

L Procedural Guidance – Petitions

The Council welcomes petitions as one way in which residents can let us know their concerns. We set out below how the authority will respond to petitions it receives.

Definition

1. We treat as a petition any communication which is signed by or sent to us on behalf of a number of people. For practical purposes, we normally set a requirement for at least 20 signatories or petitioners before we treat it as a petition. Whilst we like to hear from people who live, work or study in South Cambridgeshire, this is not a requirement and we would take equally seriously a petition from, for example, 20 visitors to the District on matters relating to any aspects of their visit for which the authority has responsibility or influence.

Scope

2. A petition should include –
 - 2.1. A clear statement of your concerns and what you want the authority to do. This must relate to something which is the responsibility of the authority, or over which the authority has some influence. Where a petition relates to a matter which is within the responsibility of another public authority, we will ask the petition organiser whether s/he would like us to redirect the petition to that other authority. Where a petition relates to a matter over which the authority has no responsibility or influence, we will return the petition to the petition organiser with an explanation for that decision;
 - 2.2. the name and contact details of the “petition-organiser” or someone to whom you would like any correspondence about the petition to be sent. Contact details may be either a postal address or an e-mail address;
 - 2.3. the names of at least 20 petitioners (which can include the petition organiser). Where the petition is in paper form, this can include an actual signature from each petitioner, but actual signature is not essential. Where the petition is in electronic form, a list of the names of the petitioners will suffice. You may include the addresses of petitioners, which may be useful to the authority, for example, in assessing the degree of local support or opposition to a planning application, but this is not essential. If you want your petition to be debated at a meeting of the Council (“A Petition for Debate”), or to trigger a public meeting of an Scrutiny and Overview Committee at which a specific officer will be required to report (“A Petition to hold an Officer to Account”), your petition will need to contain a higher number of signatories or petitioners (see below);
 - 2.4. if you are submitting the petition in response to our consultation on a specific matter, please identify the matter which it relates to, so that we can ensure that your petition is considered along with original matter.
3. Where you submit a petition in response to consultation by the authority, please address it to the return address set out in the consultation invitation. This will ensure that it is reported at the same time as the matter to which it relates is considered.
4. We have appointed a Petitions Officer, who is responsible for receiving, managing and reporting all other petitions sent to the authority. Please address petitions to –

Democratic Services Team Leader
South Cambridgeshire District Council
South Cambridgeshire Hall
Cambourne Business Park
Cambourne

5. The Petitions Officer will ensure that your petition is acknowledged to the petition organiser and entered on the authority's petitions website (<http://www.scambs.gov.uk/meetings>) and that the website is regularly up-dated with information on the progress of your petition. The Petitions Officer can also provide you with advice about how to petition the authority or the progress of your petition, at either of the above addresses or by telephone at 01954 713030.
6. Petitions which will not be reported
 - 6.1. ***Duplicate Petitions***

Where more than one petition is received in time for a particular meeting, each supporting the same outcome on one matter, each petition organiser will be treated as an independent petition organiser, but only the petition organiser of the first petition to be received will be invited to address the relevant meeting.
 - 6.2. ***Repeat Petitions***

A petition will not normally be considered where they are received within 6 months of another petition or public question being considered by the authority on the same matter.
 - 6.3. ***Rejected Petitions***

Petitions will not be reported if in the opinion of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, they are abusive or libellous; frivolous, vague or ambiguous; rude, offensive, defamatory, scurrilous or time-wasting; require the disclosure of confidential or exempt information or are otherwise considered to abuse the Council's powers, duties or obligations; or which do not relate to something which is the responsibility of the authority, or over which the authority has some influence.
7. Petitions relating to applications for a permission, consent or licence yet to be determined will be reported to the relevant regulatory committee with other responses to consultation.
8. The interpretation of the eligibility criteria by the Chief Executive and / or Monitoring Officer, the Leader of the Council and the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee shall be final.

Types of Petition

9. There are five different types of petition, as set out below. How we deal with a petition depends on which type of petition you submit –
 - 9.1. ***Ordinary Petitions***

These are petitions which do not come within any of the following specific types. Please note that petitions which raise issues of possible Councillor misconduct will be taken as complaints arising under the Local Government Act 2000 and will be reported to the Standards Committee Local Assessment Panel, rather than considered under this Petitions Procedure.
 - 9.2. ***Consultation Petitions***

These are petitions in response to an invitation from the authority for representations on a particular proposal or application, for example on planning or licensing applications or proposals for parking restrictions or speed limits. Consultation petitions which are received by the response date in the consultation invitation will be reported to a public meeting of the person or body which will be taking the decision on the application or proposal.

9.3. **Statutory Petitions**

Particular Acts of Parliament require the Council to consider petitions, for example a petition for a review of Parish Councils, or a petition for a directly-elected Mayor. Where you submit a petition under such a specific statute, we will report it to the next available meeting of the Council in accordance with the statutory requirements.

9.4. **Petitions for Debate**

If you want your petition to be reported to and debated at a meeting of the Council, it must contain at least 50¹ signatories or petitioners (this is reduced to 20 signatories or petitioners where the petition relates to a local issue, affecting no more than 2 electoral wards within the authority's area).

9.5. **Petitions to Hold an Officer to Account**

If you want your petition to be considered at a meeting of an Scrutiny and Overview Committee, where an officer, identified either by name or by post title, will be required to answer questions on the conduct of a particular matter, your petition should contain at least 50 signatories or petitioners (this is reduced to 20 signatories or petitioners where the petition relates to a local issue, affecting no more than 2 electoral wards within the authority's area). The authority has determined that such petitions must relate to the Chief Executive, a Director or a Head of Service of the authority. Please note that where the petition raises issues of competence or misconduct, the petition will be referred to the Chief Executive (or to the Head of Human Resources in respect of the Chief Executive) and will be considered under the authority's Disciplinary Procedures, and not under this Petitions Procedure².

e-Petitions

10. The authority maintains a petitions website at <http://www.scambs.gov.uk/meetings>
11. When a petition is received, within 5 working days the Petitions Officer will open a new public file within the website and will put in that file the subject matter of the petition, its date of receipt and the number of signatories or petitioners. The petition organiser's name and contact details will only be included on the website if s/he so requests.
12. As soon as it is decided who the petition will be considered by within the authority, and when that consideration will occur, this information will be entered on the website at the same time as it is sent to the petition organiser. Once the petition has been considered, the authority's decision will be notified to the petition organiser and put on the website within 5 working days of that consideration.
13. Petitions are presented on the petitions website in the order in which they are received, but the website can be searched for keywords to identify all petitions relating to a particular topic. All petitions are kept on the website for 2 years from the date of receipt.

The role of Ward Councillors

14. When a petition is received which relates to a local matter (particularly affecting specific electoral wards), the Petition Officer will send a copy of the petition to each relevant Ward Councillor at the same time as acknowledging receipt of the petition to the petition organiser.

¹ The number of signatories or petitioners required for Petitions for Debate, and for Petitions to Hold an Officer to Account have been set by the authority to try to ensure that matters of genuine concern can be brought to the authority's attention. These requirements will be reviewed periodically in the light of the number of petitions received, to ensure that the requirements are not excessive.

² Note that the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 makes no provision for handling petitions which raise issues of officer or member misconduct or officer competence, but in practice such petitions cannot be handled under the Petitions Procedure and must be handled under the procedures appropriate to such matters.

15. When the petition is reported to the person or body within the authority who can take a decision on the matter to which it relates, the relevant Ward Councillor will be invited to attend and to address the decision-taker for no more than 3 minutes (or 3 minutes each), immediately after the petition organiser.

Procedure

What happens when a petition is received?

16. Whenever a petition is received:
 - 16.1. Within 2 working days of receipt, the Petitions Officer will acknowledge receipt to the petition organiser.
 - 16.2. In some cases, the Petitions Officer may be able to resolve the petitioners' request directly, by getting the relevant Portfolio Holder or officer to take appropriate action. For example where the petition relates to fly-tipping and the authority can arrange for it to be cleared up directly. Where this is done, the Petitions Officer will ask the petition organiser whether s/he considers that the matter is resolved;
 - 16.3. Unless the matter has been resolved to the satisfaction of the petition organiser, the Petitions Officer will within 5 working days of receipt of the petition provide a substantive response to the petition organiser setting out who the petition will be reported to for consideration, when and where that will take place and inviting the petition organiser to attend that meeting and to address the meeting for up to 3 minutes on the issue covered by the petition. The invitation to the petition organiser to address the meeting is in addition to any other public speaking rights at that meeting.
 - 16.4. Whilst we are committed to dealing with petitions promptly, a petition will normally need to be received at least 10 working days before a relevant meeting if it is to be reported to that meeting. Where it is necessary to undertake a significant amount of work to collect information and advice to enable the matter to be properly considered, it may be necessary for the Petitions Officer to decide that the petition will be held over until the following meeting of the relevant body.
 - 16.5. At the same time as responding to the petition organiser, the Petitions Officer will notify political group leaders / convenors and relevant Ward Councillors and officers of receipt of the petition.
 - 16.6. Within 5 working days of receipt of a petition, the Petitions Officer will open a new public file for the petition on the authority's petitions website, setting out the subject matter of the petition, the date of receipt and the number of petitioners. The petition organiser's name and contact details will only be included on the website if s/he so requests.
 - 16.7. At each stage of the consideration of the petition, within 5 working days of any decision, the Petitions Officer will ensure that the petitions website is updated to ensure that petitioners can track progress of their petition.
 - 16.8. The process after this stage differs for the various types of petitions – see below.

What happens to a Consultation Petition?

17. Consultations Petitions are submitted in response to an invitation from the Council to submit representations on a particular proposal or application, such as a planning or licensing application or a proposed traffic regulation order.
 - 17.1. The petition will be reported to person or body who will take the decision on the proposal or application at the meeting when they are to take the decision on that

application or proposal. The Council's Constitution defines who will take different types of decision, as set out in the Scheme of Delegations and the terms of Reference of Committees and Sub-Committees at Part 3. Most Planning applications are determined by the Planning Committee and all Licensing applications are determined by the Licensing Committee. The exception in respect of planning applications is that specific officers have delegated power to determine domestic planning applications where no objection has been received. So, where a petition has been received objecting to the grant of planning permission, the application would be reported to the Planning Committee for decision. Where the petition supports the planning application, it may be determined by the relevant officer to whom power for determination has been delegated.

- 17.2. Where the petition relates to any other matter which is within the delegated power of an officer, s/he will not exercise those delegated powers but will automatically refer the matter up to the relevant Portfolio Holder for decision.
- 17.3. Where the petition relates to a matter which is within the delegated powers of an individual Portfolio Holder, s/he may decide not to exercise those delegated powers but to refer the matter to Cabinet for decision

What happens to a Statutory Petition?

18. Particular Acts of Parliament require the Council to consider petitions, for example a petition for a review of Parish Councils, or a petition for a directly-elected Mayor. Where you submit a petition under such a specific statute, we will report it to the next available meeting of the Council in accordance with the statutory requirements.

What happens to Petitions for Debate?

19. Petitions for Debate will be reported to the next convenient meeting of Council. Petitions will not be considered at the Annual Meeting of Council or at Extraordinary Meetings of Council which are not convened to consider the subject matter of the petition.
20. As set out below, the petition organiser will be invited to address the meeting for up to 3 minutes on the subject of the petition.

What happens to a Petition to Hold an Officer to Account?

21. Petitions to hold an officer to account will be reported to the next convenient meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.
22. In advance of the Committee meeting, the petition organiser will be invited to submit a list of questions which s/he would like put to the officer at the meeting. These questions will be provided to the Chairman of the Committee, who will decide whether they are appropriate, and to the officer concerned, in advance of the meeting.
23. At the meeting, the Chairman will invite the petition organiser to address the Committee for a maximum of 3 minutes on the issue, and the relevant officer will then be required to report to the Committee in relation to the conduct of the subject matter of the petition. Members of the Committee may question the officer, and the Chairman may invite the petition organiser to suggest questions for him/her to put to the officer.

What happens to an Ordinary Petition?

24. The Petitions Officer will arrange for each Ordinary petition to be reported to the next convenient meeting of the relevant Portfolio Holder, of Cabinet, of Council or of a Committee or Sub-Committee of Council which has the power to take a decision on the matter
25. At the meeting, when the matter to which the petition relates is considered:

- 25.1. Petitions which do not relate to an ordinary item of business will be considered before the normal business of the meeting, and will be considered in the order in which they were received, unless the Chairman at the meeting determines otherwise. A maximum of 30 minutes will be allowed at each meeting for considering such petitions and any petitions not reached in the time allowed will be referred to the relevant Portfolio Holder for consideration or deferred until the next meeting.
- 25.2. Any petitions relevant to particular items of business, such as petitions relating to planning applications or proposed traffic regulation orders, will be taken together with that item of business, in the normal order of business.
26. The decision-taker or the Chairman of the meeting may invite a relevant officer to set out the background to the issue before inviting the petition organiser to address him/her for up to 3 minutes. The Portfolio Holder / Chairman may then ask questions of the petition organiser, and will then invite any relevant Ward Councillors present to address him/her on the matter for up to 3 minutes (each). The Portfolio Holder / Chairman will then invite a relevant officer(s) to advise him/her/the meeting, after which the matter will be open for debate among members of the decision-making body. Where the matter is to be determined by a Portfolio Holder, s/he will take a decision on the matter. That decision may be a determination of the matter, or may be a decision to refer the matter for investigation and report back, or to refer it up to a meeting of Council, Cabinet or a Committee of the Council for determination.
27. Within 5 working days of the consideration of the petition by the relevant Portfolio Holder, the Petitions Officer will notify the petition organiser of the Portfolio Holder's decision and advise him / her that if s/he is not satisfied with that decision, s/he may require the matter to be reported to the next convenient meeting of the appropriate Scrutiny and Overview Committee for review.
28. At each stage, the Petitions Officer will enter the relevant information on the website at the same time as it is sent to the petition organiser.

Appeal to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee

29. If the petition organiser is not satisfied with the outcome of the authority's consideration of his / her petition, s/he may appeal to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee by notifying the Petitions Officer of his / her intention to appeal within 20 working days of being notified of the authority's decision on the petition.
30. Within 5 working days of receipt of intention to appeal, the Petitions Officer will determine which is the relevant Scrutiny and Overview Committee, if more than one has been established by Council, and will notify the petition organiser of the time, date and place of the next convenient meeting of that Scrutiny and Overview Committee and will invite the petition organiser to attend the meeting and to address the Committee for up to 3 minutes on why he considers that the authority's decision on the petition is inadequate.
31. At that meeting, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee will invite the petition organiser and Ward Councillor(s) to make their representations and to explain why s/he considers that the Portfolio Holder's response was insufficient. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee may not over-ride the Portfolio Holder, but the Portfolio Holder must consider any recommendations made by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

The role of the Petition Organiser

32. The petition organiser will receive acknowledgement of receipt of the petition within 2 working days of its receipt by the authority.

33. Where the petition is not accepted for consideration (see Paragraph 6 above for grounds for rejection of petitions), the petition organiser will be advised by the Petitions Officer of the rejection and the grounds for such rejection.
34. Where the petition is accepted for consideration, the petition organiser will be advised by the Petitions Officer within 5 working days of receipt by the authority as to who the petition will be considered by, and the date, time and place of the meeting at which it will be considered, and will be invited to address the meeting for up to 3 minutes. The meeting may then ask the petition organiser questions on the subject matter of the petition.
35. The petition organiser may nominate another person to address the meeting and to answer any questions on the matter.
36. The petition organiser will be regularly informed by the Petitions Officer of any decisions in respect of the petition and will be formally notified of the outcome of the petition's consideration within 5 working days of such decision.
37. The petition organiser may notify the Petitions Officer of his/her intention to appeal to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee against the decision of the authority relating to the petition within 20 working days of being notified of that decision, and may attend and address the meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee for up to 3 minutes as to why s/he considers that the authority's decision on the petition was inadequate.