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by

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on

“Petitioning in the UK House of Commons: a history and an e-revolution”

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Petitioning in the UK House of Commons: a history and an e-revolution

Petitioning has been part of the UK Parliament for hundreds of years. There are records of petitions from the fourteenth century, while the right of the public to petition was agreed by the Commons by resolution in 1669.¹

In the 19th century the Chartists presented a petition with 3.5 million signatures; the signature sheets had to be hand sewn together to create a single roll of paper that weighed over 300kg. It was carried in a large decorated box to Parliament by relays of building workers through London, along with a procession of music and flags, attracting huge crowds who watched it be delivered. When entering the House of Commons it was so big that it got stuck trying to get through the House of Commons door. After attempts to dismantle the doorframe failed, the petition was disassembled and the sheets heaped onto the floor of the House. Here they towered above the clerks' table on which, in theory, the petition was supposed to be laid.



Image: Engraving showing the Chartist petition arriving at Parliament

The biggest public petition to date (against ambulance service cuts) was presented in 1990 and had 4.5 million signatures.

E-petitions

In 2006 the Government started its own e-petitions site, where the public could submit their petitions electronically and gather signatures online. These e-petitions, however, were not connected to Parliamentary procedure or process. In 2007 the Procedure Committee in the House of Commons recommended that Parliament should be the primary recipient of petitions from the public and said that e-petitions had the potential to connect the public more effectively with Parliament. In 2014 the House of Commons agreed to establish a new e-petitions site, jointly owned by the House and

¹ Erskine May, para 24.2

Government which would be overseen by a new House of Commons Select Committee: the Petitions Committee.²

E-petitions and the work of the Petitions Committee

In 2022 there were 6.7 million signatures added to petitions, 2,360 petitions were opened, and the committee did extra public engagement with just under 40,000 people to inform petition debates. Since the start of the Parliament (from February 2020 to present) just under 800 petitions have received a response from the Government and over 150 petitions have been debated.

Any UK resident or citizen can start and sign petitions on petition.parliament.uk. The sole requirement is provision of an email address – there is no age limit; the system is built on trust, although there are systems in place to help prevent fraud.

The House of Commons (through the Petitions Committee) and the Government agree rules for acceptable petitions. In short, petitions must express a clear request for the House of Commons or Government about something which is within their responsibility. They must not:

- Call for someone to be given or lose an honour or a job (i.e sack the prime minister or give X a knighthood)
- Be a duplicate of another open petition (this splits support for an issue);
- Be offensive, extreme, libellous, a joke or refer to active legal proceedings³

Full rules are available, in plain English, on the Committee's website.⁴ The Petitions Committee staff team are responsible for moderating petitions according to the rules. When a petition is rejected, petitioners are told why and given advice on next steps – such as redrafting or signing an existing petition.

In 2022, 2,360 petitions were permitted and 8,039 were rejected. The most common reason for rejecting (40%) a petition was that it related to a matter on which there was already an active petition. 18% were rejected because they did not relate to Government's or Parliament's responsibilities; and 13% did not ask for a clear action. There is a popular Twitter feed listing the subjects of rejected petitions (<https://twitter.com/rejectpetitions>).

The team aim to check petitions within 7 days. This is subject to resource constraints. Following the 2016 referendum on EU membership, over 8,000 petitions were received in a matter of days. Following the announcement of the first Covid-19 lockdown, over 3,000 were received a single week. This took careful engagement to manage petitioners' expectations.

How e-petitions relate to the Petitions Committee

The Petitions Committee has all the same powers as a standard House of Commons departmental Committee. It can also refer petitions to other Committees, and link relevant petitions to items on the Commons Order paper.⁵

² [A brief history of petitioning Parliament - Erskine May - UK Parliament](#)

⁴ <https://petition.parliament.uk/help>

⁵ [Standing Order No. 145A](#)

Uniquely, the Committee also has the power to schedule debates on petitions in Westminster Hall, the House's second debating Chamber.⁶ These are on neutral motions. Petitions receiving more than 100,000 signatures are automatically considered by the Committee for a debate, but petitions with fewer signatures can be debated too. These are often among the most watched or read debates in Parliament.

Public engagement and petitions

The Petitions Committee has dedicated public engagement staff, to ensure petitioners and others are directly involved in the work of the Committee. Its priorities are to reach audiences that research has found tend to be less engaged with Parliamentary debate:⁷

- Disabled people;
- People who are in lower socio-economic groups: the long term unemployed and unskilled workers;
- People from minority ethnic groups;
- Women;
- Young people

Inquiry work

The Committee inquired in 2015 into support and funding for treatment of brain tumours. Following an initial Government response to a petition on the subject, which the Committee felt insufficient, the Committee launched an inquiry. It received over 1,000 personal submissions and held events to meet with contributors. It produced a report based heavily on this personal testimony, ahead of a debate in Westminster Hall. As a result of the combination of engagement and proceedings, the Government agreed to establish a working group on the subject, which included a representative of the petitioners. In the longer term, this led to an increase in funding for brain tumour treatment, and an improved mechanism for allocating funding to research.

Bringing in new voices to an existing debate

Another example of using petitions to bring in different voices to existing debates can be seen in the Petitions Committee's work on online abuse. The Committee received a petition from a well-known mother of a disabled child who received abuse online. The issue of online abuse was very much already on the parliamentary agenda but the Committee took the view that the specific experiences of disabled people were not being considered. It launched an inquiry focussed on hearing the experiences of disabled people, published initial recommendations and consulted on them and held workshops with disabled people asking them what they thought about its draft recommendations and refined them according to the feedback received. The Government committed to consulting with disabled people specifically on its work in this area.

Changing the conversation

The Petitions Committee's engagement has also changed the way in which issues are debated in Parliament. For example, it received a petition (started and signed by a large number of young people) about reducing the school week so that children didn't have to go to school on a Friday. This petition could have been dismissed as children being 'lazy' and just wanting more time off. However, after sending a survey to everyone who signed the petition, the public engagement highlighted the serious

⁶ Standing Order No. 145A(7)

⁷ [Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged? - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/libraries/commons/2017/04/11/political-disengagement-in-the-uk-who-is-disengaged/)

reasons behind it: the mental health of school children, children wanting more time to spend with families; and wanting more time to do extracurricular activities such as sport or other creative interests that they had. The summary of the survey was sent to all MPs and the Minister who responded to the debate.

Petitions and participation in wider House of Commons proceedings

10% of petitions reach the threshold to receive a government response or be considered for a debate in Parliament. That means that 90% of petitions potentially receive no feedback. To keep these petitioners engaged, the Committee team track upcoming House of Commons business and pass relevant information to petitioners. They will also inform MPs where there is a petition relevant to Parliamentary business in their name.

The Petitions Committee Team work closely with the Chamber Engagement Team (CET). CET look at upcoming debates to identify ones which are appropriate for them to conduct a public engagement exercise to help inform the debate. They first approach the MP(s) who are leading the debate and if they are content, the Team design an engagement activity, usually in the form of a survey which is then sent to people who have signed relevant petitions and people who have signed up to receive Parliament newsletters. A powerful example was a debate on a very tragic issue: sudden unexplained death in childhood. The related petition was started by a bereaved mother and called for more support for parents who find themselves in her situation. With just over 500 signatures, the petition was not going to receive a government response or its own petition debate. However, the Chamber Engagement and Petitions Teams were able to email those who had signed the petition with an opportunity to share their experiences to inform the debate. People shared their very personal experiences and views on the support, such as mental health support, that they felt was needed for parents. These were shared by the MP leading the debate and he used them to pull out the common themes to inform the debate.

The Petitions Committee Team also work closely with their colleagues on other House Select Committees. They help to promote other Committee work on issues and give those Committees access to people with lived experience or interest on a certain topic. Given the large numbers of signatories the petitions can have, promoting an open inquiry could potentially be difficult to handle with Committee Teams concerned about receiving thousands of pieces of written evidence. However, the Petitions Team will work with them to find an effective way for them to be able to engage with petitioners, for example through a survey or through facilitating meetings between petition creators and the Select Committee. On 9 February a disabled petitioner who had started a petition on financial support for disabled people, gave oral evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee who were looking into this issue.

Summary

Noting their long history as a Parliamentary proceeding, the introduction to the petitioning system of an 'e-petition' model and the creation of the Petitions Committee has improved the ability of the public to engage meaningfully with Parliamentary procedure. Linking petitioners to wider Parliamentary activity – whether debates in Westminster Hall, Committee inquiries, or direction to other relevant business – has also improved the ability of the House of Commons Service to identify relevant audiences for business within the House and increase wider public understanding of the House's work.