Public Petitions Committee – a template for e-petitions

Should you wish to submit an e-petition allowing signatures to be gathered online on the Public Petitions Committee e-petitioner web pages please complete the template below. Before submitting your e-petition please consult the Guidance on submission of public petitions for advice on what is and is not admissible. You may also seek advice from the Clerk to the Committee whose contact details can be found at the end of this form.

<table>
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<th>Details of principal petitioner:</th>
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<td>Please enter the name of person and organisation raising the petition, including a contact address where correspondence should be sent to.</td>
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Dr James Crowther, (on behalf of Edinburgh's Active Citizenship Group)  
Morey House School of Education,  
The University of Edinburgh  
Paterson's Land  
Holyrood Road  
EDINBURGH  
EH8 8AQ

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<th>Text of petition:</th>
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| The petition should clearly state what action the petitioner wishes the Parliament to take in no more than 5 lines of text, e.g.  
The petitioner requests that the Scottish Parliament considers and debates the implications of the proposed Agenda for Change legislation for Speech and Language Therapy Services and service users within the NHS |

The petitioner requests that the Scottish Parliament debates the implications of the recent decision by the Scottish Executive to reduce core funding and the decision by the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body not to provide core funding to the Scottish Civic Forum, a body set up on the recommendation of the Consultative Steering Group.

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<th>Period for gathering signatures:</th>
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<td>Please enter the closing date for gathering signatures on your petition, which we would usually recommend is a period of between 4-6 weeks</td>
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Closing date: 4th November 2005
Additional information:

Please enter any other information relating to the issues raised in your e-petition, including the reasons why the action requested is necessary. The text entered in this field should not exceed 2 pages. However, you may wish to provide further sources/links to background information.

In February 2005 the Scottish Executive announced it would have this year's funding for the Scottish Civic Forum and would discontinue funding completely in the financial year 2006/07. This triggered a debate in the Scottish Parliament on 24th February, during which cross-party support for the Civic Forum and its activities was expressed, with requests that the Parliament's Corporate Body (SPCB) explore the idea of the Civic Forum being funded independently of the Executive by the Parliament itself.

However, the SCPB at its meeting on 21st June, concluded that "the work of the SCF [Scottish Civic Forum] to some extent duplicated the work now being carried out by the Parliament itself" and the decision was taken not to provide core funding. This makes the future of the Civic Forum extremely precarious.

We welcome the Parliament's and Executive's efforts to engage the public, (our group has held seminars on the subject), for example by inviting petitions and responses to consultations, and the recent innovative Festival of Politics. However, we are not aware of any evidence that the Parliament is carrying out entirely the role which the CSG envisaged for a Civic Forum.

Section 2/20 of the Report of the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) on the Scottish Parliament published by the Scottish Office in 1998 stated that, "We endorse the proposals for a Civic Forum...", and "We recommend that the Parliament should encourage Scottish civic society through the establishment and work of a Civic Forum and through other imaginative social partnership ventures as significant means of achieving an accessible Parliament within a participative democracy."

In a debate on the CSG principles on 9th June 1999, George Reid said, "All parties, pre-election, endorsed the concept of the forum, as did the coalition agreement of 14 May... The civic forum will promote participation, facilitate debate and ensure social partnership. It will be a gateway to the Parliament and its Executive, not a gate-keeper."

Later that year, then Finance Minister Angus MacKay said, "The Civic Forum plays an important role in providing innovative ways for all relevant voices to contribute to the policy making process. I hope that the Executive's continued commitment to the work of the Civic Forum will enable it to build on existing achievements and contribute to our objective of creating an open government for Scotland."

Since those early days of the Parliament, and with a small staff including part-time and volunteer workers, the Civic Forum has built up a membership of 700 organisations and individuals, and 5,000 contacts who regularly receive 'reader friendly' information bulletins, digests of policy and consultations.

The work of the Civic Forum
The Forum's work might best be characterised as one of informal political education. Whilst it does not aim to further any one political position it does seek to encourage wider public understanding of the policy process. It has three main areas of work:

- **Engaging people with the legislative process:** by this it means developing wider knowledge and understanding of how government and parliament works so that people may engage with it more effectively.

- **Promoting civic priorities:** creating opportunities for a wider range of views and priorities to be aired and fed back into the policy making process.

- **Auditing democratic participation:** acting as an independent commentator on how the new democratic processes are working in terms of public participation and generating educational processes of participation which people value in themselves and which reflect a genuine concern to build a participatory culture for politics.
In working towards these priorities the Civic Forum has undertaken a wide range of successful activities, including:

1. Over 2,500 people participating in events facilitated by the Forum over the period April 2002 to November 2004 alone.

2. The Forum’s six part-time regional co-ordinators (one day a week) enabling events to be held in 38 different locations in Scotland, providing local accessible opportunities for members of the public and people in small community based organisations to get involved: Aberdeen, Ardrossan, Aberfoyle, ayr, Barrhead, Bellshill, Clydebank, Cromarty, Dalkilth, Dingwall, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Falkirk, Galashields, Glasgow, Glenrothes, Grantown on Spey, Granton (Edinburgh), Greenock, Hawick, Inverness, Irvine, Kilmarnock, Kirkintilloch, Lochinver, Livingston, Nairn, Newarthill, Oban, Paisley, Perth, Port Glasgow, Skye, Stirling, Stranraer, Thurso, Wishaw.

3. In a survey, 264 new actions or learning impacts were cited as a result of Forum work: including contacting MSPs, submitting a consultation response, initiating discussion in another organisation or passing on information for others to act. The Civic Forum is generating a chain of participation activity.

4. Three Parliament Day events where civic society took over the Parliament Chamber and MSPs had the opportunity to participate in direct discussion.

5. A network of Civic Participation Hubs is currently being established. The Forum’s office in Edinburgh has resources and computers available to members of the public with staff support on how to find out about Executive and Parliament processes and activities. Meeting space is available for people to prepare before coming to give evidence to Committees, meet or visit Parliament.

The Civic Forum is cited in the Parliament’s own “Participation Handbook” as an example of an organisation useful to it in reaching the wider public (as is EACG).

The Civic Forum has not been subject to any independent evaluation of its activity, its achievements or shortcomings. If there has been dis-satisfaction with the performance of the Civic Forum it has not been an open process with the opportunity to discuss conclusions drawn. For more information on this see: http://www.myedinburgh.org/?page=4432

So, why is the work of the Civic Forum no longer valued by the Scottish Executive and Parliament? And where is the SPCB’s evidence that the parliament is now carrying out the work? Two examples to the contrary:

The Scottish Islands Network Newsletter (www.scottishislands.org.uk) of February 2005 advises its members to go the Civic Forum’s website - not the Executive’s – to access a briefing paper on Voting and Boundary Changes, “For a very helpful overview of these changes and what they could mean to you”.

In a letter to the Herald on 17th May 2005, the secretary of the Dunfermline and Coast Association of Community Councils told how the Association had been refused a meeting with the Minister for Communities to put forward its views on proposed planning legislation, but that ministers had met twice with Homes for Scotland, the CBI and CoSLA about the same issue.

If the trust between politicians and voters is to be restored then politicians will have to listen to communities outside of their own political culture. In sacrificing bodies such as the Civic Forum the message to the electorate is that politicians don’t trust the people. The reciprocal process of declining trust between politicians and people can be reversed but politicians cannot solve this problem on their own. Independent and robust organisations such as the Civic Forum are necessary to reflect the maturity of a parliament that can withstand criticism of what it does or does not do. It is when it reaches this stage that the trust of the people will begin to return.

For more information about the Civic Forum and its work, see: http://www.civicforum.org.uk/
Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting an e-petition:

Before submitting a petition to the Parliament, petitioners are expected to have made an attempt to resolve their issues of concern, by for example, making representations to the Scottish Executive or seeking the assistance of locally elected representatives, such as councillors, MSPs and MSPs. Details of those approached should be entered.

Edinburgh's Active Citizenship Group, and individual members of the group, wrote letters expressing our support for the Civic Forum and our concerns for its future to each member of the Scottish Parliament's Corporate Body (SPCB) prior to its meeting on 21st June.

We received a reply from Presiding Officer George Reid. Other responses referred us to his reply. Robert Brown MSP further suggested that an evaluation of the Civic Forum as a mechanism for supporting civic participation might be a way forward.

The Presiding Officer's response, and the report of the SPCB's meeting, suggested that the Civic Forum was to some extent duplicating work already being done by the Parliament itself. We are not aware of the evidence for this, but would argue that any confusion of roles should be investigated and clarification sought to ascertain whether work was being duplicated or was in fact complementary.

Comments to stimulate on-line discussion:

Please provide at least one comment to set the scene for an on-line discussion on the petition, not exceeding 10 lines of text.

The Scottish Civic Forum was set up under the principles of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament. Its three aims are:

- Engaging people with the legislative process
- Promoting civic priorities
- Auditing democratic participation

The Scottish Executive is withdrawing the Civic Forum's core funding. The Parliament's Corporate Body has rejected a request to continue it, claiming that the Civic Forum is duplicating work done by the parliament itself, but there is mounting evidence the underlying rationale and philosophy on which the Forum was founded is no longer valued – a major change in the relationship between the Parliament and civil society requiring urgent debate.

Petitioners appearing before the Committee

The Convener of the Committee may invite petitioners to appear before the Public Petitions Committee to speak in support of their petition. Such an invitation will only be made if the Convener considers this would be useful in facilitating the Committee's consideration of the petition. It should be noted that due to the large volume of petitions it has to consider, the Committee is not able to invite all petitioners to appear before the Committee to speak in support of their petition.

Please indicate below if you do NOT wish to make a brief statement before the Committee when it comes to consider your petition.

I do NOT wish to make a brief statement before the Committee
Signature of principal petitioner:
When satisfied that your petition meets all the criteria outlined in the Guidance on submission of public petitions, the principal petitioner should sign and date the form in the box below. Other signatures gathered should be appended to this form.

Signature Jim Crowther...

Date.....29 September 2005..............................................................................................................

For advice on the content and wording of your e-petition please contact:

The Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP
Tel: 0131 348 5186 Fax: 0131 348 5088
e-mail: petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Note
Completed e-petition forms should also be sent to petitions@scottish.parliament.uk