HOUSE OF COMMONS

House of Commons: Evidence to the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions

Background – Establishment of the e-petitions system

1. On 8 May 2014, the House of Commons resolved to establish an e-petitions system at the beginning of the following Parliament. In particular, the House agreed that this e-petitions system would be 'collaborative', meaning that it would be jointly owned by the House and the Government.[1]

2. The resolution called on the House of Commons Procedure Committee to develop detailed proposals for the e-petitions system. After receiving both written and oral evidence, the Committee published its report on 4 December 2014. In short, it recommended:

   a. A new e-petitions website, owned jointly by the House of Commons and the Government;
   b. The creation of a Petitions Committee to oversee the e-petitions system;
   c. The establishment of a staff team to support the Committee in its consideration of e-petitions, to accept and reject e-petitions started on the website, and to advise and assist members of the public on petitioning.[2]

3. The Procedure Committee hoped that the creation of an e-petitions system, together with the establishment of a Petitions Committee, would significantly enhance the relationship between the public and their elected representatives, as well as provide more information about the work of the House of Commons to members of the public.[3]

4. On 24 February 2015, the House of Commons approved the Procedure Committee's recommendations.[4] The Petitions Committee was established on 20 July 2015, and the e-petitions website went live on 21 July 2015.

The rules and structure of the e-petitions system and the Committee

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[1] Votes and Proceedings, 8 May 2014; HC Deb (2013–14) 580, c311 ff

[2] Procedure Committee, *E-petitions: a collaborative system* (2014), https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmproced/235/235.pdf

[3] Procedure Committee, *E-petitions: a collaborative system* (2014), https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmproced/235/235.pdf, pg. 3.

[4] Votes and Proceedings, 24 February 2015; HC Deb (2014–15) 593, c248ff

5. The Petitions Committee consists of eleven backbench Members of the House of Commons. The Chair of the Committee is elected by the House in a secret ballot, and Members of the Committee are elected internally by their party and then formally appointed by the House. The party composition of the Committee reflects the broader composition of the House. In the 2015-2017 Parliament, six Members of the Committee came from the Conservative Party, four (including the Chair) came from the Labour Party, and one came from the Scottish National Party (SNP).

6. In order to be considered by the House of Commons Petitions Committee, e-petitions must be created on the petition.parliament.uk website. Those who create e-petitions, as well as those who sign e-petitions, must be British citizens or UK residents. They must also have a valid email address.[5]

7. Once a member of the public has created an e-petition, they must gather the signatures of five other people who support their e-petition. When the e-petition has reached a total of six signatures (the five supporters and the e-petition creator), the staff of the Petitions Committee check to see if it meets the agreed rules.

8. In short, all e-petitions:

    a. Must be about something for which the Government or the House of Commons is responsible;
    b. Must make a clear request for action;
    c. Must not contain any libellous, defamatory or offensive language;
    d. Must not mention an active court case;
    e. Must not duplicate an existing petition;
    f. Must not be a joke, an advert, nonsense, etc.[6]

9. E-petitions which meet these criteria are published on the petition.parliament.uk website and are open for signature for six months.

10. E-petitions which do not meet the rules are rejected. If an e-petition is rejected, the Committee staff will always provide a short explanation for the rejection, and, if appropriate, direct the petitioner to other ways of addressing their concerns. For example, if the issue raised by an e-petition is the responsibility of a local council, the

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[5] A single email address can be used to sign the same petition twice. This practice was designed to allow people who share an email address, such as couples, to sign the same petition without having to create their own individual address.

[6] These terms and conditions were proposed by the Procedure Committee in *E-petitions: a collaborative system* (2014), https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmproced/235/235.pdf, pp. 35-37

Committee staff will direct the petitioner to a website where they can find out who their local councillor is, and will include, if it exists, a link to their local council's e-petitions website.

11. Most rejected e-petitions are published on the e-petitions website, and are accompanied by the explanation for their rejection. If the e-petition contains libellous, defamatory or offensive material, or if it is a joke or nonsense, it is not published.

12. When an e-petition reaches 10,000 signatures, the relevant Government department must respond to the issues raised by the e-petition within twenty-one days. The response is first published on the e-petitions website for the public to view, and is then considered by the Petitions Committee. If the response does not appropriately address the petitioner's concerns, the Committee writes to the Government asking for a more appropriate response.

13. Any e-petition which reaches 100,000 signatures is considered for debate in Westminster Hall, the House of Commons' second debating chamber. When considering whether or not an e-petition should be scheduled for debate, the Committee takes a number of factors into account. For example, if the issue raised by the e-petition has been already been debated in the House, or is an issue that is likely to come before the House through other means, the Committee will usually choose not to schedule that e-petition for further debate. In contrast, if the issue raised by the e-petition has not received significant attention in the House, or there is an appetite among other Members for debate on the issue, the Committee will likely schedule a debate on that e-petition. In some cases, e-petitions with fewer than 100,000 signatures have been scheduled for debate.
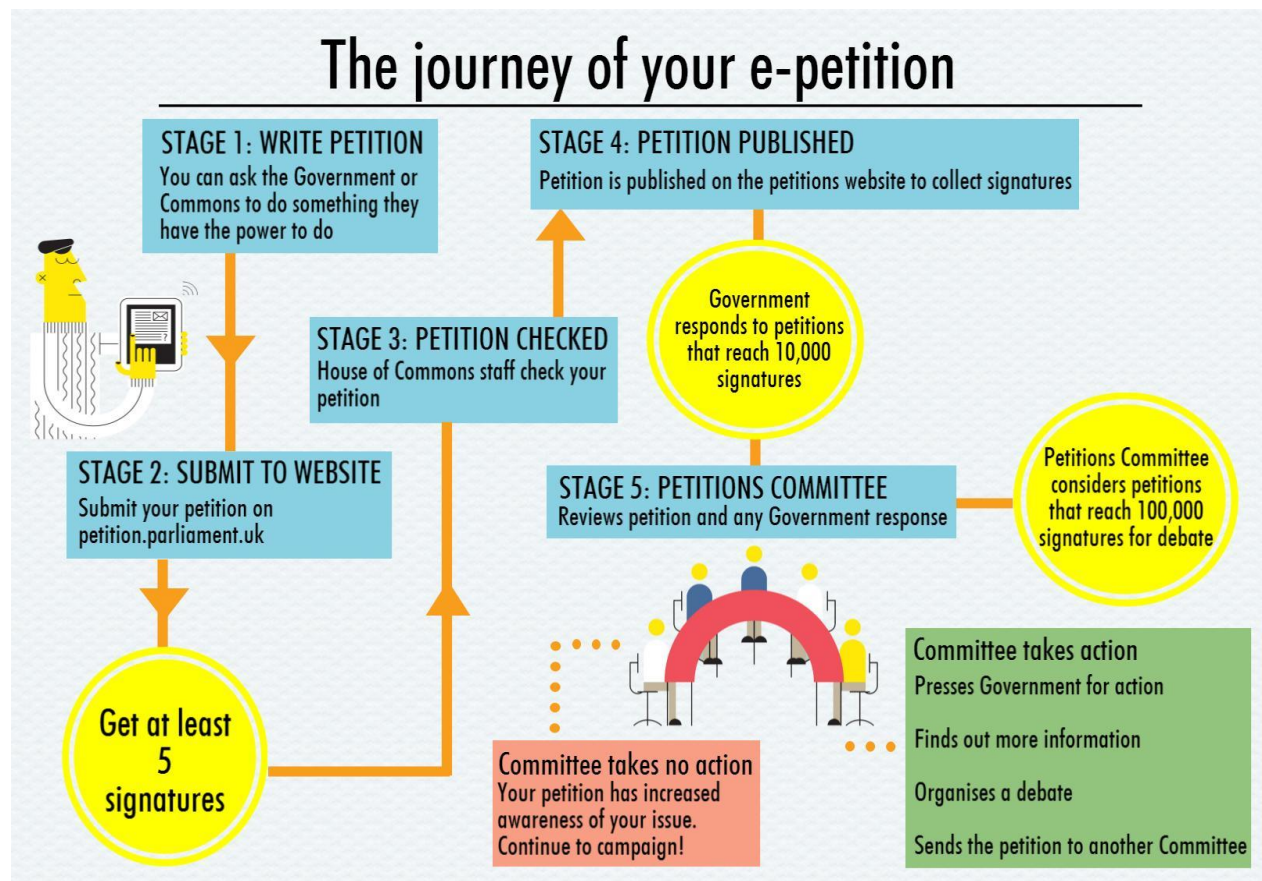
Figure 1: *The journey of your e-petition.*

The system in practice: statistics and impact

    Popularity

14. In its short lifetime, the e-petitions system has become a remarkably popular means of public engagement with the House of Commons. From the opening of the e-petitions website on 21 July 2015 to its closure for the Dissolution of Parliament on 3 May 2017, over 30,000 e-petitions were started on the site. Of these, 10,950 were opened for signature. In total, 475 e-petitions received responses from the Government and 47 were debated in the House of Commons.

15. In the same two-year period, e-petitions published on the petition.parliament.uk website received over 31 million signatures. Over 14 million of these signatures were unique email addresses, suggesting that just over a fifth of the population of the United Kingdom signed an e-petition using the House of Commons e-petitions system.

16. The most popular e-petition, which called for a second referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, received over 4,150,000 signatures; the second, which asked for US President Donald Trump to be prevented from making a state

visit to the United Kingdom, received over 1,863,000 signatures. In total, the ten most popular e-petitions collected over 9,120,000 signatures.

17. In the first year of the e-petitions system, between 200 and 250 e-petitions per week were started on the site. As Figure 2 (below) shows, this figure rose dramatically in the days after the EU Referendum on 23 June 2016, when over 6,000 e-petitions were started in the space of four days. By the end of the 2015-2017 Parliament, it was not uncommon for more than 500 e-petitions to be started in a week.

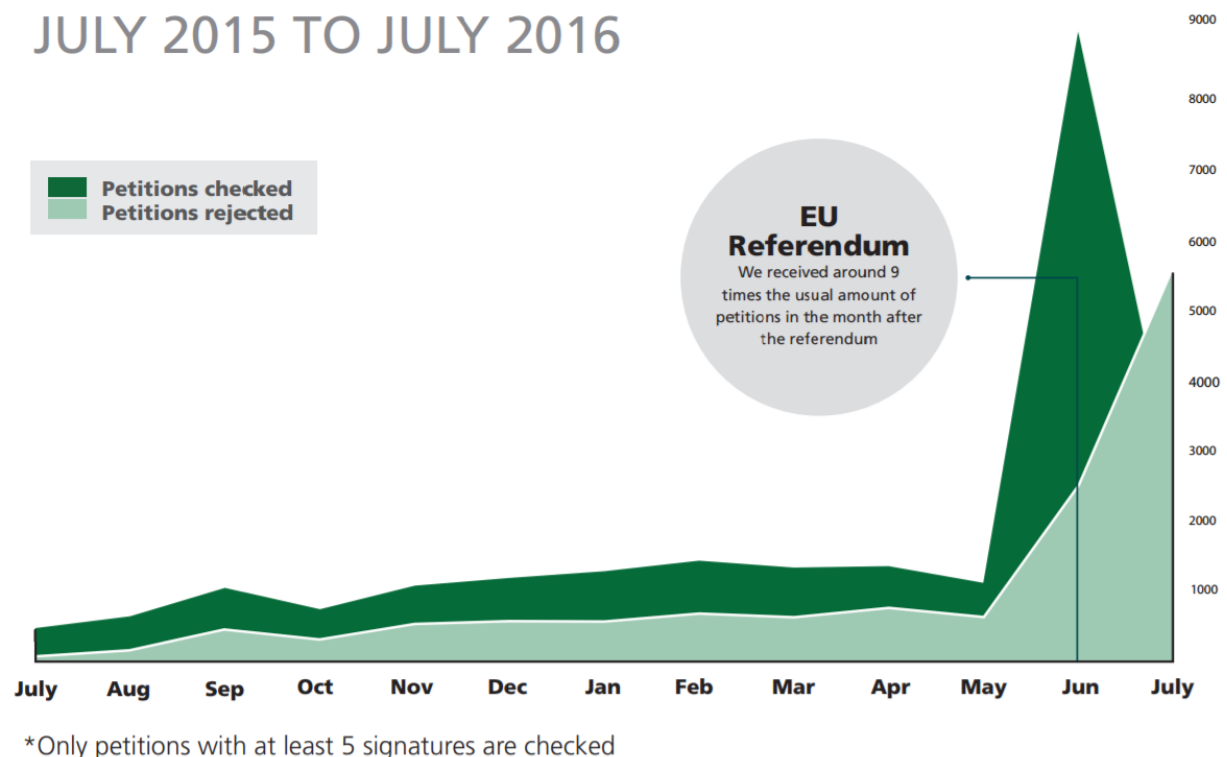## NUMBER OF PETITIONS CHECKED JULY 2015 TO JULY 2016

Figure 2: *The number of petitions checked by Committee Staff between July 2015 and July 2016.*[7]

Topics

18. The issues raised by e-petitions have varied tremendously. The most popular topic for e-petitions was health services and medicine, followed closely by education and crime, law and civil rights. People also petitioned in large numbers about agriculture and rural affairs, asylum and immigration, international affairs and domestic security, and energy and the environment. More information about the topics of e-petitions can

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[7] Petitions Committee, *Your Petitions: A Year of Action* (2016), https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Your-Petitions-A-Year-of-Action.pdf, pg. 5.

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User data

19. As Figure 3 (below) demonstrates, people who started e-petitions were spread across all regions of the United Kingdom. The most active regions are found largely in the south of England and the Midlands, though creating a petition was also popular in the north and northeast of England, and in northern Scotland.
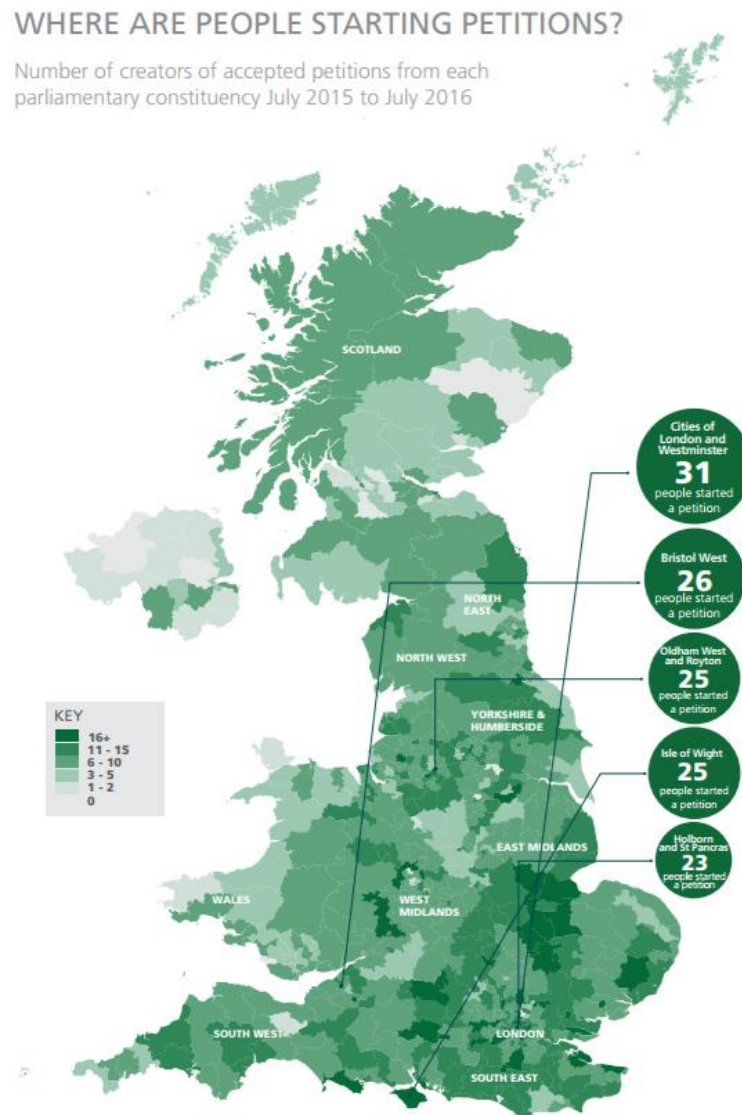

Figure 3: *The location of people who started petitions between July 2015 and July 2016.[8]*

20. The geographic spread of people who signed e-petitions is slightly less broad. Urban centres in the south of England – namely Brighton, Bristol and London – contained the largest number of people who signed e-petitions, while areas in Northern Ireland

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[8] Petitions Committee, *Your Petitions: A Year of Action* (2016), https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Your-Petitions-A-Year-of-Action.pdf, pg. 4.

and Scotland contained the fewest, as Figure 4 (below) demonstrates. The relatively low levels of petition signing in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland may be explained by the fact that many domestic policy issues, such as health and education, are devolved.
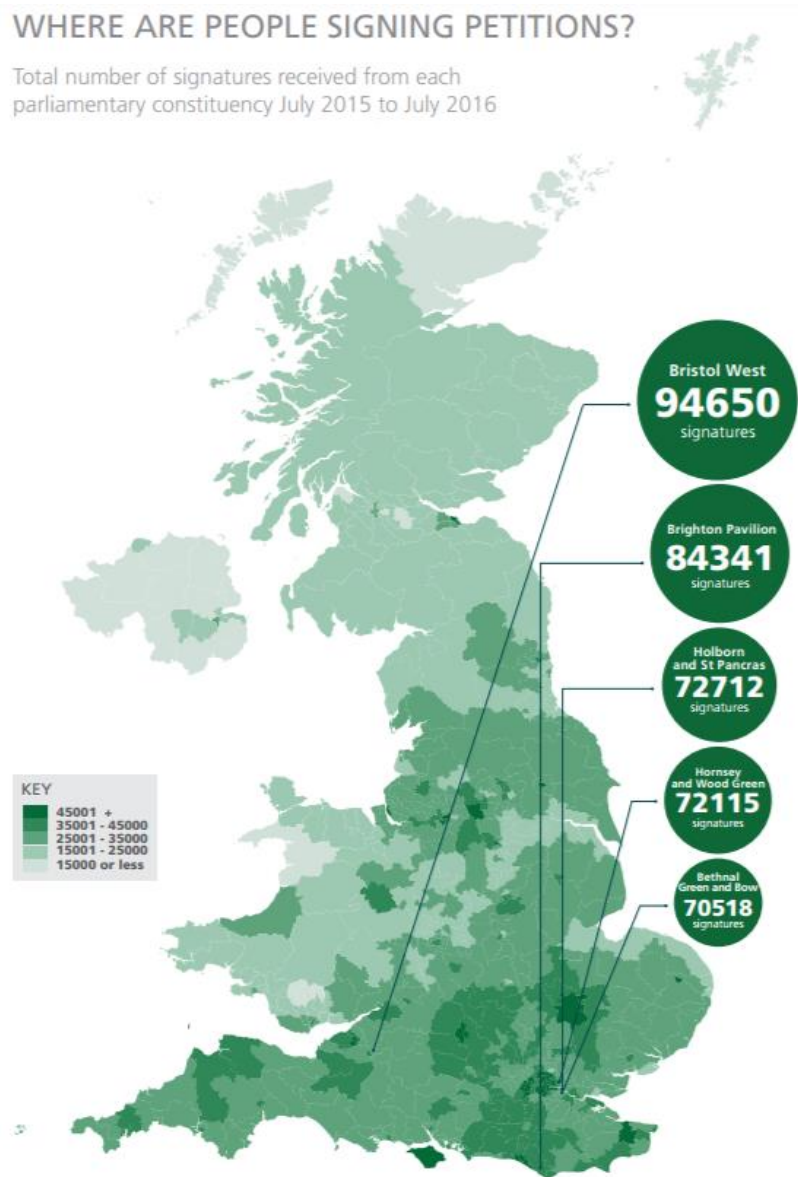

Figure 4: *The location of people who signed e-petitions between July 2015 and July 2016.[9]*

21. Other than geographic location, the e-petitions system does not collect demographic data about petitioners, such as age or ethnicity.

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[9] Petitions Committee, *Your Petitions: A Year of Action* (2016), https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Your-Petitions-A-Year-of-Action.pdf, pg. 3.

Public engagement

22. From the outset, the Petitions Committee agreed that it would "do all it can to maximise the potential for petitioners and other members of the public to be involved with debates on petitions". To achieve this, it has experimented with a range of formal and informal ways of engaging the public with debates. These have included: formal oral and written evidence; online web threads and surveys; digital debates, where a Member of the Committee discusses a specific issue with members of the public on Twitter or Facebook for a set amount of time (such as an hour); and informal discussions with petition creators or people who have contributed to web threads.

23. The appetite for this kind of engagement has at times been overwhelming and, as far as House of Commons select committees are concerned, unprecedented. In 2015, the Committee launched an inquiry into an e-petition on funding for brain tumour research, and asked members of the public to share their experiences on an online web thread. The thread received over 1,100 comments in five days, many of which were used as evidence in the Committee's subsequent report on the matter. Later that year, an inquiry into an e-petition about dress codes for women in the workplace featured a similar web thread, that time yielding over 700 responses.

24. As the e-petitions system became more popular, the number of people who engaged with the Committee increased substantially. In two recent inquiries into e-petitions— one which requested a cap on car insurance for young people (January 2017), and the other a closure of retail stores on Boxing Day (December 2016)—the Committee asked people who had signed the e-petitions to submit evidence about their experiences. People who had signed the car insurance e-petition were asked to fill in an online survey, while those who had signed the Boxing Day e-petition were asked to answer some questions about their experiences on a web forum. In total, the Committee received over 20,000 responses to the car insurance survey, and over 8,000 comments on the Boxing Day web thread. In both cases, the public's contributions were used extensively by MPs who spoke in the subsequent debates on the e-petitions.

Impact of e-petitions debates

25. In the 2015-2017 Parliament, debates on e-petitions became an important source of public engagement with the business of the House of Commons. All debates are streamed live on the parliamentlive.tv website, and are accompanied by a transcript of the debate, produced by Hansard. After a debate has finished, the Committee staff email links to the video recording and transcript to people who have signed the petition. Of the top ten most watched and read debates in the 2015-2017 Parliament, seven were e-petitions debates. In total, these seven debates accumulated over one

million viewers and readers. The most viewed and read e-petitions debate, on the e-petition relating to a second EU referendum, had over 350,000 readers and over 120,000 viewers.

26. Since the establishment of the e-petitions system, traffic to the Hansard website has also increased. Between April and July 2015, before the e-petitions system was established, the Hansard website had a total of 321,293 visitors. Between April and July 2016, a year after the e-petitions website went live and in a period that featured five e-petitions debates, the number of visitors to the Hansard website totalled 1,751,260.

27. During the previous Parliament, e-petitions debates were also popular among Members of the House. In the thirty-nine e-petitions debates, during which forty-seven e-petitions were debated, Members made a total of 468 speeches, and many others intervened. On ten separate occasions the Chair of an e-petitions debate had to impose a time limit on speeches in order to accommodate the number of Members who wanted to speak, and in two cases, debates were standing room only for Members.

28. Adding to the impact of e-petitions debates, a number of e-petitions have been the subject of local, national and international news articles. Articles about e-petitions, including accounts about evidence gathered by the Committee in preparation for debates, have appeared in news outlets like the BBC, The New York Times, The Washington Post and Al Jazeera.[10]

29. E-petitions have also had a notable impact on Government policy. In 2015, Maria Lester started an e-petition asking the Government to increase the amount of funding it provided for brain tumour research. She created the e-petition in memory of her brother, Stephen Realf, who had died from a brain tumour one year earlier at the age of 26. After taking evidence from scientists, academics and members of the public who had been affected by brain tumours, the Committee produced a report on Maria's e-petition, urging the Government to change their approach. During the debate on Maria's e-petition, during which there was standing-room only, the then Minister for Life Sciences, George Freeman MP, admitted that a greater amount of funding for

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[10] For the BBC, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39178911

For The New York Times, see https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/world/europe/donald-trump-muslim-britain-petition-ban.html

For The Washington Post, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/a-petition-calling-on-britain-to-rescind-trumps-state-visit-surpasses-1-million-signatures/2017/01/30/29a16bf4-fd26-4686-82ea-ffc12a23ef9e_story.html?utm_term=.7f2b59822351

For Al Jazeera, see http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/british-mps-debate-brexit-referendum-petition-160905170311939.html

brain tumour research was urgently needed. The Minister also announced that in response to the e-petition, the Government would convene a working group of clinicians, charities and officials to discuss how to address the need for more brain tumour research, and to advise the Government. This working group also included Peter Realf, the father of Maria and Stephen. The group is due to report to the Government in September 2017.

30. In response to an e-petition calling for the Meningitis B vaccine to be given to all children, Government Minister Rt Hon Jane Ellison MP announced a new awareness campaign about the symptoms of meningitis, and committed to a review into how decisions about the cost-effectiveness of vaccines are made within Government. In another instance, an e-petition calling for a tax on sugary drinks, started by celebrity TV chef Jamie Oliver, helped to change the Government's stance on a sugary drinks levy. Although the Government had initially rejected calls for the tax to be imposed, Rt Hon Phillip Hammond MP announced that the Government would begin a sugar levy on the soft drinks industry in 2018.

31. More information about the impact of e-petitions, including specific case studies and testimonies from petitioners, can be found in the Petitions Committee's report.

32. The e-petitions system has also allowed more members of the public to take part in the work of Parliament. For example, the creator of an e-petition calling for transpeople to have the right to define their own gender was invited to give evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee. In the Committee's subsequent report, it recommended that the gender recognition process should be reformed, quoting evidence given by the e-petition creator.

Conclusions

33. When proposals for an e-petitions system were first recommended to the House, the Procedure Committee hoped that such a system would improve the relationship between the public and the House of Commons. The system's considerable popularity during the last Parliament suggests that this has so far been the case. In its entirety, the e-petitions system not only engaged millions of people with the work of the House, but it has also had a demonstrable impact on Government policy and the wider work of Parliament.

34. The Procedure Committee also hoped that an e-petitions system would help the public to learn about the wider work of Parliament. Since the establishment of the e-petitions system, the traffic to Parliamentary websites, particularly ones where more information about the work of the House is available, has also increased dramatically.

This suggests that the e-petitions system has played a significant role in instilling a greater understanding of Parliament among the general public.

35. Looking forward, we hope that the e-petitions system will continue to be a popular way for the public to engage with both their elected representatives and the wider work of the House of Commons. We especially hope that the system will continue to diversify the group of people who engage with Parliament.

Mark Hutton
Clerk of the Journals
24 July, 2017