



Factsheet P7 Procedure Series

Revised August 2010

House of Commons Information Office

Public Petitions

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The right to petition the Crown and Parliament to air grievances is a fundamental constitutional principle. This **Factsheet** describes the way in which Parliament has historically addressed such petitions and the way in which it deals with them today.

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Introduction

A petition is a formal written request from one or more people to the Sovereign, the Government or to Parliament. The right of the subject to petition the Monarch for redress of personal grievances has probably been exercised since Saxon times. It was recognised in Magna Carta and more explicitly in an Act of 1406.¹ The Bill of Rights of 1688 restated that right in unambiguous terms, "... it is the right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal".²

This Factsheet looks at petitions to Parliament. There has been an increase in the number of petitions to the House of Commons in recent years see Appendix 1. This shows that the ancient practice does still have value to petitioners. It can be used as a means to mobilise opinion, and to create publicity locally, or indeed nationally, for an issue. Members of Parliament can use it as a way of informing the government about an issue on which their constituents hold strong views, and thus it remains a valuable tool whereby Members can hold the executive to account.

Current Procedure

Submitting a petition

Petitions to the House of Commons must meet certain specific requirements. A comprehensive list of rules for public petitions is available on request from the Clerk of Public Petitions, Journal Office, House of Commons (020 7219 3310). The rules are also available on the Parliament website:

<http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/petitioning/public-petitions/>

The notes that follow are not intended to replace that notice, which should be consulted by anyone wishing to have a petition presented to the House. **Petitioners are strongly advised to contact the Clerk before collecting signatures to ensure their petition is in an acceptable form.**

Every petition must be specifically and respectfully addressed to the House of Commons. Many petitions still use the old form of words (which were compulsory prior to 1993) "*To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament Assembled*".

Each signatory must include his or her address; and the wording must be "*respectful, decorous and temperate*". Each Petition must contain a "*prayer*", that is a request to the House of Commons which is within its competence to grant. The petition should also end with a suitable closing phrase.

In 1993, after a report from the Select Committee on Procedure, the House relaxed some of the rules regarding the preparation and presentation of public petitions, and now there is more flexibility than previously in the form that petitions may take. A modern form of words is now permitted, alongside the more traditional form referred to above. The rules were further relaxed following a recommendation by the Procedure Committee in 2004³ removing the requirement for

¹ Rotuli Parliamentorum (7 & 8 Hen. IV, No 63)

² 1 Wm. & Mary (Sess 2) Cap 2

page(s) on which the petition itself appears to be handwritten. A Petition may now be handwritten, printed or typed, but there must be no erasures, deletions or interlineations in it.

In June 2006 the Procedure Committee announced a new inquiry into the arrangements concerning public petitions to the House of Commons. The subsequent report of the committee published in May 2007⁴ made various recommendations

...to make the procedures for petitions more accessible and transparent and better able to meet the reasonable expectations of those members of the public who engage with the process.

Under Post Office regulations, petitions for presentation to the House may be sent post free to a specific Member, provided that the envelope or package containing the petition is unsealed.

It is important not to confuse public petitions to the House with petitions seeking to block the passage of a private bill. Petitions against private bills may be made directly by the petitioners if they are “directly and specifically” affected by the bill. For more information about petitions against private bills, see [Factsheet L4](#).

Numbers of signatures

The number of signatures on a petition varies widely. Petitions from a single individual are valid as long as they contain the signatory’s name and address and these are often received. By contrast the petition with the greatest number of signatures is reckoned to be the Ambulance Dispute Petition, presented on 15 December 1989 (estimated at 4½ million signatures).

Before 1974, the signatures on each petition were counted rather than estimated: the clerical officers in the Journal Office at that time were paid 12½p per thousand names for doing the job. Quite a fortune might have been accumulated by their predecessors in the 1840s when several petitions from the Chartists, one with 1,975,496 signatures (some of which were spurious), were presented.

Presentation of petitions

Only Members may formally present petitions to the House, but no Member can be compelled to do so.⁵ Although Members will, at their discretion, generally present petitions at the request of their constituents, the presentation of a petition by a Member does not imply that he or she supports the content.

The time for presentation of petitions is immediately before the half-hour adjournment debate at the end of each day’s business. Before 1974, petitions were presented at the beginning of a sitting, after private business. However, this was changed to prevent the presentation of petitions causing delays to question time. Similarly the restriction to half an hour on Friday was introduced after the presentation of multiple petitions on 7 June 1985 had the effect of delaying the start of a debate on a controversial private Member’s bill. Following the Government’s

³ House of Commons Procedure Committee, Fifth Report, *Public Petitions*, published 15 November 2004, HC 1248 2003-004, approved 19 January 2005
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmproced/1248/1248.pdf>

⁴ House of Commons Procedure Committee, First Report, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 22 May 2007 HC 513, 2006-07 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmproced/513/513.pdf>

⁵ *Chaffers v Goldsmid* [1884] 1 QB 186

response to the Procedure Committee's First report 2006-07⁶, the timing for the presentation of petitions on Friday's was changed to be the same as on Monday to Thursday, that is, immediately before the half hour adjournment debate.

Members may also present petitions informally at any time while the House is sitting by placing them in the large green bag hooked onto the back of the Speaker's Chair.

The presenting Member should write his or her name at the head of the petition. If the Member wishes to present the petition formally (on the floor of the House), he or she first takes it to the Clerk of Public Petitions for endorsement and then gives notice to the Table Office. If it is to be presented informally it should be placed in the bag already mentioned. If it is presented formally the Member will be called immediately after a whip has signified the Government's intention to move the concluding adjournment debate.

In presenting the petition, the Member is confined to making a brief statement setting out who the petition is from, the number of signatures it contains, and the petitioners' concerns, before reading out the request or 'prayer' which the petitioners are making to the House. Members who have strayed into a discussion of the merits of the petitioners' case have been called to order by the Speaker. If a Member wishes to present a petition formally but is unwilling to read out the petition, the Clerk at the Table may be asked to read out the text.

Although debate on the merits of an individual petition is ruled out of order, it is still possible to seek to have petitions of exceptional urgency debated on the floor of the House. Standing Order 134, first laid down in 1842, provides that Petitions "*complaining of some present personal grievance, for which there may be an urgent necessity for providing an immediate remedy ...*" may be discussed, though opposed. The provisions of this Standing Order have been applied rarely, the last occasion being on 29 November 1960.⁷

A Member of the Lords may present petitions to the House of Lords – reading out whom the petition is from and what their main point is. However, the procedure is very rarely used, and leads to no action. There have been only twenty-eight petitions presented in the House of Lords in the last twenty years, and the last occasion on which one was presented was 13 December 2000.

Presentation of Petitions by the City Corporation

The Sheriffs of London are entitled, by ancient usage, to present any Petition which the Corporation of the City of London wishes to make to the House in person at the Bar of the House. They are conducted to the Bar by the Serjeant at Arms with the Mace. The Speaker says "*Mr Sheriff, what have you got there?*" and a Sheriff, or the City Remembrancer who accompanies them, answers by reciting the substance of the petition. If the Sheriffs bring with them a Mace or Sword, it has to be retained by Commons Doorkeepers in the Bar Lobby, just outside the House. The most recent occasion upon which this ceremony was enacted was on 16 February 1948. The privilege of presenting a Petition at the Bar was also accorded to the Corporation of Dublin after 1813. But as Dublin is now the capital city of the Republic of Ireland, it is doubtful whether such a presentation would nowadays be claimed or permitted.

⁶ *The Governance of Britain*, The Government's Response to the Procedure Committee's First Report, session 2006-07, on *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, Cm 7193.
<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7193/7193.pdf>

⁷ Following a presentation of a petition by Sir L Ungoes-Thomas on behalf of Anthony Wedgwood Benn.

Proceedings in Parliament

Since 1842 the action taken by the House on Petitions has usually been minimal. Petitions are currently sent to the relevant Government department. The department will generally investigate the case that the petitioners have made and a Minister may lay a reply to the petitioners' case before the House. The Votes and Proceedings publication for the day the petition was presented will record the petitions subject matter, description of the petitioners, and whether or not the petition was submitted formally or informally. The full text of the petition is printed in Hansard.

Before 1974, petitions were sent to a Select Committee on Public Petitions. The Committee sorted and classified them, and could report on whether they were in order under the rules of the House. The Committee had no power to look into the merits of any Petition, nor could it recommend remedies. The Committee was abolished on 4 April 1974. The Procedure Select Committee in 2004 recommended that petitions, when they were sent to Government departments should also be sent to the relevant select committee. They also recommended that Government observations, or notifications received by the Journal Office that no observations are to be made, should also be passed on to the relevant committee. The Procedure committee commented that 'On occasions, committees may wish to press for observations to be made when then they have not been forthcoming'. The House approved that recommendation on 19 January 2005.

The House has no power to compel the Government to make any observations on a petition although in 2007 the Government committed to respond to all 'substantive' petitions (Cm 7193⁸). Petitions presented to the House and any observations the Government has subsequently made on them are printed in Hansard and available on the parliamentary website. An example of a petition and observation is given in Appendix 2.

Tracing petitions

Since May 2008 Petitions and Government observations are now available daily on the Hansard homepage - <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

For older petitions, please consult the Parliamentary Archives

<http://www.parliament.uk/publications/archives.cfm> (Telephone: 020 7219 3074).

Not all petitions will have survived but current practice is that top copies are retained there in perpetuity.

History of Petitions

It has been argued that Parliament originated in meetings of the King's Council where petitions were considered. The first known petitions to the Lords and to both Houses of Parliament date from the reign of Richard II, but seem to have become widespread from the reign of Henry IV onwards. In 1571 a Committee for Motions of Grievances and Petitions was first appointed. In medieval times *receivers and triers of Petitions* were appointed by Parliament to collect petitions. Some cases would be referred to local courts: major matters were reserved for Parliament itself.

⁸ *The Governance of Britain*, The Government's Response to the Procedure Committee's First Report, session 2006-07, on *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, Cm 7193.
<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7193/7193.pdf>

With the increase in the influence and importance of Parliament during the reign of Charles I, petitioning became one of the main methods of airing grievances by those classes not represented in Parliament. The House of Commons began to appoint committees specifically to examine petitions, particularly those concerned with religious liberties.

The House was not always sympathetic to such petitions. On 10 December 1640, for instance, the following entry is recorded in the Journal:

Petition found on Salisbury Plain

Mr Serjeant Hide, Mr Mallory, Mr Hollys, Lord Digby, Sir Guy Palmes, Sir Gilbert Gerrard:

This Committee was appointed to peruse a Petition, that was inclosed in the Cover of a Letter, addressed to the Parliament, and found upon Salisbury Plain; and, being brought to the Mayor of Salisbury, was by him sent up to Serjeant Hide, a Member of this House, and by him this Day offered to the House.

The Committee, after they had perused it, found it of no better Consequence than to be burnt.

By the Restoration, disorderly scenes resulting from mass presentations of petitions led to an act against tumultuous petitioning (13 Cha 2 Cap 5) in 1661, which limited the presentation of a petition to a maximum of 10 people. This act, with amendments, is still in force.

Development of petitioning

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, petitions generally dealt with personal or local grievances. But from the Restoration and eighteenth century period, as the Commons' judicial functions ceased, it became more common to make representations or complain about matters of public policy. Petitions were traditionally read before the start of debates, and by the 1830s this was taking up a considerable amount of time in the chamber. Radical MPs often used the petitions system as a way of getting frequent, unscheduled, debates on subjects on which they felt strongly. It was also used as a way of obstructing government and other business as their debate preceded the main business of the Day. The average number of petitions presented annually to the Commons in 1785-9 was 176. By 1811-5, this had grown to over 1,100; and in the years 1837-41, the figure was almost 17,600.

In 1832 Sir Robert Peel engineered the establishment of a select committee to investigate the presentation of petitions. The Committee's recommendations resurrected the idea, first mooted in the civil war period, of establishing committees to examine petitions, in order to take them out of the chamber of the House. Its report was debated immediately after Parliament reassembled, but the Government did not completely remove petitions from the floor of the House.

Many radical Members objected to any alteration of the procedure, largely upon the grounds that petitioning was the only form of redress open to the vast majority of people who were not electors. A Committee was, however, established and special morning (actually noon-3 pm) sittings were held to deal with petitions. These sittings lasted until 1835. After this, a rule appears to have been regularly applied to prevent debate arising out of petitions, which the Speaker enforced, though it was not a standing order.

Debating the rules

On 7 February 1838, Mr Ward, a Member for Sheffield, attempted to enter into a general discussion of the Corn Laws on the basis of presenting a petition from his constituents on the subject. He was interrupted by Speaker Abercromby, who ruled him out of order, which was the usual practice. The rules of the House concerning debate on petitions were then themselves debated on the following day, and the rule was upheld. However, the scale of the problem remained and proved rather overwhelming. In 1841, 18,648 petitions were presented; on 8 February 1842 alone, for instance, 199 separate petitions were presented to the House (including one from *Passengers on Blackfriars Bridge*). The record for numbers of petitions presented in any one session was set in 1843, when 33,898 were presented.

Following an unsuccessful attempt in early 1842 to rescind the rule, the Government acted. After a debate on 14 April 1842, the House agreed by 268 votes to 46 to a Government motion to introduce new standing orders relating to petitions. These precluded any debate on the merits of a petition following its presentation, and this is essentially the current practice.

Surprisingly, the 1842 changes did not significantly reduce the number of petitions. The number of petitions rarely fell below 10,000 per session in the nineteenth century; in the long session of 1893-94 the number received was 33,742.

Numbers of petitions

The end of the 19th century showed a marked reduction in the number of petitions presented, although some were signed by enormous numbers of petitioners. The Times in 1901 considered that "*whatever their practical utility [petitions would] always have a sentimental value as keeping alive a popular right based upon one of the fundamental principles of the British Constitution*". Belief in the efficacy of individual appeals to Parliament had not entirely died out, "*but if the man in the street could see how unceremoniously the ordinary memorial is dealt with this belief would not long survive*".

From the First World War onwards, possibly reflecting such a sentiment, or possibly also the extension of the franchise, the number fell away almost to nothing. In a typical session of the 1970s about 35 petitions were presented, though certain matters, for example, disabled persons' mobility in 1977, led to a large number of petitions.

A great rise in the numbers of petitions occurred in the early 1980s. Subjects such as proportional representation, contraception, abortion, embryo research and capital punishment led to a large number of petitions, some with huge numbers of signatures. In many cases dozens or hundreds of identical petitions came from different areas. The number, for instance, presented in 1983-84 was 764 compared with the 35 or so of five or ten years before. By the end of the 1990s around 100 petitions were being presented each session. A table showing the number of petitions presented in recent sessions is included as Appendix 1.

E-Petitions

Although the House of Commons has not yet adopted a facility to petition electronically, recommendations have been made for the introduction of an e-petitioning system.

In May 2007, The Procedure Committee report which looked at the House of Commons' petitions system along with Early Day Motions expressed "support in principle for an e-petitions system"⁹.

The Government published a Green Paper, in July 2007, announcing a wide programme of constitutional reform. The Green Paper welcomed the Procedure Committee's proposals on e-petitioning and stated it believed "people should be able to petition the House of Commons with as much ease as they are able to petition the Prime Minister".

That November, the Procedure Committee launched an inquiry into e-petitions and in April 2008 published a report recommending an e-petitions system.¹⁰ The Procedure Committee envisaged that if its proposals were agreed by the House of Commons the earliest date at which a system of e-petitioning could be operational was likely to be early 2010.

In response to this report on 22 July 2008, the Leader of the House of Commons, Harriet Harmen MP, issued a Written Ministerial Statement.¹¹

...The government hopes that the House will endorse this way forward, allowing it to take a significant step forward in helping to promote better engagement with the public...

The Government welcomed the Procedure Committee's report and agreed with its overall recommendation for an e-petition system to be introduced to the UK Parliament with further parliamentary debate to take place. It also acknowledged further consideration needed to be given to see whether it will be possible or proportionate for the Government to respond to all e-petitions given the large increase in the number envisaged.

E-petition and the House of Lords

The July 2008 Government response to the Procedure Committee's report on the introduction of e-petitions for the House of Commons also acknowledged that "in due course the House of Lords may also wish to look at its own petitions procedure.

The following question addressed e-petitions in the House of Lords

On 11 June 2008 Lord Norton received an answer to the question:

⁹ House of Commons Procedure Committee, First Report, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, 22 May 2007, HC 513, 2006-07

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmproced/513/513.pdf>

¹⁰ House of Commons Procedure Committee, First Report, *e-Petitions*, 6 April 2008, HC 136, 2007-08

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmproced/136/136.pdf>

¹¹ HC Deb c96-99WS

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080722/wmstext/80722m0003.htm#08072253000032>

Lord Norton of Louth asked the Chairman of Committees:

What consideration has been given to permitting public petitions to the House of Lords to be submitted electronically. [HL4055]¹²

The Chairman of Committees (Lord Brabazon of Tara): As I indicated in my Answer on 16 May 2008 (WA 154), public petitions to the House of Lords are rare: the last occasion on which a petition was presented was on 13 December 2000. I do not therefore believe that expenditure on developing a system of e-petitioning unique to the House of Lords could be justified.

Other E-petition systems

There are currently a number of e-petitions systems already in existence across the United Kingdom including, the Scottish Parliament (introduced in February 2004), the Number 10 Downing Street e-petitions facility (introduced in November 2006) and the National Assembly for Wales (introduced in April 2008).

¹² HL Deb 11 Jun 2008 WA103
http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/text/80611w0001.htm#column_WA103

Appendix 1

Petitions presented to the House of Commons in sessions 1989-90 to 2008-9

Session	Total petitions presented	Formal presentation (floor of House)	Informal presentation (via 'bag')	Petitions receiving observations (c)	Petitions on which no observations made (c)
1989-90	960	235	725	—	—
1990-91	183	87	96	—	—
1991-92 (a)	452	56	396	—	—
1992-93 (b)	2,651	137	2,514	—	—
1993-94	102	60	42	—	—
1994-95	119	57	62	73	46
1995-96	77	49	26	39	38
1996-97 (a)	55	40	15	24	31
1997-98 (b)	99	73	26	55	44
1998-99	99	56	43	37	62
1999-2000	87	68	19	55	32
2000-01 (a)	36	28	8	26	9
2001-02 (b)	129	109	20	97	32
2002-03	220	194	26	178	42
2003-04	128	112	16	82	16
2004-05 (a)	51	44	7	38	13
2005-06 (b)	293	257	36	207	86
2006-07	161	142	19	112	49
2007-08	221	195	26	220	1
2008-09	123	111	12	97	26
2009-10	393	135	258	343	50

(a) Short sessions (October 1991 to March 1992; October 1996 to March 1997; December 2000 to May 2001; November 2004 to April 2005)

(b) Long sessions (April 1992 to October 1993, May 1997 to October 1998, June 2001 to November 2002; May 2005 to November 2006)

(c) Statistics on Government observations to petitions not available before 1994-95. These figures do not include petitions to which the departmental response has not yet been recorded.

Appendix 2

A modern petition and relevant Government Observation

HMRC Workforce Change (Lincolnshire)

The Petition of staff and customers of the Revenue and Customs Office in Boston, Lincolnshire,

Declares that they are concerned about cuts to public services, particularly the proposed closure of the HMRC office in Boston.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Treasury to reconsider the decision to close the office in Boston, which provides an excellent service to local people.

And the Petitioners remain, etc. — [*Presented by Mark Simmonds , Official Report, 16 July 2008; Vol. 479, c. 373.*] [P000234]

Observations from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Treasury:

The Government notes the petition, and makes the following observations:

“The Government notes that similar representations were made during the consultation exercise that HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) held with staff, unions and key external stakeholders including local authorities, on its initial proposals for restructuring its operations in Cluster 15, which includes Boston and Spalding. All representations were taken into account before final decisions were made on the future of Boston and the other offices under review.

On 17 July HMRC published the decision to withdraw from Chantry House, Boston as part of the Department's need to address new and challenging customer demands by restructuring its business and estate in the most effective and efficient way possible. HMRC will continue to maintain a local face to face advice service to customers from Chantry House, Boston or from an alternative location nearby”.

Further Information

House of Commons Library
Standard Note : Proposals for an e-petitions
system for the House of Commons
SN/PC/04725 -
<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-04725.pdf>
Available on the parliamentary website
www.parliament.uk through: Publications &
Records

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Factsheet P7 Public Petitions

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For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

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|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
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