

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Council
DATE	24 June 2015
INTERIM DIRECTOR	Angela Scott
TITLE OF REPORT	Petitions Committee - Review
REPORT NUMBER	CG/15/081
CHECKLIST COMPLETED	Yes

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report has been prepared in response to an instruction that the operation of the Petitions Committee be reviewed after a period of one year, to include consideration of the involvement of young people in the petitions process.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council:-

- (i) note the feedback received through the City Voice in relation to the operation of the Petitions Committee and the action being taken by officers in response, as outlined in the report;
- (ii) instruct officers to amend the petitions guidance to allow a petition to be considered at the subsequent meeting if the petitioner is unavailable on the original Committee date;
- (iii) retain the current Petitions criteria but instruct officers to review the number of petitions submitted in a year's time to ascertain if the requirement for 250 signatures is proving to be a barrier to engagement;
- (iv) agree that petitions submitted by young people be accepted under the petitions process where they have a minimum of five signatories which have been verified either by the school to which the pupils belong or the Youth Council;
- (v) agree that Education and Children's Services, pupil councils and the Youth Council be asked to support and promote the petitions process;
- (vi) agree to establish a small sub committee of five members which could visit schools to hear petitions to avoid the need for schools to arrange visits during the school day to present petitions to this Committee at the Town House; and
- (vii) authorise officers to amend the Orders of Reference accordingly.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Any financial implications arising from widening access to the petitions process will be negligible, though the subject matter of future petitions may involve budgetary implications for services.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no other major implications, although the potential additional demands on school staff have been raised by Education officials in relation to school staff being required to confirm that pupils signing a petition are indeed school pupils. It is hoped however that by setting the minimum figure for petitions from young people at five signatories, the impact on school staff should be minimal.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

The Petitions Committee was established in 2013 and officers were tasked to report back on the operation of the Committee, any lessons learned, and any recommendations for improvement.

Meetings of the Committee

There have been three meetings of the Committee since its inception, and three valid petitions considered. There are currently two petitions open for signature at the time of writing this report. A summary of the petitions which did not proceed is set out below:-

Vote of No Confidence	Could not be considered by the Committee due to the following:- <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Matters concerning individual elected members or Council employees• Matters designed to gain or reduce support for one or more political parties• Matters that could damage a person's reputation or discriminate against them• An allegation pertaining to people or organisations breaking the law or codes of practice• An allegation or matter which could be defamatory (contain information which is not true), discriminate against someone or contain offensive language, for example swear words, insulting, sarcastic or provocative language or other terms that could reasonably be considered as offensive by the reader
40MPH Speed Limit – A944	Could not be considered as a decision had been taken by the Council on the matter within the last 12 months

Marischal Square	Could not be considered as a decision had been taken by the Council on the matter within the last 12 months
Closure of Mugiemooss Road	Failed to attract the required 250 signatures (Only 3 signatures obtained)

Review of Operation

As part of the customer feedback work included within the Democratic Services Improvement Plan, officers used a recent issue of the City Voice to seek feedback from the public on various aspects of the democratic process, and asked several questions on the Petitions Committee.

Of the 604 people who responded to the question, “Are you aware of the recently established Petitions Committee?”, 558 were not aware of the existence of the Committee. Respondents were then asked if the Petitions Committee would be a facility they might consider using in future. Of the 564 people who answered the question, 448 said they would consider making use of the Committee. The final question asked those who had indicated that they would not use the Committee to specify the reason for this decision. The reasons given were as follows:-

Lack of trust that views would be heard and would influence decision due to previous experience	28
Too difficult to get 250 signatures	12
Lack of interest	10
Do not have access to internet or the skills required to use internet	10
Lack of time	8
No need to use this facility/nothing to petition for	6
There are better ways to get views heard	4
N/A	2
Could not use this function due to disability/impairments	2
There is already too much focus and time spent on committee meetings	2
Not sure what facility is for	1

From the feedback given it is clear that there is some work to do in terms of promoting the Committee and the facility to allow the public to submit petitions for consideration, particularly as 448 respondents indicated that they would consider making use of the facility. The Committee was established to enable the public to become involved with the Council, and to promote interest and involvement in local democracy, and at present the take-up has been very low. The team had been concerned that the public were perhaps not aware of the petitions process and the results of the City Voice questionnaire and anecdotal feedback from customers would seem to support this.

Action Taken

Some feedback suggested that lack of access to the internet might be a barrier to submitting an petition. The Committee can consider paper

petitions, but it was accepted by the team that perhaps this could be made clearer to the public and the website was amended accordingly.

In order to address the concern that views are not heard and therefore that the public cannot influence decision-making, officers in Democratic Services have undertaken to update the Petitions webpage in future with a 'You Said...We Did' section so that the public can see what has happened with previous petitions in terms of action by the Council.

Following the results of the City Voice feedback, officers in Democratic Services will also look to promote the petitions facility as widely as possible through public information sessions, social media and the Council website.

Future Operation of Petitions Committee

On a couple of occasions, the petitioner has been unavailable on the date of the Petitions Committee. While the petitioner can arrange for another person to attend the Committee to speak to the petition, it is acknowledged that this may not always be possible. It is therefore recommended that a similar process to that used for Notices of Motion be adopted and the petitions procedure be revised to allow a petition to be considered at the subsequent meeting. This would be in line with Standing Order 21(4): "If a Member who has given notice of a motion is absent from the meeting when the motion falls to be considered, the motion shall not be considered at that meeting but will be put on the agenda at the next meeting."

There was an initial concern that the requirement for 250 valid signatures was excessive and might be a barrier to submission of petitions, however as outlined above, only one of the petitions submitted thus far failed to attract the required number of signatures and so it is not considered that the number of signatures needs to be altered moving forward. It is however recommended that this figure be reviewed after a period of one year to ascertain if it is in fact proving to be problematic for people who wish to submit a petition.

Involvement of Young People in Petitions Process

As part of the review, officers were also tasked with investigating how the petitions process could be opened up to young people. At its meeting of 24 April 2015, the Petitions Committee considered a report by the Acting Director of Corporate Governance which proposed ways of involving young people (those under 18) in the process.

Discussions have been held with officers in Education and Children's Services, including those responsible for supporting Pupil Voice and Schools Councils (which would cover school pupils in the city) and the Youth Council (which would cover young people age 14 – 25, thereby including those who have left school but are not yet 18, and so do not appear on the electoral register). In order to avoid any difficulties whereby schools would need to arrange transport and teacher support for a visit to the Town House to enable pupils to present a petition, and to avoid children missing other timetabled

lessons as a result, it was proposed that a small sub committee be established to visit schools at a convenient time, for example during classes on citizenship, or modern studies. Schools would also be given the option of attending a meeting of the committee in the Town House if preferable.

It was therefore proposed that in the first instance, School Councils, Pupil Voice and the Youth Council be asked to promote the petitions process to pupils and young people. Petitions could then be taken forward through those bodies who would be asked, with teacher support where appropriate, to help frame the terms of any petition so that it would be appropriate and not fail to be accepted once submitted.

Following consideration of the report, the Petitions Committee recommended a number of actions to Council for approval, and these are outlined at recommendations (iv) to (vi) above.

6. IMPACT

Corporate – This proposal accords with Aberdeen – the Smarter City as it will promote communities and encourage participation in active citizenship, decision making and democracy. The involvement of young people will develop their self-esteem and assist in allowing them to achieve their potential.

Public - The report is likely to be of interest to the public as if the recommendations are approved, this will open up access to democracy to young people aged under 18 and enable them to engage with the Council on particular issues. The report may also be of interest to members of the public who participated in the City Voice questionnaire.

7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

If the recommendations are not approved, there is a risk that the public and particularly young people may become disinterested in engaging with the Council.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Democratic Services Improvement Plan
City Voice Issue 33

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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