The Scottish Parliament

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Ms Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

9 October 2008

Dear Julia,

I wanted to write in follow-up to our extremely interesting and useful discussion when we met during your visit to the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 1 October. There were many issues of common interest and I thought it might be helpful to you and your Committee if I were to give you some further information on e-petitioning based on our own experience.

My earlier letter of 28 June 2008 gave the background to how the e-petitions process came about. I referred to the work of the Consultative Steering Group which was established prior to the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament. In that letter, I referred to the CSG sub group which investigated ways in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) could play a positive role in encouraging participation. I draw attention to this again as I hope it sets out the commitment there has been here since 1999 to embrace new and emerging technologies as a way of enhancing opportunity for citizens to engage with the Parliament. ICT is seen as a way to increase and make it easier for citizens to engage with their Parliament. E-petitioning is of course a real and practical example of this.

It is not a one size fits all solution. Not every citizen has a PC at home. However, all public libraries in Scotland provide access to a PC and the Parliament has an arrangement with 80 of these to provide direct access to the Parliament's website. This means that an individual can access the petitions page on the website and generate their own petition, including e-petitions, from there. This we consider to be a practical and easily provided measure which demonstrates, albeit in a small way, our commitment to e-democracy.

Public Petitions Committee, TG.01, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP
Tel: 0131 348 5186, Fax: 0131 348 5088, RNID Typetalk: 18001 0131 348 5186
fergus.cochrane@scottish.parliament.uk
www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/index.htm

Our <u>PPC webpage</u> has direct access to—

- <u>guidance leaflet</u> (in varying languages and formats), video (shortly to be updated and a sign language version will be produced) and a podcast
- each petition has its own dedicated page whereby the petitioner, and anyone else, can track progress of the petition, view the petition itself, all written and oral evidence, and the research brief produced by the Parliament – very important
- <u>e-petition system</u>
- <u>Committee meeting agendas, papers, Official Reports</u>
- <u>Committee Reports</u>

The important point here is that information is made readily available to allow the prospective petitioner to decide whether they wish to go down the e-petition route or not. Of course, an e-petition has no more status than a petition not hosted on the e-part of the site. Some petitioners choose to straddle both, to gather e-signatures and submit hard copy alongside. It is about providing a choice for what is the most beneficial to the petitioner. All petitions and petitioners are equal in the eyes of the Committee, irrespective of how they are processed.

I would like to turn however to some additional matters that arose from our discussion.

E-petitions
As I said at our meeting, around 2/3 of the petitions which we receive, are now e-petitions hosted on the website. In this third session of Parliament, since 8 May 2007 150 petitions have been lodged of which 110 have been e-petitions.

In terms of functionality of an e-petition site, I would again make the make the following points—

- ensure that IT capability is robust. For a period earlier this year, the discussion forum part of our e-site was down due to hardware problems (the e-petition system is hosted on an external server and not on the Scottish Parliament's). This was of course extremely regrettable and inconvenient to us and petitioners. We now regularly receive over 1 million hits per month, some months have approach 1.8 million hits. The system therefore must have capacity to cope with usage beyond expectations
- we continue to examine ways of improving functionality and layout of the site. This is important in terms of encouraging usage and not making it too complex or off putting for people. Its core function is to provide a convenient, simple and straightforward route to bring a petition to the Scottish Parliament with minimum effort
- in terms of functionality, you might wish to consider a system that can—

  ❖ create user logins for 'multiple e-petitioner signers' and re-populate contact details upon going to a new petition

- ❖ send update emails to those that have signed a petition when the status of a petition changes and to alert people each time the petition goes before the Committee
- ❖ filter any abusive language
- ❖ format comments
- ❖ remove spam
- ❖ extract data (email addresses, names, contact details etc) for use in other applications/databases held e.g. Word databases for issuing correspondence
- ❖ link the e-petition site to your committee's page. Currently, we have e-petitions hosted on our e-petition site but, once the e-petition is lodged it appears on the PPC's home page. We must make sure that both sites are linked so that interested parties can continue to easily track the petition

In terms of cost, our contract for the provision and hosting of an electronic petitions system is with British Telecom. I cannot give you specific figures due to issues of contract confidentiality but the contract value (contract is almost three years old) is circa £142,000. This is of course less that the figure of £750,000 quoted in the report on e-petitions by the House of Commons Procedure Committee (although I have noted the qualification attached to this figure).

We do not attract the thousands of petitions that the 10 Downing Street or perhaps those which the House of Commons e-petitions site may attract. But there is an important point to make here. You must consider what you do with an e-petition (in fact all petitions) once it has been submitted. E-petitioning, as I have stated, is a mechanism provided to facilitate the submission of a petition and which offers convenience and simplicity for the petitioner over the more traditional hard copy method. However, once a petition is submitted then the scrutiny function of the Parliament is pivotal and of more importance. Something legitimate must happen to the petition and that is why having a dedicated committee is vital to convincing petitioners that there is a point to submitting their petition, that something will happen to it, that it will go before a committee of the parliament which will ask questions and seek to take the petition forward in the best way it can.

To refer this back to our founding principles, e-petitions are seen as providing an 'open', 'accessible' and 'participatory' form of engagement. However, the overall petitions process must demonstrate our commitment to 'sharing of power' as we provide a dedicated forum for people to enter into the policy development arena. My point here is that addressing the need for an e-petition site must go hand in hand with asking what is the purpose of a petitions process and a petitions committee.

Correspondence
The vast majority of correspondence from the Committee is issued in e-format (around 95%). The correspondence (e.g. to petitioners, Scottish Government, other public bodies when requesting written evidence) contains hyperlinks to referenced material - the petition, oral transcript, written evidence, briefing produced by our research department. We can also provide links to other websites e.g. one that the

petitioner has created, or other material (if appropriate) pertinent to the petition e.g. a video.

We consider this to be particularly important. Again, simple measures taken by our clerks to make the petitions process smoother and easier. For example, clerks will deal only with the petitioner but in corresponding electronically, the petitioner can easily forward correspondence to other interested parties.

The above working practices apply to all petitioners who contact us in e-format.

Conclusion
I am keen to maintain the relationship between our two committees. I have asked the Clerk to the Committee to take forward arrangements for a videoconference between both committees (as we discussed) as a way of further exchanging information and best practices. We are of course involved in our own inquiry into improving the overall petitions process and will commence oral evidence hearings on 4 November. This inquiry will take us through to reporting in June 2009 (2009 being the 10th anniversary of the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the adoption of our founding principles).

However, in advance of that, please do get in touch with myself or the Clerk if there are any questions at all that you have on the back of our meeting or the written evidence submitted.

I look forward to meeting with you again.

Yours sincerely

Frank McAveety MSP
Convener of the Public Petitions Committee