

From: Joel Cook – Democratic Services Manager  
To: Selection and Member Services Committee – 29 June 2023  
Subject: Petition Scheme Review  
Status: Unrestricted

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## 1. Introduction

- a) The County Council has had a petitions scheme since 1 September 2010. The scheme was last reviewed by this Committee in April 2014. In 2012 the County Council agreed to reduce the number of signatures required for a petition debate at County Council on a County wide matter to 10,000 and to introduce a requirement for a petition debate at a Cabinet Committee if 2,500 signatures were received. Since this time the petition scheme has worked effectively at an operational level, with a significant number of petitions being processed within required timeframes and either receiving a substantive written response or being subject to committee debate as appropriate under the Scheme. No further changes have been made to the scheme since the 2012 update. A copy of the current scheme is attached at **Appendix 1**.
- b) The Council, in the years following the adoption a Petition Scheme as required by the 2010 legislation, conducted initial periodic reviews as part of monitoring the implementation of the petitions scheme, however no significant concerns or issues have been raised since the last significant review in 2014. It may be considered, therefore, that committee consideration of the scheme is now timely and appropriate.
- c) It is good practice to review and consider the Council's approach to engaging with and capturing public views and petitions represent an important mechanism open to the public to raise issues, concerns or call for specific actions. Any petition scheme should be considered in terms of the wider constitutional and governance systems of the relevant body – in the case of Kent County Council, there are established decision-making arrangements for both Executive and Non-Executive matters. In line with these existing arrangements, where petitions call for actions or change, the ultimate decision on how to respond or whether to enact the requests made via petitions will and should remain with the decision-maker.
- d) Given the time passed since the last review, it is appropriate to seek direction from the Selection & Member Services Committee as to the need for and scope of any detailed review of the Petition Scheme. As detailed later in the report, Member discussion and Group activity has also put forward initial suggestions to be noted and taken into consideration as part of this item.

## 2. Petition Scheme

- a) The Petition Scheme is part of the Council's constitution and is therefore subject to consideration and review by this committee prior to any formal recommendations for change being made to County Council.

- b) The Scheme, in addition to being accessible within the main constitution, is available on the KCC Petitions webpages - [Current ePetitions \(kent.gov.uk\)](https://www.kent.gov.uk/petitions). It sets out the process for submission of petitions, the eligibility of signatories and the response types available to petitions depending on the number of signatures. It should also be noted that the Scheme sets out the process for complaining about how a petition is managed, which includes provision for consideration of the matter by the Selection and Member services Committee – it should be clarified here that this relates to the administration of any petition rather than handling complaints or dissatisfaction with the response provided by the relevant decision-maker or accountable body (e.g. Cabinet Member or Committee).
- c) A brief summary of the 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.
  - 10,000 signatures or more, the petition will be debated at County Council
- d) 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.

### **3. Petitions Received**

- a) The petition scheme is administered by Democratic Services. The majority of petitions received are e-petitions hosted on Kent.gov. Most significant petitions are hosted via KCC's own e-petition system but externally hosted online petitions are also accepted, providing they are closed and submitted for response with relevant verification data. Where duplicate online and paper petitions (organised and run by the same individual) are submitted, these may be merged to be taken as a single petition and the numbers combined (providing they do not include duplicate signatures).
- b) The majority of petitions received continue to relate to highways and transportation matters at district or ward level but there have also been petitions submitted relating to a range of high-profile issues, several of which have resulted in debate by a relevant committee.
- c) KCC is in the process of regularising and updating its recording approach for all petitions across all directorates. This will allow for further quantitative assessment and consideration in future as required.

#### **4. Review arrangements**

- a) This paper is presented to Selection and Member Services to facilitate Member consideration of the scheme generally and in particular, some of the issues raised previously by the Green & Independent Group as part of a potential Motion for Time Limited Debate. As referred to at the relevant Council meeting, the Motion sought to explore reducing the signature thresholds for the different types of response available to petitioners under the scheme. In accordance with arrangements made at the time with the relevant Group, the proposals are set out here for information. They are not presented here for specific consideration as a proposal but are a key point to support the committee's consideration of the issue and to inform any direction the committee may wish to give officers for further review.

G&I Group suggested changes:

- Reduction of County Council debate petition signature threshold from 10,000 to 2000
  - Reduction of the Cabinet Committee debate petition signature threshold from 2500 to 1500.
- b) Members are invited to consider the merits and implications of any changes to the thresholds as well as other elements of the scheme. Through debate, any areas requiring further review or investigation may be highlighted and Officers will progress with relevant review activity to provide proposals for consideration at a future meeting.
- c) It is important to highlight that the petition scheme is about providing an effective mechanic to support formalised public engagement with Council business in a manner compatible with the other formal governance processes and political arrangements of the Council. It is therefore an intrinsically political and Member-led process and any substantive review or potential changes should be based on directions from the Selection and Member Services Committee, rather than Officers, as the responsible body for making any future recommendations to County Council.
- d) Subject to the committee directing specific areas of review, detailed proposals and review information will be provided to a future meeting.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Selection and Member Services is asked to:

- a) Note the report.
- b) Comment on the current scheme arrangements.
- c) Advise Officers of any required review activity to be brought back for further consideration.

## **6. Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Petition Scheme

## **7. Background Documents**

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 \(kent.gov.uk\)](#)

## **8. Report Author and Relevant Director**

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