Inclusion London
Supporting London's Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations

Government E-Petitions: Information and Top Tips

The e-petitions website was launched in July 2015 so that members of the public can petition the House of Commons and ask the Government to take action. It was intended as a quick and easy way to let Members of Parliament and the Government know about the issues that you care about.

Once a petition has been started and signed by five other people it goes to Petitions Committee staff to be checked. Petitions stay open for six months.

Over the site's first year they received 23,232 petitions. They accepted and published 6,121 petitions and rejected twice as many because they didn't fit the rules. This shows there is more to be done to help people understand about how to use the site.

Overseeing the petitions site is the Petitions Committee. This is a group of MPs from different political parties, independent of Parliament, who have responsibility for ensuring petitioners are treated fairly.

When a petition reaches 10,000 signatures it is sent to the relevant Government department for a response. In the first year, the Government responded to 264 petitions. It should respond within 14 days or at most 21. The Petitions Committee keeps an eye on how well the Government responds.

The Petitions Committee also makes decisions about which petitions they take action on. That doesn't mean they can change the law or do what the petition is asking for but they can decide that the issue raised by a petition needs to be looked at further. That could mean deciding that it needs to be debated by MPs or investigated by an expert committee. The Petitions Committee can also decide to investigate petitions themselves and make recommendations to the Government for action.

When a petition receives more than 100,000 signatures, the Petitions Committee considers whether it should be debated in the House of Commons. If a petition is not debated it is usually because a debate on the subject has already happened or is happening soon. For example, although a petition calling for a debate on the ESA disability benefit cut reached 136,890 signatures, the subject had already been debated in the House of Commons and so was not scheduled for debate.

In the first year 20 petitions were scheduled for debate. The Petitions Committee also held three inquiries. These were on funding for research into brain tumours, Meningitis B Vaccine and high heels and work place dress codes. As a result of the debate on brain tumour research the Life Sciences Minister committed to set up a Task and Finish working group to examine research funding.

It is important to understand that a petition debate does NOT mean a vote to implement the request of a petition. Getting a debate is a way of raising an issue amongst MPs and is only one step in a campaign. For example, even though the Meningitis B vaccine petition had over 823,000 signatures, it was rejected by the Government. However, it led to extensive media coverage and as a result more parents are paying privately where they can afford to do so.

Another petition calling for a tax on sugary drinks was referred from the Petitions Committee to the Heath Committee as part of their inquiry on childhood obesity. A debate was also scheduled in Parliament. The petition was a significant part of a wider campaign involving Jamie Oliver which eventually led to the Government introducing a sugar levy on the soft drinks industry from 2018.

E-petitions have also been successful in promoting the work of Parliament more widely. E-petition debates are some of the momst watched and read debates ever. The readership of Hansard has increased by over 300% and the viewing of Westminster Hall debates by around 900%.

For more information:

https://petition.parliament.uk/

http://www.parliament.uk/petitions-committee

For a copy of "Your Petitions: A Year of Action", the report into the first year of the Committee July 2015 – 2016:
https://spark.adobe.com/page/Rw2pqPcJVSd36/

Top Tips

- Make sure there isn't already an e-petition on the same issue. The majority of applications for petitions get turned down. Over the first year about half of those rejected were too similar to a petition that was already open on the site.
- Check your petition fits the criteria. It must be asking for something that the UK Government and the House of Commons are responsible for, not, for example, your local council.
- Focus your petition on a realistic policy aim. A government petition is not going to lead to outcomes such as a Minister being sacked. Think about a positive question you can ask MPs to get behind.
- Promote your petition. You will only get sign ups through active promotion. Nearly half of all users of the petition site come through social media with Facebook accounting for the majority of these.
- Don't rely on the petition alone. Work with other groups who share your aim. If a petition is scheduled for debate you need to make sure MPs actually go along. The best way to ensure this are for supporters to write to their constituency MPs to raise the issue.
- Don't have false expectations. Even if a petition does reach 100,000 signatures, there is no duty on Parliament to debate it. E-petitions are most successful as an awareness raising tool as part of a wider campaign.