

From: Joel Cook – Democratic Services Manager
To: County Council – 23 May 2024
Subject: **Petition Scheme Review**
Status: Unrestricted

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Selection and Member Services Committee considered the petition scheme several times in 2023 and 2024. The Committee agreed to recommend changes to the number of signatures required on petitions to trigger debates at various types of meetings. As the Petition Scheme forms part of the Constitution, County Council must now consider the recommendations from Selection and Member Services Committee.
- 1.2 This report sets out the key points discussed by the Committee as it worked towards developing the final recommendations and outlines the main considerations that were used to determine the suggested changes. Extensive background on the history of the petition scheme and commentary on the role petitions play within the Council's governance have been set out in the previous committee papers and full details are referenced in the Background Documents section.
- 1.3 The last substantive petition scheme review, undertaken in 2014 resulted in no changes being recommended. The last change to the Petition Scheme approved by County Council was in 2012, when the number of signatures required for a petition debate at County Council was reduced to 10,000 and a requirement for a debate at a Cabinet Committee was introduced if over 2,500 signatures were received.
- 1.4 The data on petitions received and processed for the period 2014 to August 2023 was presented to Selection and Member Services during this current review and no further information on more recent petitions indicates any substantive change to patterns or signature levels so the appendices for the prior reports remain relevant.

2 Petition Scheme

- 2.1 The Petition Scheme sets out for the public the process for submitting a valid petition, either a paper petition or an e-petition. The Petition Scheme makes it clear that if a valid petition is submitted it will receive a response and, depending on the number of signatures, it may lead to a debate at County Council, a Cabinet Committee or be referred to another appropriate meeting. This information can be accessed via the [Petitions page](#) on the Kent.gov website.
- 2.2 A summary of the current petition thresholds is set out below with brief commentary on how these operate in practice:
- All accepted petitions will receive a response from the responsible Cabinet Member (where further action such as committee debate is required under the

process, the written response will commonly be confirmation that any detailed response will be deferred pending committee consideration).

- (a) Where the petition relates to a County Council matter that relates to a specific District Council area and contains at least 1,000 signatures it will be debated at the most appropriate local meeting (e.g. Joint Transportation Board).
- (b) Between 2500 and 9999 signatures, the petition will be debated at the appropriate Cabinet Committee.
- (c) 10,000 signatures or more, the petition will be debated at County Council.

2.3 At present, the majority of petitions receive signature numbers at double or low three figure levels. As a result, the most common response to petitions is a written response from the relevant Cabinet Member. This is an appropriate and reasonable position for the scheme to be in because a key purpose of the petition scheme is to formalise, within the Council's governance, the requirements to respond to issues raised by interested stakeholders.

3 Committee consideration of the review

- 3.1 At a meeting of the [Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 29th June, 2023](#), Members were invited to consider the petition scheme generally, explore any areas requiring review and to provide Officers with a steer on the necessary review activity and related research. In particular, the Committee was asked to consider the merits and implications of changes to the petition thresholds, recognising that specific reductions in signature threshold numbers had been suggested by the Green & Independents Group earlier in the year.
- 3.2 The comments from the discussion were collated and a report was presented to a meeting of the [Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 19th October, 2023](#), setting out the merits, challenges and implications of the potential changes to the Petition Scheme.
- 3.3 The Selection and Member Services Committee were broadly in agreement with the principle of reducing the signature thresholds to encourage resident engagement with the Council and the democratic process. However, prior to agreement, Members sought further assurance on the eligibility criteria of signatories and clarification on the operational considerations before resolving any firm recommendations to Full Council.
- 3.4 The Selection and Member Services Committee considered an update on the review and approved recommendations for changes to the Scheme at its meeting on 14 March 2024.

4 Recommended Changes

- 4.1 The Selection and Member Services Committee, at its meeting on 14 March 2024, resolved the following:

- a) Confirm that that 'live, work or study in Kent' be maintained as the eligibility criteria for signatories.
- b) Recommend that the relevant signature thresholds for requiring formal debates be amended as follows:

County Council:

Reduced from 10,000 to 5000 signatures

Cabinet Committee:

Reduced from 2500 to 1500 signatures.

Local meeting:

Reduced from 1000 to 750 signatures.

4.2 This decision confirmed that no change should be made to the eligibility criteria on the basis that the purpose of the Scheme was to encourage and facilitate interested stakeholders in engaging with the Council on key issues in a formalised way. It was noted that the previous review had considered the implications of not requiring all signatories be residents in Kent and that the view had been taken that in the modern setting where people travelled for work and education, the activities of the Council were important for residents and to those who travelled to the County.

4.3 The decision also set out new signature number levels for the various types of response. As set out above, the suggested number of signatures triggering the different debate settings was reduced across the board. The most significant reduction being halving the number needed to require a debate at Full Council. There have only been a limited number of issues debated at Full Council in the last decade and the Committee was of the view that the signature target should be made more achievable. The reductions in Cabinet Committee and local meeting signature levels are smaller in scale but have been proposed at levels designed to support a balanced approach that ensures significant strategic issues relevant to the Council may still be appropriately debated by Members while very local, smaller scale issues are duly considered and responded to by the relevant portfolio holder. An increase in the number of petition debates taking place at Full Council, Cabinet Committees and relevant Local Meetings should be expected if these changes are approved by Council.

4.4 All valid petitions would continue to receive a response from the relevant portfolio holder in all cases, though the nature of that response may vary depending on whether additional committee discussion is required. In cases where the proposed thresholds for further debate at meetings are not met, a written response will be the only outcome. This would apply to any petition receiving between 1 and 749 signatures under the proposed arrangements.

4.5 These proposed changes reflect a view from the Committee that it was a positive step to support an increased number of petition debates. It was noted that this may impact on the decision-making timeline and increase resource demand on certain departments as relevant issues arose but priority should be given to supporting stakeholder engagement in the Council's processes and deliberations.

4.6 A copy of the Petition Scheme with the proposed amendments showing as tracked changes is included as Appendix 1.

5 Summary of considerations

- 5.1 Petitions debated at the appropriate level are more likely to achieve the required outcome. Escalation to Full Council debate does not overrule the Executive's role as the final decision-maker and can result in duplication of the relevant Cabinet Committees' advisory role within the governance process. The Scheme must manage the expectations of the Lead petitioners and signatories.
- 5.2 Should reduced thresholds be implemented, additional resources would be required to manage an increase in petitions debated at Full Council and Cabinet Committee, therefore timetabling for all substantial or challenging decisions would have to be planned accordingly.
- 5.3 The 100,000 signature requirement for Parliamentary debate which framed previous suggestions of setting the County Council debate threshold at 2000 signatures, does not automatically trigger but rather prompts consideration of a debate. Also, the figure needs to be considered in context – an issue supported by 100,000 UK residents is more likely to have strategic implications for the Government and therefore merit Parliamentary debate. The equivalent proportion of the population figure in Kent (2000 signatures) does not necessarily indicate an issue of a similar strategic scale, with various petitions having a distinctly local or operational focus.
- 5.4 Limiting or restricting the eligibility criteria of the petition scheme and the introduction of substantive additional verification checks may have a detrimental impact on the operations and accessibility of the scheme, risking a perception of disenfranchising key stakeholders. The Petition Scheme is a mechanism used by the local authority to actively encourage participation and engagement in public matters and there are no significant operational concerns about inappropriate or ineligible signatories at present.
- 5.5 Any changes to which 'Local Meetings' were best placed to manage relevant petition debates required if the signature threshold is met (1000 at present and 750 in the new proposals) would be subject to wider Council governance activity, including review of Joint Transportation Boards. Any 'appropriate local meeting' should include a combination of formal Member involvement and the authority to make recommendations to the Council. At present, Joint Transportation Boards are the only official body to which this applies but if and when changes are made to District level arrangements, this may be reflected within the Scheme at that time.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The review and consideration by the Selection and Member Services committee concluded that the current eligibility arrangements remain effective in focusing the Scheme on issues affecting those with a specific connection to Kent. There is no evidence to suggest non-Kent residents routinely sign petitions in significant numbers to the point that it skews the process to a substantive degree or that this has any significant impact on the operations of the petition scheme and related debates or issue consideration by Members.

6.2 The Committee agreed that reducing the threshold that triggers debate at Cabinet Committee or Full Council sent a positive message that Elected Members wish to consider and discuss the views of Kent residents, students and workers on a more regular basis. The proposed signature thresholds seek to strike a balance between supporting an increased number of debates where there is clear and significant interest from stakeholders and recognising that the Council's formal meetings are dedicated, in the main, to considering strategic county-wide activity rather than locally focused matters.

7. Recommendation

County Council is asked to APPROVE the changes to the Petition Scheme, as recommended by the Selection and Member Services Committee.

Signature thresholds for requiring formal debates be amended as follows:

County Council:

Reduced from 10,000 to 5000 signatures

Cabinet Committee:

Reduced from 2500 to 1500 signatures.

Local meeting:

Reduced from 1000 to 750 signatures.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Proposed Amendments to Petition Scheme

8. Background Documents

Agenda Item, Petition Scheme Review, Selection and Member Services Committee
[Agenda for Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 30th November, 2023, 2.30 pm](#)

Agenda Item, Petition Scheme Review, Selection and Member Services Committee
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Agenda Item, Petition Scheme Review, Selection and Member Services Committee
[Agenda for Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 19th October, 2023, 2.30 pm](#)

Agenda Item, Petitions Review, Selection and Member Services meeting, 29 June
[2023 Agenda for Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 29th June, 2023, 2.30 pm](#)

Agenda Item, Petition Scheme Review, Selection and Member Services meeting 25 April 2014, [Agenda for Selection and Member Services Committee on Friday, 25th April, 2014, 2.30 pm \(kent.gov.uk\)](#)

Agenda Item, Petition Scheme Review, Selection and Member Services meeting 10 July 2012, [Agenda for Selection and Member Services Committee on Tuesday, 10th July, 2012, 11.00 am \(kent.gov.uk\)](#)

Agenda item, Proposed changes to the Constitution (a) Adoption of a Petition Scheme, County Council meeting 22 July 2010, [Agenda for County Council on Thursday, 22nd July, 2010, 10.00 am \(kent.gov.uk\)](#)

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