

Role and operations of the Standing Committee on Petitions

Introduction

- 2.1 The Petitions Committee's primary role is to receive and process petitions to the House of Representatives and act as a conduit to the House for the presentation of petitions that meet Standing Order requirements. It may also inquire into petitions matters and the petitions system.
- 2.2 The Committee's role and responsibilities are defined formally by Standing Order 220:
- (a) A Standing Committee on Petitions shall be appointed to receive and process petitions, and to inquire into and report to the House on any matter relating to petitions and the petitions system.
 - (b) The committee shall consist of ten members: six government and four non-government members.

The Petitions Committee

Expectations and principles

- 2.3 The first Petitions Committee was established on 12 February 2008, when a number of changes were effected to the House's Standing Orders.
- 2.4 The Standing Orders, in particular those relating to petitioning and General Purpose Committee operations, provided the framework for the operation of the first Committee. The Standing Orders bind the Committee to operate within the formal arrangements of the House but they do not prescribe how it should conduct its business. This left the first Committee

(and indeed the current Committee) with latitude to determine how it would fulfil its role most effectively.

- 2.5 The activities of the first Committee, as reported in the *Work of the first Petitions Committee*,¹ reflect this broad framework. This was a time of bedding down the process and of observing developing trends in the numbers of petitions received, the interest in pre-preparation requirements and follow-up by the public on ministerial responses to petitions tabled.
- 2.6 The Committee of the 43rd Parliament has had the benefit of reflecting on the activities of the first Committee and how its approach could be refined to suit the ever changing petitioning environment. The Committee also benefitted from the first-hand experience of the first Committee through three Members who were appointed to the Committee again in the 43rd Parliament.
- 2.7 The fundamental role of receiving and processing petitions remains the most significant part of the current Committee's work, with most private meeting time devoted to assessing petitions for compliance and deliberating over correspondence on petitions.
- 2.8 The other facet of Standing Order 220, the ability to 'inquire into and report to the House on any matter relating to petitions and the petitions system' has enabled the Committee to review and report on its activities this parliament, including through this report. The current Committee has not sought to inquire into specific aspects of the petitioning system but the Chair's statement every sitting Monday provides an informal mechanism to report on significant issues and activities.
- 2.9 The Committee has maintained the view that under the Commonwealth Constitution, and House Standing Orders and practices, there are some immutable aspects of the House's petitioning process. This is not only important for practical reasons² but also to manage the expectations of a well-informed and highly communicative petitioning public. It is therefore clear that the Committee cannot:
- Deal with matters outside its jurisdiction, that is, State or Local Government matters;
 - Resolve matters raised in petitions;³

1 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *The work of the first Petitions Committee: 2008-2010*, June 2010.

2 For example, there is no point making a request of the House about a matter that falls within State legislation – as the House can take no action.

3 The Committee Chair regularly advises witnesses at round table meetings and the House that this is beyond the role of the Committee.

- Change Government policy or administration;
 - Oblige a Minister to respond to a petition or follow-up an outstanding response for a petitioner;
 - Present petitions which do not comply with Standing Orders; or
 - Limit freedom of speech by not allowing the presentation of petitions which clearly comply with Standing Orders and other practices of the House.
- 2.10 The last point is worth expanding on. The House's respect for freedom of speech is at the core of the Committee's requirement to be objective in all aspects of its operations. This respect is reflected in Standing Order 206 (b), which gives the Committee little discretion – 'The Standing Committee on Petitions must check that each petition lodged for presentation complies with the standing orders, and if the petition complies it shall be approved for presentation to the House'.⁴
- 2.11 The Committee has made clear that its role is not to make value judgements on the subject matter of a petition. Nor does the Committee determine the petitions selected to be heard at public hearings on the basis of personal opinions or beliefs.⁵
- 2.12 This approach is very similar to the manner in which Members present petitions in the House. Members do not need to support a petition they present; similarly the Petitions Committee may or may not agree with the content of a petition it approves for presentation. Accordingly, when the Chair of the Committee presents petitions he may personally agree with some, and disagree with others, but this is irrelevant in his independent role as Committee Chair.⁶
- 2.13 The Chair of the Committee frequently reiterates his independent role in his presentation statements, for example:
- I conclude today by reinforcing the neutrality of the Committee in terms of petitions subject matter. The Committee's role is to assess petitions against standing order requirements, in conjunction with the established practices of the House, and to provide a conduit for the tabling of compliant petitions. Committee members must leave behind their personal views and allegiances regarding the subject matter and requests of petitions. The Committee determines whether a petition is compliant based only on the House's petitioning requirements. Naturally, this also extends to

4 House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders as at 20 October 2010*, SO 206 (b), p. 84.

5 This will be discussed later in this Chapter under *Public hearing activities with petitioners and public servants*, at 2.49, page 12.

6 *House of Representatives Practice*, 6th Edition, pp. 634-635.

my role as the Chair in tabling petitions in this timeslot. In presenting these compliant petitions I am not endorsing their content or requests. I may personally agree with some of the petitions and vehemently disagree with others, but my personal views and those of the Committee do not inform the outcome of a petition's status.⁷

- 2.14 The objectivity of the Committee's decision-making and the independence of the Chair's presentations have been starkly demonstrated when the Chair presents, in the same presentation timeslot, different petitions with diametrically opposed views or requests.⁸

Operations of the Petitions Committee

Considering petitions and receiving Ministerial responses

- 2.15 Standing Orders continue to require that a petition must first be certified by the Petitions Committee as meeting House requirements before it can be recognised as a petition when presented in the House.
- 2.16 Petitions intended for presentation in the House are received and processed by the Committee's secretariat in preparation for the Committee's deliberations at its regular private meetings each sitting week.
- 2.17 Standing Order 206 (b) requires the Committee to 'check that each petition lodged complies with the standing orders...'. Standing Orders 204 and 205 cover the form and content of petitions, and rules for signatures. The Committee must determine whether the petitions received comply with these requirements. The more significant requirements are that:
- A petition must be addressed to the House of Representatives only;
 - It must contain a request for action by the House only and the House must be capable of performing the action requested;⁹
 - The terms of the petition must not contain alterations and must be no more than 250 words;
 - The petition is written in moderate language and the terms not be illegal or promote illegal acts;

7 HR *Debates* (26.11.2012) 13 079.

8 For example, petitions for and against same sex marriage – HR *Debates* (21.2.2011) 539; 542 and 544 – and for and against an additional pharmacy in the Glen Gala Shopping Centre, Victoria – HR *Debates* (4.7.2011) 7 248 and 7 250.

9 For example, it can't be a State or Local Government matter or asking for intervention in an action that a private organisation or individual can legally undertake.

- The petition either be written in English or, if in another language, be accompanied by a certified translation;
 - The full terms of the petition must be at the top of the first page and, as a minimum, the request of the petition must be at the top of other pages;
 - The full name, address and handwritten original signature of a principal petitioner must appear on the first page;
 - House Members can't be a principal petitioner, nor sign their support for a petition; and
 - The signature of each petitioner must be in his or her own hand writing (unless the petitioner is incapable of signing¹⁰) and be provided on original hard-copy (not copied, pasted or transferred).¹¹
- 2.18 Specific requirements of the Standing Orders are considered in more detail in Chapter 3.
- 2.19 Petitions considered to meet the format and content criteria are found to be 'in order'. In-order petitions are subsequently presented in the House, either by the Committee Chair, currently on Monday mornings of sitting weeks,¹² or by other Members who have indicated – and principal petitioners who have agreed – that they will present them.
- 2.20 Prior to presentation, at the same time as it considers compliance with Standing Orders 204 and 205, the Committee resolves whether petitions will be referred to a Minister or Ministers with relevant portfolio responsibility. Following presentation of petitions – whether by the Committee Chair or a Member – their terms are referred in writing by the Chair of the Committee to the appropriate Minister or Ministers for a response.¹³
- 2.21 Only those petitions which meet the requirements of the Standing Orders can be referred. Therefore, only in-order petitions can be presented in the House, published in Hansard, and be referred to the Executive for comment. The ability to have an issue brought directly before a Minister provides petitioners with an added and significant incentive to ensure that

10 This is in the case of physical incapacity to sign, not to overcome inconvenience.

11 House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders as at 20 October 2010*, Standing Orders 204–205, pp. 83–84.

12 House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders as at 20 October 2010*, Standing Order 34 (Order of Business), pp. 26–27. Note that in the 42nd Parliament the Chair's presentation timeslot was established on 24 June 2008 via Sessional Order 207 to enable these presentations on Mondays at 8.30 pm–8.40 pm. This replaced the Standing Orders of 13 February 2008 which provided for the Speaker's presentation of in-order petitions.

13 House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders as at 20 October 2010*, Standing Order 209 (a) and (b), p. 85.

the content and format of their petition meets Standing Order requirements.

2.22 Most petitions the Committee approves for presentation are referred for a ministerial response. The exceptions are few and occur mostly when the House has received multiple petitions on the same subject matter or the petitions request the same action. In these cases the matter is not repeatedly referred for a response. Instead, the first ministerial response received on that particular type of request for action will be sent to subsequent petitioners. The response is published in Hansard and to the Committee's website – clearly linking a response to a petition matter. This transparency reduces the expectations of subsequent prospective petitioners of receiving an individual ministerial response.

2.23 Standing Order 209 (b) provides it is 'expected' that Ministers will respond to a referred petition within 90 days of a petition being presented in the House. The response is received by the Committee which then affirms the Chair will formally present the response to the House during the next opportunity (sitting Monday). This provides the Committee with a full-circle role in the petitions process – as summarised by the Chair:

The Committee therefore acts as a conduit for both the tabling of petitions and responses to them. It also acts as a gatekeeper. I believe that this unique combination provides the House's petitions system with a high level of certainty and responsiveness.¹⁴

2.24 The Committee regards the timely and well-considered responses to petition matters by the Executive as one of the key successes of the House petitioning processes introduced in 2008. The expectation by petitioners that they will receive a response within a certain time frame provides a level of accountability by the Government not only to the public, but also to the House.

2.25 The responsiveness by Ministers to the Committee's referral of petitions has been a very positive aspect of the changes to petitioning. For example, in 2007 there was only one Ministerial response and in 2008, the first year of the Committee's operations, the figure was 56. By 2011 a total of 136 responses were received; with 83 responses in the 2012 year. As at 17 June 2013, after less than six months of the 2013 year, 38 Ministerial response letters had been received.¹⁵

14 Chair, *HR Debates* (20.8.2012) 9 039.

15 Statistics provided by the Chamber Research Office. Note the number of documents tabled is counted for statistical purposes; in practice these 38 response letters provided responses to 44 petitions.

2.26 Statistics for the 43rd Parliament show a robust number of ministerial responses presented each year. But this only tells part of the story. The real success has been the rate of response. The Committee Chair has spoken on numerous occasions throughout this parliament about the positive rate of ministerial responses. For example, in November 2012 he noted:

The highlight of these statistics, however, is the high ministerial response rate to petitions tabled. This is indeed a success story that has been raised on previous occasions since the inception of the Committee in 2008, but this year's results were exceptional. Ninety-two per cent of petitions tabled this year received a ministerial response. This contrasts with the 2011 rate of 70 per cent, which was already a very good result considering many petitions tabled in the spring sittings receive tabled responses in the following year; as would be expected for quite practical reasons.¹⁶

2.27 In the financial year to 17 June 2013 (the last ministerial response tabling at the time of this report), the rate of response to petitions tabled in the same period was 74 per cent.¹⁷ This rate is considerably skewed downward given that 38 petitions (of the total 101 presented since 1 July 2012) have only been presented since 27 May 2013, such that they could not reasonably expect a response to be presented before this report is presented. This statistic reflects the expectation that a bulk of petitions would be received near the end of the final sittings of the 43rd parliament (as petitioners rush to submit petitions and Members to make presentations). As such, responses to these petitions would not be anticipated before the end of the budget sittings and expected dissolution of the House.

2.28 Most responses received express neither agreement nor disagreement with the petitioner's viewpoint – nor do they accept or deny a petitioner's request. And the Committee considers that ministerial responses were not intended to represent a grant or denial of a request, as supported by the 90 day timeframe for responses. Rather, responses provide petitioners and stakeholders with an (often comprehensive) outline of the Government's relevant policy, funding arrangements, administrative process or legislative framework. A response may explain why the Government takes a particular stance on a matter and whether there are any plans for review or change.

16 Chair, *HR Debates* (26.11.2012) 13 079.

17 78 actual responses to petitions (between 1 July 2012 to 17 June 2013) to 101 petitions presented in the same period.

2.29 While it would be rare for a Minister to agree to undertake the action sought in a petition and relay this in a response, there are occasions when petitions, which have previously received a response that did not contain an acceptance, have later had their request fulfilled. This does not necessarily mean that one petition request has directly led to the desired outcome. However, in some cases the request has been unique and has related to such a narrow field of stakeholders that a causal link could be drawn between the original petition and the later Government action.¹⁸ One example of this was mentioned on 20 March 2013 during the Member for Aston's adjournment debate speech:

I am proud to report to the House that the Knox headspace centre was officially opened this week. The opening of this centre has been the culmination of a two-year campaign which I have spearheaded, along with community members in my electorate. ... I would particularly like to thank the chief petitioners, Pauline Renzow and Prerna Diksha, for their tireless effort.¹⁹

2.30 After responses are presented their text is published in full, in Hansard, and on the Committee's website, in line with Standing Order 209(c). In this way, not only does the principal petitioner receive the information about the issue, but so also does any stakeholder – supporter or indeed opponent of the petition – and any prospective petitioner. The response process provides an avenue for Government accountability.

2.31 In general, most petitioners do not anticipate that a petition alone will lead to the direct resolution of their concern. Most Australians participate in petitioning with the pragmatic view that it is a respected method of raising awareness of an issue – within the community and with Parliament – or a grievance. The promise of a resolution may certainly be an impetus for petitioning, but not the sole reason. This understanding was summarised by the Chair recently:

As much as it would be rewarding for petitioners to see a nice, neat resolution to their concern outlined in the ministerial response to their petition, in a well-functioning democracy this is a rarity. Therefore, the executive's response to a petition which is anticipated to be received by the committee within a few months

18 For example, the petitioning in 2010 for public funding of a drug to treat the medical condition of Paroxysmal Nocturnal Haemoglobinuria – which was included in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme on 1 January 2011, two months after a ministerial response was received which merely provided details of the Government's processes to assess the requested drug. It is unclear, however, whether the petition itself, other public awareness campaigns or merely the plight of the petitioners led to this result.

19 HR *Debates* (20.03.2013) 2 776.

of referral does not represent a granting or a denial of a wish – and most petitioners would understand this.²⁰

Communications by and with the Petitions Committee

- 2.32 A large part of the Committee's role involves communicating advice of petitioning outcomes and responses to petitions. The Committee does this directly, via correspondence to principal petitioners and Members who have been involved in presentation or delivery of petitions, and indirectly, to the public, through Hansard and the Committee's website.
- 2.33 These activities partly fulfil Standing Order requirements, and partly the Committee's stewardship role. The webpage constructed in response to the Procedure Committee's recommendation that the Department of the House of Representatives create a petitions page on its website, visible from the home page, and which provides contact details and guidance on preparing a petition, remains available.²¹
- 2.34 The Parliament's website now provides clear access to petitioning information from the home page and at the petitioning launch point it clearly delineates between petitioning the House and the Senate. General information on preparing a petition, a petitioning checklist and contact details for the Committee's secretariat is available with a link to the Petitions Committee website. The Petitions Committee's web page is also available via the list of House General Purpose Standing Committees.²²
- 2.35 The Committee's web page provides public access to the terms of tabled petitions and to ministerial responses. It also lists any public meetings conducted by the Committee and the transcripts of these. Even though petitions and responses are already publicly available in the Hansard of the day of presentation to the House, publication in this format enhances transparency by linking tabled petitions and responses. This is significant for petitioners and anyone who is interested in the issues they raise.
- 2.36 The other benefit of re-publishing the terms of tabled petitions on the Committee's website is that petitions are categorised in subject matter areas, enabling prospective petitioners to research prior petitions on the

20 Chair, *HR Debates* (18.03.2013) 2 275.

21 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, 2007, p. 31. The Committee's web page is available at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=petitions/index.htm, viewed 11 June 2013.

22 The Committee's webpage is at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=petitions/index.htm and general information on preparation of petitions is available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/work/petitions.htm>, viewed 11 June 2013.

same or similar subject matter, and to see petition wording which has met the format and content requirements of the House. So, the website is not only a communication device but also has an important educational role.

- 2.37 Public expectations about access to information on petitioning are increasing. The Chair has discussed this aspect:

With increasing acceptance of, and access to, communications and information technology by people of all ages and walks of life, the petitioning requirements are being disseminated widely through the Committee's website and communications via a public email address. This is in addition to telephone and postal communications and published information made available by the Committee for distribution at Members' electorate offices across Australia.²³

- 2.38 The Committee is supported by a small secretariat which provides administrative, research and drafting support. One of the significant aspects of the secretariat's work is liaison with prospective petitioners as they prepare their petitions for signature collection and then tabling in the House.

- 2.39 Improved access to information about petitioning and the Committee's web pages, as well as the access to advice from the secretariat, ameliorates a high rate of out-of-order petitions received. In any case, it reduces the disappointment and agitation of petitioners who would have prepared out-of-order petitions due to minor oversights (for example, exceeding the word limit), but who avoid this by using the Committee's resources before collecting signatures.

- 2.40 The absolute numbers of out-of-order petitions received in the 42nd parliament showed a decline on 'pre-Committee' out-of-order petition numbers, with 39 petitions out-of-order in 2008, 20 in 2009 and 23²⁴ in the 2010 year.²⁵ As volumes of petitions received in the 43rd Parliament increased, so did the number of out-of-order petitions. The absolute numbers of out-of-order petitions jumped up in the 2011 year to 80,²⁶ but, given there were 271 petitions received²⁷ (thus 191 complied), the out-of-order rate was only 30 per cent. The absolute numbers fell to 52 in 2012,

23 Chair HR *Debates* (23.05.2011) 3 980.

24 Note that 11 petitions were received in the 43rd parliament between 27 October 2010 and 24 November 2010; thus 34 petitions were out-of-order in the full 2010 year.

25 Figures provided by the Chamber Research Office, Department of the House of Representatives.

26 Twenty-two of these were assessed in a single meeting.

27 Committee private meeting statistics. The number of petitions assessed as complying in any given year is unlikely to equate to the number of petitions presented in the same period.

reflecting far fewer hastily prepared ‘immediate response petitions’ which were prevalent in 2011.²⁸

- 2.41 In the 2013 year-to-date only 12 out-of-order petitions have been received.²⁹ The Committee is pleased to see that fewer petitions are being received which don’t meet the House’s requirements.
- 2.42 The Committee also notes fewer electronically produced (and thus out-of-order) petitions are being received in 2013, commensurate with prospective petitioner queries about the House’s acceptance of non-handwritten petitions. Growing awareness of the House’s signature rules may have contributed to a recent decline in out-of-order numbers after the initial burst in popularity of petitions prepared through on-line petitioning sites.³⁰

Private meetings during sitting weeks

- 2.43 The Committee continues to meet at least weekly during sitting weeks for a private meeting, principally to consider proposed petitions and responses.
- 2.44 During these meetings the Committee also considers more general correspondence, its current and future work program and other general Committee matters. Since it first met in October 2010, the Committee of the 43rd parliament has held more than 45 private meetings.

Presentations and announcements by the Committee Chair

- 2.45 At the commencement of the 43rd Parliament the Standing Orders were amended to change the time for the Chair of the Petitions Committee to present petitions to the House. This was set for 10.00am to 10.10am on sitting Mondays.³¹
- 2.46 Since November 2010 the Committee Chair has made 30 announcements of petitions found to be in-order (and which petitioners have not asked

28 For example, the 2011 year featured many small petitions opposing the live export of animals. These petitions were prepared and received soon after the airing of a documentary television program on the subject matter; most of which did not meet the standing order requirements.

29 Statistics to 5 June 2013.

30 For example, the Get-Up! Website (<<http://www.getup.org.au/campaigns>>) and more recently, the Go-Petitions site (<<http://www.gopetition.com/>>) and Change.Org sites (<<http://www.change.org/petition>>), none of which follow any parliamentary jurisdictional guidelines.

31 This was one of the changes in Standing Order 34, Order of Business. In the 42nd Parliament, Sessional Order 207 and Standing Order 34 provided for a timeslot on Monday evenings between 8.30 pm and 8.40 pm – this commenced on 24 June 2008 and continued to 20 October 2010.

other Members to present) and of ministerial responses considered by the Committee at its previous meeting.³²

- 2.47 The Chair also makes a general statement about the Committee's work to the House at this time, time permitting. Standing Order 207(a) enables the Chair's announcement and statement and also a statement by another Member of the Committee. From time to time during the 42nd Parliament, statements were made by other Committee Members in the Petitions timeslot. This was usually made by the Deputy Chair, after consultation with the Chair, so that speaking times and topics would be appropriate. In the 43rd Parliament only one Committee Member has used the petitions timeslot to make a short statement following the Chair's statement.³³
- 2.48 The Chair's statements provide the House with regular reports on the Committee's activities, in particular public meetings and on key aspects of the petitioning process. The statements also enable the Chair to provide six monthly statistical updates on petitions received. As such, the statements serve as an important accountability measure.

Public hearing activities with petitioners and public servants

- 2.49 Standing Order 220, which outlines the Committee's role, states that the Committee may inquire into, and report to the House, on any matter relating to petitions and the petitions system. This enables the Committee to conduct its round table hearings with principal petitioners and/or senior officers of relevant Government agencies.
- 2.50 These are intended to facilitate a public dialogue on the petition issue raised and not to investigate the matter with a view to resolving or following-up any individual petition concern.
- 2.51 The Committee held 8 public meetings with principal petitioners or public servants over the course of the 43rd Parliament.³⁴ At the first round table meeting the Committee spoke to one petitioner, as well as with representatives of one Government department and one agency. At one hearing the Committee spoke exclusively with senior public servants – one of the petitions considered was later separately discussed with the principal petitioner, in the petitioner's home town. The other hearings were held interstate, solely with principal petitioners or their representatives. All round table meetings with public servants held during the 43rd Parliament have taken place at Parliament House.

32 Announcements to 24 June 2013.

33 *HR Debates* (22.08.2011) 8 706. On 22 August 2011 Mr R Broadbent MP spoke following the Chair.

34 Refer to Appendix B for the full list of public round table hearings held in the 43rd Parliament.

- 2.52 The Committee does not formally accept submissions or exhibits at these public hearings as its role is not to investigate with the view to recommending any action on petitions or of resolving matters. These public discussions enable explanation and exploration of issues beyond that allowed by the petition's 250 word limit. After round table hearings, the official transcript of evidence is forwarded by the Committee to the relevant Minister or Ministers of the portfolio area.
- 2.53 During the 43rd Parliament the Committee continued the first Committee's contact with young people. A number of petitions were received from school groups during the period – and it was rewarding to see that most of these met the Standing Order requirements. The Committee attended a hearing at a secondary college in Perth in August 2012. Members were impressed with the confident interaction between these students and the Committee on a complex subject on which the principal petitioner, herself a student, was well versed.³⁵ The Committee then held informal discussions with the students, teachers and the school principal on the broader parliamentary process and the role of Members. The Committee values this sort of engagement as an additional benefit of the reinvigorated House petitions process.
- 2.54 The Committee's approach to round table hearings has changed since the 42nd Parliament. In that parliament, as the Committee was defining its role and was settling into a pattern of operations, it afforded more time for round table hearings, the bulk of which were conducted in Canberra with public servants. These hearings covered a greater number of petitions, initially adopting a program based more on coverage of petitions presented rather than on any particular criteria.
- 2.55 The Committee of the 43rd Parliament was faced with a significant increase in the number of petitions received – with approximately 275 petitions being received and assessed in 2011 as compared to numbers of 150, 170 and 170 in 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively.³⁶ This meant that, in addition to reconsidering the value in attempting to conduct public hearings for most petitions, it also had a larger task in its primary operations.
- 2.56 Petitions to be discussed at public hearings are now largely selected because of sustained or broad interest in the issue and the likelihood that a further, public discussion may be beneficial. Interstate hearings with

35 House Standing Committee on Petitions, *Transcript*, 31 August 2012.

36 Refer to Appendix C, the total number of petitions received per annum approximates the total numbers tabled, plus those petitions found out-of-order. There will be variations between the number so petitions assessed as compliant and the number of petitions tabled in any given year – mainly due to sittings recesses intervening between a meeting at the end of a calendar year and the next presentation opportunity in the new year.

petitioners necessarily involved discussion of petitions generated from particular geographic areas.

2.57 Every petition presented does not, therefore, become the subject of a hearing. The Chair emphasised the Committee's approach:

Rather than take a blanket approach to holding public hearings on a large number of petitions received, the committee has found value in selecting petitions which have displayed strong local interest – or other notable characteristics – and to discuss these petitions in greater detail. The committee cannot follow up or make recommendations to government on individual petitions, but the hearing process enables a public dialogue, with the potential for further action to take place, beyond the committee's role, merely because the matter has received further parliamentary airing.³⁷

2.58 Having discussed the practical aspects of its operations, in the following chapter the Committee considers its formal framework – House Standing Orders; feedback that it has received from petitioners on the process; issues that are recurring – resourcing and electronic petitioning; and an issue that is emerging – possibilities for debate on the subject matter of petitions.

37 Chair, *HR Debates*, (20.08.2012) 9 039.