PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Making voices heard

## *Inquiry into the e-petitioning system of the House of Representatives Petitions Committee*

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions

May 2018
CANBERRA

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# Contents

Chair's Foreword ..... v

Membership of the Committee ..... vii

Terms of Reference ..... ix

List of Recommendations ..... xi

## The Report

**1 Background ..... 1**

Introduction to e-petitioning in the House ..... 1

Key features of e-petitions ..... 3

Background to the inquiry ..... 5

Scope of report ..... 5

**2 Accessibility of e-petitions ..... 7**

Ease of use ..... 8

Design and layout ..... 11

Promoting and sharing e-petitions ..... 13

Signing an e-petition ..... 17

Signing and email verification process ..... 18

Committee comment ..... 22

Timeframe for signing a petition ..... 25

Is four weeks long enough? ..... 27

Committee comment ..... 29

Access for non-English speaking Australians ..... 30

Committee comment ..... 32

**3 Future enhancements ..... 35**

Objectives of e-petitioning ..... 36

Utilisation of e-petitions ..... 37

Committee comment ..... 39

Comparisons to other jurisdictions ..... 40

Committee comment ..... 41

**Appendix A. List of submissions ..... 45**

**Appendix B. List of witnesses and public hearings ..... 47**

**Appendix C. Snapshot of user survey ..... 49**

**Appendix D. User survey questions ..... 51**

# Chair's Foreword

Historically, the only way to petition the Parliament was to put ink to parchment or pen to paper. When e-petitioning was introduced to the House of Representatives at the commencement of the 45th Parliament, the aim was to engage a greater number of Australians in the petitions process. E-petitioning was seen as necessary to keep in step with the needs of an increasing number of Australians who are used to communicating and engaging with public services online.

With over 300 e-petitions certified at the conclusion of this inquiry, the House e-petitions system has proven a worthwhile and successful venture. This inquiry examined in detail how the e-petitions system might be improved and enhanced. In doing so, the Committee considered the experiences of other domestic and international jurisdictions that have introduced e-petitioning.

Most importantly, the Committee heard directly from users of the House e-petitions system, and spoke with stakeholders interested in the e-petitioning process. Users generally praised the introduction of the e-petitions system, but considered there were some aspects of the system that could be improved. Much of the feedback focussed on how the system could be made simpler and more accessible for all users.

The Committee carefully considered all of the gathered evidence before formulating its recommendations to enhance the system. The Committee has proposed initial changes that would significantly improve the user experience of the e-petitions system and provide greater accessibility for all Australians, within current resources. For practical reasons and resourcing considerations, not all suggestions could be incorporated into the findings of this report.

Some issues raised during the inquiry were relevant to the practice and procedures for both e-petitions and paper petitions. As these issues were outside the scope of

this inquiry, the Committee considered that a further inquiry into the Committee's role and the procedural framework of petitioning should be conducted to explore these issues.

I would like to express my thanks to the Deputy Chair, the Hon Ms Justine Elliott MP, and to my colleagues on the Committee, for their ongoing support of petitioning in the House, and their hard work and professionalism. I also acknowledge the previous Chair, Mr Ross Vasta MP, who launched the inquiry on the Committee's behalf. On behalf of the Committee, I warmly extend my thanks to the inquiry participants, who prepared submissions or gave their time to the Committee. It was important to hear such informed perspectives from a variety of stakeholders including individuals, school children, organisations and parliaments from other jurisdictions.

I commend the e-petitions process and this report to the House of Representatives, and on behalf of the Petitions Committee I thank all Australians who have enthusiastically lodged an e-petition, or signed an e-petition to the House.

**Lucy Wicks MP**
**Chair**

# Membership of the Committee

***Chair***

Mr Ross Vasta (from 14/9/16 to 21/6/17)

Mrs Lucy Wicks MP (from 21/6/17)

***Deputy Chair***

Hon Justine Elliot MP

***Members***

Mr Russell Broadbent MP

Mr Scott Buchholz MP

Mr Steve Georganas MP

Mr Ben Morton MP

Mr Ken O'Dowd MP

## Committee Secretariat

Ms Rebecca Gordon, Committee Secretary

Mrs Renee Toy, Inquiry Secretary (from 19/7/17)

Ms Rebeka Mills, Project Officer

Ms Adrienne Batts, Research Officer (from 10/11/17)

# Terms of Reference

On Wednesday, 24 May 2017 the Standing Committee on Petitions resolved to inquire and report on:

- The extent to which the e-petitions system has met the expectations of Parliamentarians and members of the public
- Future enhancements of the e-petitions system
- Other related matters

In conducting this inquiry, the Committee will give consideration to the experiences of other jurisdictions that use electronic petitioning systems.

# List of Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

2.70 The Committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives, in conjunction with the Department of Parliamentary Services, work within existing resources to update the House e-petitions system and web page design to improve user experience and accessibility for all users, giving consideration to adding the following features to the House Petitions List and website:

- A unique URL for each petition, to allow petitioners to easily share and promote their e-petitions for signing;
- Additional navigation options to improve the ability to search for an e-petition, such as the ability to re-order the list according to subject matter or date certified (i.e. listing the current e-petitions open for signatures at the top of the page);
- An easier signing process, if the security and robustness of the verification process can be maintained;
- The use of plain English language, including simple instructions for using the e-petitions system and wider petitions process;
- The use of explanatory symbols and imagery in addition to text, to increase understanding of the petitions process;
- A series of online written and video tutorials to assist users to create and sign petitions.

## Recommendation 2

3.27 The Committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives develop a campaign to promote petitioning in the House, with an emphasis on e-petitioning.

## Recommendation 3

3.43 That the Committee inquire into and report on:

- The role and operations of the Standing Committee on Petitions;
- Petitioning the House of Representatives, including a review of Standing Orders and other relevant practice and procedures.

3.44 In conducting this inquiry, the committee will give consideration to the petitions processes and procedures of other jurisdictions.

# 1. Background

## Introduction to e-petitioning in the House

1.1 Electronic petitioning (e-petitioning) was first proposed by the House of Representatives (the House) Standing Committee on Procedure (the Procedure Committee) in 2007, as part of its inquiry into petitioning the House.[1]

1.2 The Procedure Committee recommended e-petitioning in recognition of the reality of modern lobbying and campaigning and its impact on the petitioning process.[2] E-petitioning was seen as a reflection of societal changes in modern information communication technologies, and as a means of reinvigorating traditional and administratively cumbersome processes.[3]

1.3 The Procedure Committee concluded that information technologies such as the internet and email could generate huge support for issues, such as those addressed in petitions. The Committee noted that 'disallowing electronic petitions in the 21st century essentially denies a growing number of petitioners the opportunity to air their grievances'.[4]

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[1] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, August 2007.

[2] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, August 2007, p. 38.

[3] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, August 2007, p. 37.

[4] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, August 2007, p. 38.

1.4 In 2009, the House Standing Committee on Petitions (the Committee) inquired into the introduction of an e-petitioning system for the House of Representatives.

1.5 In determining whether the House should accept e-petitions, the Committee considered its potential to engage a greater number of Australians in the working of the Parliament.[5] The Committee balanced this potential opportunity with consideration of the necessary procedural changes and resources required to implement e-petitioning; as well as potential security and privacy concerns associated with introducing the system.[6]

1.6 Further discussion of the considerations behind the establishment of e-petitioning in the House is undertaken in chapter 3.

1.7 As part of the 2009 inquiry, the Committee explored the experience of other parliaments with e-petitioning and the potential implications of applying similar models in the House.

1.8 Having considered the experience of other jurisdictions, the Committee recommended that e-petitioning be introduced, recommending a number of proposed features and procedures for the new system.[7]

1.9 The Government supported the Committee's recommendation and requested that the Speaker and the Department of the House of Representatives implement e-petitioning within existing resources.[8]

1.10 On 22 October 2015, the Speaker of the House, the Hon Tony Smith MP announced that the House would introduce e-petitioning, stating that the 'work will be done within existing resources, and will involve consultation

[5] Julia Irwin MP, Chair, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning to the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p.viii.

[6] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning to the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. xiv.

[7] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning to the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. xiv.

[8] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *The work of the Petitions Committee: 2013-2016*, p. 25. See also, Australian Government, *Australian Government response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions report: Inquiry into Electronic Petitioning to the House of Representatives*, February 2015.

with the Petitions Committee and secretariat to ensure that the system meets requirements'.[9]

1.11 The e-petitions system was officially introduced in the House at the commencement of the 45th Parliament, with new Standing Orders being introduced in the Chamber on 13 September 2016.[10]

1.12 Announcing the commencement of e-petitioning, the Speaker stated:

> The system as developed will be accessible from the House of Representatives website. It will enable members of the public to enter and sign petitions online and track the progress of any petition as it is presented, referred and responded to. This new development will update the petitions system and make it easier for members of the public to petition the House.[11]

1.13 The then Chair of the Committee, Mr Ross Vasta MP, commented on the introduction of e-petitioning in his first statement during the 45th Parliament:

> The first batch of e-petitions has been considered by the committee and these petitions are currently available for members of the public to sign on the website. The Petitions Committee is pleased that members of the public are able to create and sign petitions through this system and anticipate, with some interest, an increase in petitions.[12]

1.14 As at 26 March 2018, 256 e-petitions have been certified by the Committee, and presented to the House. In comparison, 263 paper petitions have been certified by the Petitions Committee as at the same date during the 45th Parliament, and presented to the House.

## Key features of e-petitions

1.15 The process for accepting e-petitions in the House differs in one fundamental way from the process for accepting paper petitions. Before an e-petition is made available to the public for signing, the principal petitioner must lodge the petition through an online portal within the Australian

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[9] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *The work of the Petitions Committee: 2013-2016*, p. 25.

[10] Hon Christopher Pyne MP, Leader of the House, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 13 September 2016, pp. 752-6.

[11] Hon Tony Smith MP, Speaker, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 13 September 2016, pp.675-6.

[12] Mr Ross Vasta MP, Chair of the Standing Committee on Petitions, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 10 October 2016, p.1224.

Parliament House (APH) website. If the Committee considers that the e-petition complies with the relevant rules of the House (Standing Orders)[13], the e-petition is made publicly available for signing via the Petitions List, through the APH website.[14]

1.16 In comparison, paper petitions are assessed by the Committee after the principal petitioner has created the petition and collected signatures by hand.

1.17 Further discussion on the process for lodging, signing and presenting an e-petition is provided in chapter two.

1.18 Key differences between the rules for paper petitions and e-petitions include:

- Once certified by the Committee, e-petitions are available to collect signatures online for four weeks. Paper petitions can collect signatures for an unlimited amount of time as they are not certified until after signatures have been collected.
- E-petitions must be in English. A paper petition can be in a language other than English providing that a certified English language translation is attached.
- E-petitions must be signed electronically by entering the signatory's name and email address and following an email certification process to confirm the signature. Paper petitions require only a signature in the person's own handwriting. The signature must be original and unaltered.[15]

1.19 This report discusses the differences between e-petitions and paper petitions in the context of whether the House e-petitions system, introduced in September 2016, has met the expectations of Parliamentarians and members of the public.

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[13] Standing Orders 204, 205 and 205A.

[14] See Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, Petitions List, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Petitions/House_of_Representatives_Petitions/Petitions_General/Petitions_List> viewed 21 February 2018.

[15] Standing Orders 204, 205 and 205A.

## Background to the inquiry

1.20 On 24 May 2017 the Committee resolved to inquire into and report on the e-petitioning system of the House of Representatives Petitions Committee.

1.21 The Terms of Reference to the inquiry are found on page vii of this report.

1.22 Eighteen submissions and two supplementary submissions were made to the inquiry. A list of submissions is provided at Appendix A.

1.23 The Committee held three public hearings in Canberra for the inquiry. Details of these hearings are provided at Appendix B.

1.24 The Committee also conducted two online surveys throughout the course of the inquiry.

1.25 The first survey sought feedback from members of the public on the e-petitions system, and was available on the Committee's website from 17 August 2017 until 30 October 2017. The survey received 293 responses. The snapshot of the survey that was published by the Committee during the inquiry, as at 13 October 2017, is provided at Appendix C. A full list of survey questions is provided at Appendix D.

1.26 A second survey of Members of the House of Representatives was conducted from 9 October 2017 until 8 November 2017, receiving seven responses. The results of this survey were not published.

## Scope of report

1.27 During the Procedure Committee's inquiry into petitioning the House in 2007, the then Clerk of the House noted that 'making the House more open to the people is an institutional obligation'.[16] With this consideration in mind, e-petitioning was developed with a primary objective to increase the accessibility of the work of the House.

1.28 Some eighteen months after the introduction of e-petitions in the House, it is timely for the Committee to consider whether the e-petitions system has met the expectations of members of the public, and Members of Parliament alike, in contributing to an open, accessible electronic system of petitioning the House.

[16] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, August 2007, p. 37.

1.29 In line with the inquiry's terms of reference, it is prudent to also identify what enhancements might be made to improve the system, by reviewing the House e-petitions system, measured against the features of e-petitioning in other jurisdictions.

1.30 Chapter two of this report considers whether the e-petitions system is fit for purpose, by evaluating feedback from users on the design and layout of the system. This chapter considers the functionality of the e-petitions system, to determine whether e-petitions are accessible by all potential users, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In reviewing the system's functionality, the chapter considers features of e-petitions systems in other jurisdictions.

1.31 Chapter two also discusses the timeframe allocated to signing an e-petition, in comparison to other jurisdictions. The current timeframe for e-petitioning has been assessed with consideration of the current House requirements and sitting pattern, and having regard to the needs of petitioners and people interested in signing a petition.

1.32 Chapter three of this report identifies some of the procedural issues that arose during the inquiry, including comparisons to international jurisdictions where e-petitioning has proven increasingly popular. The chapter considers the future of e-petitions in the House, having regard to the original objectives of the system, and whether the system meets these objectives.

# 2. Accessibility of e-petitions

2.1 When conceptualising the House e-petitions system in 2009, Chair of the Committee, Ms Julie Irwin MP, noted, 'the potential to engage a greater number of Australians in the working of their Parliament has been behind every consideration made by the Committee'.[1]

2.2 In this inquiry, the Committee has sought to assess how easily members of the public have been able to voice their concerns via the House e-petitions process, since it commenced operating. The Committee sought feedback from individuals about their experience of e-petitions, including any changes they thought would improve the accessibility of the system.

2.3 The Committee received a range of comments from people who had engaged with the e-petitions system, both in submissions to the inquiry, and through responses to the Committee's online survey. As one petitioner told the Committee, 'the petition process is important and should be supported' as the 'people need a voice'.[2]

2.4 Evidence received focussed on the accessibility of the e-petitions system when compared with other systems, and the ability to share and promote petitions across different social media platforms.

2.5 This chapter considers how easy the e-petitions system is to use, having regard to issues such as the functionality, design and layout of the system; the signing process for e-petitions; and the ability to share and promote petitions. This chapter also discusses accessibility of e-petitions for individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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[1] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. vii.

[2] Name Withheld, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

2.6 Some evidence about the accessibility of e-petitions related to procedural matters. This chapter discusses one such issue, being the length of time that e-petitions are available to collect signatures.

2.7 Other matters that arose in evidence extend to the procedures that govern the lodgement of both paper and e-petitions more broadly. These matters are outside the scope of this inquiry, as discussed in more detail in chapter three in comparison with other jurisdictions.

## Ease of use

2.8 The Committee sought to hear directly from users about their experiences with the e-petitions system. Specifically, the Committee was interested in how easily users were able to view, create, search, sign and share e-petitions.

2.9 The Committee received mixed responses about the user experience of e-petitions, through its online user survey.

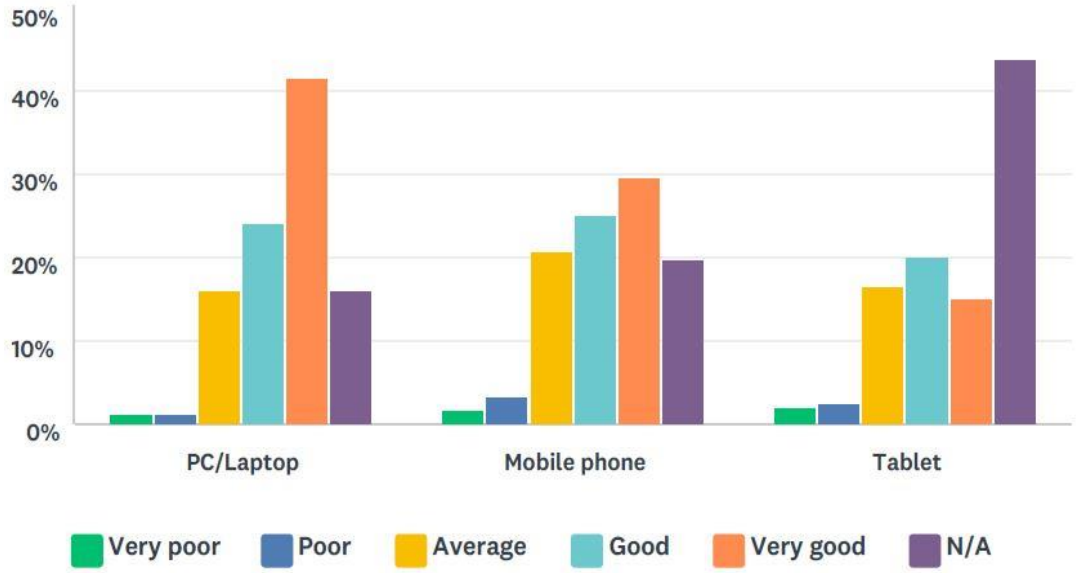
2.10 Survey data informed the Committee about how individuals were accessing e-petitions online, and whether the process was meeting users' expectations.

2.11 Almost 46 per cent of users indicated that they accessed e-petitions via a Windows computer or tablet. Petitioners using an iPhone or iPad accounted for about 37 per cent of respondents; while 28 per cent of respondents relied on an Android phone or tablet.[3]

2.12 When asked to rate the accessibility of the e-petitions system on their chosen device, 42 per cent of respondents using a PC or laptop indicated that the system was 'very good'. A graph of the range of responses (from 286 people) according to device type is displayed at Figure 2.1.

[3] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *e-petitions user survey*, Question 6: What types of devices do you use to access the e-petitions system?, 31 October 2017.

**Figure 2.1 Accessibility of the e-petitions system on electronic devices**




*Responses to e-petition user survey question 8: How would you rate the accessibility of the e-petitions system using the following devices?*

2.13 The Committee sought additional comments from survey respondents, regarding the accessibility of the system. A selection of these survey responses is outlined at Box 2.1.

## Box 2.1 - e-petitions user survey responses

**Question 9: Do you have any comments about accessing the e-petitions system on the device(s) you have identified?**

It's easy.

Very easy to follow

The system works well, is responsive and intuitive

I personally didn't have any problems signing, but many people signing our petition did

It's a hidden service. I could not find much information about it, how it works etc Its like you dont want people to find it.

Make it easier

Little hard

Took a short while to find the petitions list

It's slow to load. The formatting of the test is also not very clear.

2.14 While undertaking the inquiry, the Committee received four petitions that were prepared on behalf of a group of Year 5/6 students at St Anthony's Catholic Primary School in Sydney. The school group lodged three paper petitions and one e-petition. The Committee asked the students for feedback on the e-petitions process during a public hearing held via videoconference from Canberra, on 6 December 2017.

2.15 Advising the Committee on how to make the e-petitions process easier, one of the students, Aden, suggested that the Committee provide a tutorial to assist people in creating an e-petition. Aden stated:

> I think that you should add a small tutorial for people who don't know how to make an e-petition... It's a bit tricky for some people.[4]

2.16 Another student, Lillian, told the Committee, 'Maybe make it easier and simpler? That might help a bit'.[5]

2.17 Sienna, also a student, thought the e-petitions website was quite slow to load. She suggested that 'maybe it would make it a bit easier if you make it faster'.[6]

2.18 Other evidence received from the general public on the accessibility of the e-petitions system, focussed on three key areas:

- the general design and layout of the page;
- the ability to share and promote an e-petition; and
- the signing process for e-petitions.

2.19 These issues are discussed in more detail below.

## Design and layout

2.20 The design and layout of the e-petitions system was the source of much comment in submissions.

### *Web page design*

2.21 Mr John McLean submitted that the current system was 'clumsy, incomplete and unhelpful'. Mr McLean considered that the design of the e-petitions page could be improved with the following adjustments:

- A short title needs to be included for easy identification. For humans to identify things names are much better than numbers (for example, domain names in internet addresses) so the unique number needs to be

[4] Aden, Student, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Marsfield, *Committee Hansard,* Wednesday 6 December 2017, Canberra, p.3.

[5] Lillian, Student, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Marsfield, *Committee Hansard,* Wednesday 6 December 2017, Canberra, p.3.

[6] Sienna, Student, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Marsfield, *Committee Hansard,* Wednesday 6 December 2017, Canberra, p.3.

retained for computer processing but a name, not necessarily unique, is needed for humans.

- The reasons for the petition are essential components and they need to be stated as clearly as possible. Formatting is an important part of clear written expression and therefore the format in which the instigator stated those reasons must be retained.
- Optional supplementary information should be allowed (up to some practical word limit) so that the instigator has the opportunity to present a more thorough case. I suggest [Microsoft] Word or PDF format would be most appropriate, although checking for computer viruses would be required. This would be included in the pre-approval process where presumably there are already checks for distasteful material.[7]

2.22 Another submitter told the Committee that most of the problems with the e-petitions system related to 'bad web page design'.[8]

2.23 Mr Daniel Griffin suggested that the design of the e-petitions website should focus on accessibility:

> It is paramount that the focus in designing a digital petition platform is the accessibility to create petitions. Petitions should be able to be created with minimal setup and as little 'sign up' steps as possible. A cumbersome system only limits those who are less skilled in computers to create petitions and have their voice heard.[9]

### *Searching for a petition*

2.24 Another design issue raised in evidence related to the ability to search for a petition on the Petitions List. The Petitions List, located on the Committee's website, includes e-petitions available for signing, as well as all petitions (electronic and paper) that have been presented to the House; and/or been referred to and/or received a Ministerial Response. Petitions are not listed in any particular order, except that e-petitions appear before paper petitions.[10]

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[7] Mr John McLean, *Submission 5,* p. 3.

[8] Name Withheld, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

[9] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission* 2, p. 3.

[10] See Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, Petitions List, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Petitions/House_of_Representatives_Petitions/Petitions_General/Petitions_List > viewed 21 February 2018.

2.25 Mr Griffin provided a suggestion on how petitions could be made more visible:

> Popular petitions should also be easily seen from the main e-petitions webpage and petitions should be able to be sorted by location that they were created and topic they address.[11]

2.26 Mr Griffin put forward two examples of e-petitions systems in other jurisdictions that he considered had a greater search capability. For example, Mr Griffin considered that the United States Government e-petitions system, called 'We the People', had an effective way of finding a petition of interest:

> Petitions are assigned 'tags' so that petitions may be grouped and searched by area of interest allowing citizens who have similar concerns to find already existing petitions thus unifying their voice with others.[12]

2.27 The second example raised by Mr Griffin noted the approach taken by the United Kingdom e-petitions system:

> What is unique about the UK's petition system is the ability to search petitions by postcode allowing citizens to find petitions created by others in their local area, again creating a level of unity in the petition signing process similar to the US tagging system.[13]

## Promoting and sharing e-petitions

2.28 The ability to promote and share e-petitions online through methods such as email and social media platforms enables petitioners to reach a wider audience, and gather community support for the concerns raised in their petition, in the form of signatures.

2.29 Currently, e-petitions are available for signing for four weeks from the date the Committee has certified the petition, via the Petitions List, mentioned earlier in this chapter. If an individual wants to sign a particular petition, they must search the list using the number allocated to the particular petition, or manually scroll through the list of petitions available for signing.

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[11] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

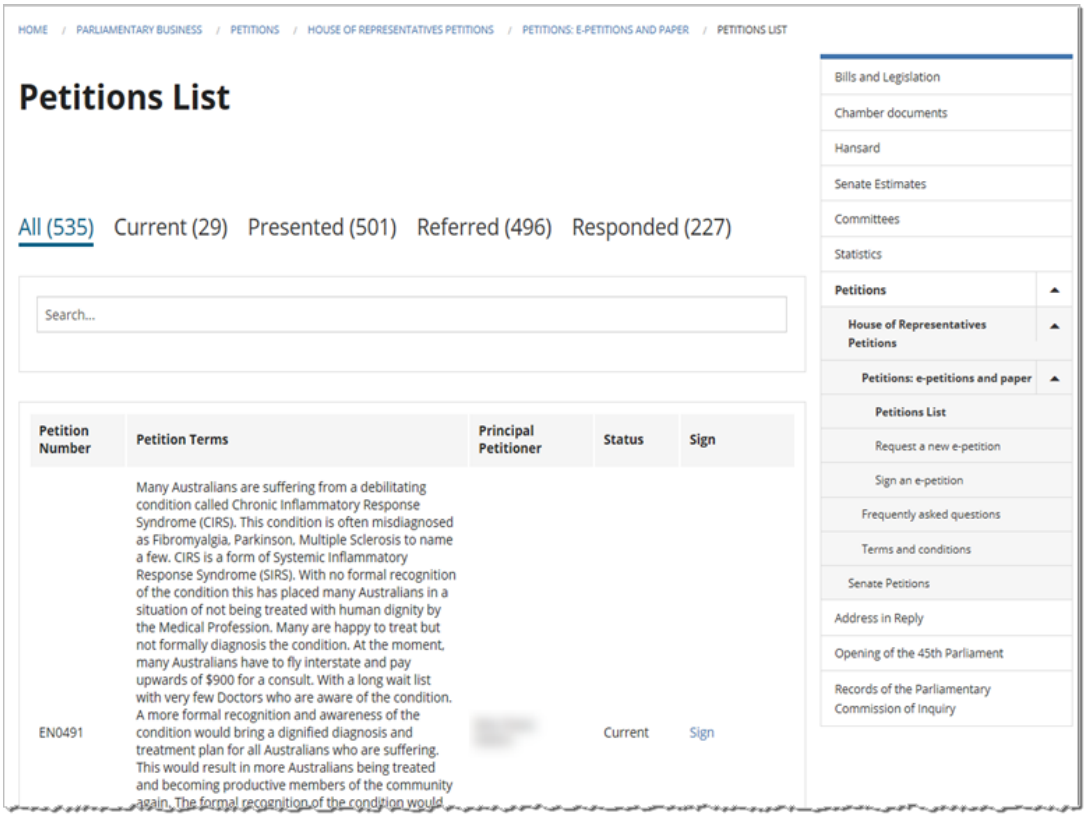
[12] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission 2*, p. 2. See also, The White House, *We the People*, <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/ > viewed 26 March 2018.

[13] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission 2*, p. 3.

The list of petitions available to sign at any one time may be numerous. Once the user has found the petition, they click on the hyperlink provided to take them to the signing page.

2.30 A screenshot of the Petitions List and hyperlink available to sign a petition is found at Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2 – The House of Representatives Petitions List**




*This image displays the list of petitions available for signing. Users must click on the hyperlink 'sign' to take them to the signing page for the petition.*

2.31 Some individuals suggested that the House e-petitions system could improve the ability to share and promote an e-petition, by creating a unique URL for each e-petition.

2.32 Mr Griffin commented that the ability to share e-petitions was a key element of the e-petitions process and a unique URL would enhance accessibility:

> Digital petitions have excellent potential to connect concerned citizens no matter where they are geographically, however a digital petition needs to be easily accessible and discoverable. This can be achieved by allocating petitions clear and easy to follow URLs.[14]

2.33 Mr Griffin again referred to the United States Government e-petitions site as an example of good practice in this area.[15] According to Mr Griffin:

> All petitions created receive their own dedicated webpage on the platform with a unique URL and built in share buttons for Twitter, Facebook and email making accessing and sharing a petition simple and accessible.[16]

2.34 An example of a petition available for signing on the White House 'We the People' site is provided at Figure 2.3.

[14] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

[15] The White House, *We the People*, <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/> viewed 26 March 2018.

[16] Mr Daniel Griffin, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

**Figure 2.3 The White House 'We the People' – petition available to sign**

*This example shows how a petition can be signed and promoted using the White House 'We the People' website.*

2.35 Mr McLean also called for each e-petition to have a dedicated webpage containing the following information:

- Petition number;
- Short title;
- Possible flag to indicate House of Representatives or Senate petitions;
- Closing date;
- Number of signers;
- Status (open, closed);
- Class associated with status (presented, referred etc);
- Instigator's name;
- The requested action;
- The reasons presented as formatted by the instigator; and
- If supplementary information is available then a means to display it.[17]

[17]Mr John McLean, *Submission 5*, p. 4.

2.36 It should be noted that the absence of a unique URL does not prevent a person from successfully sharing their e-petition online.

2.37 The recent experience of a petitioner in successfully sharing and promoting an e-petition via social media platforms provided useful feedback to the Committee.[18] In this instance, the petitioner promoted their e-petition[19] extensively, by posting a direct link to the petition signing page to their followers on Facebook. The link was also shared on another Facebook page.

2.38 As a result of the petitioner's promotion, the e-petition was signed by 48,985 people. As at 26 March 2018, this was the highest number of signatures received for an e-petition, and the highest number of signatures in a petition lodged during the 45th Parliament.

## Signing an e-petition

2.39 Much of the feedback provided on the House e-petitions system related to the signing process associated with e-petitions.

2.40 Feedback on the signing process spanned the following issues:

- the steps involved in signing a petition (i.e. the design of the signing process);
- the timeframe for signing a petition; and
- the process that follows an e-petition, depending on how many signatures were obtained.

2.41 The process following the signing of an e-petition is discussed in more detail in chapter three.

[18] See the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, *House of Representatives Hansard,* 4 December 2017, pp. 12361-2.

[19] The petition related to the 'Safe Schools' program and the 'Catching On Early' and 'Catching On Later' programs.

## Signing and email verification process

2.42 To sign an e-petition, users must first:

- locate the correct e-petition on the petitioning webpage;
- enter their name and email address;
- agree to the terms and conditions of use for e-petitions;
- pass a simple challenge response test (reCAPTCHA) to determine whether or not the user is a human; and
- confirm their email address within 24 hours, by clicking on a link sent to their nominated email account. If the time period lapses, the link to signing the petition becomes invalid.

2.43 This process has been designed to ensure the integrity of e-petitioning, by seeking to prevent illegitimate or fraudulent 'signatures'.

2.44 However, some users expressed dissatisfaction at the signing process, due to the number of steps required before signing was confirmed.

2.45 One user considered that the system 'seems designed to keep people from signing petitions'. The user explained:

> Once you check sign, the page refreshes such that the captcha box is at the bottom of the page. You must scroll down to notice this second step. Many people, especially the elderly will be unaware that they have not finished signing the petition.[20]

2.46 Ms Jenny Gibbs told the Committee that people attempting to sign her petition had reported some issues in doing so. She detailed the three most significant of these issues:

- When getting towards the end of an e-petition we are told that there is 'just one more step' but it isn't clear enough that the step requires going through your emails to get and submit a confirmation message.
- When going through the various steps of signing, the lower edges of pages (general info on dark background) come up needing pages to be scrolled up to be able to complete each section.
- Many folk who have told me they have signed my petition have done no more than hit the 'sign' tab aligned to the petition. That is they haven't gone through the process such that they do the confirmation email.[21]

[20] Name Withheld, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

[21] Ms Jenny Gibbs, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

2.47 Some of the students at St Anthony's Catholic Primary School also found the signing process for e-petitions challenging. One of these students, Sienna, stated:

> We've also found that signing [an e-petition] is a bit difficult. It's hard to find how to do it.[22]

### *Email verification*

2.48 Some users opposed the rule that restricted more than one person from using the same email address. This rule was considered to be problematic for couples and others who shared one email address.

2.49 Mr Philip Clark saw the requirement for one verifiable email address to be discriminatory:

> There is a perceived need to include rather than exclude the many citizens such as couples, older families and people living in aged accommodation who share an email address when individuals and groups with multiple email addresses can provide multiple signatures.[23]

2.50 Mr McLean agreed that the requirement to register one email address to sign a petition posed issues for couples who shared an email address. He also considered that someone who owned multiple email addresses could potentially sign a petition multiple times. Overall, Mr McLean considered that the signing process was a 'gaping flaw' in the design process.[24]

2.51 The requirement to have a valid email address for signing an e-petition is not unique to the House's e-petitions system. The UK Parliament also requires e-petition creators and signatories to have a valid email address. This jurisdiction does however allow an email address to be used twice to sign the same petition, to accommodate people who share an email address.[25]

2.52 A person seeking to sign an e-petition in the House must verify their email address within 24 hours of registering the address, by clicking on a link sent in an email to the registered address. Jurisdictions such as the UK

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[22] Sienna, Student, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School Marsfield, *Committee Hansard*, Wednesday 6 December 2017, Canberra, p. 3.

[23] Philip Clark, *Submission 4,* p. 1.

[24] Mr John McLean, *Submission 5,* p. 4.

[25] United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Submission 12,* p. 1.

Parliament also have requirements to verify an email address, as part of their e-petitions process.[26]

2.53 Some people who attempted to sign a petition found that this verification step did not meet their expectations.

2.54 Mr McLean considered that the system was clumsy in requiring access to a web page, then to an email, and then back to a web page again.[27]

2.55 In comparison to the House system, the ACT Legislative Assembly required that an individual accept conditions of use for signing an e-petition, including that they must only join an e-petition once, and that they must provide their correct name, address and email address.[28]

2.56 Mr Max Kiermaier, Deputy Clerk and Serjeant-at-Arms of the ACT Legislative Assembly considered that an onerous authentication process might prevent people from signing an e-petition. Mr Kiermaier noted that you could not verify a person's signature in paper petitions:

> Are you going to authenticate the names and addresses of people who sign a paper petition? So maybe the fact that somebody has to go through this authentication process may deter somebody from signing up to a petition.[29]

2.57 The Committee sought feedback on the email verification process through its online user survey. The survey received close to three hundred responses in total. A snapshot of the survey published during the inquiry can be found at Appendix C. A full list of questions from the user survey is provided at Appendix D. Responses regarding the email verification process were mixed, with examples of these provided at Box 2.2 below.

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[26] House of Commons Procedure Committee, *E-petitions: a collaborative system*, Third Report of the Session 2014-15, p. 37.

[27] Mr John McLean, *Submission 5,* p. 4.

[28] ACT Legislative Assembly, *e-petitions conditions of use*, <https://epetitions.act.gov.au/Conditions.aspx> viewed 21 February 2018.

[29] *Committee Hansard,* Canberra, 18 October 2017, p. 3.

## Box 2.2 - e-petitions user survey responses

**Question 9: Do you have any comments about accessing the e-petitions system on the device(s) you have identified?**

An option to have a verification sent to my mobile instead of to my email would be fitting seeing it's the 21st century too please.

Worked well, no problems.

Almost missed the anti-spam verification down at the bottom cause (sic) I had to scroll down. The final confirmation e-mail has the 'click here' to confirm in very small font.

**Question 17: Do you have any comments about the email verification process?**

24 hours is not enough time. Especially when it was not made clear on the petition page that a confirmation email would be sent.

Just a bit frustrating to have to have a (sic) added steps to verify, but I guess it prevents fraud.

I do not access the email account on the device used to complete the e-petition.

Should be given more time to access and confirm signature via email

I didn't know an email had been sent

## Committee comment

2.58 The Committee received mixed reviews about the general usability and accessibility of the e-petitions system.

2.59 While some users indicated that they found the e-petitions website to be easy to use and follow, other users complained about the design and layout of the system, and proposed changes to make e-petitions easier to create, sign and share.

2.60 While some petitioners have been successful in promoting and sharing their e-petitions using social media platforms such as Facebook, other users have found it difficult to share the link to their petition for signing, and did not find the Petitions List to be intuitive or easy to navigate.

2.61 The Committee notes that while a direct link to an e-petition can be shared online, this is not a user-friendly process. The Committee therefore sees value in refining and improving the e-petitions layout and design, to simplify the process for creating, promoting and signing a petition.

2.62 The Committee is also concerned that some users have identified difficulties in signing e-petitions, and these difficulties are largely attributed to the email verification process.

2.63 The Committee must balance user concerns with its responsibility to provide a robust and legitimate e-petitions system that upholds the integrity of the petitioning process in the House. It is for this reason that certain security measures were adopted as part of the e-petitions process.

2.64 These security measures include both email and anti-spam verifications and the requirement to enter one valid email address. These steps minimise the chance of the system inadvertently accepting fraudulent signatures.

2.65 Such measures are not applicable for paper petitions because obvious invalid signatures on paper petitions can be identified and discounted from the final signature count. It is far more difficult for petitioners to collect fraudulent signatures on a large scale, when each page and signature of a paper petition can be assessed for its validity by petitions staff.

2.66 While the email verification process has some flaws and inconveniences, the Committee is of the view that these issues cannot outweigh the need to maintain a robust and legitimate e-petitions process. Nevertheless, the Committee is supportive of minor system updates and enhancements being

made, in line with user suggestions, to ensure that users can create and sign a petition with relative ease.

2.67 The Committee envisages that updates to the e-petitions system and petitions website could include providing information in plain English on creating, submitting and signing an e-petition (and information on petitions more broadly). Updates could also include providing visual aids such as flowcharts and other graphics to convey key information, and clear instructions or visual cues during the two-step signing process to minimise the number of people failing to verify their email address. The Committee is of the view that these updates would improve accessibility for all users, including users from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as discussed later in this chapter.

2.68 Further, there may be reasonable enhancements that can be made to assist people in sharing and promoting their petitions for signing.

2.69 The Committee recognises that website enhancement is subject to the resources of the Department of the House of Representatives, in conjunction with the Department of Parliamentary Services, which has responsibility for the Parliament of Australia website as a whole. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives work with the Department of Parliamentary Services, within existing resources, to improve user experience and overall accessibility to the e-petitions process.

## Recommendation 1

**2.70 The Committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives, in conjunction with the Department of Parliamentary Services, work within existing resources to update the House e-petitions system and web page design to improve user experience and accessibility for all users, giving consideration to adding the following features to the House Petitions List and website:**

- **A unique URL for each petition, to allow petitioners to easily share and promote their e-petitions for signing;**
- **Additional navigation options to improve the ability to search for an e-petition, such as the ability to re-order the list according to subject matter or date certified (i.e. listing the current e-petitions open for signatures at the top of the page);**
- **An easier signing process, if the security and robustness of the verification process can be maintained;**
- **The use of plain English language, including simple instructions for using the e-petitions system and wider petitions process;**
- **The use of explanatory symbols and imagery in addition to text, to increase understanding of the petitions process;**
- **A series of online written and video tutorials to assist users to create and sign petitions.**

## Timeframe for signing a petition

2.71 E-petitions are available to collect signatures online for four weeks from the date they are certified by the Committee as meeting the Standing Order requirements. Each e-petition automatically closes for signatures at 11:59 pm on the last day of the four week period, after which time additional signatures cannot be added.

2.72 During the development of the e-petitions system, this timeframe was determined having regard to a number of important factors. Special attention was given to the sequence of procedural events that e-petitions must follow in accordance with Standing Orders[30] and their requisite timeframes.

2.73 In summary, the Committee must first meet to consider whether an e-petition is 'in order'—that is, that the petition meets Standing Order requirements— prior to it being made available on the Petitions List for signing. Committee meetings are scheduled to occur during each week that the House of Representatives sits.

2.74 Once the Committee has certified (i.e. accepted) an e-petition, and the four week period for signing the petition has lapsed, each e-petition is presented to the House. This task is usually undertaken by the Committee Chair during the allocated time each week for petitions.[31] Alternatively, another Member may present a petition at another time.[32] Following presentation, the Committee usually refers each e-petition to a Minister for response. The response is expected to be provided within 90 days of receipt of the referral.[33]

2.75 Figure 2.4 below demonstrates the procedural process that an e-petition must follow if it is considered in order by the Committee and presented by the Committee Chair:

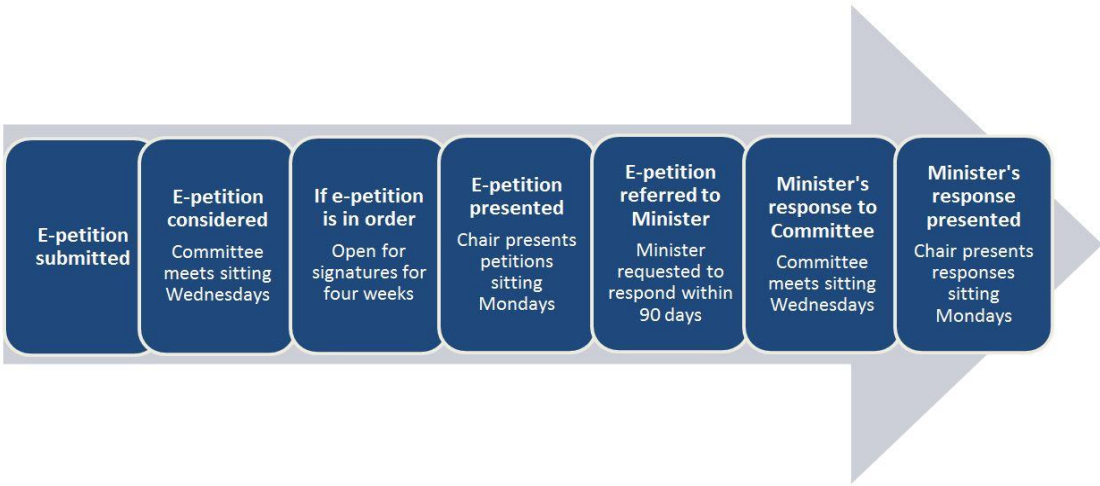
[30] Standing Orders 204, 205A and 206–209 determine the rules for e-petitions, the presentation of petitions and the actions on petitions.

[31] Standing Order 207(a).

[32] Standing Order 207(b).

[33] Standing Order 209(b).

**Figure 2.4 Procedural workflow of an e-petition**




*This image demonstrates the procedural workflow process for an e-petition that is considered in order by the Committee, presented by the Committee Chair and responded to by a Minister.*

2.76 Given these requirements, the minimum timeframe for an e-petition to be submitted, considered by the Committee, open for signatures, presented and referred is approximately five weeks. The maximum is approximately 12 weeks but can extend well beyond during an election year where breaks in the sitting pattern are longer.

2.77 In addition, a response from the Minister can take 90 days or longer to be received. Ministerial responses are provided to the Committee at their next available meeting during a sitting week, before being presented to the House by the Chair as part of the petitions report, in the next available sitting week. This process is therefore bound by the House of Representatives sitting pattern and can lengthen the time taken to complete the full cycle of an e-petition.

2.78 The decision to implement a four week signature collection period was made to ensure that petitioners have adequate time to collect signatures, while not unduly delaying the petitions process, which could actually reduce a petition's potential impact.

## Is four weeks long enough?

2.79 As mentioned above, even the shortest possible timeframe for signing can be too long for e-petitions that address contemporary issues. For example, if an e-petition addresses legislation before the House, the legislation could be passed (or not) and the issue resolved before the signing period is complete.

2.80 Conversely, the timeframe may not be long enough. Petitioners may feel that they have not had adequate opportunity to promote their e-petition and gain the support of their community, as would be possible with a paper petition. Mr Wayne Hodges addressed this concern in his submission to the Committee:

> There needs to be more time available to e-petitions to make it fairer for those collecting e-petitions rather than paper petitions. At present there is an indefinite period has (sic) available when collecting signatures for a paper petition… Yet current e-petitions are for four weeks. This means that if one were to choose to collect signatures via an e-petition one would have added conveniences and advantages, but would be gravely disadvantaged in time compared if one were to collect in paper. [34]

2.81 These circumstances are not unique to House of Representatives e-petitions. Other jurisdictions, such as the ACT Legislative Assembly, have noted that some petitioners prefer shorter signature periods, and others longer. Mr Kiermaier, Deputy Clerk and Serjeant-at-Arms of the Assembly stated:

> Sometimes there are contemporary issues in the community, which members of the community want aired as soon as possible. We have had instances of a petition being there for only a few weeks, for instance, and the member who sponsored it and the members of the community want to air that issue in the next sittings of the assembly…Some members of the community want it aired as soon as possible; others are quite content to gather signatures and have it dealt with in the fullness of time.[35]

2.82 Mr Shane Donnelly, Clerk of the House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania, also outlined why a quick turnaround is sometimes preferred:

> …anecdotally I would say the average [signature collection time] would be three or four months. Often there will be a much quicker turnover if an e-petition is generated as a quick device associated with legislation being introduced, so if a bill is introduced and it is likely to be brought on within the

[34] Wayne Hodges, *Submission 18,* p. 1

[35] *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 18 October 2017, p. 1.

> next month or so you will have a e-petition generated in response to this legislation and then that is tabled or attempted to be tabled in similar timing to the second reading debate to inform the debate.[36]

2.83 The ACT Legislative Assembly has a minimum of one week and a maximum of six months posting (signature collection) period for e-petitions, that is stipulated by the principal petitioner and sponsoring MLA.[37] The Parliament of Tasmania allows the same time period for its e-petitions, and also requires sponsorship by a Member.[38]

2.84 These periods allow for some flexibility, yet both jurisdictions have noted that the average posting period falls somewhere in between these poles. The Parliament of Tasmania, for example, submitted that the average posting period for e-petitions in the House of Assembly was 86 days[39] and the ACT Legislative Assembly provided that posting periods for their e-petitions can be 'three or four months'.[40]

2.85 Both examples show allowable posting periods significantly longer than the House's four week period.

2.86 This doesn't mean, however, that the House's timeframe is necessarily an impediment to community engagement. Since the implementation of the e-petitions system, the House of Representatives has presented numerous e-petitions with a significant total of signatures collected during this timeframe. For example, during the 45th Parliament, e-petition EN0395, on the 'Safe Schools' program, was presented with 48,985 signatures;[41] e-petition EN0155, relating to the religious status of Islam, was presented with 11,169 signatures[42] and e-petition EN0096, on entitlements for past Members of Parliament, was presented with 8,356 signatures.[43]

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[36] *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 25 October 2017, pp. 4-5.

[37] ACT Legislative Assembly, *Submission 17,* p. 1.

[38] The House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania, *Submission 16,* p. 3.

[39] The House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania, *Supplementary Submission 16.1*. p. 1.

[40] Mr Max Kiermaier, Deputy Clerk and Serjeant-at-Arms, ACT Legislative Assembly, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 18 October 2017, p. 1.

[41] Hon Kevin Andrews MP, *House of Representatives Hansard,* 4 December 2017, pp. 12361-2.

[42] Mr Ross Vasta MP, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 22 May 2017, pp. 4496-7.

[43] Mr Ross Vasta MP, *House of Representatives Hansard,* 27 February 2017, p. 1428.

## Committee comment

2.87 The Committee notes that the four week period for signature collection was determined in consideration of two main competing interests. The first consideration was to allow enough additional time for the procedural steps of petitioning the House to take place. The second consideration was to have regard to the expectations of petitioners seeking to collect signatures and petition the House on contemporary and evolving issues of public interest, or matters of importance to them personally, where such issues require a timely response.

2.88 Throughout this inquiry the Committee heard that, for some petitioners, four weeks is not long enough to garner support for their petition. The Committee was informed that some petitioners could benefit from a shorter posting period to address contemporary concerns in a timely manner.

2.89 The Committee recognises that in some domestic jurisdictions, petitioners nominate a preferred signature collection period, in collaboration with the sponsoring Member. The Committee was told that the average timeframe for signature collection in these jurisdictions was around three to four months—a significant increase on the timeframe allowed in the House.

2.90 Notwithstanding the experience in other jurisdictions, the Committee considers that a four-week signing period is an appropriate timeframe for House e-petitions. In the Committee's view, this timeframe strikes an appropriate balance between the needs of petitioners, in promoting and sharing a petition; and the need to ensure that a petition is responded to in a timely way. This timeframe also minimises additional delays due to necessary bureaucratic and parliamentary procedures, including the parliamentary sitting pattern.

2.91 Accordingly, the Committee does not propose to change the timeframe for signing an e-petition at this time.

## Access for non-English speaking Australians

2.92 Standing Order 204(d) states that an 'e-petition must be in English'. This requirement differs from the language requirements for a paper petition which 'must be in English or be accompanied by a translation certified to be correct'.[44]

2.93 The instructions for submitting and signing an e-petition are also published in English on the petitions website, and petitions information is not currently available in other languages.

2.94 The Committee heard that the current petitions requirements, and lack of instructions in languages other than English, were significant barriers for people of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, who wish to create or support a petition.

2.95 The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) submitted that the e-petitions website, and the wider Australian Parliament House website was largely inaccessible to the communities they represented:

> Unfortunately, the website of the Australian Parliament House where the e-petitions portal exists is particularly inaccessible for CALD Australians. There is no provision of translated material online and no ability to access the information provided online in a Language Other than English (LOTE) via other means such as a LOTE specific telephone line. The webpages are text dense and do not utilise symbols or images to facilitate effective and swift communications. For users with low English language proficiency (reading) text dense webpages are difficult to interface with.[45]

2.96 Dr Emma Campbell, Director of FECCA, considered that promoting the e-petitions process was an important starting point to increasing access to people of CALD backgrounds:

> The majority of Australians, never mind those for whom English is not a first language, are not even aware of the petitions process. If they are aware of it, finding it on the APH website or knowing how to navigate it is very difficult in English.[46]

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[44] Standing Order 204(d).

[45] FECCA, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

[46] *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2017, Canberra, p. 1.

2.97 Dr Campbell submitted that information about the e-petitions process needed to be provided in plain English. Where appropriate, Dr Campbell considered that information should be provided in other languages, or at least the facility provided for people to obtain support in other languages, for example through the translation and interpreting system.[47]

2.98 To achieve greater accessibility for CALD communities, FECCA made a series of recommendations drawn from their *Digital Access and Equity for Multicultural Communities* report.[48] Specifically, FECCA submitted:

> FECCA recommends that all the webpages related to the House of Representatives e-petitions system recognise the diversity of users and the ensuing gaps in capacity and access, and, utilise person-centric design for those who do not speak English as their first language and/or have limited digital literacy or access. This can be achieved through implementing some of the following measures:
>
> - Ensure that information is available in community languages and plain English;
> - Identify the availability of interpreters or translators and translated materials with an easily recognisable and consistent symbol;
> - Enable interactive technologies for people with low written proficiency in both English and their preferred language, for example, the ability to hover over text and access an audio translation;
> - Provide multiple pathways for members of the CALD community to interact with the e-petitions system if they have any queries, for example, online, over the phone, through a translator;
> - Communicate with ethnic communities in order to improve awareness of the e-petitions systems; and
> - Clearly convey information about privacy and security to users in plain English and community languages.[49]

2.99 FECCA provided some examples of other parliaments that supported e-petitioning in languages other than English. The organisation noted that the parliaments of Victoria and Queensland both allowed e-petitions in

[47] *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2017, Canberra, p. 1.

[48] FECCA, *Digital Access and Equity for Multicultural Communities*, 2016.

[49] FECCA, *Supplementary Submission 7.1*, p. 2.

languages other than English to be presented, if accompanied by a certified translation.[50]

2.100 Further, FECCA noted that the House of Commons in the United Kingdom also allowed for e-petitions in languages other than English, when accompanied by a translation certified by a Member.[51]

## Committee comment

2.101 Accessibility must be at the heart of the e-petitions system, in keeping with the overarching purpose of petitioning, to provide a direct link between members of the public and the Parliament.

2.102 The Committee notes the evidence provided by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) suggesting that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may find it difficult to access and engage with the e-petitions system, because of the density of information provided on the petitions website, and/or because of a lack of information being provided in languages other than English.

2.103 Petitions in languages other than English can be submitted as paper petitions, where they are accompanied by a certified English translation. In such cases, the Committee would assess the petition terms using the certified English translation. Once approved by the Committee and presented to the House, the English terms of the petition would be published on the Petitions List online, recorded in the House Hansard, and forwarded to the relevant Government Minister for response. This places the onus on the petitioner to ensure that the English translation accurately reflects the terms of the original signed petition.

2.104 The Committee is of the view that where possible, the rules and requirements for e-petitions should mirror the rules pertaining to paper petitions. However, the Standing Orders currently provide that e-petitions may only be submitted in English. This variance in petition requirements was established for a number of reasons, including that English is the official language used in the Parliament, and as such, the Committee as a whole can only be asked to assess the terms of a petition in English.

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[50] FECCA, *Supplementary Submission 7.1*, p. 1.

[51] FECCA, Supplementary Submission 7.1, p. 1.

2.105 Hypothetically, if the process for e-petitions was to mirror that of paper petitions, the terms of an e-petition would have to be published online in the language other than English, so that people could read and sign the petition in that language. However, this process would place the onus and risk on the Committee to ensure that the petition terms published on the website accurately reflected the English translation that the Committee assessed as meeting the Standing Order requirements. In circumstances where the Committee has ultimate responsibility for the content that appears on the petitions website, this process would pose an unacceptable risk to the reputation and integrity of the e-petitions system, the Petitions Committee and the wider Parliament. Noting that people may still lodge a paper petition in a language other than English, the Committee does not propose any changes in relation to the English language requirement of e-petitions at this time.

2.106 Some of the language accessibility issues raised by FECCA relate to the APH website more broadly, and cannot be dealt with in isolation in the context of the e-petitions website. These issues are therefore outside of the scope of inquiry. Such issues include providing general information in LOTE, and other design features of the e-petitioning site that are carried across the APH website.

2.107 To ensure that Australians from all backgrounds, including culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are able to access and engage with the e-petitions system, the Committee supports the exploration of a series of updates to the Committee's website, as outlined in Recommendation 1.

# 3. Future enhancements

3.1 The Committee has been tasked with inquiring into the extent to which the e-petitions system has met the expectations of Parliamentarians and members of the public, and what future enhancements might be appropriate for e-petitioning in the House.

3.2 To assist the Committee in undertaking these inquiries, this chapter explores the development of e-petitioning in the House, and the objectives behind the chosen approach.

3.3 To determine the success of e-petitioning, this chapter examines how the system has been utilised so far, and considers the results of the surveys conducted by the Committee. The surveys are outlined in chapter one. A snapshot of results for the online user survey can be found at Appendix C. A full list of questions posed in the user survey is provided at Appendix D.

3.4 This chapter also considers the experiences of other jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas, and identifies how the procedural features of other e-petitions systems compare to the House system.

3.5 This inquiry has informed the Committee about possible future enhancements to the e-petitions system that would assist in meeting the needs of the Petitions Committee, Parliamentarians and members of the public.

# Objectives of e-petitioning

3.6 In conceptualising the e-petitions system in 2009, the then House Petitions Committee considered two fundamentally different approaches. These approaches were reflected in the e-petitions systems implemented in two parliaments: Queensland and Scotland.[1]

3.7 A key question to be answered by the Committee at that time, was whether the House should adopt a 'more expansive model' of e-petitioning to maintain levels of engagement with petitions, or whether a more moderate level of change would be sufficient to bridge the gap between the Parliament and the people.[2]

3.8 Central to answering this question was consideration of what role the Committee should play in the management of e-petitions, and the implications of the chosen approach on resourcing and the practice and procedures of the House.[3]

3.9 The Committee concluded that initial arrangements for electronic petitioning should 'involve minimal changes to House practice and procedure'.[4] The Committee found that the e-petitioning model adopted by the Queensland Parliament offered the lowest barrier to entry for introducing electronic petitioning to the House.

3.10 The approach adopted by Queensland involved introducing a website-based system for e-petitions, to be administered by the Parliament. The e-petitions would otherwise be managed in a similar way to paper petitions.[5]

3.11 The Committee determined that implementation of a system similar to that of the Queensland Parliament represented the most effective solution for the

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[1] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, chapter 6.

[2] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. 28.

[3] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. 28.

[4] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. 71.

[5] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. 25.

House of Representatives.[6] Following the Government's response to the Committee's report, the Department of the House of Representatives worked with the Department of Parliamentary Services to develop an original e-petitions system that was based on the principles of the Queensland model. That is, all e-petitions would be submitted, signed and published on a website to be administered by the Australian Parliament.[7]

## Utilisation of e-petitions

3.12 As outlined in chapter one, since its introduction in the 45th Parliament, there have been 256 electronic petitions certified and presented to the House. These petitions have collected a total of 136,752 signatures, with one petition obtaining 48,985 signatures. Three of these petitions have been presented by individual Members, with the remainder being presented by the Chair of the Petitions Committee. [8]

3.13 In comparison, 263 paper petitions have been certified and presented to the House. These petitions have comprised over 264,367 signatures, with one petition obtaining 45,971 signatures. Twenty-nine of these petitions have been presented by individual Members, with the remainder being presented by the Chair of the Committee.[9]

3.14 Despite the high number of e-petitions lodged over the 45th Parliament, the limited results of the Members' survey indicated that some Members remain unfamiliar with the House e-petitions system, and considered that their constituents were also unfamiliar with e-petitioning.

3.15 One Member responded that it would be useful to better understand how to utilise e-petitions, so they could inform their constituents on how to use the system. Another Member considered that while e-petitioning made the process of petitioning more efficient, manual (paper) lodgement would still be necessary for some members of the community.

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[6] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, p. 70.

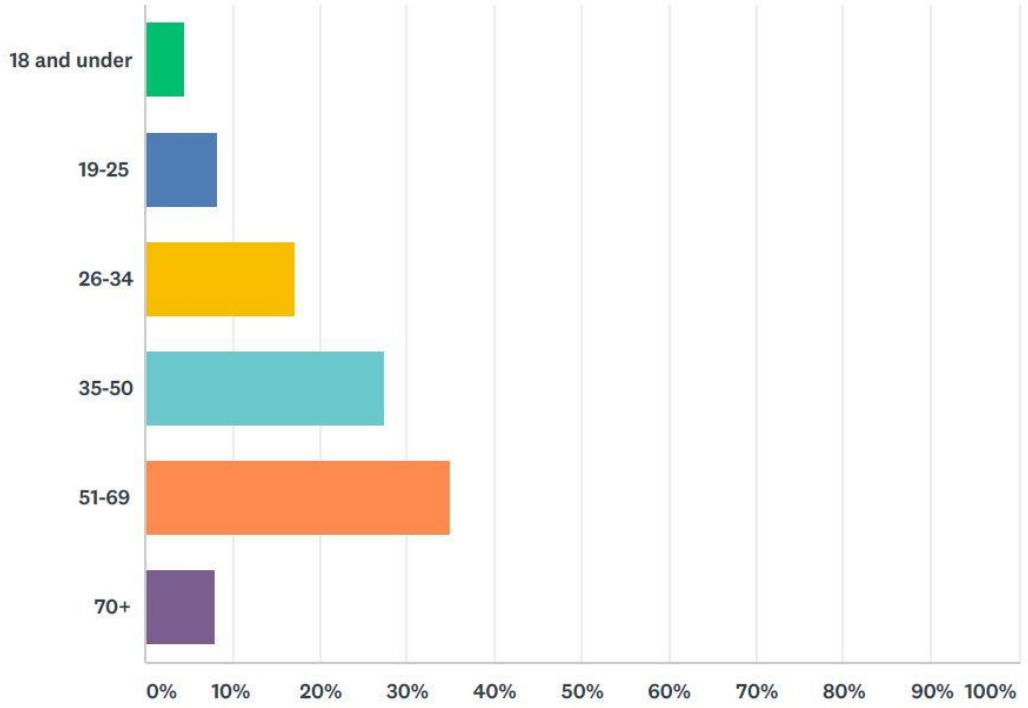
[7] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *Electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives*, October 2009, pp. xiv-xv.

[8] Petitions statistics as of 26 Mar 2018.

[9] Petitions statistics as of 26 Mar 2018.

3.16 The results of the online survey conducted during the inquiry may shed some additional light into who uses the e-petitions system. Figure 3.1 below provides the demographics of respondents to the online survey into e-petitions, conducted by the Committee in 2017. The survey is outlined in chapter one, and a snapshot of results is provided at Appendix C. Almost 35 per cent of 292 respondents who gave their age range were between 51-69 years of age. Just over 27 per cent of these respondents were aged between 35-50 years of age.

**Figure 3.1 Online user survey results: demographic of respondents**




*This graph provides the demographics of respondents to the online survey.*

3.17 The survey results were commented on by Caitlin, a student of St Anthony's Catholic Primary School in Sydney, who participated in a public hearing in Canberra:

> I feel that it [the e-petitions system] would be better if more people participated. I can see from the results that you've collected that there weren't a lot of people who used it, and the majority were middle aged. I feel as if it

could have been advertised a bit more, and more people would have found it a little bit more accessible.[10]

3.18 A number of respondents to the e-petitions user survey agreed that the e-petitions system should be publicised more widely.

3.19 Some of these responses are outlined in text box 3.1 below.

## Box 3.1 - e-petitions user survey responses

**Question 21: Do you have any further comment about the House of Representatives e-petitioning system?**

I feel APH website epetition system doesnt[sic] have wide reach and seems complicated and inconspicuous to the masses… I would imagine only a small fraction of Australian's [sic] are aware of their right to petition and participation in policy making…

Promote it more.

While I realise you have bureaucracy to wrestle with, and that you are striving to keep pace with the 21st century by having an e-petitioning site, it needs to be far more widely advertised.

If you want people to use it, you need to publicise it. I visit the Parliament web site regularly, yet I've never seen it.

Needs more access/knowledge given to a broader audience

I discovered this website on Facebook, only because an NGO mentioned a petition in one of their posts. Maybe petitions should be advertised by the House?

[10] Cailtin, student, St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Marsfield, *Committee Hansard,* Wednesday 6 December 2017, Canberra, p. 3.

## Committee comment

3.20 E-petitioning in the House has had considerable success during its first years of operation. The volume of e-petitions that have been received and certified by the Committee in the 45th Parliament is comparable to the number of paper petitions certified over the same time period.

3.21 The Committee understands that an increasing proportion of the Australian population wants to access information and engage with public institutions online. It is clear from the evidence in this inquiry that many people would prefer to petition the House and sign petitions using the e-petitions process. It is the Committee's role to ensure that the process for e-petitioning meets the needs of petitioners and those people wishing to sign e-petitions. This includes making sure the process is as streamlined and user-friendly as possible.

3.22 Enhancements to the website, as foreshadowed in chapter two, such as the introduction of instructional videos and other accessible information, will assist people to navigate the e-petitions process from start to finish.

3.23 The user survey results suggest that younger Australians may not be engaging with the e-petitioning process as much as might have been expected. The Committee also notes comments from Members of the House, and members of the public, that e-petitioning should be promoted more widely.

3.24 The Committee will endeavour to work with other Members of the House, to provide them with up-to-date information and increase knowledge and understanding of the e-petitioning process in the House.

3.25 Further, the Committee will work with the Department of the House of Representatives to promote e-petitioning to a wider audience and take steps necessary to engage more people in the process of petitioning the House.

3.26 The way in which e-petitioning is promoted will likely be extended to the wider petitioning process. A proposed review of the House petitions process is foreshadowed in the next section, 'Comparisons to other jurisdictions'.

## Recommendation 2

**3.27 The Committee recommends that the Department of the House of Representatives develop a campaign to promote petitioning in the House, with an emphasis on e-petitioning.**

## Comparisons to other jurisdictions

3.28 The following Australian and international parliaments provided submissions to the Committee's current inquiry:

- The Scottish Parliament
- House of Commons, Canada
- House of Representatives, New Zealand
- House of Commons, United Kingdom
- Committee on Petitions, European Parliament
- New South Wales Legislative Council
- House of Assembly, Parliament of Tasmania
- ACT Legislative Assembly

3.29 In addition, the Committee heard from representatives of the ACT Legislative Assembly and the Tasmanian House of Assembly (via teleconference) in public hearings held in Canberra.

3.30 Submissions from individuals and other parliaments noted some procedural differences between the House e-petitions system and other e-petitions systems in Australia and overseas.

3.31 While the differences between the House e-petitions system and other jurisdictions are numerous, the primary differences addressed by submitters related to the process and outcomes following lodgement of an e-petition.

3.32 Currently, an e-petition (or paper petition) only requires one signature (that of the principal petitioner).[11] If a petition meets Standing Order requirements, any petition with one or more signatures can be presented to the House and referred to the Minister with a request for response. Once petitions are presented to the House and referred to a Minister for response, no further action is usually taken.[12]

3.33 This practice differs from other domestic and international jurisdictions where further action might be taken on petitions that meet a predetermined signature threshold.

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[11] Standing Order 205A.

[12] The only other possible action that may be taken is to refer a petition to another Committee – see Standing order 208(c).

3.34 For example, in the UK House of Commons, a petition that collects 100,000 or more signatures is considered for debate in Westminster Hall, the House of Commons' second debating chamber.[13]

3.35 In Scotland, the Public Petitions Committee has broad powers to decide what action should be taken on admissible petitions. Such actions could include writing to relevant stakeholders for their views; undertaking a formal inquiry; holding a plenary debate; or referring the petition to another committee or a Minister for response.[14]

3.36 Another point of distinction is that some parliaments, for example the ACT Legislative Assembly and the Tasmania House of Assembly, require that a petitioner find a Member to sponsor or present their petition, before the petition may be accepted.[15] The House has no such requirement. This feature was not discussed in any detail during this inquiry.

## Committee comment

3.37 Investigating the different features of e-petitioning in other jurisdictions has assisted the Committee to identify possible areas for improvement. The inquiry into e-petitions has highlighted what features of the House system work well, and what enhancements the Committee should consider in order to meet the expectations of the Parliament and members of the public.

3.38 Consideration of the different models and approaches to processing and actioning e-petitions raise questions for the House that move beyond the scope of this inquiry. The Committee notes that some individuals raised questions relating to the House petitions processes that, while important, go beyond the operation of the e-petitions process. These questions go to the wider role of the Petitions Committee and the management and operation of petitions in the House more broadly.

3.39 The Committee has chosen to limit discussion of petitions procedures in this report to questions that relate directly to the operation of the House e-petitions system. Discussion of petitions procedures that relate to both e-petitions and paper petitions, and questions about the role of the Petitions

[13] House of Commons, United Kingdom, *Submission 12*, p. 3.

[14] The Scottish Parliament, *Submission 8*, p. 3.

[15] See, for example, ACT Legislative Assembly, *Submission 17*; Parliament of Tasmania House of Assembly, *Submission 16*.

Committee and Members in the petitioning process should be deferred to a wider review, which can be conducted following the tabling of this report.

3.40 Since the Committee's establishment in the 42nd Parliament, each Committee has reflected on the work it has undertaken, the role and operations of petitions in the House, and the Committee's role more broadly. One such review has not yet been undertaken during the 45th Parliament.

3.41 It is therefore timely for the Committee to reflect upon its operations and the petitions procedures (for both paper and electronic petitions), to determine whether they are fit for purpose and meet the expectations of Members of the House, and members of the public.

3.42 The Committee believes there would be merit in undertaking a new inquiry into the full review the Petitions Committee as soon as practicable.

## Recommendation 3

**3.43 That the Committee inquire into and report on:**

- **The role and operations of the Standing Committee on Petitions;**
- **Petitioning the House of Representatives, including a review of Standing Orders and other relevant practice and procedures.**

**3.44 In conducting this inquiry, the committee will give consideration to the petitions processes and procedures of other jurisdictions.**

**Lucy Wicks MP**
**Chair**

# A. List of Submissions

**1** *Name Withheld*

**2** Mr Daniel Griffin

**3** Ms Jenny Gibbs

**4** Mr Philip Clark

**5** Mr John McLean

**6** *Name Withheld*

**7** Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA)

- 7.1 Supplementary to submission 7

**8** The Scottish Parliament

**9** *Name Withheld*

**10** House of Commons, Canada

**11** House of Representatives, New Zealand Parliament

**12** House of Commons, United Kingdom

**13** Secretariat of the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament

**14** New South Wales Legislative Council

**15** *Confidential*

**16** House of Assembly - Parliament of Tasmania

- 16.1 Supplementary to submission 16

**17** ACT Legislative Assembly

**18** Mr Wayne Hodges

# B. List of witnesses and public hearings

## Wednesday, 18 October 2017

Committee Room 1R1

Parliament House

Canberra

*ACT Legislative Assembly*

- Mr Max Kiermaier, Deputy Clerk
- Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA, Assistant Speaker

## Wednesday, 25 October 2017

Committee Room 1R4

Parliament House

Canberra

*Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia*

- Dr Emma Campbell, Director
- Dr Alia Imtoual, Senior Policy and Project Officer

*Parliament of Tasmania, House of Assembly (Via teleconference)*

- Mr Shane Donnelly, Clerk of the House

## Wednesday, 6 December 2017

Committee Room 1R3

Parliament House

Canberra

*St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Marsfield (via videoconference)*

- Mrs Deborah Irons, Year 5/6 Teacher
- Aden, Year 5/6 Student
- Caitlin, Year 5/6 Student
- Elissa, Year 5/6 Student
- Emily, Year 5/6 Student
- Erica, Year 5/6 Student
- Genevieve, Year 5/6 Student
- Grayson, Year 5/6 Student
- Hannah, Year 5/6 Student
- Imogen, Year 5/6 Student
- Lillian, Year 5/6 Student
- Louise, Year 5/6 Student
- Sienna, Year 5/6 Student
- Thomas, Year 5/6 Student

# C. Snapshot of user survey

1.1 Following is a snapshot of the online user survey results from the e-petitions system inquiry, published by the Committee on 13 October 2017.

# Snapshot

## Survey results from the e-petitions system inquiry

## Overview

The Standing Committee on Petitions are currently inquiring in the e-petitions system, and have been surveying system users. The survey aims to find out who is using the system, how easy it is to use and what can be improved. The survey has been available online since 17 August 2017 and has received over 180 responses. This is a snapshot of some results received so far.

Only **7.3%** have used the e-petitions system to **create a new e-petition**, whereas over **66%** have used the system to **sign an e-petition**

Over **59%** heard about petitioning the House of Representatives on **Facebook**

Over **51%** of respondents **live in a city**

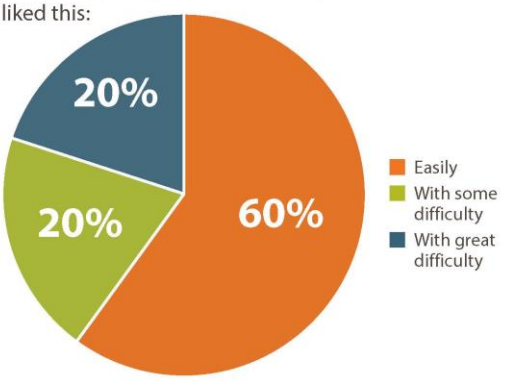
**51-69 years** is the most **common age bracket** of respondents

People accessed the e-petitions system on both personal devices and computers equally, but found that accessibility was **better on a PC or laptop**

## Navigation

The survey also asks respondents to rate the ease of navigation when using the system. Results were mixed with some users finding navigation harder than others.

When asked **'How easily were you able to navigate through the required fields on each page when preparing your petition?'**, the responses looked liked this:




## User Comments

Some comments received so far include:

- *It takes a while to load if you are searching.*
- *Only 2 pages to check so it was easy.*
- *Just a bit frustrating to have an added step to verify, but I guess it prevents fraud.*
- *Good and easy.*
- *Each petition should have its own URL. The various tabs and resulting columns on display were confusing, particularly without tooltip definitions of certain words and statuses - I had to ring the committee.*
- *I like that it verifies email.*
- *How can one share these petitions? Doesn't seem easy.*
- *Doesn't need changing as far as I can see!!!!*

The Committee appreciates all of the responses they have received so far. The survey will be open until Friday 2 November 2017 and can be accessed via the Committee website: **www.aph.gov.au/epetitionsinquiry**

# D. User survey questions

1 Please select the option that best describes where you live:

- Rural
- Regional
- City

2 Are you a resident of Australia?

- Yes
- No

3 Please select the age group to which you belong:

- 18 and under
- 19-25
- 26-34
- 35-50
- 51-69
- 70+

4 How did you hear about e-petitioning the House of Representatives?

- Email campaign
- Social media
- Word of mouth
- Community or special interest group
- Online news
- Other (please specify)

IF ANSWER IS SOCIAL MEDIA AT QUESTION 4

5 Please tell us which social media platform you found out about the e-petitions system on:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Other (please specify)

IF ANSWER IS ONLINE NEWS AT QUESTION 4

6 Please tell us which online news platform you found out about the e-petitions system on:

7 When using the e-petitions system did you…

- Request a new e-petition
- Sign an existing e-petition
- Search for or view an existing e-petition
- None of the above

IF ANSWER IS NONE OF THE ABOVE AT QUESTION 7

8 Do you have any comment that you would like to make about your experience with the e-petitions system?

9 Please tell us what device you were using to access the e-petitions system:

- Personal computer (including laptops and all Apple branded)
- Mobile phone
- Tablet
- Other (please specify)

10 Please tell us what web browser you were using to access the e-petitions system:

- Internet Explorer
- Google
- Google Chrome
- Safari
- Mozilla Firefox
- Android Browser
- Microsoft Edge
- Other (please specify)

IF ANSWER IS MOBILE PHONE OR TABLET AT QUESTION 9

11 What is the operating system of the device you used when accessing the e-petitions system?

- Android
- iOS (Apple)
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)

12 How would you rate the overall accessibility of the e-petitions system on this device?

- Excellent
- Good
- OK
- Bad
- Really bad

13 Do you have any comments about accessing the e-petitions system on this device?

IF ANSWER IS REQUEST A NEW E-PETITION AT QUESTION 7

14 When preparing your petition, how useful did you find the suggested text in guiding you to complete the fields correctly and to meet the petition requirements?

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Not very useful
- Totally useless

15 Do you have any comments about the suggested text?

16 How easily were you able to navigate through the required fields on each page when preparing your petition?

- Very easily
- Easily
- With some difficulty
- With great difficulty

17 Do you have any comments about navigating through the required fields?

18 How easy was it for you to verify your email address and submit your petition?

- Very easily
- Easily
- With some difficulty
- With great difficulty

19 Do you have any comments about the email verification process?

IF ANSWER IS SIGN AN EXISTING E-PETITION AT QUESTION 7

20 When signing a petition, did you find that the webpages were easy to navigate?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- Not really
- No

21 Do you have any comments about navigating these webpages?

22 How easy was it for you to verify your email address and submit your signature?

- Very easily
- Easily
- With some difficulty
- With great difficulty

23 Do you have any comments about the email verification process?

IF ANSWER IS SEARCH FOR OR VIEW AN EXISTING E-PETITION AT QUESTION 7

24 Was the petition that you viewed or searched for easy to find on the webpages?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- Not really
- No

25 Were you able to view and navigate the petitions easily on the webpages?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- Not really
- No

26 Do you have any comments about searching or viewing an e-petition?

27 Have you used any other online petitioning system before to create, view or sign a petition?

- Yes
- No

IF ANSWER IS YES AT QUESTION 27

28 How does this online petitioning system compare with the House of Representatives e-petitioning system?

- Better than
- About the same
- Worse than

29 Do you have any further comment about how you compare the House of Representatives e-petitioning system to other e-petitioning systems that you have used?

30 Was this your first time using the e-petitions system?

- Yes
- No

31 Do you have any further comment about the House of Representatives e-petitioning system?