Committee Work Programme - Consideration of New Petitions

Background
1. The Committee has a significant workload between now and the dissolution of the Parliament on 3 April 2007. Under Standing Orders, public petitions can be lodged at any point until dissolution of the Parliament. The Committee therefore needs to agree an approach to its work programme for the remainder of the session.

Issues
2. There are currently 160 open petitions. Around 8 current petitions are normally dealt with at each meeting of the Committee. It is therefore clear that if the number being considered at each meeting is not increased significantly, there will be a large volume of outstanding work to hand over to the Session 3 Committee.

3. New petitions are being lodged at the rate of around 2 per week. These are normally dealt with at the rate of five or six per meeting and, as oral evidence is taken on at least two or three of them, the issues raised in new petitions take up the bulk of the Committee's time at meetings.

4. For these reasons, it may be considered useful to agree a date by which the Committee will end consideration of new petitions. It could instead concentrate on making progress with a greater number of existing petitions.

5. In addition, as the Committee cannot bind its successor to a course of action embarked on in relation to a petition, it may be considered sensible that the Committee does not commit time and resources to consideration of a petition that may have to be considered anew by the Session 3 committee.

6. Agreeing a cut-off point for consideration of new petitions would therefore have several benefits:
   - It would allow the Committee to concentrate on considering the substantial number of current petitions, thereby reducing the number to be inherited by the Session 3 Committee;
   - It would prevent the Committee spending valuable time on matters that may be considered again by the Session 3 committee or of taking decisions that may be overturned by its successor;
• It will avoid the raising of expectations among new petitioners who may expect decisions to be taken before dissolution or of courses of action embarked upon to be followed by the new committee.

Cut-off date
7. Should the Committee agree to the above, it is suggested that the cut-off date for consideration of new petitions be the end of January 2007. It is considered that this date does not represent a significant disadvantage to new petitioners due to the proximity of dissolution.

8. New petitions lodged after that date could, of course, also be lodged on the e-petitioner website so that petitioners have the opportunity to create or maintain momentum with the issues they are seeking to raise before the petitions are considered in Session 3.

Exceptions
9. Should the Committee agree to a cut-off point for consideration of new petitions, there may be petitions lodged after that date that the Committee would, exceptionally, wish to consider. This may be for example for reasons of urgency or to take decisions on admissibility. It is suggested therefore that the Committee considers taking a decision in principle which does not rule out consideration of new petitions in exceptional circumstances.

Recommendation
10. It is recommended that, in order to allow the Committee to concentrate on reducing the volume of outstanding petitions to be considered by its successor in Session 3, and for the other reasons given above, the Committee agrees to end consideration of new petitions at the end of January 2007, except in exceptional circumstances.

David McGill
November 2006