

INQUIRY INTO E-PETITIONS

Organisation: House of Commons
Name: Ms Anne-Marie Griffiths
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Memorandum to the Procedure Committee of the New South Wales Legislative Council

Background

1. On 8 May 2014, the UK House of Commons agreed a motion supporting the establishment, at the start of the following Parliament, of a “collaborative” e-petition system which would enable members of the public to petition the House of Commons and to press for action from Government. The motion called on the Procedure Committee to work with the Government and other interested parties on the development of detailed proposals.¹

2. The Procedure Committee published a report, setting out its recommendations for an e-petitions system jointly owned by the House of Commons and the Government, on 4 December 2014. The report is available online here:

<https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmproced/235/235.pdf>

The written and oral evidence taken by the Committee is available online here:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/procedure-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/e-petitions/>

3. In summary, the Committee recommended:

- a new e-petitions website, jointly owned by the House of Commons and the Government;
- the creation of a Petitions Committee to oversee the petitions system;
- the establishment of a team of staff to support the Committee in its consideration of petitions, to accept and reject petitions started on the petitions site, and to advise and assist petitioners.

4. The Committee hoped that the creation of the Petitions Committee, together with the new e-petitions site, would significantly enhance the relationship between the petitioning public and their elected representatives and significantly improve the information available to petitioners about what the House of Commons does.

¹ Votes and Proceedings, [8 May 2014](#); HC Deb (2013–14) 580, [c311 ff](#)

5. On 24 February 2015, the House of Commons approved the Committee's recommendations.² The new Petitions Committee was established on Monday 20 July 2015, and the new petitions site (petition.parliament.uk) was opened on Tuesday 21 July 2015.

Submission and acceptance of e-petitions

6. E-petitions must be started on petition.parliament.uk. A short video explaining the process is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkww36mYgBc>

7. Once the petition creator has entered the text of their petition on the site, and confirmed their personal details, they must seek the support of at least five other people. Once the petition has at least six supporters (including the petition creator), it is checked by the staff of the Petitions Committee to see whether it meets the rules for petitions.

8. The rules for petitions are set out in detail in the Procedure Committee's report. In short, petitions:

- Must be about something for which the Government or the House of Commons is responsible
- Must make a clear request for action
- Must not contain any defamatory or offensive language
- Must not mention an active court case
- Must not duplicate an existing petition
- Must not be a joke, an advert, nonsense etc

9. Petitions that meet the rules are accepted and opened for signature on the site. Petitions remain open for signature for six months. If a petition has to be rejected, staff explain the reason and, where appropriate, direct petitioners to other ways of addressing their concerns. For example, if someone starts a petition about something for which the Scottish Parliament is responsible, the petition is rejected and the petitioner is directed to the Scottish Parliament's own petitions system.

10. Rejected petitions are published (unless they contain material that is illegal, offensive, etc), together with the reason for which they were rejected. They are available online here:

² Votes and Proceedings, [24 February 2015](#); HC Deb (2014–15) 593, [c248ff](#)

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions?state=rejected>

Impact on public engagement

11. The opening of the petitions site has significantly increased the numbers of people who engage with the UK Parliament. From July 2015 to the closure of the site at the Dissolution of Parliament on 3 May 2017:

- Over 30,000 petitions were submitted on the site
- 10,950 petitions were accepted and opened for signature
- Over 31 million signatures were added to e-petitions
- Over 14 million unique email addresses were used to sign e-petitions

12. The Petitions Committee in the 2015–17 Parliament aimed to maximise the potential for petitioners and other members of the public to be involved with the debates that are triggered by petitions. It published a report on its first year of work, which is available online here:

<https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Your-Petitions-A-Year-of-Action.pdf>