Written evidence from the House of Commons Petitions Committee – RIS0074

The House of Commons Petitions Committee welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House of Lords Liaison Committee’s inquiry: Review of investigative and scrutiny committees’ publications.

As requested, this written evidence highlights the range of public engagement activities undertaken by the Petitions Committee.

Background

The UK Parliament e-Petitions system is the most popular Parliamentary site of its type in the world.

Petitions have been started or signed by over 14 million unique users. The largest petition had over 4 million signatures.

In this Parliament alone, 29,309 petitions have been created, leading to almost 200 government responses and 32 debates.

At the start of the Parliament, the Petitions Committee agreed the following objectives:

- The petitions system should be an effective way for petitioners to have their voices heard by Parliament and Government;
- The petitions system should increase and enhance public engagement with Parliament and Government, especially among people from disengaged groups; and
- The petitions system should connect petitioners with parliamentary business and increase Parliament’s awareness of petitioners’ concerns.

Methods

The Committee has experimented with different types of public engagement to inform its inquires and the petition debates that it schedules. This has included:

- Surveys (both quantitative and qualitative);
- Web threads on the Parliament website;
- Discussions on existing forums, such as Mumsnet and Money Saving Expert;
- “Digital debates”, which include discussions between the public and MPs on Twitter and House of Commons Facebook page;
- Informal evidence sessions with members of the public; and
- Round table discussions.
Examples

Almost all petitions debates are preceded by some kind of public engagement. Below are detailed examples of how the different public engagement methods have worked in practice.

Surveys

Quantitative surveys have proven particularly useful for hearing from very large numbers of signatories to petitions in a manageable way. A 20% response rate to a request for information on a petition can lead to tens of thousands of answers. The use of quantitative surveys mean that we can hear from large numbers of signatories to petitions without significant extra resources.

Qualitative surveys require more staff resources, but allow more scope for signatories to petitions to express their views.

*Survey: Open book GCSE English Literature exam*

The Committee received a petition asking to “Change the GCSE English Literature exam from closed book to open book.” The Committee agreed to schedule this petition for debate on 26 March 2018

*Method*

A quantitative survey was chosen to allow the Committee to hear from a large number of those who signed the petition. There were also concerns that many signatories of the petition were under 18 and it would not be appropriate to encourage them to share their concerns in a public forum. A survey allowed all the information to be reviewed and summarised by staff without being made public.

To design the survey, the Committee worked with Parliament’s Education Service on a focus group with year eleven students.

The survey was sent to over 165,000 people who had signed the petition.

The survey allowed respondents to identify themselves as current students, former students, parents and carers, or teachers. Only teachers were directed to a free text box to allow them to make more detailed comments.

*Result*

The survey received 16,376 responses. 93% of respondents were taking their GCSE exams that year.

Answers were analysed by staff and summarised into a briefing for the Chair of the Committee, who was leading the debate. The Chair used both
statistics and quotes from the survey and the focus group during her speech.

The public engagement added more detailed statistical information about why people had signed the petition. The Member leading the debate was also able to use quotes from teachers to illustrate the data gathered from students. Committee staff would not have been able to analyse 16,376 responses without using a quantitative survey.

The debate is currently the second most watched debate on parliamentlive.tv this Parliament with just under 103,000 views.

*Survey: Debate on the cost of car insurance for young people*

The Committee received a petition asking to “Put a max of £1200 on car insurance for 18-25 year olds”. The petition had been signed by over 185,000 people.

The Committee scheduled a [debate](#) on this petition on 20 March 2017

The Committee decided to take formal [oral evidence](#) on this petition from insurance companies and experts to help inform the debate. It worked jointly with the Transport Committee to do so.

The Committee also decided to find out more from those who had signed the petition, to help inform the debate and its questioning during the formal oral evidence session.

**Method**

The survey was designed with both quantitative and qualitative questions about young drivers and car insurance.

The Committee also held an informal meeting with the petition creator, Rhys, to find out more about why he started the petition and how the issue affected him.

**Result**

The survey received 20,498 responses.

The Committee used the information from the survey and informal meeting with Rhys during the formal oral evidence session.

The oral evidence was published and made available to MPs taking part in the petition debate.

The survey showed that 49% of young people in rural areas could not get to work without a car and 31% could not get to education or training. Some respondents were young carers, who told the Committee about how their caring responsibilities made a car was essential.
Through the public engagement, what could have been a debate about whether young people were bad drivers became a debate about access to work and education and the experiences of young carers.
Web threads on the Parliamentary website and discussions on existing forums

Web threads have proven to be particularly useful in hearing people’s experiences in a more accessible and informal way than asking people to submit written evidence.

Web threads can be resource intensive as they require staff to carefully check all comments before publishing them on the Parliament website. They do not have the same protection from privilege as formal written evidence, which is reported to the House.

Web thread: the closure of retail stores on Boxing Day

The Committee received a petition “Close all retail on Boxing Day, retail isn't needed on Boxing Day!” which had over 148,000 signatures.

The Committee scheduled this petition for a debate on 12 December 2016.

To help inform the debate, the Committee decided to hear the views of signatories to the petition and the wider public. It invited people to share their personal experiences of boxing day shopping and working in retail on a web thread on the Parliament website.

A link to the web thread was emailed to everyone who had signed the petition. It was also promoted on Parliament’s social media channels.

Result

The web thread received over 8,000 comments from retail workers, their families, store owners and shoppers. All comments were read by staff, summarised and made available to Members.

The Chair of the Committee led the debate and used quotes from the web thread during her speech.

The public engagement helped to balance out the economic arguments expressed during the debate by bringing in some of the personal experiences of those affected.

The public engagement and debate helped to drive a large amount of media coverage on the issue.
Web thread and informal meetings for the Petitions Committee’s inquiry into funding for research into brain tumours

Fund more research into brain tumours, the biggest cancer killer of under-40s

This petition had been started by Maria Lester in August 2015 on the anniversary of the death of her brother, Stephen, from a brain tumour. Stephen died when he was just 26. Maria’s petition called for more funding for brain tumour research.

The Committee decided to launch an inquiry into this petition in October 2015. This was the Committee’s first ever inquiry. When the Committee made its decision, the petition had just under 14,000 signatures and had received a response from the Government. The Committee was surprised to see that, in spite of the excellent work done by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Brain Tumours, there had not been any recent debates on brain tumours. The Government’s response to the petition also did not give the Committee confidence that the Department for Health had grasped the seriousness of the concerns highlighted by the petition. The Committee therefore decided—having first consulted the Health Committee—to start its own inquiry.

The Committee published its report in March 2016 (during brain tumour awareness month) and scheduled a debate on this petition on 18 April 2016.

Method

The Committee opened a web forum on which people affected by brain tumours could share their views and experiences. There were 1,100 contributions in just five days—at the time, a record for a select committee web thread.

Some of those who responded were invited to attend a private informal round table event with the Committee. This enabled Committee Members to hear in more detail from those affected by brain tumours and for Members to meet some of the people behind the stories. Their stories are included in the Committee’s final report. Many of those who participated became ambassadors for the Committee’s inquiry, doing local press about their experience and promoting its final report.

The Committee also held two oral evidence sessions, including taking evidence from the petition’s creator, Maria Lester, and her parents. This oral evidence was done in the usual formal way, but the Committee had previously met the family informally and staff spent a lot of time helping to prepare the family. The Committee also allowed Maria to read an
opening speech at her request, which helped her say everything she wanted to.

In March 2016 the Committee published its report. Within the report, the personal experiences of patients and their families are recounted in depth, often in their own words, and includes photographs of people lost to brain tumours far too young. This helped create a powerful report.

The report concluded that brain tumour research funding was inadequate and not given sufficient priority. It called for the Government to give a clear statement of whether it believed that current levels of funding were adequate, and if not, asked what it would do to ensure that funding for brain tumour research increases.

The Committee launched the report at an event in Parliament where the petitioner and those who had contributed to the web thread and Committee’s inquiry were invited to attend. This helped gather support behind the Committee’s report and recommendations.

The report was positively received not just by campaigners, but also by oncologists and brain surgeons.

Result

It was standing room only in Westminster Hall for MPs and the public when the petition was debated on 18 April. The community that had gathered around the petition and inquiry were excellent campaigners and lobbied their MPs to attend. Many MPs shared stories of their constituents during the debate, adding to the stories already cited in the report.

In response to the debate and the Committee’s report, the Minister announced that the Government [now] accepted that it needed to do more to increase the amount of funding for brain tumour research, and announced that he would set up a Department of Health working group of clinicians, charities and officials to work out how to do that.

The Government’s response to the debate and to the Committee’s report was a huge change from its initial response to the Committee. When Maria and her family came out of the gallery they told staff, “we feel like we’ve all finally been heard.”

Peter Realf, Maria and Stephen’s father, was invited to take part in the working group to be the representative of families affected by brain tumours.

The working group report was published on 22 February 2018. Its publication was accompanied by a joint press notice from the Government and Cancer Research UK announcing an extra £45 million of funding for research into brain tumours. The Government has since released another
press announcement on 13 May 2018 announcing a “Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Research Mission” which the Committee understands will be overseeing the funding and implementation of the recommendations made by the Department of Health’s working group. The Committee continues to follow up on this work.

Peter Realf has been heavily involved in promoting the work of the Petitions Committee and sharing his experience with those representing "disengaged" groups to help encourage more people to understand and use petitions as one way to help get their voices heard.
Web thread and formal oral evidence session with contributors: inquiry into high heels and workplace dress codes

Make it illegal for a company to require women to wear high heels at work

This petition was started by Nicola Thorp after she was sent home from work for refusing to wear high heels. She said that she had googled ‘how to change the law’ and saw a link to start a petition on the UK Government and Parliament petitions site.

The Committee, working jointly with the Women and Equalities Committee, decided to conduct an inquiry into this petition in June 2016. The aim of the Committee’s inquiry was to gain a clear understanding of what the current law says about this issue and how it is affecting people in the UK.

The Committee published its joint report with the Women and Equalities Committee in January 2017.

Method

The Committee first wanted to know how widespread the issue was by conducting some public engagement. It opened a web thread on the Parliament website and invited comments from anyone who had been affected by the issue. It received over 700 responses.

Through Parliament’s Digital Outreach Team, the Committee also worked with Mumsnet, an online parenting forum, who hosted a thread in which women were invited to share their experiences.

The comments received highlighted to the Committee that there were certain industries where the practice of requiring women to wear high heels was rife, particularly the hospitality and retail sectors.

The Committee, working with the Women and Equalities Committee, decided to hear from experts on the issue as well as Nicola and two women who had commented on its web thread. Although they had never been to Parliament before, they gave excellent evidence to the Committee. However, it was with regret that the Committee learnt that one of the witnesses who was invited to give evidence after commenting on the web thread, had received some online abuse as a result. (This is something all Committees should consider when dealing with non-expert witnesses on certain types of inquires that can attract negative attention).

The public engagement along with the oral evidence highlighted that this was a serious problem affecting mainly women in insecure jobs, highlighting an issue that the Government had not been aware of.
The Committees published a joint report which called for the Government to take urgent action to improve the effectiveness of the Equality Act. It recommended that the Government look carefully at the current law and, if necessary, to ask Parliament to amend it – to make it clearer.

The report also called for more effective deterrents for employers such as financial penalties and an awareness campaign directed at employers, workers and students, to improve their understanding of the law and workers’ rights.

**Result**

The company who had been responsible for the dress code which had affected Nicola Thorp apologised to the Committee and changed their workplace dress codes.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission ran a social media campaign aimed at young women to promote awareness of the law, following the petition and the Committees’ inquiry.

The Government has produced guidance on workplace dress codes which it published on 17 May 2018. The Chair of the Committee did a joint press briefing with Nicola in Manchester on 23 July to raise the profile of this new guidance and the success of Nicola’s petition.
Digital debates

The Committee staff work closely with Parliament’s Digital Outreach Team who facilitate digital debates on Parliament’s social media channels and on other existing online forums.

*Foreign aid spending digital debate*

**Stop spending a fixed 0.7 per cent slice of our national wealth on Foreign Aid**

The Committee scheduled this petition for a [debate](#) on 13 June 2016. The Committee agreed to work with the International Development Committee on a live Twitter chat, to help inform the debate.

*Method*

Steve Double MP, the Member of the Petitions Committee who led the debate, and Stephen Twigg MP, Chair of the International Development Committee, both took part in a one-hour Twitter chat and asked the public a set of prepared questions about international aid. At the time, it was the first House of Commons digital debate with more than one Member taking part.

*Result*

Out of all the House of Commons digital debates held so far, #ukaiddebate was the:

- 1st highest in number of original tweets (1,400)
- 2nd highest in reach (number of twitter account feeds it appeared in) (7,715,203)
- 3rd for retweets in general (3,414)

During the digital and Westminster Hall debate, #UKAidDebate was trending in the UK. Comments made by the public were referred to during the Westminster Hall debate.

*Fireworks digital debate*

**Change the laws governing the use of fireworks to include a ban on public use**

The Committee scheduled this petition for [debate](#) on 29 January 2018.

*Method*

A [Facebook discussion card](#) was posted on the House of Commons Facebook page to hear the public’s opinions on the petition.
The UK Fireworks Forum, a forum for firework enthusiasts, also posted a thread so that the Committee could hear the opposing view to the petition.

**Result**

The Facebook post was seen by 10,853 accounts between 19 and 24 January 2018. There were 932 clicks on the post and 246 engagements which include comments, reactions (such as likes etc.) and shares. The forum received 16 detailed comments.

Both the Facebook and forum comments were used by Susan Elan Jones MP, the Member of the Petitions Committee who led the debate, in her opening speech.
Consulting on draft Committee recommendations through surveys, Facebook and informal round table events: Committee inquiry into online abuse and the experiences of disabled people. (Ongoing)

Make online abuse a specific criminal offence and create a register of offenders

The Petitions Committee agreed to conduct an inquiry into online abuse, specifically focusing on the experiences of disabled people.

This petition was started by Katie Price following the online abuse directed at her son, Harvey, who has complex disabilities.

The Committee specifically wanted to hear from disabled people themselves. The inquiry began with an informal session with disabled people to hear about their views and experiences.

Although there was scope for digital engagement, the Committee recognised the sensitivities around the topic. There were concerns that open public engagement could encourage people to make public accusations of crime or potentially direct abuse back on to the petitioner. The Committee were also mindful of the capacity for staff to deal with potential disclosures of abuse.

The Committee decided that it would consult with disabled people and other members of the public on a set of draft recommendations towards the end of the inquiry, before finalising its recommendations in a final report.

The consultation encouraged public involvement, but reduced the potential risks associated with engaging on such sensitive topics.

Method

The Committee published its draft recommendations in a Special Report which has also been produced in Easy Read and Brail versions.

The Committee has held informal round table discussion events with disabled people in Scotland, Northern Ireland, north-east England (and will hold similar events in London and Wales this October) to discuss the recommendations in detail and hear the views of disabled people.

The Committee also produced an online survey, which has been shared widely with charities and groups representing disabled people. The House of Commons Facebook page has also hosted a discussion thread on the recommendations.

This appears to be the first time a House of Commons Select Committee has consulted on its draft recommendations, before producing a final report.
Oral evidence in an informal layout

The Committee has experimented with different layouts for taking oral evidence sessions with signatories of a petition and members of the public, to help make them more comfortable and feel less intimidated. For example, instead of sitting at the traditional witness table, witnesses have been invited to sit around the horse shoe with MPs following a precedent set by the Environmental Audit Committee.

*Oral evidence session families: Meningitis B vaccine*

**Give the Meningitis B vaccine to ALL children, not just newborn babies.**

This petition was started in September 2015 by a concerned parent, Lee Booth, after he was told that his six-month-old daughter was too old to receive the vaccination.

The petition grew rapidly and gained over 800,000 signatures the following February after the parents of Faye Burdett who had contracted meningitis B shared photos of their daughter seriously ill in hospital. Faye tragically died on 14 February 2016.

The Committee scheduled a [debate](#) on this petition on 25 April 2016.

The Committee decided to work jointly with the Health Committee to hear oral evidence on this issue to help inform the debate.

The Committee invited the Burdett family, the petition creator and other families who had been directly affected by meningitis B to give oral evidence. This enabled them to share their stories and have their voices heard. It was obviously a very sensitive issue and the Committee were able to make it as informal as possible by enabling the families to sit around the horseshoe with them.

*Result*

During the debate the Minister announced an awareness campaign of the symptoms of meningitis B.

The Government also committed to publishing a report on how the cost-effectiveness of vaccines was calculated. Following an [oral evidence session](#) with the Minister in February 2018 to pressure the Government to make good its commitment to publish this report, the Government agreed to launch an [accessible consultation](#) on the method for calculating the cost-effectiveness of vaccines for the public to contribute to.
Emailing signatories of petitions to promote the work of the House

The House of Commons Procedure Committee report, which recommended the setting up of the jointly run petitions site and the Petitions Committee, said that one of the roles of the Petitions Committee staff team would be:

“[…] keeping petitioners and signatories who have opted in to receiving further information informed of the progress of their petition, and (subject to the volume of petitions received and the resources available) informing them of other Parliamentary developments or activity touching the subject of their petition, and making such information available on the e-petitions website”

It said:

“the establishment of a Petitions Committee with its own team of staff has the potential to produce a significant improvement in the information which is available to petitioners about what the House of Commons does and the many ways in which Members of Parliament use the opportunities the House offers them to respond to the public's concerns.”

In the first two years of the site being open, staff sent just under 200 emails to signatories of petitions about the following types of work which were directly related to the issue of their petition:

- Other debates in the House of Commons e.g. adjournment debates; Opposition Day Debates; Government Debates and Urgent Questions; and
- House of Commons Select Committee work e.g. web threads or opportunities to contribute to relevant inquiries; oral evidence sessions; and the publication of reports.

The Procedure Committee report was clear that this work would be done “subject to the volume of petitions received and the resources available”. In practice, the volume of petitions to check has vastly exceeded expectations.

Result

Emails notifying signatories of a debate include links to the Hansard transcript and parliamentlive.tv. The emails sent to signatories have led to an increase of over 300% of readership of Hansard and 900% of viewing of Westminster Hall debates.

Petitions debates or debates that the Committee team have emailed signatories to petitions about were the most viewed or read debates every week since the Committee was re-established at beginning of the 2017
Parliament. In any given week, they receive an average of 87% more readers than the second most popular item of Parliamentary business.

Emailing signatories about relevant Select Committee inquiries has had a particularly significant impact.

For example, some 86% of people who visited the recent PACAC forum on Devolution and Brexit went there following an email from the Petitions Committee team. The largest petition involved had only 3,079 signatures, but drove nearly 8,000 people to the forum, suggesting that emails to signatories are widely shared.

Emails to signatories also seem to have diversified the people contributing to inquiries. For example, following an email to signatories of a petition about changes to the Royal Marines, a significant number of submissions to a Defence Committee inquiry came former Marines and Navy personnel, who do not generally engage with Select Committee inquiries. They were directly affected by the topic of the inquiry and displayed expertise and understanding of the issues.

The House of Commons Committee Office Web and Publications team have begun to track the impact of emailing signatories with calls to evidence, so that more detailed evidence of impact can be tracked.

One of the first emails which Petitions Committee staff sent, was to approximately 30,000 people who had signed a petition to “Allow transgender people to self-define their legal gender”. The Women and Equality Committee received 85 of its 253 pieces of evidence were from people who had signed the petition. The evidence included very personal stories, which were described as “a really valuable part of the inquiry.”

October 2018