

ITC e-PARTICIPATION WORKSHOP

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you this morning. I would like to speak specifically about e-petitions and use this as a practical and positive example of e-democracy.

You will of course be familiar with the work undertaken by the [Consultative Steering Group](#) prior to the Parliament's re-establishment. In particular, the CSG's [Expert Panel on Information and Communications Technology](#) set out recommendations on democratic participation and ICT. The [CSG itself](#) recognised that in applying ICT to the work of the Parliament, it must be innovative, planned and well designed, that the Parliament should seize the opportunity which well designed IT provides and that it should aspire to be an example of best practice. The 'spirit' of the CSG report was adopted by the Parliament on [9 June 1999, motion S1M-39](#).

Since its earliest days the Parliament has been mindful of the importance in enhancing engagement opportunities. Some ICT based, some not. We recognise that no one approach can meet all needs or demands.

Turning to [e-petitions](#), I believe this is a positive example of responding to the CSG desire for innovation. When e-petitions was formally launched in February 2004, following an approach from the International Teledemocracy Centre, the Parliament was the world's first legislature to accept e-petitions.

Why start with a history lesson? Well, because I hope it sets out the institutional support there has been to embrace new forms of ICT that help citizens engage with their modern elected Parliament. Petitions provide a direct route for citizens into the policy development/scrutiny arena, a good example of addressing the Parliament's founding principles of sharing power.

E-petitions provide a convenient forum for people to quickly and conveniently submit a petition and to gather support on it, addressing its access and participation founding principles.

But, does it work? The important lessons we have learned from e-petitions is that—

- it must be easily available. It can be accessed directly from the Committee's webpage or from the front page of the Parliament's website
- it must have easy to follow guidelines and be simple to use
- there must be open communication with clerks. While some people are quite comfortable using the system, others are not
- and, most importantly, it must work! In keeping the system simple, we reduce the risk of it confusing people and being so clever that it ends up not working or putting people off.
- finally, we must be confident that the system can have an impact. And it can. Hosting an e-petition can open up consideration of the issues behind the petition to a worldwide audience.

To date there has been little abuse of the system. Offensive comments, spam, rogue signatures are quickly removed. One Alex Salmond, 10 Downing Street recently supported an e-petition along with James Bond and Charles Edward Stuart! This helps maintain the system's integrity. Striking a balance between maintaining an open system which allows for a robust exchange of views and preventing abuse can present challenges but not insurmountable ones.

The petitions system provides a platform for individuals to air their grievances, initiate and contribute to policy development and participate at the heart of the political process. E-petitions has enhanced this desire further.

The petitions process is now an integral part of the Parliament's founding principles and the e-petition process has added further credibility to its

commitment to improve accessibility and participation in its work and hold the Scottish Government and public bodies to account.

Engaging with groups traditionally marginalised from the political process is a challenge. There has been a steady decline in democratic participation over recent decades across the world. The Parliament is aiming to reverse this and lead the way by embracing new trends in civic activism and participation.

We must continue to be innovative and seek to employ ICT and emerging technologies, where suitable, to encourage and promote accessibility and participation. The continued development of, and commitment to, the e-petitions system is vital to broadening the parliamentary process to greater and more diverse audiences and the informal contract between the Parliament, its Members and the public whom they serve.

We need to do more to ensure the views of the disadvantaged, minority communities, young people and those who have been excluded from the democratic process are heard.

On the back of a [petition from Young Scot](#) about engagement and e-democracy the Committee is taking forward an inquiry into the public petitions process. It will seek to identify what works well, what not so well, where improvements are needed, how to increase awareness of the petitions process amongst marginalised groups, encourage and improve participation in the process. Most importantly, it will consider its own role in the scrutiny of petitions.

This scrutiny issue is perhaps the most important aspect of the inquiry. If the result of widening access to the petitions system, for example through ICT, and increasing the volume of petitions from citizens is reduced scrutiny by Parliament then clearly something has gone wrong.

Having a very open and accessible petitions process and encouraging greater use of social software tools such as e-petitioning is all very well but it must be

matched with effective scrutiny. People must feel that the petitions process and the Public Petitions Committee has a relevance, that it can lead to change, it can make a difference. These are important questions that we must continually ask ourselves. The [2006 research by Glasgow University](#) into the petitions process reported—

‘the ability of common folk to bring their concerns to the Parliament through the petitions system is democracy in action. You aren’t always going to get what you want but at least the Scottish Parliament has to look at your petition.’

In 2004 the [e-petitions system](#) when launched attracted around 40,000 hits per month. We now attract over 1,000,000 hits per month, one month we hit 1.8 million. So, it is fair to say, people are interested. They use e-petitions.

About 3/4 of the petitions submitted are done so as e-petitions. There is much greater usage and it is the preferred method for petitioners.

E-petitioning provides an opportunity to empower those who have previously felt socially excluded from the democratic process. The discussion forum allows the possibility of an online debate on the issues raised. With traditional methods of petitioning the citizen can only support a petition through adding a signature. E-petitioning provides the opportunity to comment on the issues raised either in support or against and is therefore much more interactive. The discussion forum can assist in furthering the Parliament’s goal of creating a culture of consultation and participation.

- E-petitioning is more convenient to petitioners in gathering signatures. Dispersed populations can raise & publicise concerns
- it can capture the broadest possible geographic spread of gathering support (or not) through the discussion forum
- there is 24/7 availability
- there is less work for petitioner in gathering signatures

I should like to conclude not on a note of pessimism but perhaps slight caution. The petitions process, including e-petitions and other forms of e-engagement must, like the Parliament itself, continue to evolve and adapt. Our procedures and processes must recognise the demands of people and be open to fresh ideas and challenges. We constantly seek to investigate ways in which we can genuinely improve access and participation and e-petitions is no different.

Two quick examples—

- About 95% of the correspondence the clerking team to the PPC now issues is done so electronically and, where possible, hyperlinked to referenced material so that a simple letter to a petitioner can act as a one stop shop for all information they, and others, may need about the status of that petition.
- Each petition has its own page on the [PPC website](#). From there you can hyperlink to the petition, the research briefing prepared by SPICe, all written evidence and the oral transcript for each meeting at which the petition is considered. We are also happy to link to websites which petitioners may have set up themselves.

There has been considerable interest from petitions committees in other legislatures across the world in e-petitions and the role of the PPC – Australia, Catalonia, Czech Republic, Gauteng in South Africa, Saxony. This role issue is perhaps the most important point, and one I made earlier. We don't play the numbers game here. The No.10 e-petition site attracts about 30,000 e-petitions and the House of Commons recent report on e-petitions referred to its expectation that once it has an e-petition system the number submitted would likely be close to the No.10 figure. But what happens to these petitions? Where is the scrutiny? What control is exercised in terms of admissibility? How is this really serving petitioners?

Technology is an enabler, not a solution. We may only attract 200 petitions per year, around 150 of them e-petitions but we have a dedicated Committee that considers each and every one. Providing a facility for citizens to submit their petitions electronically must be coupled with a relevant, accountable, legitimate, open, identifiable mechanism to then action these petitions. That is a fundamental for any petitions process.