

Management Board**E-PETITIONS**

Clerk of the Procedure Committee

Purpose

1. This paper is intended to inform the Board of—
 - (a) The Procedure Committee's work on drawing up a scheme for e-petitions to the House of Commons; and
 - (b) The possible implications of such a scheme for the House as a whole.

Conclusions and decisions

2. The Board is invited to note that—
 - (a) The House has supported in principle the introduction of an e-petitions system
 - (b) The Procedure Committee will make detailed recommendations for a scheme in early 2008. There may be political pressure (including from the Government) for rapid implementation.
 - (c) E-petitions will be costly in terms of ICT and staff resources. We should expect very high numbers to be submitted (No 10 Downing St received over 30,000 in the first year of operation). They may place significant burdens on individual Members and on the House's procedures.
 - (d) E-petitions are likely to become a very visible and high profile part of the House's broader efforts to improve engagement with the public.
 - (e) There are significant risks associated with the implementation of an e-petitions system.

E-petitions

3. On 25 October the House *welcomed* the Procedure Committee report which expressed support in principle for an e-petitions system and proposed to undertake the work to draw up a practicable system and *approved* the Government response which fully supported that proposal and looked forward to the Committee's further report as soon as reasonably practicable.
4. **The Board is invited to note the support which both the House and the Government have already expressed for an e-petitions system.**

Responsibilities

5. The Procedure Committee's work to draw up a practicable scheme is being supported by the staff of the committee. The Committee is also being advised by PICT. I have briefed John Pullinger and Liz Parratt on the committee's work. If the House agrees to introduce a scheme, implementation will involve the (by then) Departments of Chamber and Committee Services, Information Services and PICT. It is also likely that the Procedure Committee itself will look for a role in the implementation process.
- 6. The Board is invited to note the cross-cutting nature of this initiative and the need for continuing close co-ordination between all those involved.**

Timetable

7. The Procedure Committee plans to hold evidence sessions on e-petitions before Christmas and to publish a report in February or March 2008. The report will describe the scheme and how members of the public could initiate e-petitions. The House will need to agree to the scheme (and possibly to associated implementation issues) before work on implementation can begin.
8. Preliminary advice from PICT suggests that the project could not be implemented in-house and that therefore the work (or some of it) would have to be tendered for and that this process would take a minimum of four months (once a specification has been prepared). Implementation thereafter should be expected to take about a year. So it is unlikely that any scheme could be introduced before late 2009.
9. It is possible, however, that the Government will push for earlier implementation. They would like the House of Commons to be 'the forum to which many national petitions are presented'¹ rather than No. 10 Downing Street. And the No. 10 e-petitions system was set up and launched in just a few months.

Resources

10. It is too early for any firm estimate of the costs of the scheme but implementing the ICT elements of the scheme are likely to cost more than £0.5 million. The costs will be substantially more than for the No. 10 system, which was built by MySociety, a not-for-profit organisation, in partnership with No. 10. It is unlikely that they would be willing to do the same for the House, and the Board may consider that such an arrangement would anyway not be appropriate for the House.
11. It is difficult to estimate what non-ICT resources might also be required. No. 10 received more than 30,000 e-petitions in its first year and nearly 5 million signatures. They initially underestimated the amount of staff time required to process individual e-petitions. It is likely that the Procedure Committee will recommend a Petitions Committee to oversee the system and consider which petitions might deserve further parliamentary consideration. Probably at least 10 staff would be needed to support that committee and process petitions. If very large numbers of petitions were received, they might need very rapid reinforcement. The No. 10 site

¹ Government response para 15

regularly takes several weeks to process submitted petitions. Members are unlikely to consider such delays to be acceptable.

12. The Board is invited to note the potential resource implications of introducing e-petitions.

Wider implications

13. There will a great deal of unpredictability associated with the introduction of e-petitions. This note draws attention to just three areas where they are particularly likely to be felt: on Members, on parliamentary procedures and on the connecting with the public agenda.

Members

14. The Procedure Committee has decided that e-petitions, like traditional petitions, can be formally presented only by a Member and that it follows from that that a specific Member's willingness to do so must be established before the petition is opened for e-signatures. The Committee's intention is that this should normally be the petitioner's constituency Member. If large numbers of admissible e-petitions are submitted (No. 10 rejects slightly less than half of all submitted), Members may feel inundated by requests to sponsor or facilitate (the Committee's current preferred word) them. If the petitions were then formally presented on the floor, sittings could be significantly lengthened. For example, 5,000 petitions over an average session would mean, on average, more than 30 presented each sitting day.

Parliamentary procedures

15. At present petitions are formally presented either on the floor of the House just before the end of day adjournment debate, or by being placed in a bag at the back of the Speaker's chair. They are published in Hansard and sent to the relevant government department and the relevant departmental select committee. The committees are expected to place them on their agendas but not necessarily to do anything more. The government department is expected to provide a response within eight weeks. The responses are also published in Hansard.

16. A Member could follow up a petition or a government response by, for example, asking parliamentary questions or seeking an adjournment debate on the issue raised by the petition, but this happens only very occasionally. Select committees have not to date taken any substantive action on the basis of petitions sent to them.

17. Given the likely cost of setting up an e-petitions system and the expected levels of public response, there might be pressure to introduce more effective procedures for their subsequent consideration in the House.

Connecting Parliament with the Public

18. If a parliamentary e-petitions system gets anything like the take-up of the No. 10 site, it will quickly become one of the most visible ways in which Parliament connects with the public. If implementation goes smoothly this could be a good thing and supportive of the House's

objectives in this area. But there are a number of way in which it could go wrong. For example:

- Implementation is likely to take at least 18 months from the decision of the House to proceed. This could be perceived to be (or represented as) deliberate delay;
- The website might be incapable of coping with traffic levels. There might be deliberate attacks on it.
- Members may be unprepared for the volume of e-petitions they are expected to facilitate. They may turn against the procedure. Or the unwillingness of a significant number of them to take up e-petitions may subvert the procedure.
- The House's lack of effective procedures for further consideration of particularly popular petitions may be considered inadequate or even dismissive of those who had signed them.

Any of these outcomes could also have significant knock-on implications for the broader connecting Parliament with the public agenda.

19. The Board is invited to note the level of risk associated with implementation of e-petitions.

Mark Hutton
14 November 2007