

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL



19 January 2021

Mr Ken O'Dowd MP
Committee Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions

Uploaded electronically through www.aph.gov.au/Committee/Submissions; and
By email at petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr O'Dowd

Re: Invitation to make a submission – Inquiry into aspects of the House of Representatives petitioning system relating to security and accessibility

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to your committee.

I hope the brief submission attached with this letter is of use to the committee in its deliberations. Please contact me if you or your committee staff require any further information on this. I look forward to reading the committee's report in due course.

Thank you again for the invitation to make a submission. I wish you well with your timely and important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Young
Clerk of the Legislative Council

Attach.

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

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Legislative Council of Victoria Submission to Standing Committee on Petitions

Thank you for the opportunity to make this brief submission to your inquiry into aspects of the House of Representatives petitioning system relating to security and accessibility.

1. General background on the Legislative Council's petitioning system.

The Council accepts both paper petitions and e-petitions submitted through the portal on our website.

[Chapter 10 of the Legislative Council's Standing Orders](#) outlines the rules and process for petitions.

In November 2016 a report of the Legislative Council Procedure Committee recommended the introduction of e-petitions and this was accepted by the House in early 2017. The Commonwealth Parliament provided valuable assistance to us in setting up the e-petitions technology.

General information on paper and e-petitions, including a downloadable template, is available [here](#).

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Council's e-petition system became particularly important as the only way to petition the House (as the normal circulation and signing of paper petitions was not possible).

2. Comments regarding the terms of reference

Fraudulent activity

We are not aware of significant issues with fraud in the Legislative Council petitions system, however we continue to carefully scrutinise all petitions and requests for e-petitions to the extent possible.

As well as reviewing all petitions and the wording of all proposed e-petitions to ensure they conform with Standing Orders, the Table Office has an internal set of procedures for verifying signatures on petitions, which are intended to have a degree of flexibility to allow as many people as possible to participate in the process. For example —

- All signatories must have a residential Victorian address
- A signatory can only sign a petition once and any duplicate signatures will be disallowed
- A person who is incapable of signing a petition can have another person sign for them
- Allowing a variation of a full name and address (for instance a first name initial and surname is accepted), in so far that with the information provided, you would be able to locate that person on the electoral role.

These rules are uniformly applied to all petitions to ensure fairness and impartiality.

There are no age restrictions for petitioning the Legislative Council.

All petitions presented to the House must be sponsored by a Member. The principal petitioner is responsible for contacting a Member to sponsor their petition. The Table Office has adopted the practice of informing the principal petitioner when their e-petition has been sponsored. This serves the purpose of keeping the principal petitioner updated in the process and also providing them an opportunity to request that a particular Member not table their petition. Although the principal petitioner requests a tabling date, ultimately it is up to the sponsoring Member to table on that date.

We insist on confirmation that a Member has actually sponsored an e-petition, to prevent any fraud in this regard.

Security

In general terms, our e-petitions system has the following security features:

- Requests are validated to ensure they do not contain malicious code
- Protocols exist to distinguish between human and automated/bot access to the website
- Signatory address validation restricted to Victorian addresses (see below)
- Logs are available to review further information related to those joining an e-petition.

If the Committee requires additional technical security information our IT team is happy to assist.

Accessibility (e-petitions)

The e-petitions form verifies a person's address by using data from Google Maps. While this makes inputting addresses easier, it also has some impacts on accessibility. Not all addresses (particularly in new housing developments) are in Google Maps. Persons experiencing homelessness face an additional obstacle, although where an address is not able to be provided the Table Office will work with that person to find a solution.

The Table Office works with the principal petitioner on the wording of the e-petition. Once the draft is agreed, the Table Office uploads the e-petition on the Parliament's webpage and publishes it. It is then up to the petitioner to advertise and promote their petition.

The principal petitioner has control over how long their petition stays open (Standing Orders prescribe a minimum of one week and a maximum of six months). Principal petitioners may request to extend the duration of their petition (there is no limit to the number of times a principal petitioner may extend).

Progressive tabling is permitted, whereby, an e-petition will be closed temporarily, signatories tabled and then reopened for more signatures. In this case, the e-petition is reset to zero signatures when it is reopened.

Once tabled, a petition is a public document and anyone may request a copy. The Table Office will email a scanned copy of the certified petition in pdf format. Requests can be made in person or via email. Most requests for copies come from Members or their staff. As with all public documents in its care, the Council does not require a reason to provide a copy of a petition and does not keep records of access.

The public nature of petitions has caused some concern amongst certain members of the community, who may then wish to retract their signature. In another internal procedure not in Standing Orders, the Table Office does allow any signatory to request in writing, that they be erased from a petition, provided it is done before tabling. Most requests have been from signatories who did not realise petitions are public once tabled.

Other issues re accessibility

The Council surveyed a small number of e-petition participants. The survey highlighted the following barriers for the public with the e-petition process:

- People unaware of e-petitions
- Hard to locate on the website
- Website is not mobile friendly
- Language used can be difficult to understand and there is a lot of information.

We continue to look for ways to improve the accessibility of petitions to the public.