Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall

Sixth Report of Session 2012–13
House of Commons
Procedure Committee

Debates on
Government e-Petitions in
Westminster Hall

Sixth Report of Session 2012–13

Report, together with formal minutes and written evidence

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 17 April 2013
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.

Current membership

Mr Charles Walker MP (Conservative, Broxbourne) (Chair)
Jenny Chapman MP (Labour, Darlington)
Nic Dakin MP (Labour, Scunthorpe)
Thomas Docherty MP (Labour, Dunfermline and West Fife)
Sir Roger Gale MP (Conservative, North Thanet)
Helen Goodman MP (Labour, Bishop Auckland)
Mr James Gray MP (Conservative, North Wiltshire)
Tom Greatrex MP (Lab/Co-op, Rutherglen and Hamilton West)
John Hemming MP (Liberal Democrat, Birmingham Yardley)
Mr David Nuttall MP (Conservative, Bury North)
Jacob Rees-Mogg MP (Conservative, North East Somerset)
Martin Vickers MP (Conservative, Cleethorpes)

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

Rt Hon Greg Knight MP (Conservative, Yorkshire East) (Chair until 6 September 2012)
Karen Bradley MP (Conservative, Staffordshire Moorlands)
Andrew Percy MP (Conservative, Brigg and Goole)
Bridget Phillipson MP (Labour, Houghton and Sunderland South)
Angela Smith MP (Labour, Penistone and Stocksbridge)
Sir Peter Soulsby MP (Labour, Leicester South)
Mike Wood MP (Labour, Batley and Spen)

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.

Publications

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 Huw Yardley (Clerk), Lloyd Owen (Second Clerk) and Jim Camp (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.
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**Summary**

In July 2012, the House agreed to allow debates on Government e-petitions to take place on Mondays in Westminster Hall, on a trial basis during the current session. Three debates have taken place during the session, with a fourth scheduled on the day of publication of this report. The Government’s e-petitions website continues to be popular, and a dedicated slot in Westminster Hall on Monday afternoon provides a clear end-point for the process. We agree with the Backbench Business Committee that the trial has been successful and recommend that the temporary changes to the Standing Orders be made permanent.
1 Debates on Government e-petitions in Westminster Hall

Introduction

1. On 17 July 2012 the House agreed to a recommendation in our 7th Report of Session 2010–12 to allow debates to take place on Mondays in Westminster Hall to consider e-petitions set down by the Backbench Business Committee.¹ This was implemented on a trial basis until the end of the current Session.

Experience of the pilot of Monday sessions to debate e-petitions in Westminster Hall

2. During the course of this Session there have been three debates in Westminster Hall to consider e-petitions, with a fourth scheduled on the day of publication of this report.² Each debate which has taken place has been well attended, with contributions from Members from all sides of the House. E-petitions continue to be popular, with the most popular receiving hundreds of signatures per hour.³ There has not been overwhelming demand for the House to hold debates on e-petitions, but interest amongst Members and the public has remained significant.

View of the Backbench Business Committee

3. The Backbench Business Committee has considered the impact of such debates. In its view:

The Committee’s unanimous view was that the pilot has been a success. The level of demand for Monday debates has not been overwhelming; the Committee retains its right to assess whether particular petitions which have reached the eligibility threshold of 100,000 signatures are suitable for such a debate; and in the four cases where it has given its assent to a bid for debate, it felt that a sound case had been made that the debate would secure a good attendance by Members and be of widespread interest to the public.

The Committee would therefore support a further amendment to the relevant Standing Orders to make this change permanent.⁴

Cost

4. The Government’s response to our previous report expressed the view that it was “vital the issue of cost is considered as part of the review of any pilot and before any subsequent

¹ Debates on Government E-petitions, Seventh Report of Session 2010-12, HC 1706.
³ http://petitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions
⁴ See the written evidence on page 9 of this Report.
decision on proposals for the availability and use of time beyond the pilot period”. The response estimated that, based on evidence provided to our last inquiry by the Clerk Assistant, it would cost around £34,200 per annum if a debate was held each month (one debate a month being the figure which would result at the then prevailing rate of e-petitions reaching the 100,000-signature threshold).

5. The Clerk Assistant has confirmed that experience has provided no reason to alter the estimates of the cost of holding Monday sessions in Westminster Hall to debate e-petitions which he made at the time of our original inquiry. There have been fewer such sessions than anticipated at the time of the Government’s response: at the current rate of four per Session the estimated cost of holding such sessions is just over £11,000 per annum. The maximum annual cost which would be incurred, were such a debate to be held in every sitting week, would be a little over £100,000. Based on these estimates, we consider that the use of Westminster Hall on a Monday afternoon to debate e-petitions represents an appropriate use of resources, bearing in mind that there is a public expectation that e-petitions will be considered by the House.

**Allocation of backbench time**

6. In evidence preceding our previous report, the Government suggested that time allocated to debates on e-petitions be counted as backbench business for the purposes of Standing Order No. 14(4). Whilst the Backbench Business Committee is responsible for determining whether an e-petition should be debated in Westminster Hall, e-petitions arise out of Government and are addressed to the responsible Government Department. The proposal that e-petitions should be debated in the House came from Government and the House was not asked to take a decision on it before it was introduced. We therefore remain of the view that it would not be appropriate for these debates to be counted towards the sessional total of backbench business days. The Backbench Business Committee supports this view. However, we would not seek to limit the ability of the Backbench Business Committee to schedule time in the Chamber or on other days in Westminster Hall to consider e-petitions where appropriate. Such debates would properly count towards the sessional total of backbench business.

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5 Debates on Government E-Petitions: Government Response to the Committee’s Seventh Report of Session 2010-12, Fourth Special Report of Session 2010-12, HC 1902.

6 Debates on Government E-Petitions, Ev 8.

7 Debates on Government E-Petitions, Qn 9–11, 18.

8 Debates on Government E-Petitions, para 12.

9 See the written evidence on page 9 of this Report.
2 Conclusion and recommendations

7. We agree with the Backbench Business Committee that the current pilot has been successful. The use of a dedicated slot in Westminster Hall on Monday afternoon provides a clear end-point for the e-petition process. It allows the House to consider e-petitions without reducing time for debate on other subjects. It also provides a cost-effective means by which the House can meet public expectations to debate e-petitions. We see no reason why this success should not continue. **We therefore recommend that the changes to Standing Orders No. 10, No. 14 and No. 152] be made permanent.**

8. We have just one change to propose to the current arrangements. E-petitions are currently considered on a motion “That this House has considered the e-petition from [petitioners] relating to [subject of e-petition]”. In practice identification of the petitioners has not been consistently used, nor do we consider it necessary. **We recommend a minor change to Standing Order No. 10(5)(a) such that e-petitions be considered on a motion “That this House has considered the e-petition relating to [subject of e-petition]”**.
Formal Minutes

Wednesday 17 April 2013

Members present:

Mr Charles Walker, in the Chair

Mrs Jenny Chapman
Nic Dakin
Thomas Docherty
Sir Roger Gale
Helen Goodman

Tom Greatrex
John Hemming
Mr David Nuttall
Jacob Rees-Mogg
Martin Vickers

Draft Report (Debates on Government e-Petitions in Westminster Hall), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 8 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

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

[Adjourned till Wednesday 24 April at 3.00 pm]
Written evidence

Memorandum from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee

**Sittings in Westminster Hall (e-Petitions)**

The Backbench Business Committee has reviewed the operation of the temporary change to Standing Order Nos. 10, 14 and 152J to allow the Committee to schedule debates on e-petitions between 4.30 pm and 7.30 pm on Mondays in Westminster Hall up till the end of the present Session.

Since this change came into effect last September, the Committee has scheduled four such debates on e-petitions, two of which were held in the autumn, and two of which will take place before the end of the Session.

The Committee’s unanimous view was that the pilot has been a success. The level of demand for Monday debates has not been overwhelming; the Committee retains its right to assess whether particular petitions which have reached the eligibility threshold of 100,000 signatures are suitable for such a debate; and in the four cases where it has given its assent to a bid for debate, it felt that a sound case had been made that the debate would secure a good attendance by Members and be of widespread interest to the public.

The Committee would therefore support a further amendment to the relevant Standing Orders to make this change permanent. It does so on the assumption that, as was the case during the pilot, days allocated under this procedure should continue not to count towards the total of 35 backbench business days per Session provided for by Standing Order No. 14(4).

*20 March 2013*
# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government’s response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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