



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Published 13 June 2018
SP Paper 355
3rd report (Session 5)

Public Petitions Committee Comataidh nan Athchuingean Poblach

Annual Report 2017-2018



Published in Scotland by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

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Contents

Introduction	1
The work of the Public Petitions Committee	2
What petitions have achieved	5

Public Petitions Committee

The remit of the Public Petitions Committee is to consider and report on - whether a public petition is admissible; and what action is to be taken upon the petition.



<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/petitions-committee.aspx>



petitions@parliament.scot



0131 348 5254

Committee Membership



Convener
Johann Lamont
Scottish Labour



Deputy Convener
Angus MacDonald
Scottish National Party



Rachael Hamilton
Scottish Conservative
and Unionist Party



Rona Mackay
Scottish National Party



Brian Whittle
Scottish Conservative
and Unionist Party

Introduction

1. During the Parliamentary year from 12 May 2017 to 11 May 2018, the Public Petitions Committee has considered 86 petitions over the course of 21 meetings. New petitions lodged this year account for 37 of the total number of petitions consideredⁱ. A total of 26,508 signatures of support and 2,203 comments were received on new petitions in this year. The support demonstrated for these new petitions has again demonstrated the important role that the petitions process plays in enabling people to let the Parliament know what they think on a range of issues.
2. The total number of new petitions lodged in this Parliamentary year was 39. This compares to a total of 42 new petitions lodged in the 2016-17 parliamentary year and 45 new petitions lodged in the 2015-16 parliamentary year.
3. In keeping with the principles of openness and transparency, the vast majority of the Committee's work continues to be taken in public. Five of the Committee meetings have included consideration of items in private, with just one meeting taking place wholly in private. The pieces of business that have been considered in private include draft reports, consideration of correspondence and consideration of the Committee's work programme.

ⁱ A total of 39 petitions were lodged within the year; 2 of which had not yet been considered by the Committee at the time of writing this report.

The work of the Public Petitions Committee

4. The Committee has undertaken a wide range of actions this year in response to the issues raised by petitions. The majority of the Committee's scrutiny of issues continues to be undertaken by gathering views on the actions called for in petitions by way of written evidence. In total the Committee has received 676 written submissions during this Parliamentary year. However, the Committee is also keen, wherever possible, to use different methods to gather evidence.
5. The Committee has taken oral evidence this year from 77 witnesses, the majority of whom were either a petitioner or people supporting the petitioner. In total 40 witnesses were either petitioners (23) or individuals giving evidence alongside petitioners (17).
6. The Committee has also taken evidence from Scottish Government Ministers on eight petitions. As part of its role in scrutinising policy and practice, the Committee has also taken evidence from other stakeholders, such as evidence sessions on the support and treatment available to young people with mental health concerns and on the use and impact of child contact centres.
7. In addition to witnesses, a high number of MSPs continue to participate in the consideration of petitions, either through their role as a constituency or regional member, or because they have a particular interest in the subject matter of a petition. In this year a total of 18 non-Committee MSPs participated in meetings, with some members making contributions in multiple petitions.
8. As has been true in previous years, the subject category on which the Committee has received most petitions is health. However, petitions are also now starting to reflect the powers that have come to the Scottish Parliament as part of further devolution. These have included petitions on subjects such as the Scottish Parliament's electoral system, the dates of Scottish Parliament elections and the use of powers in relation to social security.
9. Although the Committee has the power to refer petitions to other committees, it has done so on only five occasions this year. Instead, the Committee carries out its own inquiries into the issues raised by petitions. Some of these, such as evidence-taking, have been outlined earlier in this report.
10. The Committee's work has also recognised that petitions can be brought to the Parliament at any stage in the development of policy or in the law-making process. If it can, the Committee tries to avoid duplicating work that is being undertaken elsewhere. In relation to referral of petitions, the Committee has therefore tried to refer petitions to other committees only where consideration of the issue raised by the petition would fit with the existing work programme of the relevant committee. For example, the Committee referred PE1636 which calls for the Scottish Government to introduce legislation requiring that all single use drinks cups be 100% biodegradable to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee as part of that Committee's work on Scotland's approach to waste management.

11. The Committee has also taken the decision to defer consideration of petitions to enable relevant work to be completed. Examples of this include a petition about abusive and threatening communications being deferred until the independent review of hate crimes offences publishes its report and a petition regarding the use of log burner stoves being deferred until the Government publishes its response to an inquiry into air quality that was undertaken by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.
12. The Committee has also taken the opportunity to bring petitions forward for debate by the Parliament, having secured debates on a petition on improving youth football in Scotland and on a petition regarding polypropylene mesh medical devices.
13. The Committee undertook a fact-finding visit to Dumfries and Galloway in September 2017 which allowed members the opportunity to gather views in relation to two petitions in a more informal setting. In the course of the visit the Committee was able to:
 - Meet parents and children with diabetes, and clinicians, to understand the impact of treatments such as continuous glucose monitors and insulin pumps
 - Meet business and individuals campaigning for improvements to trunk road infrastructure in the area.
14. The Committee has also undertaken a range of fact-finding visits to football academies around Scotland as part of its scrutiny of the petition on improving youth football.
15. In seeking evidence and undertaking fact-finding visits on petitions, the Committee has regard to ensuring that its actions are appropriate in relation to ensuring that equal opportunities are observed throughout its work. For example, the Committee has sought to ensure it hears views directly from children and young people where actions called for in petitions relate to their rights or interests.

The Public Petitions Committee in numbers (2017-18)



86 Petitions considered



Written evidence received



77
Number of people who gave evidence



Signatures received

What petitions have achieved

16. The Committee values the role that petitions play in raising awareness of issues that may not otherwise reach the attention of members of the Scottish Parliament. Every admissible petition is considered by the Committee which is a positive outcome in terms of awareness-raising. A number of petitions go on to achieve more than that and lead to changes being recommended by the Committee and/or agreed to by the Scottish Government.
17. Examples of outcomes achieved over this Parliamentary year are:
 - PE1581 which called for the introduction of a national strategy for school libraries. The petition secured a commitment from the Government to introduce a strategy; the petition was closed in November 2017 on the basis that a clear plan was in place for development and delivery of the strategy.
 - PE1621 which called for to the Government to raise the awareness of Scottish Health Professionals and public of the early signs of Sepsis. A public awareness campaign was announced by the Scottish Government in February 2018.
 - The Committee published its report on PE1463 on thyroid and adrenal testing, diagnosis and treatment in which it set out a number of recommendations, including the introduction of a clear, single testing protocol to be applied across Scotland.

