Public Petitions Committee

1st Report, 2013 (Session 4)

Annual Report 2012-13

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Public Petitions Committee

Remit and membership

Remit:

To consider public petitions addressed to the Parliament in accordance with these Rules and, in particular, to—

(a) decide in a case of dispute whether a petition is admissible;

(b) decide what action should be taken upon an admissible public petition; and

(c) keep under review the operation of the petitions system.

(Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament, Rule 6.10)

Membership:

Chic Brodie (from 18 September 2012) (Deputy Convener from 2 October 2012)
Jackson Carlaw (from 27 June 2012)
Adam Ingram (from 30 October 2012)
Richard Lyle (from 18 September 2012 until 30 October 2012)
Angus MacDonald
Mark McDonald (until 18 September 2012)
Anne McTaggart
Nanette Milne (until 27 June 2012)
David Stewart (Convener)
Sandra White (until 18 September 2012) (Deputy Convener until 18 September 2012)
John Wilson

Committee Clerking Team:

Clerk to the Committee:
Anne Peat

Assistant Clerk:
Stuart Todd
Andrew Howlett
Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Public Petitions Committee during the Parliamentary year from 11 May 2012 to 10 May 2013.

2. The main purpose of the Public Petitions Committee is to consider all admissible petitions. By this means, the public petitions process provides members of the public with direct access to this Committee to raise issues of concern. Our petitions process is an example of the Parliament’s founding principles of accessibility, participation and, in particular, the sharing of power put into practice.

3. The way in which the Committee approaches its consideration of petitions can be regarded as similar to undertaking mini-inquiries. As with subject committee inquiries, this Committee considers what the issues are and in most cases will call for evidence / views and then decide what action to take on each petition. At any one time, the Committee will have around 50 petitions under consideration covering a wide range of issues.

4. The Committee can call Scottish Ministers in to give evidence and this year heard from the Minister for Community Safety on the petition calling for a ban on the use of mosquito devices and from the Minister for Children and Young People on a petition from Barnardo’s Scotland on child sexual exploitation.

Petitions

5. This is the second year of the Session 4. Last year we reported that 43 petitions had been carried forward from Session 3. As at the start of this year 22 of these were still under consideration. As of the end of the year, 8 were still under active consideration by this Committee, 8 had been referred to other Committees and are still under consideration by them and 6 had been closed.

6. As always, many initial approaches about bringing public petitions were received. These approaches do not always result in a petition being lodged. Sometimes there will be another course of action more appropriate to what is being sought. Of the 166 proposals received, 46 new petitions were formally
lodged and considered by the Committee this year. The Committee invited petitioners to attend to speak in respect of 28 of these.

7. New issues brought to the Parliament this year included a national tree for Scotland, improved services for mental health sufferers, a register of interests for Scotland’s judiciary, effective testing for thyroid and adrenal disorders and an opt-out system for organ donation.

8. The Committee also bid for and secured time in the Chamber to debate a petition on flood insurance problems (PE1441). The debate took place on 7 May 2013.

Inquiries

9. The Barnardo’s Scotland petition called for research into the extent of child sexual exploitation in Scotland and the development of new Scottish Government guidelines. After some initial work, the Committee decided to use the petition as the basis for an inquiry. The Committee appointed an adviser to assist it and as part of its pre-inquiry work visited a Barnardo’s project in Glasgow. Calls for written evidence, in two tranches, were issued in April and May 2013. The inquiry has commenced its oral evidence taking and this will continue into next year.

Engagement and innovation

10. Parliament day is at the heart of the Parliament’s engagement strategy for Session 4. It seeks to take the Parliament into communities around Scotland, inspiring local people to take an interest in and engage directly in the work of the Parliament. It very much echoes the ethos of the Public Petitions Committee. The Committee played a central role in Parliament Day 2 in the Western Isles. It held an informal drop-in session in Stornoway and then a well-attended formal public meeting, taking evidence on a number of local petitions. Issues considered included equitable access to insulin pumps, inter-island transport links and Wi-Fi on CalMac ferries.

11. As part of the Scottish Youth Parliament’s (SYP) 50th sitting, the Public Petitions Committee met jointly with the SYP to consider a number of public petitions prepared by members of the SYP. Three new petitions on young people’s hospital wards, a Scottish living wage recognition scheme and a young carers grant were considered.

12. In recognition of advances in technology, the Parliament launched a new website. As part of this project a new online petitions facility was also developed and launched. The new facility is easier to use, more integrated with the Parliament’s other systems and processes and provides better security protections. It also enables petitioners to link-up with social-media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Prospective petitioners are invited to register an account and draft their proposals online; proposals are then submitted to the clerking team to review. So far, 652 accounts have been created by prospective petitioners.

13. This year the Committee established its own Twitter account and now has nearly 200 followers.
14. The Committee recognises the importance of sharing best practice with other parliaments / assemblies and legislatures. During the year covered by the report, the Committee visited the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff and met with its Petitions Committee to discuss matters of shared interest.

**Equalities**

15. Equalities issues continued to be mainstreamed throughout the Committee’s work. One example of this is the (on-going) inquiry into child sexual exploitation. The Committee recognised that it was important to hear from organisations representing minority ethnic communities in Scotland who might have particular cultural or religious considerations. The Committee has sought both written and oral evidence from such bodies.

**Meetings**

16. The Committee met formally 20 times during this Parliamentary year. No meetings were held entirely in private. 7 meetings included items in private. The reasons for taking items in private were to discuss oral evidence heard earlier in the meetings or to consider the approach to the inquiry into tackling child sexual abuse.

17. The Committee also met informally in Glasgow with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

**Bill and subordinate legislation**

18. The Committee did not consider any Bills or subordinate legislation during the period of the report.
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