

William Powell AM  
Chair  
Petitions Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
CF99 1NA

Your ref:  
Our ref: PO/RB/SG

17 December 2014

*Dear William*

## **REVIEW OF PUBLIC PETITIONS ARRANGEMENTS**

We met earlier in the year as part of my usual regular discussions with Committee Chairs. I mentioned that I thought it would be useful to review our arrangements for public petitions, in particular admissibility and related arrangements, in anticipation of the fifth Assembly.

You will recall that I said I would welcome the Committee's involvement in reviewing these areas. I think this is something that you also broadly welcomed.

The petitions system is highly valued by many members of the public who submit petitions. Since the system was introduced in 2007 over 830 petitions have been submitted to the Assembly and most have been referred to the Petitions Committee. Petitions often bring about positive outcomes, whether by changing or influencing Government policy or simply by allowing citizens the chance to have their concerns heard at the heart of government. Set against this is whether petitions are always focused on issues where they can make most difference and whether we can find ways to prioritise our consideration of them more effectively.

**Croesewir gohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg/We welcome correspondence in both English and Welsh**

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Since we met, as part of wider changes to the Assembly's ICT systems particularly our website, a number of changes have had to be made to our online petitions system. Although these changes have not resulted in noticeable changes to the system for petitioners, they have resulted in some internal improvements for the administration of the system.

These changes have bedded down and there is no reason why a review of the wider arrangements should not now take place. If the Petitions Committee is content to undertake this work, I would like it to consider how improvements can be made to:

- the current admissibility criteria;
- the way in which we deal with admissible petitions; and
- how the Assembly's Standing Orders and other systems might need to change to support any recommendations.

The overall aim would be for the Petitions Committee to report in time to inform decisions on how petitions are dealt with in the Fifth Assembly.

Within these broad areas I think it is important that the Committee itself decides how best to approach this task and what its detailed terms of reference should be. While the Committee should draw primarily on its own very considerable experience of our petitions system, it should also look at best practice elsewhere, particularly in the rest of the UK and Ireland. The views of those who use the system and the wider public in Wales should also be important considerations.

The Presiding Officer rather than the Petitions Committee is formally responsible for decisions on the admissibility of petitions but has delegated day-to-day decisions to the Clerk of the Petitions Committee. Having said that, and without wanting to be prescriptive, there are some questions that the Committee may wish to focus on particularly:

- Should petitions continue to be allowed only on matters that are within the direct ability of the Assembly or the Welsh Ministers to assist in resolving them?
- Should petitions about the operational responsibilities of individual local authorities continue to be inadmissible? Are there any other





bodies, such as Local Health Boards or some Welsh Government Sponsored Public Bodies, to which similar arrangements should apply?

- Should petitions on planning matters, which involve quasi-judicial decisions by Welsh Ministers, be subject to petition? Should we deal with petitions about matters that have been or are being considered by the Ombudsman or similar office holders?
- Does the current threshold for signatures strike the right balance between encouraging petitions on a wide range of issues while also ensuring that petitions are not submitted on more trivial matters? Should organisations continue to be exempt from the minimum signature requirement?
- There are no age or residency restrictions on who can submit or sign a petition. Should the system focus on people who live in Wales?
- Assembly Members are not allowed to submit petitions. Should similar restrictions apply to staff who work for them or to Assembly staff, who are required to be politically impartial?
- Should political parties be allowed to submit petitions?
- Do the current arrangements provide enough protection against repeat, vexatious or trivialising petitions?
- Are our systems for petitioning working effectively and are the Committee's own procedures adding as much value as possible?
- What, if any, changes are needed to Standing Orders or other procedures to facilitate improvements?

Obviously, some changes the Committee might suggest will need to be considered more widely. For instance, by the Business Committee if changes to the Assembly's Standing Orders are recommended. Other changes may have resource implications that the Assembly Commission would need to think through. However, I would hope that the Committee may also be able to suggest improvements that can be made within current arrangements and resources.



Llywydd  
Presiding Officer



I would therefore be grateful if you could discuss and let me know if it would be prepared to undertake this task. It would be helpful if the Committee could report to me by the end of the autumn term next year, which should allow time for any recommendations for change to influence consideration of arrangements for petitions in the Fifth Assembly.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rosemary".

**Dame Rosemary Butler AM**  
**Presiding Officer**