



OFFICE OF THE
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PUBLIC PETITIONS WEBSITE COULD LEAD WAY TO COMMONS DEBATES

Public petitions which secure the backing of 100,000 signatures will be eligible for debate in Parliament through a newly-launched website, the Government announced today.

The system is designed to ensure that petitions become a useful and accessible tool for strengthening people's engagement with politics in the United Kingdom.

The new site will be based on the DirectGov portal, which is operated by the Government Digital Service, and it will open up an important route for the public to access the democratic process. It replaces the e-petitions system previously available on the Downing Street website. The new link is: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/e-petitions>

The launch fulfils a commitment contained in the Coalition Agreement's Programme for Government, published in May, 2010.

A decision to table the subject of a suitable petition for discussion will be for the Backbench Business Committee, which has powers to propose non-governmental matters for Commons debate.

Sir George Young MP, Leader of the House of Commons, said: "Today's launch represents another step towards a more accessible and transparent Parliament."

He said that there was a wide scope for the public to present its views. Petitions would only be ruled out as ineligible for inclusion on the site if they are:

- deemed to be libellous or offensive
- not directly a matter for government
- related to honours and appointments
- duplication of an existing open petition

Sir George added: "In recent weeks, Parliament has been at the centre of public interest, by leading the debate on phone hacking allegations.

“But this shouldn’t mean that Parliament becomes complacent. There’s much more that we can do to build confidence in the work of the House of Commons and we should continue to find new ways of encouraging people to engage.

“The public already have many opportunities to make their voices heard in Parliament, and this new system of e-petitions could give them a megaphone.

“Of course, parliamentary time is not unlimited and we want the best e-petitions to be given airtime – so we will monitor the site closely over the coming months to assess whether the 100,000 figure is an appropriate target.”

Deputy Leader of the House David Heath MP said: "The e-petitions website is the latest example of how the Coalition is continuing to take forward its Programme for Government. It underscores our commitment to reform of the parliamentary process, and will help to reinforce the aim of greater engagement by people in the politics of this country."

Petitions will be moderated by government departments, with oversight from the office of the Leader of the Commons. Any petitions which are ineligible – for example, in the case of those deemed libellous or offensive – will not appear on the website, or will appear on a ‘rejected petitions’ page and, consequently, will not be open for signature.

A petition, which reaches the threshold for debate on the website and does not contravene House of Commons rules on *sub judice* issues or breach Commons conventions on pre-empting debates or consideration of Bills, will be passed to the Backbench Business Committee for further consideration. The Committee has a minimum of 35 days for debate in each session.

It would up to the Committee to decide whether the petition is granted a debate. Relevant Government departments and select committees would also be informed.

The petitions site is open to UK citizens and residents, whose valid addresses are matched against a list of UK postcodes. A valid e-mail address will be verified by confirmation e-mail, with safeguards to prevent the same e-mail address being used for multiple entries of support for each petition.

Notes to editors:

1. The link to the e-petitions system - <http://www.direct.gov.uk/e-petitions> – is scheduled to be live from July 29, 2011.
2. Following the launch, there will be a “moderation period” which will allow departments to consider public petitions for any legal or procedural issues which should bar them from publication
3. The previous government website was launched in November 2006 and later suspended shortly before the 2010 general election.

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