

From: Joel Cook – Democratic Services Manager
To: Selection and Member Services Committee – 14 March 2024
Subject: **Petition Scheme Review**
Status: Unrestricted

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Selection and Member Services Committee has considered the petition scheme several times in 2023, with a plan to conclude the review and confirm whether any changes are required in early 2024. This report sets out the key points discussed by the committee previously and the relevant considerations to determine any recommendations to County Council. 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 reports so this has not been repeated in this report – full details are referenced in the Background Documents section.
- 1.2 The scheme was last reviewed by this Committee in April 2014. The last change made to the Petition Scheme 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 if over 2,500 signatures were received. A copy of the current scheme is attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 1.3 The data on petitions received and processed presented to the Committee at previous meetings covers the period 2014 to August 2023. No new information on more recent petitions indicates any substantive change to patterns or signature levels so the appendices for the prior reports remain relevant and reliable to inform any decisions.

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 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 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 should not be taken as the petitions not being taken seriously – a key component of the petition scheme is that it formalises, within the Council's governance, the requirements to respond to issues raised by interested stakeholders.

3 Proposed Amendments and options considered

- 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 the verification process adopted by Kent County Council before resolving any firm recommendations to Full Council.
- 3.4 A further review was undertaken by Democratic Services to assess the verification process and the actions required should any changes take effect. The findings were presented to the [Selection and Member Services Committee on Thursday, 30th November, 2023](#).
- 3.5 The Selection and Member Services Committee agreed to defer any final decision to its next meeting scheduled to take place on 14th March 2024.

4. Summary of considerations

- 4.1 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.

- 4.2 Should reduced thresholds be implemented, additional resources would be required to manage an increase in petitions debated at Full Council and timetabling for all substantial or challenging decisions would have to be planned accordingly.
- 4.3 The 100,000 signature requirement for Parliamentary debate 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 figure in Kent of 2000 does not necessarily indicate an issue of a similar strategic scale, with various petitions having a distinctly local or operational focus.
- 4.4 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. Conclusion

- 5.1 The current eligibility arrangements continue to be 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 or that any such signatories skew the process to a substantive degree or have any significant impact on the operations of the petition scheme and related debates or issue consideration by Members. It is therefore recommended that no change is made to the eligibility criteria and the Committee is reminded that operational reviews will continue outside of formal review of the Scheme (constitutional aspect) to explore technical improvements as and when they become available.
- 5.2 Reducing the threshold that triggers debate at Cabinet Committee or Full Council sends a message that Elected Members wish to consider and discuss the views of Kent residents, students and workers on a more regular basis. Members must consider which forum is best placed to debate the type of issue being raised in petitions, and bear in mind that it is the Executive's responsibility to develop policies and ensure services are delivered to improve the quality of life of Kent residents. The suggested amendments to the thresholds, detailed below, seek to strike the relevant balance.
- 5.3 The Selection and Member Services Committee is asked to consider this report, in the context of the previous papers and discussions regarding the Petition Scheme review undertaken by Democratic Services. The specific recommendations for change set out in the following section reflect the Committees previous deliberations and are supported by the information collected in the review.

6. Recommendation

Selection and Member Services is asked to consider the following:

Option 1: (The Committee may recommend one or more of the following changes to the Scheme)

- 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.

Option 2: (Note - The Committee is not required to recommend any changes)

- a) Agree that no changes be made to the Petition Scheme;

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 – 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
[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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