

Effective petitioning – the internet way

First Edition

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About this guidebook

This guide has been compiled by Bristol City Council with contributions from the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames around the theme of ePetitioning.

It was commissioned by the International Centre of Excellence for Local eDemocracy (ICELE) to draw on findings from pilot local authorities, academics and central government during recent heightened exposure of this eTool in the context of eDemocracy.

Extracts of this guide have been taken from the document '*eDemocracy from the top down*', written by ITC and Bristol City Council on behalf of the Local eDemocracy National Project.

When reading this guide it is worth remembering that ePetitions can be used in various peer groups, such as citizens with a community group or citizens with their elected members.

ICELE would like to thank the following people for their contributions to this guide:

Carol Hayward	Bristol City Council
Ann Sweeney	Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames
Councillor Mary Reid	Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames
Tom Steinberg	MySociety
Mike Brewin	Bristol City Council
Shane McCracken	Gallomanor

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THE BASICS

“The one political activity that people are most happy to do apart from voting is signing a petition”

Tom Steinberg, MySociety

A petition is a formal written request from one or more persons to the Sovereign, Government or Parliament. The right of the subject to petition for redress of personal grievances has been exercised since Saxon times; it was mentioned in the Magna Carta and more explicitly in an Act of 1406.

In an era of restricted political rights, the public petition was an important avenue for those who had no parliamentary representation to have their complaints heard. Until recently, the impact of petitions had diminished because public complaints could also be brought to the attention of members through the media and questions asked in Parliament or at council meetings. However, with the increasing emphasis on eDemocracy, particularly with the national interest raised in the Number 10 ePetitions website, the impact of petitions is starting to be felt once again.

Within local authorities, petitions have a constitutional basis; members of the public have a democratic right to petition their council.

Petitions can be used to mobilise opinion or to generate publicity for an issue, and may be used by the council to inform government about an issue on which their citizens hold strong views.

What is an ePetition?

An ePetition is a petition that has gathered support electronically (most often online). An ePetitioning service forms another channel for the petitioning process, and provides facilities for citizens to initiate, support and possibly comment on petitions online. This creates an online record of ePetitions, and provides an opportunity to create an online hub for petitioning information, including paper petitions.

ePetitions enable and encourage petitioners to provide background information on the petition. Many ePetitions encourage discussion around the issue to help inform both those who are interested in signing and those receiving the ePetition.

What sort of sites are on the web already?

There are many petition sites on the web, some of which have existed in one form or another for years, building up a good reputation among internet users.

In the UK, Pledgebank (www.pledgebank.com) is one of the best-known and most respected sites of this kind (and appears as a targeted advertisement when you search Google for “petitions”); although it fulfils a subtly different need. Pledgebank pulls together groups of supporters for a particular action; petitions generally ask people to agree with a goal or opinion.

PetitionOnline.com is very popular, well known and scores well in searches for petitions and petition services. Based in the USA, it attracts petitioners from all over the world and accepts submissions in any language. It is a side-project for a commercial web firm, is funded by donations and some Google AdSense ads, and in the words of its creators: “has a long way to go to break even”. Despite a confusing front page and likely significant costs for hosting and bandwidth, it continues to thrive.

ThePetitionSite.com, GoPetition.com, and WebPetitions.com all offer broadly similar services, with varying degrees of professional presentation. Despite global reach via the internet, they are all dominated by petitions from and about the USA.

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iPetitions.com is another commercial outfit run by private individuals from the USA, Croatia, India and Belgium. It is funded from banner advertising and donations. It does, however, offer the most up-to-date and friendly-looking user interface for creating a new petition.

PetitionThem.com is a privately funded site based in the UK. It carries some banner advertising to help cover costs. Unlike every other service on offer, this one provides some degree of moderation; every petition that is submitted is reviewed by one of the site's staff before being posted online. There is also a cap on the maximum number of live petitions, designed to keep the site operating at a "manageable level". The majority of petitions on the site are UK-related, although a significant minority still originate from the USA and other countries.

Petitions.org does not offer petitions of its own. Instead, for a small fee, it links to any other petition, hosted on any other petitioning site. The idea is to increase traffic to each featured petition.

All of these services offer much the same thing; in most cases it is a basic level of service. To present completed petitions, users would have to either point councils to a URL, or manually print out every page of electronic signatures and deliver them by hand.

International Examples

Norwegian ePetition project in 14 municipalities

<http://einitiativ.hive.no/Lorenskog>

Tasmanian regional Parliament, Australia:

<http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/>

<http://210.8.42.131/view/EPetitions%5FTAS%5FAssembly/>

<http://210.8.42.131/view/EPetitions%5FTAS%5FCouncil/>

Wellington City Council, NZ:

<http://www.wellington.govt.nz/haveyoursay/e-petitions/>

Netherlands, independent system run by Reinder Rustema:

<http://www.petities.nl/>

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Finland, independent/private platform:

<http://www.adressit.com/>

Queensland Parliament ePetitions

www.parliament.qld.gov.au/petitions

Larger eGov/eParticipation systems at municipal level, including e-petitioning:

- eConsensus project http://www.gov2u.com/ongoing_projects.htm
- Amposta citizen platform, Spain <http://eparticipa.ciutatdigital.cat/>
- eAdministration system in India

Petition campaigns frequently run by NGOs, such as:
moveon.org or avaaz.org

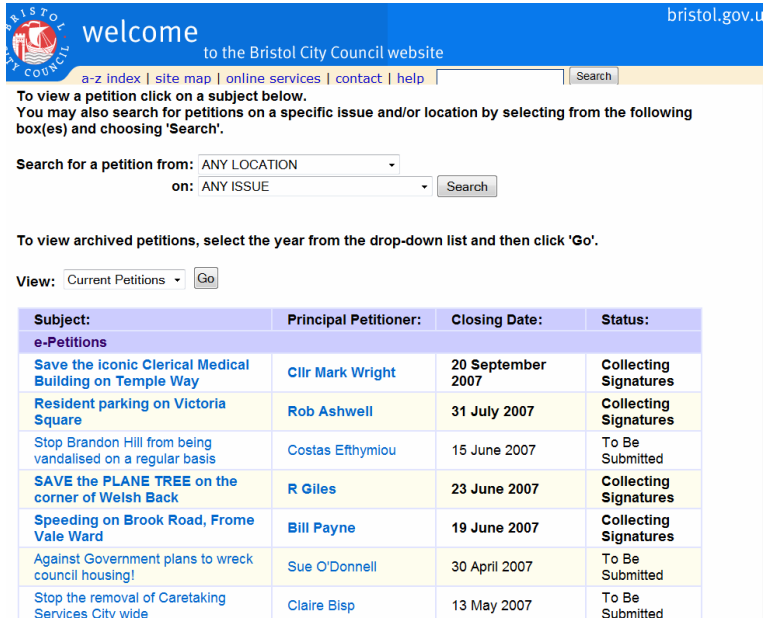
What does an ePetition look like?

The answer to this question largely depends on the type of petitioning platform you use. In this section we look at the ITC software in detail and the functionality that it brings. The Number 10 ePetitioning software, shown below, works in the same way, but with a much altered way of finding and presenting petitions.

The screenshot shows the Number 10 ePetitions website. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for PRIME MINISTER, GOVERNMENT, NEWSROOM, DOWNING STREET, and BROADCASTS. Below this is a search bar with the text "Search All No.10" and "Enter search terms". The main content area is titled "E-Petitions" and features a "BETA TEST" announcement. The announcement states that the e-petitions system was launched in November 2006 and is currently in a public "beta test". It explains that users are welcome to sign and create petitions, but technical improvements are being made. A "BETA TEST" badge is visible in the top right corner. The main content area includes a "Create a Petition" button, a "View Petitions" button, and a search bar. Below the search bar, there are two sections: "Five most recent petitions" and "Five most popular open petitions". The "Five most recent petitions" section lists several petitions, including "We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...", "prevent prisoners from being able to claim their time spent in police custody as part of their sentence", "Campaigning for a Leith Museum", "scrap the National Curriculum Tests (SATs) which pupils take at the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen.", and "extend the government-initiated Design for Manufacture competition to include the design, the construction and the use of a prototype housing estate where there are". The "Five most popular open petitions" section lists several petitions, including "We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...", "Stop proposed restrictions regarding photography in public places (67648 signatures)", "Change the current student loan interest repayment, to deduct payments monthly not annually (67288 signatures)", "Continue funding for the Royal Air Force Aerobics Team - The Red Arrows (59593 signatures)", and "Abolish plans to build a £100 million mega Mosque. (57405 signatures)".

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List of ePetitions: Typically this is a table listing ePetitions followed by paper petitions. Each has a descriptive subject or title for the petition, the name of the “principal petitioner” who raised it, the closing date beyond which names can no longer be added, and the petition’s status.



The screenshot shows the Bristol City Council website's ePetitions page. At the top, there is a blue header with the Bristol City Council logo and the text "welcome to the Bristol City Council website" and "bristol.gov.uk". Below the header is a navigation bar with links for "a-z index", "site map", "online services", "contact", and "help", along with a search box. The main content area contains instructions: "To view a petition click on a subject below. You may also search for petitions on a specific issue and/or location by selecting from the following box(es) and choosing 'Search'." There are two dropdown menus for "Search for a petition from:" (set to "ANY LOCATION") and "on:" (set to "ANY ISSUE"), with a "Search" button. Below this, it says "To view archived petitions, select the year from the drop-down list and then click 'Go'." There is a "View:" dropdown menu set to "Current Petitions" and a "Go" button. The main content is a table of e-Petitions.

Subject:	Principal Petitioner:	Closing Date:	Status:
e-Petitions			
Save the iconic Clerical Medical Building on Temple Way	Clir Mark Wright	20 September 2007	Collecting Signatures
Resident parking on Victoria Square	Rob Ashwell	31 July 2007	Collecting Signatures
Stop Brandon Hill from being vandalised on a regular basis	Costas Efthymiou	15 June 2007	To Be Submitted
SAVE the PLANE TREE on the corner of Welsh Back	R Giles	23 June 2007	Collecting Signatures
Speeding on Brook Road, Frome Vale Ward	Bill Payne	19 June 2007	Collecting Signatures
Against Government plans to wreck council housing!	Sue O'Donnell	30 April 2007	To Be Submitted
Stop the removal of Caretaking Services City wide	Claire Blisp	13 May 2007	To Be Submitted

Conditions of Use: A *Conditions of Use* page should be included, describing the “rules of engagement”, in terms of the kinds of comment that may be removed from the discussion forum attached to each petition (“offensive and disruptive” ones), and the kinds of promotional activity that are discouraged (i.e. spamming).

Petitions Guidance: A *Guidance* page should describe the petitioning process using a “frequently asked question” format covering the basics of raising a petition and the council’s role in acting on it. This may include a privacy statement.

Viewing and signing an ePetition

By clicking on the name of a petition in the list, a visitor to the site can view a further set of options for that petition.

In the ITC software, the menu changes to provide functions to read and (optionally) “sign” the petition, view the names and neighbourhood/ward of those who have signed, or join an online discussion. There is an option to view the progress of a petition, in terms of the council’s official response once it has been considered by the committee or officials it has been sent to. Users may also forward the petition to an acquaintance by email with a “tell a friend” facility.

For monitoring purposes, visitors to the ePetitioner site who choose to add their name to a petition can be presented with an exit questionnaire. This allows users’ comments and perceptions of the acceptability of the site to be monitored.

The screenshot shows the Bristol City Council website interface. At the top, there is a blue header with the Bristol City Council logo on the left, the text "welcome to the Bristol City Council website" in the center, and "bristol.gov." on the right. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: "a-z index | site map | online services | contact | help" and a search box. The main content area features a navigation menu with buttons for "About e-Petitions", "List Petitions", "Read/sign petition", "Information", "Discussion", "View signatures", "Progress", and "Tell a friend".

The main content area displays the following information:

Home Office Police Community Support Officer cuts
Raised by: Cllr Sue O'Donnell on 15 December 2006

The petitioner requests that Bristol City Council protests about the proposed reduction in the number of 132 promised Police Community Support Officers that we find so valuable in making us feel safe. We object to the Home Office cuts and if these are not reversed we ask that Bristol is given the highest priority from what reduced numbers are left.

Sign The Petition
(Closing date for signatures - 16 March 2007)
This petition will now be submitted. For updates on the petition progress, check the [progress](#) page.

Petition Details

Petition title:	Home Office Police Community Support Officer cuts
Raised by:	Cllr Sue O'Donnell
Date raised:	15 December 2006
Corresponding issue:	Policing and public safety
Number of discussion comments:	1
Number of signatures:	51

[View all of the signatures](#)

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Administration controls

The ePetitioner tool also includes a set of administration functions. In Kingston upon Thames these are used by Democratic Services officers and in Bristol by the Corporate Consultation team.

The administration functions are accessible only to authorised users, allowing them to create and edit ePetitions and also to moderate the online discussion and to view the exit questionnaire responses.

Who can start or sign an ePetition?

Most councils will have information within their constitution about who is able to start or submit a petition. The same rules hold true for ePetitions.

In general, there are unlikely to be any age restrictions. Some councils may only allow people who live within the local authority area to start and submit petitions; other councils may allow anyone with a valid interest in the area to do so.

These constraints are likely to apply equally within the ePetition system. Most ePetitions can be signed by people from anywhere around the world, although local issues are more likely to be supported by local residents. The Number 10 ePetitions website specifies that those signing an ePetition must be British residents.

The encouragement given to children to sign ePetitions should be considered in light of the possibility that under-13s are being prompted to divulge contact details online. We recommend that children are only encouraged to sign ePetitions under adult supervision, and with the context and purpose fully explained, such as in a school or community group setting. Schools should be given specific guidelines on ePetitioning.

How do ePetitions complement existing practices?

An ePetitioning service does not necessarily mean any differences in existing constitutional or internal processes. However, a public space for petitions creates an opportunity for review that will improve how responsive the council is with petitions in general.

Carol Hayward, Corporate Consultation Manager in Bristol City Council, said of ePetitioning: *“It has enabled us to review our constitutional guidelines and it highlighted certain differences between the way we dealt with petitions for planning issues and for all other issues. In particular, petitioners submitting petitions at planning meetings needed to give 24 hours notice whereas only two to three hours was needed for other meetings. This has now been resolved so that all petitioners need to give 24 hours notice.”*

Introducing ePetitions can highlight other differences within the council. For example, planning departments often deal with petitions and letters in a different way and so don't have a centralised method of being able to record all of the petitions received and show how they have been dealt with.

Issues are often dealt with on a case-by-case basis and petitions form part of the evidence base that helps to shape the overall decision. However, planning departments do normally have a formal response mechanism in place and publish the decisions that have been made on planning applications so would generally have a degree of transparency already.

Having an ePetitions website enables councils and citizens to see how petitions are processed in general. A transparent website which shows how petitions influence decisions makes it more important to have an established process that shows how the council will respond and how quickly a citizen is likely to receive a response. For example, the process could be that the executive member and head of department sign off the response within fifteen days.

How do paper petitions and electronic petitions converge?

Petitioners are encouraged to have paper petitions as well as their online version. Some issues, such as local parking schemes, will be best dealt with at the local level and are unlikely to attract much wider support. Petitioners are instructed to combine the paper petition and ePetition when making their submission to council.

For paper petitions, councillors and those attending the council meeting will only get to see the title of the petition being presented and the number of signatures. For ePetitions, there is the ability to produce a report of the petition, which allows the issue to be considered in more detail.

Some petitioners may feel they need to enter details of names and addresses collected on paper to their online petition. This should be discouraged as the names can be combined at the point of submission and it is against the spirit of ePetitions to add other people's names. People should have the opportunity to review background information and decide for themselves whether to sign the ePetition. People signing for themselves can be kept directly informed of progress by visiting the website or by leaving their email address for updates.

What has happened with ePetitioning in the past?

The Scottish Parliament along with the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University first trialled the idea in the UK that government should host and support an ePetitions website that could allow members of the public and elected representatives to raise issues, gather support and receive feedback.

A dedicated Public Petitions Committee (PPC) had been established by the Scottish Parliament to actively promote petitions as a means by which the public can effectively raise issues of concern with the parliament.

The committee's role is to consider all petitions submitted to the parliament and to decide what action could be taken. The committee also ensures that petitioners are kept informed of progress at each stage of the parliament's consideration of their petition.

The electronic petitioning model was set up in partnership with the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University in March 2000 with a requirement for openness, accessibility and participation. Since then it has been taken up by a number of customers, most notable of which is the German Bundestag.

The software was developed so that a visitor could do the following key functions for each ePetition:

- view or sign it
- read background information
- discuss it in a forum
- review feedback
- see more information about the principal petitioner

To help ensure that the relevant information would be provided to the PPC, a template report was also developed that highlighted these key points to provide an analysis of the information collected.

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Once the committee had considered each ePetition, feedback would be posted on the ePetitioner website to notify interested people of its progress through the parliamentary system.

Evaluation of the Scottish Parliament's ePetitioner indicated widespread support from within the parliament and from those who started and signed petitions. It was felt that it was enabling the Scottish Parliament to address the decline in civic engagement that has become widespread in Europe.

Some local authorities have trialled ePetitions for one-off campaigns such as Hampshire County Council's online campaign "Hands off Hampshire". This campaign gave residents the chance to express their opinions and comment about the redistribution of Central Government grant money away from the south east of England. Although this was seen as a success, the Council has not since set up further ePetitions or established an ongoing ePetitioner service.

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LOCAL AUTHORITY ePETITIONING

The International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) initially proposed trialling online petitioning services with two local authorities to explore opportunities to enhance local petitioning.

Their research indicated that no local authorities had used an online petitioning service, outside of publishing ad hoc council-supported petitions.

Based on their experience of running an online petitioning service for the Scottish Parliament, ITC identified that e-enabling petitions has the potential to encourage more active public engagement, giving communities more opportunity to influence the policy agenda.

Developing an additional avenue for petitions would also potentially improve access to this democratic mechanism for members of the public who are not able to access traditional paper-based petitions, particularly people with mobility issues.

The Local eDemocracy National Project research

The Local eDemocracy National Project embarked on a series of pilots with Bristol and Kingston upon Thames to investigate the benefits of ePetitioning.

The aims of the project were as follows:

- to outline requirements for the design and management of ePetitioning processes to stimulate active citizen participation in local communities
- to strengthen and enhance transparency and accessibility of petitioning through formalising the local petitioning process, and publishing presented paper petitions online to create a central location for petitions
- to trace the path of ePetitions through the structures of each council and assess whether and how input by the public via ePetitioning impacts on decision-making at different levels

These aims were matched with the following work programme:

- **Develop, host and support ePetitioning services for Bristol and Kingston upon Thames.** The International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) ePetitioner software was to be tailored to match the design of the Bristol and Kingston upon Thames councils' websites. ITC would then host and support the ePetitioner services for each council for the duration of the trial.
- **Establish ePetitioning rules and processes.** Both councils were to review their petitioning rules and develop guidance which included ePetitioning.
- **Communicate ePetitioning services to local residents and councillors.** Marketing and promoting ePetitioning services locally by both councils aimed to build awareness and encourage and support use of the services

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- **Evaluate process and report on e-engagement using ePetitioning at a local government level.** ITC were to monitor and evaluate the service, developing an evaluation report with recommendations.
- **Develop guidance and case study material.** After the trial's completion, Kingston upon Thames was to produce "how to" guidance and a case study for other local authorities to use.

What was achieved?

The ePetitioning trials ran in Kingston upon Thames and Bristol from September 2004 over six months and allowed residents and interested parties to start, join and comment on petitions online.

Some adjustments were made to ITC's ePetitioner software to make it suitable for local government rather than central government use, particularly adding local government categories and enabling different vocational information to be recorded that would be more relevant to local councils.

Towards the end of the six-month trial, the administration of the ePetitioning system was handed over to the local authorities so that councils could track the progress of ePetitions and paper petitions after they had been submitted.

This process increased the transparency of local petitioning, and formalised monitoring of the petition outcomes with the system's owner.

At the end of the pilot period (17 March 2005) there were seven ePetitions for Kingston upon Thames, and nine paper petitions were presented to the Council in the same period.

In Bristol there were nine ePetitions and 22 on paper. The total number of ePetition signatures was 173 in Kingston upon Thames and 890 in Bristol. Citizens, officers and members who took part in the evaluation were almost unanimously in favour of ePetitioning.

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The issues raised through ePetitioning are unarguably issues that are important to citizens, and are evidently addressed through local authority decision-making. ePetitions were raised on, for example, road crossings, telecoms masts, and Post Office closures.

The website and its associated guidelines on petitioning make both the process and the petition outcomes more visible. The added visibility applies to paper as well as ePetitions, since paper petitions that are presented at Council meetings are also listed on the ePetitioner page. The evaluation states the following:

“The evaluation found much had been accomplished in both councils. Over the one year project lifetime staff were recruited, the supplier contracted, ePetitioner implemented, working practices and processes examined and the tool launched to be used by the public. ePetitioner was used by hundreds of citizens in each council area, and showed early signs of impacting on decision-making.”

Both councils continued ePetitioning after the pilot, with Kingston's website being brought in-house, and the ePetition websites have become well established within their respective councils.

Conclusions from the pilot

Representation

Citizens, officers and members who took part in the evaluation were almost unanimously in favour of ePetitioning. It has enjoyed strong support from councillors in both Kingston upon Thames and Bristol, particularly Kingston, and from the departments who are directly involved in the day-to-day servicing of representative government.

There was support for the view that ePetitioning enhances the councillor's role by making it more visible, and by offering greater convenience and choice to citizens who wish to raise concerns through the formal processes of their council.

Citizens can set up ePetitions by completing an online form or by email. These ePetitions are then managed by officers with identified responsibilities for this task. In Kingston these are officers serving committees that consider petitions, and who normally receive paper petitions after they have been presented at an Executive or Neighbourhood committee meeting.

Engagement

There was some evidence that ePetitioning reinforces "civic-mindedness" as the service has so far largely been used by people who believe that community action can influence decision-making but who have not previously taken such action themselves.

Citizens who took part in field tests felt that a higher proportion of ePetition "signatures" are likely to be from those genuinely concerned about the topic raised. Conversely, many felt that ePetitioning is less effective than paper for gathering signatures on highly localised issues, which are best addressed by adopting the traditional door-to-door and street methods of campaigning associated with paper petitioning.

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ePetitions were raised on issues affecting a range of geographic and cultural communities, and drew attention to wider democratic processes including policy consultation and the planning process. Some ePetitions were raised on very localised issues, typical examples being road crossings and telecoms masts. Others were on topics more clearly applicable across the borough, such as Post Office closures. Further ePetitions focused on the needs of ethnic minorities, for example Halal food stall certification (in Bristol).

However, citizens thought it more likely that they would be made aware of a petition that interested them through being approached in person than from visiting the ePetitions page on a council website. Some thought it essential for ePetitioning to provide an “alert” feature, so they could be notified by email when an ePetition was raised matching a topic they had signed up to.

Transparency

The ePetitioning pilot increased transparency in part by formalising the process for handling petitions for the first time. The publication of the site and its associated guidelines on petitioning makes both the process and the petition outcomes more visible.

The added visibility applies to paper petitions as well as to ePetitions, since paper petitions that are presented at council meetings are also listed on the ePetitioner page. ePetitions include a “progress” page, to be updated by the responsible officers with information on the petition’s outcome after consideration by the relevant committee or department. All participants considered this a key advantage of the system.

Conflict and consensus

The ePetitioner system incorporates an online forum where visitors to the site can exchange comments about the issues raised, with the principal petitioner and others.

This facility is regarded as highly important by councillors. ePetitioning seems likely to offer more constrained opportunities to debate the issue concerned, because of the constraints of the medium and difficulties targeting those most interested or affected. However, a freer debate is possible for those willing and able to make the effort. The opportunities are maximised by combining ePetitioning (preferably with online alerts) with paper and in-person campaigning.

Political equality

It was evident that ePetitioning has improved inclusiveness for some, since ePetitions have been raised and signed by people who told us they would not otherwise have done so.

There was some evidence that Black and Minority Ethnic groups are represented among ePetition signatories in proportion to the local population, although it is too early for this to be conclusive.

Some councillors, officers and citizens pointed to the inequality of access to computers, with the occasional concern that ePetitioning represents little more than another channel for those already actively engaged to raise their voice.

There were some concerns about the formality of the guidance published by Kingston and Bristol about the petitioning process, and there is a need for simpler clearer language both in that guidance and on the site itself. The guidance would also be improved by highlighting the councils' translation and interpretation services. In the longer term some participants felt ePetitioner should offer translation of the guidance and on-screen dialogue into minority languages.

Community control

For principal petitioners and citizens the success of the system depends on the councils publishing details of the petition's progress, for the whole community to see, as much as on individual's concerns being addressed.

We recommend a formally defined time limit for the authority to respond to petitions that have been received, even if this response is merely to give the date of the committee at which it will be considered. The date of each update should also be included in the progress page.

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There is a potential for ePetitioning to improve responsiveness in two ways:

- Officers may hear about issues that concern their work some weeks or months in advance, since ePetitions are published when they are raised rather than when they are finally submitted for consideration.
- The ease and speed with which ePetitions can be raised potentially offers citizens an advantage over paper, since some procedures limit the time citizens have to respond. This includes the Planning and Licensing Application procedures, where objections are weighted according to where the objector resides. One potential risk of ePetitioning on this criterion is that different perceptions of the system's role may make it a victim of its own success.

Despite their positive view of the system, many of the citizens we spoke to regarded it as a “last resort” for righting wrongs, rather than as a first step in civic engagement.

This raises the interesting possibility that any increase in the number of petitions received could be seen as a success in terms of councils' citizen-engagement strategies, but as a failing by those citizens who would regard a list of petitions as a litany of complaints.

Avoiding this risk is again probably a matter of ensuring that the system demonstrates a track record for redressing complaints and addressing concerns.

Experience so-far

In Bristol, 67 ePetitions had been started from September 2004 to April 2007. These generated 630 comments and 27,000 signatures in total.

The most common topics were the environment and transport. The ePetitions gaining the highest levels of signatures are as follows:

- Include plastics within recycling collections (4867 signatures)
- Keep Banksy [street art /graffiti] (3196 signatures)

An additional ePetition on keeping home-care in-house has generated a higher number of signatures (nearly 8000) but these signatures have been manually added from paper petitions by a series of five to six coordinators and so cannot be considered in the same light.

“Although not against the current conditions of use, this is against the spirit of the ePetitions system. We set up ePetitions so that people would have time to digest the information provided before signing and would also not feel pressured to do so. The online system also allows us to be able to contact people if they leave us their email address. We now won’t have that direct contact so it doesn’t help us to build that relationship with the petitioners and it’s unlikely that those people who have been manually added will come on to the website for an update on progress.”

Mike Brewin, Consultation and eParticipation Officer
at Bristol City Council

The demographics of users are reasonably representative, although it appears most attractive to the 25–50 age group. There are slightly more female users than males. Users of the site include 10% first-time petitioners which is seen as a good way of showing that the ePetitioner is encouraging greater levels of participation throughout the city.

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Mary Reid, Councillor at the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and former Chair of the Local eDemocracy National Project explained how they use ePetitions:

“In Kingston we encourage participation at meetings and working groups, especially at Neighbourhood level, so ePetitions fit neatly into processes that are already interactive.

“Any petition placed before the Council MUST be considered by one of the committees, if it is about anything for which the Council has responsibility. The petitioner has the right to speak to full Council when presenting a petition and again when it comes before a committee. Petitions are taken seriously and officer time is devoted to researching and reporting on the issues raised.

“One interesting aspect of our ePetitioning system is the way it has empowered young people to campaign on issues.”

In Kingston there have been 29 ePetitions with 2309 signatures and 78 discussion comments. There has been a similar emphasis on the environment and transport, with an additional focus on planning issues. The highest level of support so far (around 700 signatures) has been to save a particular bus service.

Kingston upon Thames had a much higher level of participation from the under-25s age group, probably due to the high level of use of the service by one of the local Members of the Youth Parliament. In addition, Kingston's ePetitioner has also proved more attractive to older people, so is much more balanced in terms of age of participants. Other demographic data collected shows that participants are reasonably representative of the local population and there is a higher level of first-time petitioners at 19%, again likely to reflect the higher use of younger residents.

In Kingston upon Thames, a decision was made that the website would be aimed primarily at local residents to increase overall participation levels and that councillors already had other ways of tapping in to the democratic process. This can explain the differences in levels of participation between Kingston and Bristol, where councillors have initiated around half of all ePetitions on the website.

Communication activity

Press releases from both councils generated local and national press coverage for the trials' launch. Articles were published in residents' magazines and on council websites. Bristol primarily used advertising in local papers and distributed some promotional material. Kingston upon Thames produced posters and flyers and distributed them in public locations.

Both councils promoted ePetitioning internally, through local representatives, community and advocacy groups, and events for other eDemocracy activities.

Kingston upon Thames also saw the library staff as key partners in helping to support and encourage use of the ePetitioning service, whereas Bristol targeted UK online centres with posters and communication material.

Since the initial flurry of promotion, Bristol has continued to promote and encourage councillor use of the ePetitioning website and has issued occasional bulletins, news articles and press releases to highlight what actions have been taken as a result of ePetitions.

Greater promotion of the website has been made through the main Council website and the Council continues to try to syndicate RSS feeds through local media websites.

However, the greatest level of promotion has come from the individual petitioners who have gained media coverage and posted links on busy community websites to encourage support of their issues. This self-promotion has meant little cost and effort to the Council in maintaining ongoing interest in the website.

Briefing decision-makers on the results

The written formalisation of petition procedures extends to the presentation of ePetitions to council members at committee meetings. At a meeting, petitions may be presented on paper, complete with the accompanying names, and recorded in the minutes.

Normally, however, they are not considered by members until a subsequent meeting, when they are presented as an agenda item rather than in their entirety.

It is necessary to produce a Briefing Report for each ePetition, summarising its subject and the support gained for it during its time collecting signatures on the website. This need stems in part from the day-to-day formalities of committee meetings and their servicing (i.e. paper documents rather than web pages are circulated to individuals who refer to them during meetings).

A model was developed by ITC for generating a report to be submitted alongside each ePetition, and this was adopted by both councils. It included the following:

- **Information on the validity of signatures on the ePetition.** The system automatically checks for duplicate names, email addresses and IP addresses. Duplicate names are automatically removed but duplicate email addresses and IP addresses are flagged as something to consider in more detail.

In Bristol, one ePetition was submitted with a large number of signatures being added within a short period of time from the same IP address. Further investigation led the consultation team to discover that the IP address came from a local business and that the Chief Executive of that business had been encouraging staff to sign the ePetition by sending round an email with details. This seemed consistent with the pattern of signatures so the ePetition signatures were declared valid.

- **A breakdown of where people have signed the petition from.** In Bristol, analysis is carried out by postcode to provide information by council ward to help inform decision-makers and councillors. In Kingston upon Thames, this is analysed on a neighbourhood level, which is more appropriate for their way of working.

CHAPTER TWO: LOCAL AUTHORITY ePETITIONING

- **An analysis of the accompanying discussion.** The forum can provide a range of supporting or conditional information. For example, one ePetition asked for a new bridge to be built over Bristol's harbourside. Many people commented within the forum that they only supported the bridge as long as it would not restrict tall ships from using the harbour. Other forums have shown that views on the issue are divided or have asked for additional actions to be taken as part of the ePetition.

An example of this brief is reproduced below:

Date Prepared: 18th February 2005

ePetition summary details

Title

Extension of Consultation on Creating Capacity within Kingston Special Schools

Petitioners

The ePetition was raised by Mary Macan on behalf of MAPS (Parents/carers of children with special needs/disabilities), Carers' Support Worker, Kingston Carers Network.

Dates ePetition opened and closed

The ePetition was raised on 2nd February 2005 and was closed for signatures on 18th February 2005, after running for a period of 16 days.

Statistical overview of signatures

A total of 41 signatories signed this ePetition; all of whom were within the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames area. The distribution of the petitioners by area was:

Kingston Town Neighbourhood 7

Surbiton Neighbourhood 18

Maldens and Coombe Neighbourhood 9

South of the Borough Neighbourhood 5

Other – Kingston 2

CHAPTER TWO: LOCAL AUTHORITY ePETITIONING

Validity of signatures

41 names were entered into the ePetition database, and none of these names had to be removed from the list of signatures.

Full ePetition text

- 1. Many parents of children with special educational needs who are, will, or could be affected by the proposals have not been informed about the consultation process or invited to take part.*
- 2. Inadequate notice for the consultation meetings at Bedelsford, Dysart and St. Philips (e.g. parents at Bedelsford were given less than one week's notice).*
- 3. Too short a time period allowed for responding to the consultation document. We request that a fuller consultation be carried out with all parents of special needs children in the borough, including those on the disabilities and SEN registers, and that the consultation period is extended.*

Additional information provided by those raising the ePetition

The Royal Borough of Kingston is reviewing its provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and is carrying out a consultation with key stakeholders. The proposals laid down in the document will have far reaching consequences for many SEN children and young people in and out of the borough. We are concerned that there is inadequate consultation of parents with Special Educational Needs pupils. For a copy of the consultation document, visit www.kingston.gov.uk/education/creating_capacity_within_kingston_special_schools.htm.

Synopsis of comments to the site

This section normally provides an analysis of the comments entered into the integrated discussion forum during the collection of signatures.

Follow-on work

Additional work has been carried out by Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley and Rotherham (all through [Easy@contects](#)) to build an iDTV interface for the ITC software.

This enables people to see and sign ePetitions through a digital television service, but the system currently only supports the initiation of ePetitions online. However, this opens up the ePetitioner software to a far greater audience, particularly in areas of low internet access.

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THE BENEFITS

“I feel ePetitioning is really important – a way of furthering the inclusivity etc etc of the council. It is not just disinterested or disadvantaged people who cannot get involved in local issues, but busy people who have trouble doing much else other than work and bath the kids before 8pm – the Internet is my saviour”

Bristol ePetition signer

Relevance of ePetitioning and expected impact

The ePetitioner system's appeal in the more general sense is likely to depend on whether citizens find the petitioning process a relevant way to raise their concerns.

In a recent survey, field test participants were asked about their experiences and expectations. The views expressed about ePetitioning were almost all positive, while expectations of the petitioning process having a positive outcome ranged from mildly hopeful to highly sceptical.

All field testers replied to questions about their expectations by referring to the ability to see results published in the *Progress* page – not just as a means to follow up the progress of petitions they supported but as a “guide to what might happen”. This suggests that the credibility of the system will depend on the clarity of the outcomes and the effectiveness of tracking and publishing these outcomes.

Expectations of the petitioning process were inevitably bound up with local politics and views regarding the competence of the councils.

“If comments are easily available online you’ve got a clear record of what people are thinking or saying. The usual system is to get a leaflet through the door saying I’m worried about ‘X’, can you come to a meeting about ‘X’. And if I can’t be bothered going to the meeting I’m not going to find out about it, but at least if I’ve got it here [on ePetitioner]. I can find out about it in my own time and at my own convenience, and maybe engage in some discussion about it without leaving my house.. because I might have a vague interest in it but I’d think oh God I can’t be bothered at this time of night because it’s not that important to me this issue. But having it online that’s very convenient isn’t it?”

The information included in ePetitioner about the issues raised and about the principal petitioner was seen as an advantage over paper by some participants.

Citizen benefits

The main advantage is simplicity and convenience compared with petitioning on paper. For some, the possibility to petition the council online made the difference between doing it and not doing it:

“If you are in full-time work, and if you have a small child, ePetitioning makes it easier to get involved in the local community. It gives a voice to those in such a position, who would otherwise be silent on local politics”.

Maria Samuels – principal petitioner

Creating an online petitioning service provides a service for members of the public that can help them to tap in to the constitutional process. When starting the ePetitions service, both Bristol and Kingston upon Thames took the opportunity to review existing constitutional rules and processes and to provide user-friendly guidance on petitions.

Support is also provided during the life of the ePetition with advice given about how to promote the ePetition, how to submit it and linking the citizen to their councillor where required.

This has led to a success in encouraging new people to raise issues or even just to sign petitions. In Kingston upon Thames, around 19% of people signing ePetitions had not signed a traditional petition before. Some petitioners, particularly young people, have also stated that they would not have raised the issue without the ability to do so online.

ePetitioner provides an opportunity for campaigners to reach a wider audience than is possible with a traditional petition. It encourages the petitioner to provide background information and to link to external websites where appropriate. Each ePetition has its own discussion forum where people can agree or disagree with the issue.

Benefits of ePetitions for the citizen also include the ability to receive feedback on petitions raised. Traditional petitioning mechanisms don't often allow members of the public to hear how their support has been considered. By having an ePetitioning website, there is an opportunity to publish all of the petitions received and to show how they progress from being submitted, presented, referred and managed by a council officer.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

The increased visibility of a petition's progress after being submitted increases the political accountability of the council to petitions, including potential lack of a response. This helps people to hold the council to account, and enhances petitioning as a democratic tool.

The online environment also allows for more deliberative debate – and the ePetitioning service allows people to post comments (sometimes in disagreement with the issue), and reflect on other people's posts. This should lead to less pressure on people to sign petitions, allowing them to make a more informed decision about whether or not to support the issue.

By having an awareness of current issues, people who disagree strongly with an ePetition also have the opportunity to start an opposing ePetition. Where councillors are encouraged to use the ePetitioner, it additionally makes it easier for people to see their councillors' views and the petitions they are supporting on behalf of their residents.

Benefits to authority

“ePetitions can provide another way for people to raise matters with the council if they want to...it's a matter of extending choice...I'd expect developments like this to become more and more important over the next few years.”

Stephen McNamara, Head of Legal Services at
Bristol City Council

Benefits for the council include the early warning of issues that people are going to raise. Being able to feed back to members of the public helps to encourage greater transparency of decision-making and, over time, it is expected that citizens will increase their understanding of government.

ePetitions with an accompanying discussion forum allow the government body to understand the issues in more detail. Instead of simply being presented with a list of people asking for a particular action, the discussion will also include comments from people who disagree with the ePetition or who have supplementary points to raise.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

For example, an ePetition on collecting plastic for recycling had an associated discussion forum that highlighted the lack of plastics recycling points around Bristol. It also showed a desire for citizens to be able to recycle cardboard. Although the overall request could not be met, the Council was able to use the high level of support to encourage local supermarkets to host more plastics recycling points and also started to include cardboard collections within its weekly recycling collections.

Reports produced once the ePetition has closed allow the council to analyse the signatures received by ward or area of the city. This can be particularly useful in demonstrating the interest levels in an area-specific service, such as a local swimming pool, and understanding the strength of feeling from different parts of the city.

Another benefit for councils is that ePetitions do not require large amounts of ongoing promotion and publicity. Each new ePetition generates publicity that draws people to the website. If regular feedback is offered, the website will continue to be regularly visited by interested people.

Likewise, as the council is facilitating the process rather than supporting and managing each ePetition, the amount of officer time needed to manage the service is not excessive.

ePetitions have helped to achieve strategic objectives

The Royal Borough of Kingston's commitment is 'to help create the best opportunities, services and environment for the people of the Borough of Kingston' with a focus on the outcomes produced for residents. The project fits within two of the Council's strategic objectives – "Working in Partnership" and "Putting People First". Online petitions were delivered in Kingston through the efforts of the Council and the Local eDemocracy National Project, demonstrating effective partnership working within the Borough.

A key part of "Putting People First" in Kingston is increasing accessibility to the Council and enabling residents' voices to be at the heart of the planning and delivery of services. This project delivered on this objective by demonstrating the Council's commitment to promoting democracy and maximising opportunities for public participation in the democratic process.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

Bristol has an excellent track record of involving citizens in consultation and debate. The Council has long provided public space at Council meetings but has been looking at ways of further encouraging public participation into the Council's democratic processes.

In Bristol, introducing the ePetitioning service has helped raise the profile of petitioning in general and has given the Council the opportunity to review how petitions are processed and perceived. It is leading to more openness in decision-making and the development of a standard procedure for responding to petitions, which will be incorporated within the Council's Customer Excellence programme.

Benefits to councillors

“One of the roles of the councillor is to provide help, and mine is an ethnically diverse ward and there are certain groups and organisations – ethnic and religious – that find it difficult to get accurate, adequate representation. And as they get access to technology, this presents a chance to give them that representation – it is much more inclusive.”

Councillor Sue O'Donnell

ePetitions create many opportunities for councillors to engage with their constituents at a local level and can complement other communication and campaigning work that the members carry out as part of their normal business. Some councillors in Bristol have successfully used ePetitions to raise ideas for discussion and the discussions have then gone on to influence how the petition is taken forward.

For example, two councillors started an ePetition suggesting that a busy and narrow swing bridge be closed to motorised traffic so that pedestrians and cyclists would feel safe using the bridge at all times. Support for the ePetition started to come through from their existing networks.

However, when the issue gained media coverage, people who disagreed with the petition started to raise vociferous objections within the accompanying discussion forum.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

An opposing ePetition was initiated by another councillor who gained similar levels of support and both were submitted to Council. In this example, the discussion around the issue helped to come up with potential solutions and the Council decided to pilot a compromise of closing half of the bridge and using a contraflow on the other half.

Councillors can use the centralised petitioning database to track progress of ePetitions of interest and to view submitted paper petitions and their details. It allows councillors to see a more balanced view of public opinion about an issue through the discussion forum, which allows those opposing the petition a chance to have their say and people to give conditional support.

Councillors can view ePetitions raised by members of the public, and can immediately gauge the level of interest and activity around issues by the number of signatures and types of comments posted. They can also demonstrate their concerns and support of issues to local citizens by sponsoring or supporting ePetitions themselves.

Drawbacks

ePetitions can create a demand for action, and supporters of high-profile ePetitions can often consider the petition to be a form of referendum. It is important that expectations are realistic.

It is also important that there is a defined process for updating the feedback on individual ePetitions. In Bristol, because the ePetitioner system is run by the consultation team, there have been difficulties in receiving information about paper petitions that have been submitted at Council meetings and in being kept in the loop about feedback that has gone out to principal petitioners. It is vital that this process doesn't create extra work but sits with the appropriate officers and becomes part of their daily job.

Officers and elected representatives need to be clear what influence petitions will have on decision-making. If petitions show no sign of influencing decision-making for particular service areas, it may mean that changes within the overall council system are needed in order to enable the public to feel listened to. The perceived beneficiaries are often cited as "the computer literate" and disabled people "who cannot get out and about".

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

For ePetitions, the first point of contact between citizen and council may be a “neutral” officer rather than a councillor. Councillors may be better positioned to offer advice on the issue and the likely effectiveness of petitioning. This potential gap is addressed in Bristol by automatically notifying the relevant councillor when a constituent raises an online petition.

Citizens can be tempered by the effort needed to publicise the petition.

“It is a good tool, but it needs advertisement” says principal petitioner Maria Samuels, who initially relied on word of mouth among friends, but went on to produce a leaflet and distribute it locally. For others, the demands of publicising an ePetition make them ambivalent about its benefits:

“That is one of the disappointing aspects of ePetitions. With a paper petition, it is easier to get signatures by asking people to read the petition and let them decide whether they would like to sign or not. With an ePetition, you have the problem of directing them to a website in order to sign. This can lead to people simply forgetting about it. For instance, my sister’s children go or are about to go to the school; I asked her frequently to sign the ePetition, but she did not get around to it. If it had been a paper petition, they all would have signed. So you lose some of the immediacy of the petition by doing it online.”

Principal ePetitioner

“The web address was included on a school newsletter, but there is a tendency for parents to read only those bits that are relevant to their children and then put it to one side. You would have to be extremely interested in order to go back to it to find the web address. Then, the address is long and complicated and not immediately obvious – it would help to have a simpler web address. The fact that a paper petition can support ePetitions should be made more obvious. If there were a facility to print-off petition forms that could be used as a paper petition it would make it easier for people to collect signatures.”

Principal ePetitioner

“...distributing a petition by hand is a lot more likely to get more signatures. Because you can actually see it... and the urgency. They tell you it’s happening now and it is urgent to sign it whereas on the Internet maybe people will not go to check it every day.”

Survey participant

CHAPTER THREE: THE BENEFITS

Political tensions can arise with the ePetitions system. It is important that the Conditions of Use are considered carefully at the time of their introduction, but these should continue to be monitored, particularly around election periods.

For example, during an election period an ePetition was started by an opposition councillor in response to a perceived threat to the local swimming pool. The information about the perceived threat came from a Council report and was checked before the ePetition went live. However, criticisms were made by the leading party as it was not a proposal that they were intending to support. They felt that this was not an issue, but the ePetition remained live as the information had been checked and was felt to be valid.

The signatures can be difficult to validate. Although paper petitions are rarely checked for valid names and addresses, the ePetition software does allow some checks to take place and, as the data is more public, additional work may be needed to ensure that the signatures are authentic. IP address and email address can be checked readily by the system but there are times when additional measures are needed.

“For the home care ePetition where names were manually added from paper lists by five to six co-ordinators, validation of the batch-entered signatures created problems for us as the system uses name, address and postcode to eliminate duplicate entries. Slight variations in either of these enabled signatures to bypass the validation check. These are usually apparent and flagged as 'multiple IP address' but with batch-entered data these were less obvious. We estimated a further 2% of the signatures were in fact duplicates.”

Mike Brewin, Consultation and e-Participation
Officer at Bristol City Council

As with all eDemocracy tools, ePetitions will not necessarily reach all citizens. However, with the advances in signing ePetitions using a mobile phone or digital TV, these barriers will continue to be reduced over time.

Petitions are seen as an “easy” form of participation and as such can sometimes not be taken as seriously as more in-depth qualitative work or online survey results. However, their value must be seen as a good “way in” to democratic engagement and if people feel that this has made a difference, they will see the benefits in taking part in other forms of eDemocracy.

4

THE WIDER PICTURE

The Number 10 ePetitions website (<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk>) has proved a controversial addition to the UK ePetitioning field with an overwhelming response by the public to its introduction. When the road tax ePetition was open, the number of people signing ePetitions peaked at around 200,000 per day, a similar level of new registrations to the popular MySpace website.

The Number 10 ePetitions site was set up to replicate the existing petitioning mechanism, so petitioners must provide a petition title and background information, and are given a unique website within the prime ministers website, such as <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/midwives>. The website categorises ePetitions within 16 categories, including *Housing*, *Environment*, *Business and industry*, and *Public order, justice and rights*.

The site is managed by the Number 10 communications team. It is still being worked on to automate as many aspects as possible so the team will simply need to decide whether to accept or reject each ePetition. Explanations are given for any ePetitions that are rejected, and petitioners are also invited to resubmit them after editing.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE WIDER PICTURE

People signing an ePetition must be British citizens or residents and need to provide a unique email address for verification purposes before the signature is accepted. This verification process does not exist with the ITC software.

Expectations were exceeded in terms of numbers of people visiting the website and a key benefit of the system has been the ability to directly contact those who have signed ePetitions.

There is no formal mechanism in place to consider petitions that are submitted to the Prime Minister, although it is expected that the high-profile nature of the website will mean that decisions are influenced by the issues raised; in particular, the road tax petition, which attracted 1.8 million signatures.

Another criticism has been the lack of discussion forums to provide context and supporting information for the ePetitions, but it is felt that the level of interest in the website would make the provision of accompanying forums unmanageable.

Issues attracting the highest numbers of ePetitions so far have been *Transport and infrastructure* and *Health, wellbeing and care*.

Case study

An ePetition asking for a more reliable train service in the South West of England following service cuts attracted 1704 signatures. The petitioner was pleased with its success as the highest level of support for a domestic transport issue at that time and that it attracted so many signatures despite the campaign being run from home.

The petitioner felt that the emailed response from Downing Street was disappointing but felt that, overall, the ePetition had generated a lot of media interest, which had helped to open a number of doors and so had been successful in raising the profile of the campaign in general. He felt that the train company was now taking his campaign group a lot more seriously and that they had made some improvement in services as a result of that.

Selecting an ideal solution

There are a number of free ePetition websites that allow users to create and publicise their issues but have no direct link with government at any level. In addition, some councils or voluntary groups have introduced an online form that allows people to enter their name and address in support of an issue, but these versions of ePetitions are not considered to be an appropriate model for civic or governmental use.

Local authorities or governments considering introducing ePetitions for ongoing democratic engagement should include the following key functions:

- the ability to view and sign an ePetition
- the inclusion of background information
- ongoing links with appropriate council systems
- a feedback mechanism

In addition, it is recommended that discussion forums be included as an important element of ePetitions to allow the council and users to better understand the issue being considered.

Suppliers of common ePetitioning platforms include the following:

- Napier / ITC (<http://itc.napier.ac.uk>) – fee
- WebLabs (www.web-labs.co.uk) – fee
- MySociety (www.mysociety.org) – open source

Other considerations

Order of petitions

It is useful to be able to sort the *List Petitions* page in alphabetical order, issue or location.

Security

Few major concerns are voiced about security of the data entered or trust in its proper handling, although paper petitions can feel more “private” than ePetitions.

There is a risk of eGovernment sites being “spoofed” (fake sites set up to mimic the original) which could include ePetitioner sites being set up to gather contact details for nefarious purposes.

The ITC ePetitioning platform

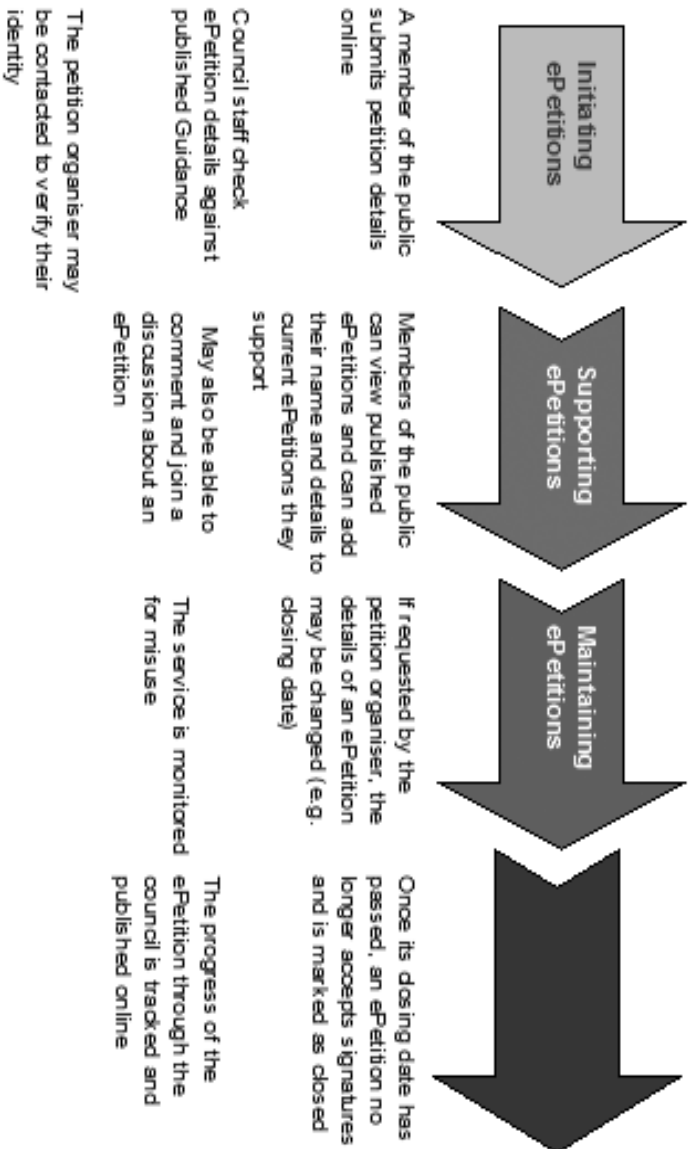
ITC licence the ePetitioner system. The fee depends on the size of the population it will be serving: country, region or local authority. The system is **not** hosted on ITC servers.

ePetitioner is implemented in Microsoft Active Server Pages (ASP) and uses a SQL Server database to hold the petitions data. It uses the open standard XHTML 1.0 for web page markup, and ODBC (Open DataBase Connectivity standard) to connect to the database.

The system is currently hosted on a Windows 2003 Server running IIS and SQL Server 2005. Disk requirements for the application are less than 10MB.

For local authorities there is a one-off fee of £7,000.

Administering an ePetition



CHAPTER FOUR: THE WIDER PICTURE

The administration tools should provide the facilities to administer all aspects of the creation of a petition, moderation of a discussion forum and the change of status of petitions.

Once an ePetition has closed, there must be further tools to enable the petition's details, signatures and discussion comments to be pulled out of the database in a report format. Control measures should be included to prevent misuse of the system, for example by people signing the petition multiple times.

Why councillors support petitions

Councillors have a dual role. They may be considered both as representatives of the council (Executive or Scrutiny) to the people, and as representatives of the people to the council. The councillors we interviewed regarded supporting their constituents' petitions as an important element of the latter role.

For Cllr McDonald, the councillor's role in petitioning is also as an actively engaged citizen:

"In general, often those who raise petitions are those already involved in politics or who have a concern for the local community and some may become recruited into politics that way. Eventually, you find that in any given ward, those who go around collecting petitions, or serving the community, are often involved in one of the political parties... From a community partnership perspective, if I had an issue with some particular group (e.g. disabled, elderly, youth) should I leave it to them to organise petitions? Often they will come to us with an issue they want us to adopt and so petitions may be precluded by communities working together..."

Petitions are often raised in the name of a councillor who has been approached by a constituent aiming to raise public support for their position on a local issue. Supporting a petition is, for councillors, a means to demonstrate that they are "in touch" with local concerns. A petition is a means of representing local interests, joining the councillor's role as firstly an advocate of the people to the council and secondly of the council's executive (or scrutiny) to the people. This "balancing act" extends to the final decisions taken on a petition issue.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE WIDER PICTURE

“A petition has to be more than a list of names; it is an indicator to those in government that an issue has to be looked at and legislation has to be examined. The number of signatures does not necessarily indicate the strength of feeling in an area. Quite often people will sign a petition if it is thrust under their noses, sign it and forget about it, and even sign it again later. Conversely, you could have a petition with just five names, served by a small group, which could have more far-reaching consequences. A petition is a way of grabbing your attention, but the number of signatures should not necessarily make that petition more valid than another one. On the council, we reckon that ten signatures are sufficient to indicate a valid case – we may even look into the issue before the petition is presented. You do get situations where, after considerable consultation a large majority of the population support a particular policy, a small group raises a petition to fight this policy, no matter how many signatures they get from that group, it should not affect the going-ahead of the policy that is in the interests of the majority. The petition might cause you to re-jig the policy slightly to compensate that group, but not abandon it.”

Cllr McDonald

The *Discuss Petition* online forum was seen as a vital part of the tool by councillors, and one that should be complemented by face-to-face discussion between petitioners and the public, preferably including their councillor. For Cllr Kevin Davis, the online opportunities were more limited:

“The petition only carries a narrow definition of the issue, and you get a clearer understanding of why people would sign through talking with them – which is lost with an ePetition. Conducting a paper petition gets to a wider range of people’s issues.”

It is tempting to think of a petition as simply a container for “an issue”, or perhaps a position on an issue, with the contents sealed when the petition is raised, and names then added before delivery to the local authority for processing.

Framing ePetitions in this way would underestimate the extent to which a petition is used by its advocates to elaborate and re-present issues that the petition raises.

That is, by relating the text to other concerns raised through discussion with potential supporters and detractors, the principal petitioner or councillor may gain an understanding of why the petition is important to others, and potentially make a better case for it.

Synergy with the 2007 DCLG white paper

The DCLG white paper has clues that ePetition is a worthwhile exercise. For example, it suggests a 'structured approach to petitions'.

Community Call for Action

The Community Call for Action aims to reinforce the role of the councillor as a community leader, to give local people an active role in local policy development and to improve accountability.

The key difference in this new legislation is that the council will need to tell members of the public what they are going to do about issues raised; for example, if a member of the public contacts their councillor about a particular issue, the onus is on the councillor to feed back what actions will be taken or why no decision is being taken.

A councillor should also be able to trigger a response from service providers, who must consider that matter and state what action they will take or explain their decision not to act.

ePetitioning provides a simple solution to this demand. Petitioners (be they councillors or community members) are able to raise issues and generate support or discussion around those issues before contacting the council formally through the submission of that petition.

By providing a central space for all petitions to be stored and for responses to be posted online, the council is able to show how each petition has been considered and can respond publicly. By also enabling the system to email responses, the council will be able to contact any interested parties directly, allowing a more proactive way of communicating with local residents.

5

HOW TO RUN ePETITIONS

For local authorities establishing and supporting a local ePetitions service, there are seven key steps:

1. Secure councillor and senior council support
2. Develop and publish petitioning rules and guidance (including ePetitions)
3. Identify and formalise internal processes for ePetitions
4. Develop and/or implement the ePetitions system
5. Publicise and communicate the service
6. Support the ePetitions service
7. Evaluate the ePetitions service on a regular basis

Securing councillor and senior council officer support

Securing internal support for the new service is vital towards making sure that ePetitions are seen as a valid democratic process, and that the service's processes are adopted internally. Councillors should become key users of the service, so maintaining regular contact with them is important.

Developing and publishing petitioning rules and guidance

In order to determine rules around ePetitions (such as who can start an ePetition and what happens after it is finished), first investigate the council's petitioning rules and processes. Each local authority may have slightly different petitioning rules (usually specified in its constitution), and different internal processes for petitions. For example, petitions are often presented or tabled at neighbourhood meetings in Kingston upon Thames, while in Bristol they are mainly presented at full Council meetings.

Legal guidance should be obtained to clarify how political issues will be handled and the use of the ePetitions system by councillors, particularly during an election period. In Bristol, it was felt that the Council was facilitating the process rather than supporting the issues, so councillors have been encouraged to use the ePetitioner and there are no major constraints during an election period.

These rules should be formalised and, when the new service goes live, published as petitioning guidance. This ensures that ePetitions are viewed within the broader context of petitioning. It is important to retain as many similarities as possible between offline petitioning and ePetitioning so they are viewed as the same democratic process.

If some steps need to change for ePetitions, the petitioning rules need to be checked in the council's constitution to see if amendments are required for ePetitioning to be a valid democratic process.

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Some thought might also be needed to identify whether or not council staff should be able to sign ePetitions that are directly related to their work. The staff code of conduct should be referred to, particularly relating to the political neutrality of the post and also IT use during work hours.

See **Appendix 1** for an example of Bristol's petitioning guidance.

Key questions to help develop petitioning guidance

- Who can start a petition?
- What issues can a petition be on?
- How many signatures need to be on a petition (for it to be considered a petition)?
- Are there any rules around the wording of a petition?
- How long can a petition run for?
- How can a petition be presented to Council?
- What happens after the petition is presented?
- How can petitioners keep updated of the progress of petitions?
- What are some possible outcomes of petitions? (i.e. Why should a member of the public consider starting a petition?)

Key questions specific for online petitioning

- How do you check the identity of the principal petitioner?
- What happens after an ePetition closes for signatures (i.e. it has passed its closing date)?
- How long can an ePetition run for? (The closing date should be set by the petitioner.)

Identifying the internal processes for ePetitions

Like any system, an ePetitioning service requires someone to take ownership of managing it. It needs a key owner who will take responsibility for reviewing and approving ePetitions and also needs someone to publish, maintain and track the progress of ePetitions.

Paper petitions do not require a central manager as they may have different entry points to the council (for example, they may be submitted directly to departments, presented at public meetings or sent to the Secretariat).

Prior to the service's launch, the local authority should identify and formalise who is responsible for the service as a whole and who is responsible at each step of the ePetitioning process.

Staff involved should be trained on how to support ePetitioning, including how to update ePetitions online. Target timeframes should also be set and published online to manage expectations. The detail of the processes may be different between councils depending on how petitions are managed internally.

Ideally the system should sit within the area responsible for democratic processes and council meetings in the council, such as the Cabinet Support team or Democratic Services. For example, in Kingston upon Thames it sits with Democratic Services, who are responsible for petitions presented at meetings. The Democratic Services Manager is responsible for the service as a whole and council officers who coordinate committee meetings (including their minutes) manage the operational side of the service.

Alternatively, responsibility could sit with an area that is involved with community engagement work, such as Consultation and eDemocracy. For example, in Bristol the service is run by the Corporate Consultation team. However, the Consultation team does not have direct links with the committees or a responsibility for monitoring petitions, so it has been more difficult to ensure that regular feedback is provided on the ePetitioner website.

In addition, key contacts in other departments should be identified and notified about the service. Heads of Services should be notified as part of this process too.

Developing and/or implementing the ePetitioning system

Local authorities can develop their own ePetitioning system using existing infrastructure or purchase existing software, such as ITC's ePetitioner software.

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At a minimum, the system should be able to deliver the ePetitioning processes outlined above and should fit within the council web site's look and feel.

In addition to the key processes, the following key issues should be considered during development or selection of an ePetitioning service:

- duplicate signatures
- abusive or obviously spurious signatures (e.g. historical figures)
- multiple signatures from the same IP address
- defamatory or abusive comments
- archiving ePetitions
- downloading of petitioning service statistics for reports
- producing reports of individual ePetitions
- tracking of ePetitions and petitions

Some of these issues could be handled manually when required, or you may wish to build features into the ePetitioning service. For example, an ePetition report for a committee could be prepared manually or it could be downloadable from the service's administration area once the ePetition is closed for signatures.

Additional functions could be added to improve access to the service, such as the following:

- an automatic email to ePetition supporters (including the principal petitioner) when its outcome is published
- an alert service for signed-up users when new ePetitions are published
- RSS feeds

The system should also be able to be updated or changed over time to adapt to technical and possibly legal changes, particularly to the content.

Publicising and communicating the service

When the ePetitioning service is launched it needs to be clearly and widely promoted to build local awareness and encourage take-up. This includes building councillors' awareness of the service so they can use it to support or start ePetitions on behalf of residents and can let residents know about it.

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Promotional activities to build awareness of the service could include the following:

- establish a prominent presence on the Council web site's home page
- issue press releases to local media to increase local news coverage
- run articles in Council publications, such as residents newsletters and e-bulletins
- develop promotional items, such as flyers, posters, postcards and bookmarks, and distribute them to community organisations, public access computer locations (for example, libraries), schools and Council receptions
- directly contact key community organisations and advocacy groups to let them know about the service
- advertise in local media, such as newspapers and the sides of buses
- give presentations to community groups, public access computer locations and other local residents
- request links or advertising on local web sites
- provide information at local events

Without promotional activity, it will be difficult to build initial interest and use of the service. The experience of the trials in Kingston upon Thames and Bristol showed that it takes time and effort to establish the service – but efforts have been rewarded as local interest in and use of the service has increased over time.

Once an audience for ePetitions is established, and awareness grows as more ePetitions are started, it is important to maintain this audience and to provide communication facilities to keep interested parties in the loop, such as an email alert service.

Supporting the ePetitioner service

Once the ePetitioning service is up and running, it needs to be supported, maintained and monitored. As specified in the step *Identifying internal processes for ePetitions*, the roles and responsibilities should be identified up front.

The sorts of tasks for council officers are listed below.

For new ePetitions

- Check the wording of the ePetition.
- Contact the principal petitioner to verify they submitted the ePetition. This is an opportunity to confirm where they would like the ePetition to go after it is closed for signatures and to clarify any required amendments.
- Contact other council staff who need to be aware of the ePetition.
- Publish the ePetition online.

For current ePetitions

- Make changes requested by the principal petitioner (e.g. extending the closing date of the ePetition).
- Regularly monitor signatures and remove obviously spurious names.
- Regularly monitor comments posted on any discussion facilities and remove inappropriate posts.

For closed ePetitions

- If the ePetition is going to a meeting, refer the principal petitioner to the right committee meeting. If the ePetition is going straight to a department, refer the principal petitioner to the department contact.
- Create a final report of the ePetition for the petitioner and send a copy to the committee or department contact. If a councillor is to present the ePetition on the petitioner's behalf, it should be sent to them too.
- Track the progress of the ePetition through the council. Publish this and any final outcomes online.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOW TO RUN ePETITIONS

For paper petitions

- Publish details of the petition online.
- Track the progress of the petition through the council. Publish this and any final outcomes online.

Other support issues

Guidance could be published to help petition organisers to publicise their ePetitions.

The moderation of discussion forums also needs some consideration. The ITC software does not pre-moderate comments, so decisions need to be taken about whether or not forums will be checked outside normal office hours.

In Bristol, the experience has been that only a small number of comments have needed to be removed, and that these were mostly spam. Forums have only been monitored outside normal office hours when particularly controversial ePetitions are running.

Regular evaluation of the service

It is important to run evaluation regularly to be able to confirm who is using the service, the levels of satisfaction with its functionality and management, and the impact of promotional activities. Different methods can be used to gather this information. Surveys are a potentially quick way to gather details – users could be asked to fill out a survey directly after signing a petition.

To gather broader and more anecdotal feedback, principal petitioners, councillors and members of the public could be consulted for their views on the service. This feedback could be used to help improve and further develop the service.

Other considerations

Authentication and verification of petition organisers and supporters

There is currently no way to accurately authenticate or verify principal petitioners and people joining petitions online (outside of contacting each person individually). This is the same for traditional paper petitions, but publishing names online leads to a higher risk of defamation and publicly obvious misuse of the service.

The Number 10 ePetitions website uses an email authentication process to provide greater confidence in who is signing individual ePetitions. However, this could be seen as providing barriers to participation so should be considered carefully before introduction.

To avoid defamation of a principal petitioner, they could be contacted to confirm their details and that they submitted the ePetition. This is also a good opportunity to confirm the petition's details and to discuss what will happen after it closes.

While direct checking of ePetition supporters' details may be very time-consuming and is not currently done for paper petitions, some measures can be put in place to remove inappropriate language or false signatures and to provide a level of confidence in the signatures provided. The names of people signing petitions should be regularly checked manually or automatically to ensure they don't include obscene language or use obviously bogus names such as historical or high-profile figures.

In addition, ePetition supporters' details should be monitored for duplicates including name and email details, and checks for repeat signing from a single IP address can be made (this can be misleading as some organisations only have a single IP address). This monitoring can be used to assign a lower level of confidence to those signatures.

The probability of abuse through false petitioners and supporters were seen as low due to the experiences of other governments running ePetition services (Scottish Parliament and Queensland Government).

End user should be aware of supposed 'ePetitions' which are sent round by email, asking people to 'sign' and pass on to others. These tend to be scams, a form of chain-letter. Issues of trust and validity are therefore important in the marketing campaign for the principal petitioner and petition operator.

Archiving Considerations

As with paper petitions, an ePetition's information must be retained for four years from the date of the meeting where it is presented, in accordance with Access to Information Legislation 1985. Concluded ePetitions could be archived by year and presented online.

Offline and online petitions

ePetitions do not replace offline petitions – they should operate in addition to the traditional petitioning process. Both processes should be as similar as possible to ensure they are viewed as the same democratic activities using different channels, and also so that minimal or no changes will be required to the council's constitution to implement ePetitioning.

Petitioners should be advised, if they are running both an online and offline petition on the same topic, that people need to be discouraged from signing both.

Tracking online petitions

The online petitioning service can make the progress of petitions once they have been submitted more transparent. However, internal processes need to be in place if this is to happen in an efficient and timely manner. Once these processes have been set up, paper petitions could also be tracked through the site in a similar manner.

Staff to manage the system

The amount of time required to manage the service depends on the number of ePetitions submitted and the existing processes in place for petitioning. Bristol's experience is that it takes an officer less than one day a week on average to manage the ePetitions system, which includes writing reports for concluded ePetitions.

Once the petitions have been published, the majority of the work lies in tracking the petitions through the council. If these processes are not already in place, it could take some time to initially identify the key department contacts and agree on how to feed the ePetition's progress through the council back into the web site.

Publicity and promotion costs

Directly after launch the service needs a high level of local promotion to build awareness and encourage take up of the new service. To minimise time and effort, cross-promotion with other activities and existing communication channels should be used in addition to activities specific to ePetitions.

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LINKS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, the ongoing ePetitioning services in Bristol and Kingston upon Thames can be viewed at the addresses provided in this chapter. Some other links on online petitioning are also provided.

UK Web links to further information

Bristol City Council ePetitions

www.bristol.gov.uk/ePetitions

Kingston upon Thames ePetitions

www.kingston.gov.uk/ePetitions

Number 10 ePetitions

<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>

Petitions factsheet

www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/p07.pdf

BBC Action Network guidance

www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/A2053649

UK Parliament

www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/publicpetitions.cfm

Scottish Parliament online petitions

www.scottish.parliament.uk/petitions

International Teledemocracy Centre

<http://itc.napier.ac.uk>

Glossary

ePetition

A petition which collects support (names and details) online, using an ePetitioning service.

ePetitioning service

An online service that allows people to start, join and possibly comment on petitions online.

Principal petitioner

The person who initiates the petition and decides when it is to be submitted.

Collecting signatures or Current ePetition

An ePetition that is collecting support online.

Closed ePetition

An ePetition that is no longer collecting support online.



APPENDIX 1 – EXAMPLE GUIDANCE

Who can submit a petition?

Any Bristol resident can submit a petition. There are no age restrictions (children can also submit and sign petitions).

However, for petitions relating to planning applications, petitioners may include non-Bristol residents who have an interest in the application, for example, the applicant, the applicant's agent, the owner of the property etc.

Online petitions

In Bristol, it is now possible to start and support a petition online. This means that the petition can be made available to a potentially much wider audience, giving you the opportunity to gather more names in support. The ePetitioning system also allows the principal petitioner the opportunity to provide background information, including links to other websites or photographs, and provides the opportunity for online debate, giving decision-makers the chance to see the strength of feeling about the issue.

You can run an online petition at the same time as a paper petition, combining the two before submitting them to the Council. Some people prefer this option as they find it easier to have one they can hand around to friends and family.

Two versions of the same ePetition will not be publicised by the Council at the same time.

What should a petition contain?

In general, a petition should include a brief title and a short statement covering the subject matter of the petition. The petition should clearly state what action the petitioner wishes the Council to take. The petition will be returned to the petitioner for further clarification should this be unclear.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE GUIDANCE

In order to be considered, petitions must also clearly display the following:

- the name of the petitioner
- the contact address of the principal petitioner, to which all communications concerning the petition should be sent
- the name and address of any person supporting the petition

Paper petitions should also include a signature.

For ePetitions, although the name and address of any person supporting the petition is required for checking purposes, only the name and area will be displayed.

The information contained in a petition must be submitted in good faith and be decent, honest and respectful.

Petitions will be rejected if they are defamatory, frivolous or offensive.

ePetitions that do not follow these guidelines will be considered inadmissible. In such cases, petitioners will be informed in writing of the reasons why a petition cannot be accepted.

During politically sensitive periods, such as just before an election, politically controversial material may need to be restricted.

Promoting the ePetition

If you would like to start an ePetition, we can give you some advice about how to promote it, and the ePetitioner site is promoted from some other Council websites. However, just as with paper petitions, the responsibility for publicising it will lie with you.

If you are promoting your ePetition by email, through newsgroups or discussion boards it is suggested that you only post information about your ePetition to others who are likely to have an interest in the ePetition. It is inappropriate to send messages indiscriminately to multiple mailing lists, individuals or news groups.

What happens once the signatures have been collected?

The principal petitioner should decide when he or she has collected sufficient names, and then submit the petition to the Council for consideration.

For ePetitions, the principal petitioner should set a closing date. Once that closing date has been reached, the list of signatures and comments will be printed off and sent to the principal petitioner who should then arrange for it to be submitted as appropriate.

Principal petitioners may wish to set their petition's time limit to coincide with a particular Council meeting (e.g. full Council or one of the Development Control (Planning) committees). See the Council Meeting Pages. For ePetitions, a week should be allowed between the closing date and the Council meeting to give us time to prepare the report.

What is the process for submitting the petition?

Petitions can be presented by the principal petitioner or by a councillor on his or her behalf at a meeting of full Council. Petitions can also be submitted at meetings (during public forum) or sent to the appropriate department at the Council.

If a petitioner wishes to submit the petition at a meeting, he or she must inform the committee by 12 noon the working day before the meeting. See the Council Meeting Pages for contact details.

If a petition relates to a planning application, the petition shall be considered at the meeting of the Development Control Committee, at which the planning application itself is considered (Constitution, Part 4, CMR 9.1a(i)).

How many names should be on the petition?

There is no maximum number of names on a petition. On average Bristol City Council would expect the minimum to be 10, however this depends on the issue at hand.

What issues can a petition relate to?

Petitions should generally be relevant to some matter in relation to which the Council has powers or duties. See the Constitution.

What happens once the petition is submitted?

Once the petition has been submitted to the Council, it will be referred to an appropriate Council officer, committee or councillor for consideration. Feedback will be publicised on the ePetitioner website once the details are available.

What can petitions achieve?

Petitions submitted to the Council inform debate and can have positive outcomes that lead to change. For example, they can

- bring an issue to the attention of the Council for them to consider, e.g. traffic calming measures or a new public swimming pool
- demonstrate strong public approval or disapproval to something that the Council is doing

Please note that during election periods, politically controversial issues will be restricted (Constitution, Part 5, Section C).