



## Petitions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 7614 Email [petitionscommittee@parliament.uk](mailto:petitionscommittee@parliament.uk) Website [www.parliament.uk/petitions-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/petitions-committee)

Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP

Leader of the House

House of Commons

3 November 2015

### **Guidance for Government departments responding to e-petitions**

You will recall that the draft memorandum of understanding for the e-petitions site—which was proposed by the Procedure Committee and endorsed by the House—did not contain any guidance about the timing or content of Government responses to e-petitions.

With the experience of operating the website for a few months now, the Petitions Committee has considered whether some guidance would be helpful. Since this is a jointly-owned website, I am writing to seek your views on our proposals.

The first suggestion is on timing. There is at present no clear expectation of how long a department should take to produce a response. There has been a huge variation in practice: the Department for Health has consistently provided very prompt responses, sometimes within only a few days. At the other extreme, four petitions have been waiting for over 80 days for a response.

This obviously creates uncertainty for the public, many of whom contact the staff of the Committee to find out when they can expect a response to their petition. It must also create difficulties for officials in departments who are trying to assist Ministers in prioritising their workload.

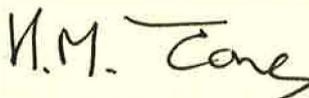
We have considered what would be a reasonable expectation for a response, bearing in mind the expectations of the public that responses will be produced quickly, but balancing this with providing time for departments to produce considered, high quality responses. We have also considered the deadlines that apply to parliamentary questions.

In our view, it would be reasonable to suggest that responses to e-petitions should usually be provided within 14 days of a petition reaching 10,000 signatures, and at the latest within 21 days.

We recognise that there may be cases in which it is not possible for departments to meet these targets. In such cases, we would be content for Ministers to write to the Committee to explain the reason for the delay.

We have also considered some general guidance about the content of responses. Some of our suggestions arise from comments that have been made to us by members of the public. I enclose a draft of the guidance, on which I would be grateful for your views.

Once we have agreed on guidance, the Petitions Committee will be monitoring performance and we will write to Ministers if we consider that the quality of responses has fallen below the standards that you and we expect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H.M. Jones', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Helen Jones MP

Chair of the Petitions Committee

## Guidance for officials: drafting responses to e-petitions

People can petition the Government and Parliament on [petition.parliament.uk](https://petition.parliament.uk). The Government has undertaken to respond to all petitions that get over 10,000 signatures.

The Government response now includes a *summary quote*, limited to 200 characters. The summary is intended to show what the government is doing **at a glance**.

The main body of the response is limited to 5000 characters.

### Guidance for good summary quotes:

- **Respond directly to the petition**

If the detail of the petition doesn't match the title, judge what is most appropriate. For example, a petition calling for a vote of no confidence in the title may well call for action on a specific policy point in the text.

- **Clearly set out the Government's position on the topic raised by the petition**

Many people will only read the summary quote, so it is important to put the key message here so that people understand what the thrust of Government's response is. If the Government is doing something, say so. If the Government thinks the current process or situation is fine, make that clear. If the Government is unable to do anything, explain this.

### Guidance for the main body of the response:

- **Be concise.**

The 5000 character limit is a maximum, not a target. Say only as much as you need to in order to explain the Government's position.

- **Be clear.**

Remember that most of the people reading the response will not be specialists in your policy area. It is important that they can understand what the Government's position is on an issue they care about.

- **Cite your evidence.**

Members of the public find it frustrating when statements are made without references to the supporting evidence. You can take advice from Petitions Committee staff about including links in your response if you need to.

- **Follow up.**

If the response promises a specific future action—such as the publication of a report or a set of statistics—provide the staff of the Petitions Committee with an update when this happens, so that they can inform petitioners.



Office of the Leader  
of the House of Commons

1 Horse Guards Road  
London  
SW1A 2HQ

Tel: 020 7276 1005  
commonsleader@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

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### Guidance for Government departments responding to e-petitions

Thank you for your letter of 3<sup>rd</sup> November.

It is interesting to note the variation in the time taken by Departments in responding to petitions that have reached 10,000 signatures. I agree that it would be useful for Departments, Members of Parliament and the public to have some official guidance on timeliness and content of responses.

Your proposal that the Government should respond within 14 days of a petition reaching 10,000 signatures and within 21 days at the latest seems reasonable. It will be more challenging for Departments to respond within this timeframe during the summer recess, but it is not an unrealistic target. I would be interested to hear your Committee's findings when monitoring Departments' responses, which should be kept under review.

I agree that it would be helpful to provide guidance on the relevance and comprehensiveness of responses. I have looked at the suggested guidance and have no comments to make at this stage.

I would be grateful if you would give me an indication of when we might expect the Memorandum of Understanding to be ready to be signed by both parties.

**Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP**  
Leader of the House of Commons

Helen Jones MP  
Chair of the Petitions Committee  
House of Commons