication of the report in November, the Clerk of the House set in hand work on the possible changes to procedures and practices which would be required were the House to endorse some or all of the recommendations and conclusions, including possible changes to Standing Orders and changes to procedures and practices.

Some recommendations and conclusions proposed specific work by the House. A progress report on these is set out as follows.

[...]

Recommendations 41 and 42-Shift in the primary focus of the House's public engagement agenda towards greater degree of public participation, and opportunity for the public to influence the content of draft laws:

Discussion at official level is under way on the future pattern and direction of the House's public engagement effort, in the light of these two recommendations. Thought is being given to approaches which would give "a real opportunity to the public to influence the content of draft laws". Decisions would be required to be taken by the proper authorities, including the House of Commons Commission and possibly the House itself, in the new Parliament.

Recommendation 43-Commissioning of investigation of practicalities of a national equivalent of "petitions requiring debate":

The Parliament and Constitution Centre in the Department of Information Services is looking further into the agenda initiative issue, as part of its general research effort. The results of the research, which should be completed by the start of the new Parliament, will inform future debate and decision on the practicalities of any sort of agenda initiative at national level. The study will of course make no assumptions about what view the House may take in future.

Recommendation 44-Urgent discussions on a new costed scheme for e-petitions:

The urgent discussions recommended by the Committee have taken place. A revised outline scheme is being prepared which is likely to be cheaper than the scheme proposed in April 2008. It will in due course be for the House in this or the next Parliament to decide whether or not to proceed.

Recommendation 48-Information for petitioners of relevant House proceedings:

House staff are preparing to pilot two alternative routes for giving suitable information to petitioners, via the Member who presented the relevant petition, with a view to identifying the best way forward early on in the new Parliament. This can then be put to the appropriate committee for decision.⁵

⁵ HC Deb 8 February 2010 cc651W-652W

1.2 Conservative Party Policy

In its 2010 General Election manifesto, the Conservative Party outlined plans for giving the general public opportunities to initiate parliamentary proceedings:

People have been shut out of Westminster politics for too long. Having a single vote every four or five years is not good enough – we need to give people real control over how they are governed. So, with a Conservative government, any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a Bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament. And we will introduce a new Public Reading Stage for Bills to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online.⁶

1.3 The Coalition Agreement

The Coalition Agreement provided that:

We will ensure that any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament.⁷

⁶ Conservative Party, [Invitation to join the Government of Britain](#), 2010, p66

⁷ HM Government, [The Coalition: our programme for government](#), May 2010, p27

2. Petitions requiring debate

In June 2010, Sir George Young responded to a written question on the Government's proposals to debate petitions:

Lisa Nandy: To ask the Leader of the House when he plans to announce mechanisms by which the public may submit petitions to this House for debate. [1637]

Sir George Young: The Government will bring forward new proposals for the public to engage with the House by submitting petitions which will be eligible for debate if they obtain 100,000 signatures, with the petition which attracts the most signatures triggering an opportunity for a Bill to be presented. We will also bring forward proposals for a new public reading stage of Government Bills.

There is clear scope for these proposals to be taken forward together, and in co-operation with the House's wider work on public engagement, in order to ensure that they are implemented in a way that is consistent, coherent and cost-effective.

The final decision about the appropriate mechanism will rest with the House itself and I hope to be able to bring forward proposals soon.⁸

He was asked again about the Government's plans, at Business Questions on 2 December 2010:

Mr Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I always used to think that my right hon. Friend was a progressive, but I am beginning to have my doubts. Is he aware that as long ago as 2008, this House was promised a debate in Government time on the electronic petitioning of Parliament? It is now nearly 2011 and we are still waiting. When, oh when, can we debate e-petitions?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and to the Procedure Committee for their work on electronic petitions. He will know that there is a commitment in the coalition agreement to take the issue forward. I hope that my office will be in touch with his Select Committee shortly to indicate how we plan to bridge the gap between House and country by taking forward the agenda of petitions. The commitment is that when a petition reaches 100,000, it will become eligible for a debate in this House. I am anxious to make progress on that agenda.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Following on from the point of the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr Knight) on e-petitions, will the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister is cancelling his No. 10 Downing street e-petitions site? If so, will he take heed of the right hon. Gentleman's advice and speed up the process of holding that debate in the House?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman is right that the No. 10 e-petitions site has been taken down, but we envisage carrying forward the ability to petition on the Directgov site.⁹

On 28 December 2010, the BBC reported that:

⁸ HC Deb 14 June 2010 cc270W-271W

⁹ HC Deb 2 December 2010 c977

A plan to allow popular online petitions to be debated in Parliament within a year has been given the go-ahead by the government.

Ministers will seek agreement with the authorities, including the House of Commons Procedure Committee, to give the petitions parliamentary time.

Those receiving most support - probably 100,000 signatures - would be debated, with some possibly becoming bills.

The same BBC report gave some information on previous announcements about the plans but noted that the proposals had not yet been discussed with the Speaker or other parliamentary authorities. The report also indicated that "Petitioners would have to be on the electoral roll and parliamentary time might also be refused if a topic had been recently debated".¹⁰

At Business Questions on 13 January 2011, Sir George Young told the House that he had held "some informal discussions with the Procedure Committee" and that he would "have further discussions, both with that Committee and with the Backbench Business Committee".¹¹

Then for oral questions to the Leader of the House of Commons, on 20 January 2010, a number of questions were tabled asking:

What recent progress he has made on the Government's plans to link petitions to debates in the House.¹²

In response to supplementary questions, the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, David Heath, addressed questions about the House's role in the process:

Richard Ottaway: Can the Minister say what a "direct portal" is? As I understand it, petitions were made to No. 10, so I hope he is going to confirm that petitions will now go to the House of Commons and that the House of Commons will debate petitions to it, not to No. 10.

Mr Heath: Well, the petitions will be to the House of Commons, but the Government's site will be used simply because it is there. The "Directgov" site is the common site for connexions via the internet to Government. I believe that the address is www.direct.gov.uk, so the hon. Gentleman might like to look at it and see whether it is a sensible portal to use-if he accepts the word "portal" at all.

Henry Smith: What will be the role of the Backbench Business Committee in government e-petitions?

Mr Heath: The Committee itself made it clear in its first special report that in determining what business should be taken, it would consider

"public petitions recently submitted to the House and petitions published on the Downing Street website-until such time as a system for electronic petitions to the House is implemented".

¹⁰ BBC News, [Online petition plan for Parliament to go ahead](#), 28 December 2010

¹¹ HC Deb 13 January 2010 c434

¹² Identical questions from Jake Berry, Richard Ottaway and Henry Smith were grouped for answer

We very much welcome the Committee's continued interest in e-petitions as a source of debate, and we will work with it and with the Procedure Committee in making sure that we have a proper procedure for linking petitions to Parliament.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): I am very surprised that the Deputy Leader of the House has not followed the Scottish Parliament system for public petitions, given that that has been widely praised both by his predecessor and by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Will he briefly outline why there is such a divergence between the 10-year-plus Scottish Parliament system and this system?

Mr Heath: I do not think that there is a huge divergence. We looked at the Scottish system and at whether it was applicable. The Procedure Committee, as the hon. Gentleman knows, has also looked at the issue. We have the Directgov site in place, and we are keen for people to be able to put petitions before the House at the earliest opportunity—and this provides the earliest opportunity. As I said, I hope we can get it up and running before the summer. If the Procedure Committee has further views on how the system could be changed in the future, we would certainly be open to its suggestions.¹³

And later at Business Questions on the same day, Sir George Young commented that:

We had an exchange on petitions that achieve a certain number of signatures, which my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House answered. If the trigger is reached and a petition hits the 100,000 mark, it becomes eligible for a debate, and its future is then decided by the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) [chair of the Backbench Business Committee], who is in her place.¹⁴

In March and May 2011, the Leader of the House confirmed the Government's intention that the e-petition system would be operating "by the summer";¹⁵ and "before the summer recess",¹⁶ respectively. Then on 18 July 2011, the day before the House was scheduled to rise for the summer (it was subsequently recalled on 20 July), the Leader of the House announced in a written answer that:

The Government e-petitions system will be launched shortly. Petitions which reach 100,000 signatures will be communicated to the relevant departmental Select Committee, and to the Backbench Business Committee who will want to consider such petitions for debate.¹⁷

¹³ HC Deb 20 January 2011 cc1005-1006

¹⁴ HC Deb 20 January 2011 c1021

¹⁵ HC Deb 21 March 2011 c845W

¹⁶ HC Deb 17 May 2011 c163W

¹⁷ HC Deb 18 July 2011 c670W

Related Commons Briefings

Two House of Commons Library Standard Notes outline the proposals that the Procedure Committee made for revising the House's petitions system and introducing a system of electronic petitioning for the House:

- [Proposals for a Petitions Committee for the House of Commons](#), SN/PC/5203, 16 March 2010
- [Proposals for an e-petitions system for the House of Commons](#), SN/PC/4725, 12 May 2010

2.1 E-petitions launched

On Friday 29 July 2011, the Leader of the House of Commons announced that "public petitions which secure the backing of 100,000 signatures will be eligible for debate in Parliament through a newly launched website".¹⁸ The website, <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/>, went live on 4 August 2011. ePolitix.com reported the launch:

A new government website is to be launched to replace the defunct Downing Street online petition page that will give the public a "megaphone" to make themselves heard, it has been announced.

House of Commons leader Sir George Young said any eligible petitions that get more than 100,000 signatures will be considered for debate in Parliament.

The new public e-petitions site, launched today, is aimed at "building confidence" in MPs' work and Parliament.

It will be up to the Commons backbench business committee, which has the power to propose debated on non-government matters, to assess all petitions that qualify.

They will then decide whether they should be given time from the 35 days it is allocated each session for non-governmental business.

[...]

It will now operate under the DirectGov portal rather than be linked to Downing Street and be moderated by government departments, with oversight from the Office of the Leader of the Commons.

Sir George said it was a "step towards a more accessible and transparent" Parliament.

He added: "In recent weeks, Parliament has been at the centre of public interest, by leading the debate on phone hacking allegations.

"But this shouldn't mean that Parliament becomes complacent. There's much more that we can do to build confidence in the work of the House of Commons and we should continue to find new ways of encouraging people to engage.

"The public already have many opportunities to make their voices heard in Parliament, and this new system of e-petitions could give them a megaphone.

"Of course, parliamentary time is not unlimited and we want the best e-petitions to be given airtime - so we will monitor the site

¹⁸ Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, [Announcements](#), 29 July 2011 [last accessed 5 August 2011]

closely over the coming months to assess whether the 100,000 figure is an appropriate target." ¹⁹

It was reported that the Speaker supported the establishment of the new e-petitions website. ²⁰

2.2 E-petitions – live

From 4 August 2011, members of the public were able to add their signatures to petitions appearing on the website, <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/>. However, the website was overwhelmed by the number of visitors:

A new e-petitions website allowing members of the public to put forward motions for debate by MPs has crashed under the weight of 1,000 visitors a minute trying to register proposals on issues such as the return of capital punishment and leaving the European Union.

The site, run by directgov and overseen by the leader of the House of Commons, opened at midday on Thursday but was frequently inaccessible due to the public clamour to add new petitions or endorse those they agreed with. ²¹

In an article in the Daily Mail, Sir George Young indicated how the new website might affect what Members of Parliament debated:

Over the last week, we've seen hundreds of submissions to a new website which will let the public tell politicians what issues they want discussed in the House of Commons.

Subjects for these 'e-petitions' have ranged from setting up an English Parliament to ensuring Formula One remains free-to-air.

It sounds simple - and it is. If you can secure 100,000 signatures, your e-petition could become the subject of a parliamentary debate.

Of course there have been some suggestions which are frivolous. That's the nature of the internet. But those petitions which have got over the moderators' hurdles will start to be published today, allowing other people to add their signatures.

Those which reach the threshold will be considered by a committee of back-bench MPs, who have the power to allocate time in the Chamber of the Commons - pushing matters of public interest on to the House's agenda, with the potential for a vote.

Parliamentary time is not unlimited and we want the best e-petitions to be given airtime. That's why we will be closely monitoring the site over the coming months to assess whether the threshold is right, or whether it should be lowered or raised.

The site has been widely welcomed as a realistic way to revitalise public engagement in Parliament. But there have been some who have been concerned by some of the subjects which could end up being debated - for example, the restoration of capital punishment.

¹⁹ Philippa Silverman, "[New public petition site launched](#)", *ePolitix.com*, 29 July 2011

²⁰ Patrick Wintour "Speaker backs launch of e-petition website: Current systems in need of overhaul, says Bercow Site will show issues considered for debate", *Guardian*, 3 August 2011

²¹ Helen Warrell, "E-petitions site crashes on launch", *Financial Times (FT.Com)*, 4 August 2011

The last time this was debated - during the passage of the Human Rights Act in 1998 - restoration was rejected by 158 votes. But if lots of people want Parliament to do something which it rejects, then it is up to MPs to explain the reasons to their constituents. What else is Parliament for? People have strong opinions, and it does not serve democracy well if we ignore them or pretend that their views do not exist.

People are beginning to wake up to the fact that this is a new era for the House of Commons. Two years ago, battered by scandal and with public confidence at an historic low, many wrote off Parliament as irrelevant.

Over the last 12 months, it has not only been more responsive to the public, it has been fighting for the public interest, for instance by leading the debate on the phone hacking revelations. There's no room for complacency: Parliament needs to keep on connecting with the outside world.

But if politicians want to regain the trust of the public, then they need to trust the public. Giving people more power is the right place to start.²²

2.3 Concerns about the e-petition system

When the e-petitions system was launched, the *Financial Times* reported that Natascha Engel, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, expressed some concerns about the expectations the site would raise and the difficulties the Committee might have in deciding between time for a debate on a petition or another issue that was significant but not the subject of a petition. The FT reported that Ms Engel had "and warned that the government might be raising expectations it could not fulfil":

"This isn't as well thought-through as it could have been, and my concern is that the government is raising demand and expectations they may not be able to deliver on," Ms Engel told the *Financial Times*. Her concern is that since the committee has only 35 days of parliamentary time allocated in each session, petition debates may be squeezed out by other important topics suggested by MPs, or vice versa.

"It's very easy just to click yes or no to something quite casually, but the consequences for us following up on it are quite significant because there's so much other business parked up for debate - the operations in Libya, huge defence issues," Ms Engel said. "It's in danger of becoming a bit gimmicky."

But Ms Engel did concede that the e-petitions site had its strengths, since anything that helped parliamentarians to "reconnect with voters and rebuild public trust" in the wake of the scandal on MPs expenses was laudable.²³

²² Sir George Young, "A clamour MPs can no longer ignore", *Daily Mail*, 4 August 2011

²³ Helen Warrell, "E-petitions site crashes on launch", *Financial Times (FT.Com)*, 4 August 2011

2.4 E-petitions – statistics

First year statistics

On 16 August 2012, the Government Digital Service published information on the number of visitors to the e-petitions website and on the number of petitions proposed, accepted and debated. The following data, among others, were given:

Petitions submitted 36,000

Valid petitions opened 15,600

Visitors

- Unique visitors 13 million
- Site visits 17 million
- Pages viewed 68 million

Signatures

- Percentage of visitors signing a petition 38%
- Signatures collected 6,400,000

Ten petitions attained 100,000 signatures²⁴

Other data

The Government Digital Service also published information to mark 100 days of e-petitions.²⁵

In its 2012 report, *What next for e-petitions?*, the Hansard Society noted that “the first petition to hit the 100,000 mark did so in just five days”. It also reported that “At present 97.7% of e-petitions receive less than 1,000 signatures”.²⁶

On 18 July 2013, Andrew Lansley told the House that 21 petitions had reached the 100,000 signature threshold and that 20 had either been debated or were scheduled for debate.²⁷

Data is made available from the e-petitions website:

Every night we generate a series of JSON documents with much of the e-petitions data. We don't provide all the data that we hold (some of it contains personal information), however we are opening up as much as we can.

There is one master document (petitions.json) that contains all the key information for all e-petitions on the site (including open, closed and rejected). This document can be found at <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/api/petitions.json> (Please note that this file more than 20Mb in size).²⁸

²⁴ Source: Peter Herlihy, “[Happy birthday e-petitions – a year in numbers](#)”, *Government Digital Service*, 16 August 2012

²⁵ Peter Herlihy, “[e-petitions: the first 100 days](#)”, *Government Digital Service*, 15 November 2011

²⁶ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p5 and p20

²⁷ [HC Deb 18 July 2013 cc1321-1322](#)

²⁸ HM Government, [Frequently asked questions](#) [click on “Is there an API to access the e-petitions data?”]

2.5 Petitions debated

On its website, the Backbench Business Committee has published a document recording the “Outcomes of e-petitions that have reached the 100,000 signatory threshold” and the “Outcomes of other petitions that have exceeded 100,000 signatories”.²⁹

²⁹ Backbench Business Committee, [Outcomes of e-petitions that have reached the 100,000 signatory threshold](#)

3. Procedure Committee review of e-petitions

The Procedure Committee reported on e-petitions in January 2012. The Committee observed that while the initiative was welcome in principle, “there have been some practical problems with its operation which must be addressed”. The Committee drew attention to two issues – time for debating e-petitions; and public understanding of the process.³⁰

The Committee noted that the Backbench Business Committee (BBCom) controlled a finite amount of debating time and that “The Government did not provide any extra time for debates on the subjects raised by e-petitions, and so the introduction of e-petitions has only increased the pressure on the time available”.³¹ It did not agree with the Leader of the House that “time for debate on subjects raised by e-petitions should be taken from the existing allocation of time to the Backbench Business Committee”. Instead, it proposed that “extra time for debate be created and dedicated to debates on subjects raised by e-petitions”.³²

The Committee suggested that it would be possible for Westminster Hall to sit on Mondays to debate subjects raised in e-petitions, and it outlined some proposals to facilitate this. It said that the BBCom should determine which e-petitions should be debated and that Members should continue to be able to bid for debates on any subject – in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall.³³ The Committee recommended that:

We recommend that the Standing Orders should be changed to allow the Backbench Business Committee to schedule debates on Government e-petitions between 4.30 and 7.30 pm on a Monday in Westminster Hall. The sitting would only take place if the Backbench Business Committee had set down the subjects of e-petitions for debate. The debate would take place on the motion “That this House has considered the e-petition from [petitioners] relating to [subject of petition]”. We recommend that this change should be introduced on an experimental basis for one year and that its effectiveness should be reviewed at the end of that period.³⁴

The Committee argued that “Many of the problems experienced by the Backbench Business Committee and by petitioners have arisen from a failure, on the part of the Government, adequately to explain the process to petitioners. We recommend that the information on the

³⁰ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, Summary

³¹ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, para 8

³² Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, para 12

³³ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, paras 13-18

³⁴ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, para 21

Government's website should be made clearer and more accurate".³⁵ The Committee made two recommendations about the wording on the e-petitions website. It also recommended that links be provided to the BCom website and guidance on e-petitions.³⁶

The Committee also considered Members' involvement in the process. It commented and recommended that:

32. There is at present no mechanism for Members to be alerted when a petition has over 100,000 signatures. It would be helpful to Members if the Backbench Business Committee were to announce, on its website and on the Backbench Business section of the Order Paper, when it had received notifications from the Leader of the House.

33. The Government already sends an email to petitioners when a petition reaches the 100,000 signature mark. We recommend that this e-mail should advise petitioners to seek a facilitating Member for their petition and provide links to the Backbench Business Committee's website and guidance. We also recommend that the Backbench Business Committee should alert Members when the Leader of the House refers to it a petition that has passed the threshold, by publishing notifications on its website and on the Order Paper.³⁷

At oral questions to the Leader of the House on 9 February 2012, a number of Members referred to the Procedure Committee's report and asked that time be found for it to be debated. Members also welcomed the principle of e-petitions and the way in which they provided a means for members of the public to connect with Parliament.³⁸

³⁵ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, Summary

³⁶ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, paras 25, 27 and 29

³⁷ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions*, 19 January 2012, HC 1706 2010-12, paras 31-32

³⁸ HC Deb 9 February 2012 cc 467-469

4. Government response

The Government's response to the Procedure Committee was published in March 2012.³⁹ Then in June 2012, in response to parliamentary questions, David Heath, the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, noted subsequent developments (see section 4.2).

4.1 Government response to the Procedure Committee

The Government welcomed the Procedure Committee's review of e-petitions. However, it did not accept that the system was poorly explained. It drew attention to the "remarkable number and range of people" that had used the website. It commented that:

We have been clear at all stages of the e-petitions process, from publication of the Coalition Agreement in May 2010 onwards, that e-petitions reaching the threshold of 100,000 signatures would be eligible for, rather than automatically trigger, a debate. This fact is repeated on the front page of the e-petitions website, on the 'How e-Petitions Work' page and on the 'Frequently Asked Questions' page. We do not, therefore, agree with the claim in the report, that there has been 'a failure, on the part of the Government, to communicate clearly and accurately with petitioners and to manage their expectations of the process effectively' (Paragraph 5), although we accept that inaccurate reporting has led to some misconceptions about the process.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the Government told the Committee that it was "committed to improving the e-petitions site and process wherever possible", and that the Government Digital Service were "developing the next iteration of the site which will deliver additional functionality and improved content in response to this report, as well as in response to feedback from Members, the public and officials who work with the site".⁴¹

The Government argued that the Committee overstated the effect of e-petitions on the BBCom. It considered that debates on e-petitions offered Members a way of holding government to account. It considered that "a case could be made for the use of time currently available in Westminster Hall on Tuesdays and Wednesdays for debates on e-petitions allocated by the Backbench Business Committee" but noted that the Procedure Committee did not recommend this option.

It also noted, as the Committee had, that there were sometimes "legitimate reasons for not debating an e-petition", and also that Members might want to initiate debates on e-petitions either in BBCom

³⁹ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12

⁴⁰ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, p1

⁴¹ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, pp1-2

time or on the adjournment. Despite these points, the Government supported proposals for debating e-petitions on Mondays on a pilot basis:

The Government would nevertheless support a proposal to allow the backbench Business Committee to schedule debates on e-petitions between 4.30 pm and 7.30 pm on a Monday in Westminster Hall, when the House is sitting, provided that this was on a pilot basis, with the House being asked to come to a subsequent decision after a full evaluation of the pilot.

During the pilot period, it would be important for the Backbench Business Committee to continue to be able to decide that e-petitions that reached the threshold were not appropriate for debate, or were more suitable for a debate on the floor of the House, in some cases on a substantive motion.

The current rate of e-petitions reaching the eligibility threshold of 100,000 signatures equates to just over one per month, which would, based on the evidence of the Clerk Assistant, equate to an annual additional cost of around £32,200 per annum if each were debated in Westminster Hall. The Government believe that it is vital the issue of cost is considered as part of the review of any pilot and before any subsequent decision on proposals for the availability and use of time beyond the pilot period.⁴²

The Government did not accept the Committee's recommendations for changes to the wording on the e-petitions website. However, the Government told the Committee that it was "not wedded to the existing wording on the site, and would welcome further discussion with the Procedure Committee and the Backbench Business Committee on finding an appropriate wording which accurately reflects the interaction between the Government and the Backbench Business Committee".⁴³

The Government welcomed the Procedure Committee's recommendation that its "e-petitions site should provide more prominent links to the Backbench Business Committee's website and to the guidance that Committee has prepared for e-petitions". It also told the Committee that it intended to make "a number of minor, technical improvements to the site early this year, when it will also be convenient to update the wording on the site in a number of areas".⁴⁴

The Government welcomed the Committee's recommendation on Members' involvement and had "already implemented it in the case of the most recent e-petition to reach the 100,000 signature threshold". The Government continued: "We would welcome the inclusion of information about specific e-petitions appearing on the Committee's

⁴² Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, p3

⁴³ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, p4

⁴⁴ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, p5

website and on the Order Paper, in addition to the current process of the notification being place in the Library of the House".⁴⁵

4.2 Government progress on implementing the Procedure Committee's recommendations

At questions on 14 June 2012, the Leader of the House outlined changes that the Government had made to the e-petitions website and indicated that the Government would support the Procedure Committee when it brought its proposals to debate e-petitions on Mondays to the House:

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Con)): What progress he has made on implementing the recommendations of the Procedure Committee on debates on e-petitions. [111330]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Heath): Following the Procedure Committee's report, we have updated and improved the e-petitions website. We have improved, for instance, the wording of the site and the search and submission functions, making the process easier and clearer for the more than 3 million people who have signed an e-petition since August last year.

James Morris: Does the Deputy Leader of the House agree that one solution to the problem of debating e-petitions would be for the Government to table a motion allowing Westminster Hall sittings on Monday afternoons during which e-petition topics could be debated?

Mr Heath: We are very sympathetic to that view. In fact, we said in our response to the Procedure Committee's report that we supported its proposals for a pilot. It is for the Procedure Committee to present such proposals in Back-Bench time, but we are working well with the Committee to enable the House to reach what I hope will be a swift decision.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Procedure Committee, *Debates on Government e-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2010-12*, 22 March 2012, HC 1902 2010-12, pp5-6

⁴⁶ HC Deb 14 June 2012 cc461-462

5. Debating e-petitions in Westminster Hall

5.1 Experiment agreed by the House

On 17 July 2012, the House agreed a proposal to allow e-petitions to be debated in an additional time slot in Westminster Hall.

The motion moved by the Chair of the Procedure Committee, Greg Knight, provided that an experiment would last until the end of the next session of Parliament (i.e. the end of the 2013-14 Session). However, an amendment, which was accepted by the House, shortened the length of the experiment until the end of the 2012-13 Session of Parliament. The House agreed the amended motion without a division.⁴⁷

On 17 September 2012, the first e-petition to be debated in Westminster Hall in time specifically allowed for debating e-petitions related to the West Coast Mainline franchise decision.⁴⁸ The BBCom allocated time for debates on e-petitions on three further Mondays in Westminster Hall in the 2012-13 Session.⁴⁹

5.2 Experiment extended

The Procedure Committee reviewed the experiment. At the time of writing its report, three debates on e-petitions had been held. The Procedure Committee agreed with the BBCom, who provided the following evidence to the Procedure Committee:

The Committee's unanimous view was that the pilot has been a success. The level of demand for Monday debates has not been overwhelming; the Committee retains its right to assess whether particular petitions which have reached the eligibility threshold of 100,000 signatures are suitable for such a debate; and in the four cases where it has given its assent to a bid for debate, it felt that a sound case had been made that the debate would secure a good attendance by Members and be of widespread interest to the public.

The Committee would therefore support a further amendment to the relevant Standing Orders to make this change permanent.⁵⁰

The Procedure Committee recommended that the procedures for debating Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall should be extended until the end of the current Parliament, with one small change, an alteration to the form of the motion on which debates on e-

⁴⁷ HC Deb 17 July 2012 cc955-956

⁴⁸ HC Deb 17 September 2012 cc191WH-236WH

⁴⁹ Children's Cardiac Surgery (Glenfield) – HC Deb 22 October 2012 cc163WH-188WH; Sudden Adult Death Syndrome – 25 March 2013 cc379WH-416WH; and Immigration (Bulgaria and Romania) – 22 April 2013 cc187WH-232WH

⁵⁰ Procedure Committee, [Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall](#), 22 April 2013, HC 1094 2012-13, para 3[Extract from Memorandum from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee]

petitions took place: “That this House has considered the e-petition relating to [subject of e-petition]”.⁵¹

On 4 July 2013, the House agreed to the change to the temporary Standing Orders and agreed that they should operate until the “end of the current Parliament”.⁵²

5.3 Government response

In his response to the Procedure Committee’s report of April 2013, which was published on 11 July 2013, the Leader of the House, Andrew Lansley, stated that:

I have been giving wider consideration to the issue of e-petitions, particularly noting the work the Procedure Committee and Backbench Business Committee have undertaken in this area. I would like to work with both Committees in considering whether further improvements to the system can be made. In looking at improving the system I see it as the right of the public to petition on any matters which are the responsibility of Parliament. Any improvements would need to recognise the right of Parliament to decide which, petitions to consider and debate and the responsibility of Government to consider and respond to the substance of petitions. I would hope that, in this context a new system based on these principles could be agreed over the next 12 months, for introduction at the beginning of the next Parliament.

With this in mind, I intend to bring forward a motion in Government time that has the effect of continuing the pilot of debates taking place, in Westminster Hall on Mondays until the end of this Parliament. This procedure could then be considered alongside any other changes that may be necessary to improve the system and can be agreed. The proposed motion makes the change you recommend relating to the motion under which debates currently take place.⁵³

The motion Andrew Lansley referred to in his response was the one agreed on 4 July 2013.

Following the publication of the Government response, Natascha Engel asked Mr Lansley when he would “bring forward his proposals for improving the Government’s e-petition system by bringing it in-house and establishing a petitions Committee”. In his reply, he referred to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s review of the implementation of the Wright Committee reforms (see section 9) and indicated that he wanted to work with committees in the House:

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I hope to be able to bring forward proposals on the basis of consensus. I welcome the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee’s report, which is published today. However, I do not share its view that petitions could fuel cynicism. I think it is demonstrable from the Hansard Society’s latest audit of political engagement that the public recognise that the House is debating

⁵¹ Procedure Committee, [Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall](#), 22 April 2013, HC 1094 2012-13, para 8

⁵² [HC Deb 4 July 2013 c1159](#)

⁵³ Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, [Government response to ‘Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall’](#), 26 June 2013 [Published as written evidence by the Procedure Committee on 11 July 2013]

the issues that matter to them more. The petitions process and the work of the Backbench Business Committee have been instrumental in making that happen. I note, for example, that of the 21 petitions that have reached the 100,000 signature threshold, 20 have either been debated or are scheduled for debate. We can do more and I have said that we can. I am sure we can do that not by transferring petitions to Parliament, with the Government standing back and leaving the process alone, but by engaging together so that the public can petition their Parliament while also seeking action and a response from their Government. I am sure we can work together to make that happen.⁵⁴

6. Government responses to e-petitions

On 13 September 2012, Andrew Lansley, Leader of the House of Commons, issued a written ministerial statement and announced that “a new threshold of 10,000 signatures to trigger written Government responses to e-petitions” was being introduced:

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Andrew Lansley):

Since my predecessor launched the Government’s e-petitions site in July 2011, the site has received more than 6.4 million signatures, shared across more than 16,000 petitions. A total of 11 e-petitions have passed the 100,000 signature threshold, making them eligible for debate. All 11 of these have been debated, or in the case of the west coast main line e-petition have been scheduled for debate in the new Monday afternoon allocation in Westminster Hall.

e-petitions have been an important part of increasing public understanding of Parliament. To improve engagement with petitioners, I am today announcing a new threshold of 10,000 signatures to trigger written Government responses to e-petitions, in addition to the existing threshold of 100,000 signatures that makes e-petitions eligible for debate.

Once an e-petition has passed 10,000 signatures, Departments will provide a response that will appear on the website and be e-mailed to all signatories who opted in to receive updates on that petition. Responses will include a statement of the Government’s policy on the issue, and details of any relevant parliamentary processes that are ongoing.

All e-petitions currently open for signature on the site, which have more than 10,000 signatures, will receive a response from Departments; we expect most of these to be published before the House returns from the conference recess. Responses to e-petitions that subsequently pass the 10,000 signature threshold will be published on a rolling basis on the relevant page of <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk>.⁵⁵

At Business Questions on the same day, Natascha Engel, Chair of the BBCom welcomed this announcement.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ HC Deb 13 September 2012 c16WS

⁵⁶ HC Deb 13 September 2012 c426

7. The Backbench Business Committee's comments on e-petitions

In its review of its work in the 2010-12 Session, the BBCom made the following comments on e-petitions:

28. After the 2010 General Election the Coalition's *Programme for Government* included a commitment "that any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament". The Leader of the House gave effect to this commitment in 2011 by announcing that he would refer to the Backbench Business Committee (to be considered for debate in backbench time) any petition on the government's e-petitions website that passed the threshold of signatures. **Since the announcement was made, the Leader of the House has made it his practice to write to the Committee informing us of each petition which exceeds the 100,000 signature threshold.**

29. **Since the introduction of the new process for e-petitions, we have adopted the practice of only considering scheduling a debate on the subject of an e-petition when it is proposed by a Member in the same way as any other suggestion for debate in backbench time; and the same criteria have been applied to evaluate subjects related to e-petitions as other subjects for debate. So far, ten petitions have passed the 100,000 signature threshold, and seven have been debated in backbench time.** The only e-petition for which we have chosen not to schedule time called on the Government to drop its Health and Social Care Bill. We considered that this issue did not meet our criteria for selection of debates: it had already been the subject of extensive debate and votes in Parliament; and the application for a debate did not have broad cross-party support (there were no supporting backbench Members from the largest political party). It was not therefore a suitable candidate for the limited backbench time available.

30. **We have also scheduled debates on subjects proposed as a result of traditional paper petitions, including a debate on a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU related to a paper petition which had gathered over 100,000 signatures.**

31. The introduction of e-petitions has heightened competition for backbench time and has had a significant impact on our work both in terms of the scope of our work and its priorities. In order to reflect on the way in which the Committee might in future best approach e-petitions, we held an informal seminar with academics and campaign groups in March 2012. This was moderated by the Hansard Society, which plans shortly to publish an account of the session and its own thoughts on the future of e-petitions. Since the Backbench Business Committee was not given the usual powers of a select committee to 'send for persons, papers and records' when it was established, it was not given the power to take evidence on issues surrounding its operation and was unable to hold any kind of inquiry on the effects of e-petitions. The House may wish to consider providing these powers to the

Committee at the same time as making any other amendments to standing orders as a result of the review of its operation.

32. The Procedure Committee has conducted an inquiry into the implications for Parliament of the Government's e-petitions system and recently published a Report on the handling of such petitions. It identified an urgent need to resolve some practical problems it identified as arising from the current arrangements and recommended that "a dedicated time slot be created for debates on subjects raised by e-petitions". Its Report recommended that additional time could be created for this purpose by means of occasional sittings in Westminster Hall on Mondays between 4.30pm and 7.30pm. It suggested that these sittings would take place on the recommendation of the Backbench Business Committee when it decided that an e-petition should be debated. These recommendations were broadly accepted by the Government in its response, for implementation on an experimental basis.

33. The Procedure Committee also recommended that the Backbench Business Committee could do more to publicise the existence of e-petitions which had reached the 100,000 signature threshold, but which no Member had yet suggested for debate.

34. The success (or otherwise) of the arrangements for debate of e-petitions will have an important effect on the ability of the House to engage with the public. The Procedure Committee notes in its Report that "More detailed consideration should be given to proposals for more substantial changes [to the e-petitioning system] in the future", including "moving to an entirely parliamentary system of petitioning". The House may also wish to consider ways of handling e-petitions which may not involve the Backbench Business Committee, such as the creation of a separate Petitions Committee. These are matters for others to take forward, but we hope our successors will give the whole House the opportunity to consider and decide on proposals for the future.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Backbench Business Committee, *Work of the Committee in Session 2010-12*, 26 April 2012, HC 1926 2010-12, paras 28-34

8. Hansard Society review of e-petitions

In March 2012, the Hansard Society co-hosted a seminar with the BBCom to discuss “how the e-petitions system could be reformed in order to enhance public engagement and better link the system to parliamentary processes”.⁵⁸ The Society subsequently published a report *What next for e-petitions?* The report was informed by the seminar but not a record of it.

The Hansard Society’s recommendations were “predicated on the principle that the system should be a parliamentary not a government petitions system, and that it should provide for a deeper more comprehensive model of public engagement than the current system offers”.⁵⁹

The Hansard Society identified a number of problems with the current system:

(a) Ownership and responsibility

The system, as it stands, is an unusual hybrid straddling a constitutional no-man’s land: it is neither fully a parliamentary nor a government system [...] petitions are simply directed to the Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, emphasising executive control of the legislature. Yet the onus is placed on the House of Commons, through the Backbench Business Committee, to respond to the most popular petitions that reach the 100,000 signature threshold.

The system is also entirely separate from the House of Commons paper petitions system.

(b) Heightened public expectations

... It is not, and never has been, automatic that an e-petition will be debated in the House of Commons, yet this is the widely-held public impression.

(c) Where’s the engagement?

(d) Should a debate be the only response?

(e) An easy route to influence?

A fair process?⁶⁰

The Hansard Society reviewed how the system works. It reported the costs associated with setting up and running the system:

The e-petitions site was built by the Cabinet Office’s ‘skunkworks’ team (a small, in-house group of staff dedicated the developing low cost IT applications) in just eight weeks at a cost of £80,700. ... Ongoing resources are provided by government and it is

⁵⁸ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p6

⁵⁹ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p7

⁶⁰ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, pp7-9, 12-13

maintained by Directgov and the Government Digital Service. The annual staff running costs are currently estimated to be around £67,500. In comparison, cost estimates for the system proposed by the House of Commons Procedure Committee in 2008 were set at around £500,000 to build the system and £750,000 in annual running costs.⁶¹

It described the process of verification and moderation undertaken by Government. The Hansard Society commented on the parliamentary procedures that are followed. The Government informs the Backbench Business Committee when an e-petition attains 100,000 signatures but the Committee does not schedule debates “of its own volition”. It continued:

It would after all be odd for the Committee to schedule a debate on an issue in which no backbencher had expressed an interest. Thus when the first petition passed 100,000 signatures and no MP came forward to champion it and no debate was consequently held, the process was widely derided in the media as a ‘farce’ and a ‘shambles’, an early indicator of the reputational risk being run.⁶²

The Hansard Society then considered the Procedure Committee’s proposals (in its report of January 2012 on *Debates on Government e-Petitions*) for time in Westminster Hall to be allocated for debating e-petitions. The Society argued that the proposal raised two key questions, first:

... like it or not, in the public mind – and indeed in the mind of many MPs – Westminster Hall is regarded as a second-class option compared to a debate in the main Chamber. There is a risk that petitioners will therefore regard themselves as having been shunted off away from the main arena.

Secondly, debates would be held on non-votable motions, often this would be sufficient, However, “e-petitions specifically require a demand for action by government to be included in them when they are registered. It is therefore counter-intuitive to require MPs only to take note of that demand and not to have an opportunity to expressly reach a view on it themselves”.⁶³

The Hansard Society then made a series of recommendations, including:

- Ownership of and responsibility for the system should rest with the House of Commons; and
- The House of Commons should create a Petitions Committee, supported by staff in a Petitions Office to engage with petitioners, moderate the process and provide a single route for consideration of both paper and online petitions.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p14

⁶² Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p17

⁶³ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, p17

⁶⁴ Hansard Society, *What next for e-petitions?*, 2012, pp19-22

9. Political and Constitutional Reform Committee review of the Wright reforms

9.1 Committee report

In July 2013, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's review of the impact of the Wright reforms was published. The Committee devoted a chapter of its report to "Involving the public". In that chapter, it reviewed the outcome of the Wright Committee's "cautious recommendations about petitions":

119. The Wright Committee made some cautious recommendations about petitions, proposing that the Procedure Committee should have a new responsibility for scrutiny of the petitions process for an experimental period from January 2010 to the end of the Parliament—in effect a matter of four months. This was not implemented. The Wright Committee was also concerned that too great an emphasis on e-petitions should not distract attention from the equally valid "standard" paper petitions. Petitions are now listed on the Order Paper and their title read by the Clerk, investing them with a degree of formality as sought.

120. Most of the Committee's proposals on petitions were however overtaken by the unexpected Coalition Agreement commitment to a 100,000 signature threshold for possible debate following an e-petition, and the establishment of a website in the summer of 2011. Our evidence made clear that many people have made use of the opportunity to sign e-petitions.⁶⁵

The Committee reiterated concerns about the confusion between the roles of Government and Parliament over the e-petitions system and considered how a Petitions Committee could operate in Westminster. It concluded that:

- "all e-petitions for consideration by Parliament must be hosted on the Parliamentary website";
- "numbers thresholds should not be used to determine whether a petition should be debated"; and
- "there is still a case for the establishment of a petitions committee, as considered by the Wright Committee".

It recommended that:

We recommend that the House should be invited to agree to a Resolution on public petitions which would outline the principal features of a new system, and which would invite the Clerk of the House to work up a detailed and costed proposition which could then be put to the House for its endorsement.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, paras 119-120

⁶⁶ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms](#), 18 July 2013, HC 82 2013-14, paras 132-134

9.2 Government response

The Government's response to the Committee's report was published in December 2013. The Government agreed with the Committee that e-petitions were "an important and established part of political process". However, it questioned the Committee's assertion that the system was failing to meet public expectations.

It reported data on the number of petitions and petitioners and argued that the e-petition system had "done a great deal to promote public engagement in the parliamentary process, as part of the Government's programme of political reform".

The Government responds to petitions with over 10,000 signatures and those with more than 100,000 signatures may be selected by the BBCom for debate in the House. The Government reported that by the beginning of December 2013, 19 out of 23 such petitions had been debated (by the end of March 2014, these figures had reached 22 out of 27⁶⁷), and that some had "had a direct impact on Government policy".

The Government then considered how the e-petition system could be developed:

79. The Government agrees that there may be some confusion with the roles of Government and Parliament under current arrangements (as is generally the case, not just in relation to petitions) but is not persuaded that clarity would be improved by requiring petitioners to choose between the two when submitting a petition. Our preference is for a single, straightforward system, on which the House and the Government should collaborate closely. Such a system should enshrine the rights of the public to petition Parliament, the right of the legislature to consider and debate the substance of petitions, and the responsibility of the Government to provide a response.

80. The issue of resources would need careful consideration, given the potentially high costs of development and subsequent running and in the context of the pursuit of savings within Parliament. The current site, developed and maintained at a comparatively lowcost by the Government Digital Service and resourced across each Ministerial department has provided an effective way to minimise the resource requirement while allowing access to a wide range of expertise.

81. We agree that there is a case for some form of petitions committee, which could provide support for petitioners, help the House determine which should be debated and help facilitate the provision of responses by Government, where appropriate.

82. The Government will consult further with relevant parties in the House with a view to bringing forward proposals for the House to consider.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ [HC Deb 31 March 2014 c448W](#)

⁶⁸ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Revisiting *Rebuilding the House: the impact of the Wright reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2013–14*](#), 9 December 2013, HC 910 2013-14, paras 78-82

9.3 Debate on a collaborative system of e-petitions

At Business Questions on 6 February 2014, Andrew Lansley said that he hoped to have a debate on e-petitions “soon” and said that there was “much wider scope and an opportunity for the House to consider and respond to petitions and allocate time for debate if the current e-petition system can be owned by both the Government and Parliament working together. I hope we can secure consensus on that soon, and give the House an opportunity to give its stamp of approval to that”.⁶⁹

On 1 May 2014, at Business Questions, the Leader of the House of Commons announced that the House would debate a number of motions on 8 May on House business including one on petitions. He explained the objective of the motion:

Although the public have on occasion seen petitions to the Government website turn into debates in this House, strictly speaking the House has no ownership of the petition system itself. I hope we can, through that debate, initiate a process by which we can enable members of the public to feel that they are petitioning their Parliament and seeking its response, and action and response from Government at the same time.⁷⁰

He also indicated that he would like to see the system proposed by the Procedure Committee agreed in principle by the summer recess.⁷¹

On 8 May 2014 the motion on e-petitions signed by the Leader of the House, the Chair of the Procedure Committee, and the Chair of the Backbench Committee was debated together with an amendment tabled by the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. Also debated were motions on programming, parliamentary privilege and amendments to Standing Orders.⁷²

The text of the motion on e-petitions and amendment:

Mr Andrew Lansley

Mr Charles Walker

Natascha Engel

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.

Amendment (a)

Mr Graham Allen

Line 1, leave out from ‘House’ to end and add ‘believes that the House of Commons should have its own e-petitions website, administered and controlled by this House and separate from that of the Government, though for cost saving purposes sharing the existing Government platform, that any hon. Member should be

⁶⁹ [HC Deb 6 February 2014 c427](#)

⁷⁰ [HC Deb 1 May 2014 cc1008-1009](#)

⁷¹ [HC Deb 1 May 2014 c1009](#)

⁷² [HC Deb 8 May 2014 cc311-57](#)

able to propose an e-petition for debate, regardless of the number of signatures the e-petition has obtained, that the Backbench Business Committee should allocate time on Mondays in Westminster Hall for debates arising from e-petitions directed to the House of Commons, but that any debate on a petition directed to Government should take place in Government time, that members of the public should be provided at the gateway to the websites with full information about how to ensure a petition is in order and to which institution their petition should most appropriately be directed, and that the House's e-petitions websites should make it clear that the public may choose instead to contact their local hon. Member about an issue directly; and invites the Procedure Committee, consulting as appropriate with the Government, the Backbench Business Committee and any other interested parties, to develop a system meeting these objectives and to return to the House with proposals which may be implemented from the start of the next Parliament.'

There was support from the Shadow Leader of the House and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for a single system of petitions overseen by a Petitions Committee. The amendment was not moved and the unamended motion was agreed to without division.⁷³

⁷³ [HC Deb 8 May 2014 cc356-7](#)

10. Procedure Committee's proposals for a collaborative e-petitions system

Following on from the debate, the Procedure Committee announced its inquiry into the e-petitions system on 14 May 2014 to develop detailed proposals for a joint e-petitions system between the House of Commons and the Government.⁷⁴

The Committee held four oral evidence sessions between 11 June and 5 November 2014 taking evidence from the Clerk of the House, academics, the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and the Leader of the House.

The Committee published its report, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*⁷⁵ on 4 December 2014. The report recommends a joint system of e-petitions to be owned by both the Government and the House of Commons via a Petitions Committee which would also oversee the paper petitions system.

The Committee, while recognising its predecessors' calls for a separate House system, acknowledged that circumstances had changed with the introduction of debates in the Commons emanating from e-petitions to the Government:

15. Whilst we regret the failure to establish the House of Commons e-petition system which our predecessors recommended in 2008, given where we are now—and in particular the link between the existing Government e-petition site and debates in the House, which is now well-established in the minds of the public—we do not consider that it would be sensible to set up a separate House system. Rather, we believe that a better way for the House now to achieve the objective our predecessors set out of “reinforc[ing] [its] historic role as the proper and principal recipient of public petitions”¹⁸ will be for ownership of a joint system to be shared between the Government and a re-established Petitions Committee, on behalf of the House.

The reports sets out detailed proposals for a collaborative e-petition system based on the existing Government e-petition site, rebranded to show joint ownership between the Government and the Commons, and a Petitions Committee established with oversight of the e-petitioning system and to liaise with the Government:

A “collaborative” system?

1. We do not consider that it would be sensible to set up a separate House system. Rather, we believe that a better way for the House now to achieve the objective our predecessors set out of “reinforc[ing] [its] historic role as the proper and principal

⁷⁴ Procedure Committee website: [Inquiry into e-petitions](#)

⁷⁵ Procedure Committee Third Report, [E-petitions: a collaborative system](#), 4 Dec 2014, HC 235 2014-15

recipient of public petitions” will be for ownership of a joint system to be shared between the Government and a re-established Petitions Committee, on behalf of the House. (Paragraph 19)

Platform for a joint system

2. A joint system should be based on the existing Government e-petition site, redesigned and rebranded to show that it is owned by the House and the Government. To emphasise the Parliamentary oversight of the system, and in line with the House’s historic role as the principal recipient of public petitions, it should use the URL epetitions.parliament.uk. There should also be a clear link from the Parliament website www.parliament.uk to the e-petition site, including from the pages which explain the existing paper petitioning system. (Paragraph 20)

Role of the Committee

3. We are persuaded that, in a jointly-owned system, there should be a House of Commons Petitions Committee charged with oversight of the e-petitioning system on behalf of the House, liaising with the Government. The Committee should also assume responsibility for oversight of the paper petitioning system in the House of Commons. (Paragraph 28)

A draft memorandum of understanding between the Government and the Chair of the Petitions Committee, and draft terms conditions of the e-petitions site is set out in the [Annex](#) of the report.

11. Debate on the Procedure Committee's proposals to establish an e-petitions system

On 24 February 2015, the House debated a motion⁷⁶ moved by Charles Walker, Chair of the Procedure Committee, to approve the recommendations of the Procedure Committee's report on *E-petitions: a collaborative system*.⁷⁷

Charles Walker introduced the motion by giving an overview of the system proposed by the Procedure Committee: e-petitions will need to attract the support of six people before going live and will remain live for six months; and a Petitions Committee, with an elected Chair,⁷⁸ to be established with oversight of the joint e-petition system.

The motion set out a new Standing Order for the Petitions Committee⁷⁹ and amended Standing Orders relating to the arrangement of public business⁸⁰ and sittings in Westminster Hall⁸¹ in order to transfer responsibility for determining debates on petitions in Westminster Hall on a Monday from the Backbench Business Committee to the Petitions Committee.

The motion was supported by both sides of the House and agreed to following a short debate. The new Standing Order providing for the new Petitions Committee:

"Petitions Committee

- (1) There shall be a select committee, called the Petitions Committee, to consider public petitions presented to the House and e-petitions submitted through the House of Commons and Government e-petitions site.
- (2) The committee shall consist of not more than eleven members.
- (3) The committee shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time.
- (4) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to adjourn from place to place, and to report to the committee from time to time.
- (5) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the evidence taken before the sub-committee.
- (6) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.⁸²

⁷⁶ [HC Deb 24 Feb 2015 cc248-57](#)

⁷⁷ Procedure Committee Third Report, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*, 4 Dec 2014, HC 235 2014-15

⁷⁸ *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 11 May 2015, [SO No. 122B](#)

⁷⁹ *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 11 May 2015, [SO No. 145A](#)

⁸⁰ *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 11 May 2015, [SO No.10\(1\)a](#)

⁸¹ *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, 11 May 2015, [SO No.14\(5\)](#)

⁸² [Votes and Proceedings 24 Feb 2015, No.112](#)

On 26 March, a Motion to add the post of Chair of the Petitions Committee to the list of Select Committees who's Chairs are paid an additional salary was agreed by the House:

Motion on pay for Petitions Committee Chair—

That the Resolution of the House of 19 March 2013, relating to Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of Section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, be amended by inserting after "the Liaison Committee", "the Petitions Committee,"⁸³.

⁸³ [HC Deb 26 Mar 2015 cc 1611-28](#)

12. The joint e-petitions system and the Petitions Committee

The Government e-petitions website closed at the dissolution of Parliament on 30 March and the new Standing Order was incorporated into the new edition of Standing Orders published at the start of the 2015 Parliament.⁸⁴

Elections for Select Committee Chairs were held on 17 June and Helen Jones was elected as Chair of the new Petitions Committee.

The role of the [Petitions Committee](#) is set out on its website. The Petitions Committee examines e-petitions and paper petitions and has the option to:

- ask for more information in writing—from petitioners, the Government, or other relevant people or organisations
- ask for more information in person—from petitioners, the Government, or other relevant people or organisations. This might be in Parliament or somewhere else in the UK
- write to the Government or another public body to press for action on a petition
- ask another parliamentary committee to look into the topic raised by a petition
- put forward petitions for debate in the House of Commons

Paper petitions

The rules for paper petitions⁸⁵ remain largely unchanged except that petitions are no longer automatically referred to a departmental select committee.

E-petitions

The joint e-petitions site⁸⁶ was launched on 20 July 2015 with broadly similar terms and conditions to the previous Government website. The Government will continue to respond to petitions that reach 10,000 signatures.

Petitions that reach 100,000 are eligible for debate by the House of Commons in Westminster Hall if recommended by the Petitions Committee. If the Committee decides that the petition should be debated in the Commons Chamber, it can put that request to the Backbench Business Committee.

⁸⁴ [Standing Orders of the House of Commons](#), 11 May 2015, SO 145A Petitions Committee

⁸⁵ House of Commons, [Public \(paper\) petitions](#)

⁸⁶ House of Commons, [E-petitions](#)

Consultation

The Petitions Committee announced an inquiry into its proposed working methods on 23 July 2015 with a deadline of 30 September 2015 for submission of responses.⁸⁷

Archived and withdrawn briefings

This note and SN/PC/6406, [Public Reading Stage of Bills](#), replace SN/PC/5884, Proposals for debating petitions and for a public reading stage for bills, which has been withdrawn.

⁸⁷ Petitions Committee, [Consultation on its working methods](#)

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