

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Policy, Information and Communications Portfolio Holder 12 March 2009
AUTHOR/S: Chief Executive / Democratic Services Manager

E-PETITIONS

Purpose

1. This report sets out the principal issues relating to the use of online petitions as a means of increasing community engagement with the democratic process. No key decision is required, but it is considered appropriate to bring the matter to the Portfolio Holder to confirm the Council's commitment, or otherwise, to online petitions. Should the Portfolio Holder decide to implement e-Petitions at South Cambridgeshire District Council, the resource implications will relate in the main to human rather than financial resources. The Council has an agreed protocol for considering petitions, therefore introducing an E-Petitions facility will involve modification of, and improvement to, an existing process rather than the creation of a new one.

Background

2. A growing number of local authorities are providing facilities for the completion and submission of online petitions. South Cambridgeshire District Council uses a committee administration software package called modern.gov, marketed by NT/e. NT/e has recently introduced an e-Petitions facility as part of that software package.

Considerations

3. The benefits of online petitions include:
 - (a) Providing an additional avenue for participating in the democratic process.
 - (b) Spreading the message more widely than might be the case with paper-based petitions (from the public's point of view) and getting a wider, and perhaps more independent, response (from the Council's point of view).
 - (c) The system's simplicity and effectiveness in an electronic world.
4. Potential drawbacks include:
 - (a) a perception that e-Petitions might diminish or duplicate the constituency and community leadership roles of local Members.
 - (b) Similar or duplicate petitions especially where they "split the vote". There should be some way to "merge" petitions.
 - (c) Staff implications: some systems operated by other local authorities are primarily manual and involve a member of staff compiling the petition from information added to the webpage .
5. Online petitioning has not been publicised, so it is not known whether or not there is a public demand for it. However, the Council's Constitution already provides for "old fashioned" petitions, and residents are already familiar with the concept. It is likely therefore that online petitions could only enhance a facility that already exists.

Nevertheless, the Portfolio Holder might wish to give some publicity to online petitions before they go live.

Options

6. The Portfolio Holder can either
 - (a) Authorise the introduction of online petitions service as soon as practicable.
 - (b) Endorse the principle of online petitions but defer a final decision pending public consultation to gauge demand for such a facility to be introduced.
 - (c) Reject online petitions at the present time. This option is not recommended, given the likely future obligation, referred to below, to make e-petitions service available.

Implications

7. Financial	There are no direct financial implications if the Council opted for the modern.gov option, which is an integral part of the next upgrade and would be provided as part of the existing service agreement. Clearly, use of another commercial provider would have additional cost implications for the Council. There would be a staff cost if the Council adopted an “in-house” option.
Legal	In the interests of data protection, the system would need to adapt to ensure that the private personal address details are not capable of being viewed on public websites. The recently published Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill contains provisions which would oblige councils to make provision for petitions to be submitted electronically. The Bill makes further provision governing the Council’s response to such petitions, and it is clear that the government is seeking through legislation to raise the profile and stature of local authority petitioning.
Staffing	It is anticipated that the likely workload generated by the provisions of an e-petitions service can be met from within existing officer resources.
Risk Management	None
Equal Opportunities	Online petitions increase access to the Council’s decision-making processes to those who might not otherwise have an opportunity to raise their concerns.

Consultations regarding how the system would operate in practice

8. Huntingdonshire District Council has been consulted as the first Authority to go ‘live’ with the e-petitions facility from modern.gov. The Council requires residents wishing to sign a petition has to register and provide details of their postal address so that officers can check that petitioners live or work within the District. As long as they have this local connection, anyone can start a petition. The details of those who sign the petition are stored in an Excel spreadsheet within Issue Manager (part of the administrative side of modern.gov).
9. If a petitioner wishes to start a petition, they simply follow the online instructions. Their request is then sent to Democratic Services who review the content of the petition before activating it online. This requires a member of the Democratic Services

Team to check the system on a regular basis (such as a week) as there is no automatic notification.

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

10.	Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future
	Not applicable
	Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community
	Enabling wider public involvement in the democratic process will help focus the Council's attention onto those issues important to local people.
	Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work
	The ability to contribute quickly and easily to a debate (in a sustainable format) will enhance the feeling of inclusiveness and wellbeing.

Conclusion

11. The introduction of an on-line petition service will improve the ease of access to the Council's decision-making structure for residents wishing to submit petitions which will stimulate interest and participation in local democracy. The facility can be introduced within existing resources and will mean that the Council is ahead of the game in terms of a future legislative requirement to make such a facility available.

Recommendation

12. It is **recommended** that South Cambridgeshire District Council introduce online petitions using its existing committee management software from 1 April 2009, subject to appropriate publicity around the launch.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- Huntingdonshire District Council (modern.gov)
<http://www.huntsdc.gov.uk/News+and+Communications/Press+releases/2008/July/first+byte+at+electronic+petitions.htm>
- Bristol City Council (Public-I)
<http://epetitions.bristol.gov.uk/>
- Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames (manual system)
http://www.kingston.gov.uk/information/your_council/epetitions.htm

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