

Statutory Guidance on Petitions

Status of this Guidance

2.1 This is statutory guidance made under section 44 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (the 2021 Act).

Purpose of this Guidance

2.2 This guidance is to support councils in the preparation and maintenance of petition schemes aimed at enabling communities to explore support for specific issues to inform council deliberations.

What the Act requires

2.3 Section 42 of the 2021 Act requires principal councils to make and publish a petition scheme setting out how the council intends to handle and respond to petitions including electronic petitions.

2.4 The petition scheme must as a minimum set out:

- a) how a petition may be submitted to the council;
- b) how and by when the council will acknowledge receipt of a petition;
- c) the steps the council may take in response to a petition received by it;
- d) the circumstances (if any) in which the council may take no further action in response to a petition;
- e) how and by when the council will make available its response to a petition to the person who submitted the petition and to the public.

2.5 A principal council must review its petition scheme from time to time and, if the council considers it appropriate, revise the scheme.

2.6 If a principal council revises or replaces a petition scheme, it must publish the revised or new scheme.

Designing a petition scheme

2.7 A petition scheme should not be considered as the sole method of receiving public views on matters. Its design and parameters should be set in the context of the council's public participation strategy and informed by the other participation pathways available to members of the public. Therefore, as part of a suite of pathways used as part of the council's wider public participation strategy, it can be a powerful tool in gauging support for specific courses of action.

2.8 Well designed and resourced petition systems, working in conjunction and harmony with other participation pathways can have a range of benefits for the public and councils. For example, petitions enable communities to quickly highlight the issues which are of the most concern to them to the council, they can add weight to representations made by ward councillors on their behalf and provide a focus for community discussion. In turn, councils gain valuable insight into the concerns of their communities and can then support communities in addressing these issues.

2.9 Petitions should not be considered as a nuisance or threat and should be considered as a good opportunity to hear the views of the public, whether in support or not of something the council may be considering or intending to do.

2.10 Councils should, when designing petition schemes, think about the process from the point of view of petitioners, including understanding what petitioners might think "success" will look like at different stages in the process, and how the process can be made as transparent and streamlined as possible.

2.11 Councils should have regard to their statutory duties in respect of equalities, Welsh language and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 when preparing their petition scheme.

2.12 Petition schemes should be developed not just to ensure a fair and robust process but also to provide a helpful and positive experience for those people who take the time to submit and promote petitions. This is likely to involve consideration of the

following issues:

- A clear explanation of the matters about which the council will accept petitions, including the criteria for making a decision to accept or reject a petition;
- How and where advice will be given to petitioners to enable them to engage productively with the process, including measures in place for disabled people and individuals with long term health conditions and neurodiversity;
- A clear understanding of the different stages in the petitions scheme, with an explanation of what thresholds will be used to determine the transition from one stage to another;
- How petitions fit in with other opportunities for the public to be involved – and signposting to other opportunities, either as complementary to a petition or instead of it, including connecting the potential petitioner with their ward councillor;
- The correct body to consider a given petition. It is right for petitions to be heard by a variety of different bodies, although the default is likely to be full Council unless it is seen as especially useful for the petition to be heard by a committee that focuses specifically on the subject matter of the petition itself;
- Petition schemes will need to consider where petitions are considered in scrutiny committees. These committees have no power to act on petitions but could (for example) adopt petitioners' arguments as formal recommendations;
- The rights of petitioners to speak in meetings, and how this engages with wider public speaking rights, and rights to make deputations;
- How and within what timeframe the council will provide feedback to the petitioner on the success or otherwise of their petition.

2.13 Councils are encouraged to explore what would constitute good practice around the framework for petition schemes set out in this guidance. For example, what might be an appropriate signature threshold for the consideration of a petition and how and when this threshold would be kept under review. This would support a balance between local discretion based on the size of the council, the nature of the scheme and its relationship to other participation pathways in the council and consistency for the members of the public who may be engaged with multiple councils or move

from one council area to another