



House of Commons  
Procedure Committee

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# **e-Petitions: Call for Government action**

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**Second Report of Session 2008–09**





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**Second Report of Session 2008–09**

*Report, together with formal minutes and  
written evidence*

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## Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

### Membership during the Session

Rt Hon Greg Knight MP (*Conservative, Yorkshire East*) (Chairman, from 9.11.05)  
Ms Celia Barlow MP (*Labour, Hove*)  
Mr Christopher Chope MP (*Conservative, Christchurch*)  
Ms Katy Clark MP (*Labour, North Ayrshire and Arran*)  
Mr Mark Field MP (*Labour, Cities of London and Westminster*)  
Mr Roger Gale MP (*Conservative, North Thanet*)  
Andrew Gwynne MP (*Labour, Denton and Reddish*)  
John Hemming MP (*Liberal Democrat, Birmingham, Yardley*)  
Mr Eric Illsley MP (*Labour, Barnsley Central*)  
Mrs Siân C. James MP (*Labour, Swansea East*)  
Mrs Linda Riordan MP (*Labour, Halifax*)  
Sir Robert Smith MP (*Liberal Democrat, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine*)  
Sir Peter Soulsby MP (*Labour, Leicester South*)

The following Members were also members of the Committee during the Parliament:

Mr David Anderson MP (*Labour, Blaydon*)  
Mr Jim Cunningham MP (*Labour, Coventry South*)  
Annette Brooke MP (*Liberal Democrat, Mid Dorset and Poole North*)  
Mr David Gauke MP (*Conservative, South West Hertfordshire*)  
Rosemary McKenna MP (*Labour, Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East*)  
Sir Nicholas Winterton MP (*Conservative, Macclesfield*) (Chairman till 9.11.05)  
Mr Rob Wilson MP (*Conservative, Reading East*)

### Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 147. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/proccom>.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Lynn Gardner and Miss Sara Howe (Clerks) and Rowena Macdonald (Committee Assistant).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Procedure Committee, Journal Office, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA . The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 3318; the Committee's email address is [proccom@parliament.uk](mailto:proccom@parliament.uk)

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## Summary

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On 6 April 2008 the Procedure Committee published a Report on e-Petitions in which we recommended that the House of Commons adopt a system of e-petitions to offer a simple, effective and transparent way for the public to tell the House and its Members about what matters to them and to indicate the levels of support for their concerns.

In July 2008 the Government issued a response, accepting our recommendations.

We very much regret that the Government now appears to lack the will to see this project through to its conclusion by approving funding at a level that would ensure the robustness and effectiveness of the e-petitions system we outlined. We call upon the Government to think again.



# Report

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## Our proposals for a parliamentary e-petitions system

On 6 April 2008 the Procedure Committee published a Report on e-Petitions in which we recommended that the House of Commons adopt a system of e-petitions to offer a simple, effective and transparent way for the public to tell the House and its Members about what matters to them and to indicate the levels of support for their concerns.<sup>1</sup> We set out a proposal for a scheme with the following key characteristics:

- E-petitions are submitted via the parliamentary website.
- If they comply with the House’s rules, the petitioner’s constituency MP will be asked to act as facilitator.
- The e-petition is then posted on the parliamentary website for a set period. Others may add their names to it.
- At the end of the period, it is closed. Members will be able to indicate support for it.
- It is then e-presented to the House.
- Petitioners and signatories may opt in to receive updates on the progress of the e-petition and/or up to two emails from their constituency MP.
- E-petitions will be printed in Hansard and sent to select committees and may be considered by them.
- The Government will normally be expected to reply within two months of presentation.
- On three occasions each year, certain e-petitions will be debated by the House of Commons in Westminster Hall.

2. Our e-petitions inquiry fulfilled a commitment in a previous Report, *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*,<sup>2</sup> to examine “the practical and procedural implications of introducing e-petitioning with a view to proposing a worked-up and practicable system to the House in due course”.<sup>3</sup> The Government expressed its support for the principle of such a scheme in its response to that Report and urged us to come forward with a worked-up scheme as soon as practicable. Similarly, on 25 October 2007 the House passed a motion welcoming our Report. We therefore were gratified but not surprised by the Government’s positive response to our e-petitions proposals as set out in a written ministerial statement on 22 July 2008.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Government went further in arguing that select committees should have an even stronger role in responding to e-petitions than we had set out.

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1 *E-Petitions*, First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2007-08, HC 136

2 *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2006-07, HC 513

3 *Ibid*, para 58

4 HC Deb, 22 July 2008, col 96-99WS

3. The Government response anticipated that there would be a debate on our Report in autumn 2008 on the basis of “a Motion which would seek the House’s endorsement for the principle of e-petitioning on the basis set out in this statement, instruct the House service to begin the design and tendering process, and charge the Procedure Committee with oversight of the introduction of the system and with consideration of more detailed rules of order”.<sup>5</sup> In the event, no debate was announced and in December 2008 we received a letter from Chris Bryant MP, Deputy Leader of the House, indicating a significant shift in Government opinion with less support for an e-petitioning system as previously envisaged.<sup>6</sup> The Deputy Leader’s letter reiterated the Government belief that “the system you have proposed would both strengthen the traditional role of the House of Commons as the recipient of petitions and make the process more accessible for the public”.<sup>7</sup> However, it went on to raise questions about the projected costs of the proposed scheme and asked us to “look at the options for lowering the expense of the House system, with the aim of producing a more cost-effective solution whilst establishing and maintaining a system in which Members and the public can have confidence”.<sup>8</sup>

4. In his letter, the Deputy Leader quoted an estimate of £500,000 for the set-up of the parliamentary system and £840,000 for annual running costs. It is difficult to provide accurate estimates for our proposed system because, as we stated in our Report, we are not aware of any other existing scheme of comparable scale and ambition. Uncertainties are created by the lack of experience or direct comparison by which to gauge the number of e-petitions likely to be submitted to and accepted by Parliament, which self-evidently would have a considerable impact on the running costs, if not necessarily on the set-up costs. One certainty, however, is that the system would involve significant expense in ensuring both that it was secure and that it worked efficiently from the first day of operation – essential factors in commanding the confidence of the public and of Members. Any reductions in costs would therefore have to be found largely in areas other than the development of the IT system. The Deputy Leader hints at this when he recognises that “finding a lower-cost option might entail further changes to the procedures which you originally recommended”.<sup>9</sup>

5. We recognise that public expenditure on the scale involved in e-petitioning has to be justified, especially at this time when the country is in recession, and in this spirit, we have carefully considered options to reduce the cost.<sup>10</sup> The result of this exercise is that we have concluded that a significant reduction cannot be achieved without breaching the fundamental principles that petitions should form part of parliamentary proceedings and that constituency Members should remain directly involved in the petitions procedure.<sup>11</sup> We stress, however, that even if we were to compromise on these essential features of our proposed system, we do not believe that the cost could be reduced sufficiently to bring the

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5 HC Deb, 22 July 2008, col 99WS

6 Ev 1

7 Ev 1

8 Ev 1

9 Ev 1

10 We are grateful to staff of the Commons for responding to our request for confidential detailed information on the cost implications of various aspects of our proposed scheme.

11 *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions*, First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2006-07, HC 513, para 58

estimate within the bounds envisaged by the Government. We believe that to accept unrealistic restrictions on costs would result in the delivery of either no e-petitions system at all or, worse, one which would bring the House of Commons into disrepute. On that basis, we are not prepared to support further work on a system which would fall far short of meeting the objective of public engagement and of reflecting the principal characteristics of Member involvement and forming part of parliamentary proceedings which were set out in the Procedure Committee Report agreed by the House.

## The Downing Street e-petitions site

6. The Government argument that we should be able to reduce the costs and still produce an effective e-petitions system is based upon a comparison with the Downing Street e-petitions site, suggesting that the difference between the set-up and running costs of the two “is so significant that it would be difficult to justify at this stage”.<sup>12</sup>

7. We have two objections to this argument. First, we note that the Deputy Leader does not disagree with us that the two systems are not “directly comparable”.<sup>13</sup> Although both sites are designed to allow members of the public to establish and add their names to petitions, and to receive a Government response, the parliamentary system would be unique in its interaction with parliamentary proceedings, which brings with it greater demands for security and authentication, as well as the involvement of Members and consequent activities, which together involve significant additional costs. In addition, we envisage that e-petitions to the House of Commons would be processed promptly whereas we understand that there is no such requirement for e-petitions to Downing Street. The differences between the two e-petitioning systems are considerable and account for a high proportion of the difference in the estimated cost.

8. Secondly, we have serious reservations over the robustness of the Downing Street costings. The Deputy Leader stated that the set-up costs of the Downing Street site were £17,500 and that the annual running costs are £109,100.<sup>14</sup> A later response by the Deputy Leader to a request from us for clarification gave broadly similar figures.<sup>15</sup> However, these are still in some cases estimates, rather than actual figures, and we note that in March 2007 the answer to a parliamentary question to the Prime Minister on the cost of administrative support to the Downing Street e-petitions system indicated that it was not possible to separate out this cost,<sup>16</sup> and that, more recently, a further reply stated that only a global figure for the cost of the digital communications unit was available, rather than the individual cost of maintaining the No. 10 website.<sup>17</sup>

9. Finally, although our Report on e-petitions rightly focussed on costs, we believe that there may well be savings to the House of Commons budget as a whole in implementing such a scheme; for example, by channelling large-scale campaigns through e-petitions

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12 Ev 1

13 Ev 1

14 Ev 1

15 Ev 2

16 HC Debates, 28 March 2007, c1524W

17 HC Debates, 26 November 2008, cc1481-2W

rather than through correspondence to Members which requires individual responses with consequent stationery and postage costs.

## **Conclusion**

**10. We remain of the view that the House should have an e-petition system because of its significant potential for enhancing public engagement with Parliament. We very much regret that the Government has changed its mind and now appears to lack the will to see this project through to its conclusion by approving funding at a level that would ensure the robustness and effectiveness of the system as outlined in our Report and accepted by the Leader of the House in her response. At a time when proposals to impose a new duty on councils to respond to electronic petitions are contained within the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill currently before Parliament, it is incomprehensible that the Government should prove reluctant to give Parliament the means adequately to undertake the same task. Whilst expenditure always needs to be considered carefully, particularly in the current economic circumstances, we do not believe that we can make the scale of economies we have been invited to consider and still deliver a viable, attractive scheme worthy of the purpose and of Parliament.**

**11. We call on the Government to think again and to allow the e-petitions project to move forward to the next stage of implementation as proposed by the Leader of the House in her response to our e-Petitions Report.**

# Formal Minutes

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**Wednesday 29 April 2009**

Members present:

Mr Greg Knight, in the Chair

Mr Christopher Chope  
Mr Mark Field  
Mr Roger Gale

John Hemming  
Sir Peter Soulsby  
Sir Robert Smith

Draft Report (e-Petitions: Call for Government action), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 11 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 13 May

## List of written evidence

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|---|---|------|
| 1 | Letter from Chris Bryant MP, Deputy Leader of the House (P8)  | Ev 1 |
| 2 | Letter from Chris Bryant MP, Deputy Leader of the House (P44) | Ev 2 |

# Reports from the Procedure Committee since 2005

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The following reports have been published during this Parliament:

## Session 2008–09

First Report	Interleaving of Bills and Explanatory Notes	HC 377
Second Report	e-Petitions: Call for Government action	HC 493

## Session 2007–08

First Report	e-Petitions	HC 136
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## Session 2006–07

First Report	Public Petitions and Early Day Motions	HC 513
Second Report	Corrections to the Official Report	HC 541

## Session 2005–06

First Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	HC 894
Second Report	Application of the <i>sub judice</i> rule to proceedings in coroners' courts	HC 714



## Written Evidence

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### Letter from Chris Bryant MP, Deputy Leader of the House to Rt Hon Greg Knight MP, Chairman, Procedure Committee

When we met on 11 November, I discussed with you the Procedure Committee's proposals for a new e-Petitioning system and specifically the projected costs of the system. I promised I would write to you ahead of your committee meeting on 10 December.

As the Leader of the House said in her Written Ministerial Statement on 22 July, the Government welcomes the Procedure Committee's proposals on e-Petitions. We believe that the system you have proposed would both strengthen the traditional role of the House of Commons as the recipient of petitions and make the process more accessible for the public.

The Leader also made clear that a fuller estimate of the likely costs should be made before the House endorses the implementation of the system. As we discussed, in the current economic climate any expenditure by the House on its own processes needs to be scrutinised very carefully and must be fully justifiable to the general public. I note that the estimated costs, as provided to you by the House Management Board in January stood at £500,000 for the set-up of the system, and £840,000 annual running costs. My understanding is these figures may now be revised upwards.

By way of contrast, I said I would provide the costs associated with the No. 10 e-Petitions website. These are as follows:

	Initial Costs £k	Running Costs £k per annum
Set-up	17.5	—
System running cost	—	15.6
System support	—	7.5 (average)
Staffing	—	86.0*
<b>Total</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>109.1</b>

*\*Based on 3 full-time staff (1 at Grade C; 2 at Grade B1) including Pensions and National Insurance Contributions.*

I realise that the No. 10 e-petition site is not directly comparable to the proposals you have made, but I find the difference between projected cost is so significant that it would be difficult to justify at this stage. I would therefore be grateful if you could look at the options for lowering the expense of the House system, with the aim of producing a more cost-effective solution whilst establishing and maintaining a system in which Members and the public can have confidence. I realise that finding a lower-cost option might entail further changes to the procedures which you originally recommended.

I would be happy for the Committee to consider re-designing the system in the light of the need to contain costs.

I look forward to hearing from you.

February 2009

**Letter from Chris Bryant MP, Deputy Leader of the House, to Rt Hon Greg Knight MP, Chairman, Procedure Committee**

Thank you for your letter of 27 January. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Downing Street has confirmed that the figure of £17,500 for procurement of their system is correct. This is what they paid My Society to set the system up, using free, open-source software. They have also confirmed that the hosting cost is £1,500 per calendar month and, in 2008–09, they plan to spend £5,500 on upgrade work. These are actual, known costs, rather than estimates.

Staffing cost is more difficult to estimate, since nobody is employed to work exclusively on petitions, but I am advised that it is very unlikely to be any higher than the figure of £86,000 per annum which I quoted in my previous letter and could in fact be lower.

I note that the costings provided to the Committee by the Management Board include elements for later sittings of the I-louse and additional printing costs for Hansard, based on the assumption that more than 30 petitions would be presented on an average sitting day. These costs obviously do not apply to the Downing St website. The Management Board also estimates that an initial staff of seven would be required, whereas the Downing St system requires an estimated two or three full-time equivalents.

However, even taking account of these differences, the House's estimates for the cost of procuring and maintaining the relevant ICT systems remain far greater than the equivalent costs for Downing St.

*March 2009*