

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
INFORMAL MEETING OF EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

25 January 2022

Proposed amendments to the Council Petitions Scheme,

Report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services)

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 That the Executive consider whether the existing Council Petitions Scheme, which is paper-based, could be updated to include an option for e-petitions to be submitted. This would be in addition to and run alongside the existing paper-based scheme.
- 1.2 That the Executive then make any necessary recommendations to the Chief Executive Officer under his emergency delegated powers, for onward recommendation to the meeting of the County Council on 16 February 2022.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Under his delegated decision making powers in the Officers' Delegation Scheme in the Council's Constitution, the Chief Executive Officer has power, in cases of emergency, to take any decision which could be taken by the Council, the Executive or a committee. Following on from the expiry of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, which allowed for committee meetings to be held remotely, the County Council resolved at its meeting on 5 May 2021 that, for the present time, in light of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic circumstances, remote live-broadcast committee meetings should continue (as informal meetings of the Committee Members), with any formal decisions required being taken by the Chief Executive Officer under his emergency decision making powers and after consultation with other Officers and Members as appropriate and after taking into account any views of the relevant Committee Members. This approach will be reviewed again in February 2022.
- 2.2 The Council's existing petitions scheme is based upon the submission of a paper petition that has been circulated by the petition organiser.
- 2.3 The petitions scheme outlines how we respond to a submitted petition, as summarised below:
- Between 1 and 499 signatories – the matter is responded to by the relevant service/department
 - Between 500 and 30,129 – there is a debate at the appropriate Area Constituency Committee (ACC)
 - Above 30,130 – there is a debate at County Council.
- 2.4 The submitted petitions can be organised and signed by anyone who lives, works or studies in North Yorkshire, including people under 18.
- 2.5 The details of the scheme can be accessed via the following link – [Petitions information and advice | North Yorkshire County Council](#)

3.0 PETITIONS RECEIVED

- 3.1 Around 10 paper-based petitions are received a year. Most of these relate to highways matters and typically are signed by less than 50 people.
- 3.2 In the past three months, we have received three e-petitions that have been organised through the '38 degrees' site or the 'Change.org' site.
- 3.3 These petitions do not conform with our scheme as when they are submitted to us a link is provided with details of the petition and the number of signatories but not complete details of their address nor a signature. The most information that can be provided, upon request, appears to be the name and postcode of those people who have accessed the site and expressed their support for the petition.

4.0 CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 E-petitions organised through independent internet sites tend to be more readily circulated and so have higher numbers of signatories. The higher number of signatories means that these e-petitions are more likely to trigger a debate at an ACC, than a paper-based petition.
- 4.2 The headline on our website for the petitions scheme is 'We welcome petitions and recognise that they are one way in which people can let us know their concerns'.
- 4.3 Paper-based petitions represent the bulk of the petitions submitted and can be carried out by and with people who either do not have access to or are unfamiliar with IT.
- 4.4 We have the option of switching on the existing e-petitions function in the Modern Gov committee management system, at no additional cost, and directing people to that function.
- 4.5 The e-petitions function on the Modern Gov committee management system is well established and already in use by a number of the district and borough councils in North Yorkshire. It has also been subject to testing by Technology and Change and Democratic Services, to ensure that it is both accessible and easy to use.
- 4.6 Anyone wanting to start an e-petition would be directed to our website and instructions would be given there. Anyone wanting to sign an e-petition will be asked to provide their name, address and postcode, plus a valid email address. They would then receive an email containing a link that they must click on in order to confirm their email address is valid. Once this step is completed, their 'signature' will be added to the e-petition. Anyone viewing an e-petition will only be able to see the names of those who have signed. No contact details will be visible.

5.0 MEMBER WORKING GROUP ON THE CONSTITUTION

- 5.1 At the meeting of the Member Working Group on the Constitution on 25 November 2021, the proposed introduction of an e-petitions scheme was considered. The following issues were raised during the course of the discussions:
- There is a risk that e-petitions are so convenient to use that the number of signatories is artificially inflated by people signing who are not necessarily fully aware of or engaged in the issue that is being petitioned. When a paper petition is organised and the petitioner knocks on doors in the immediate local area, then it is much more likely to reflect the strength of local opinion
 - Petitions are welcomed in whatever form that they are presented as it is another route by which local people can engage with the Council on issues of local importance

- There is a need to embrace technology, particularly when all that is required is to enable an existing feature on a system that is already in place at no additional cost
- It can sometimes be difficult to ascertain whether a person studies or works in the county, based upon the information in the petition. People are, however, given the benefit of the doubt and a judgement was made based upon the information available.

5.2 The proposed introduction of an e-petitions scheme to run alongside the existing paper-based scheme was unanimously approved by those present at the meeting.

6.0 CONCLUSION

6.1 In view of the increasing use of e-petitions websites locally and nationally, it is timely to review the existing Council petitions scheme, which is paper-based. E-petitions have the value to being able to reach more people and be more widely publicised, increasing opportunities for members of the public to engage in the work of the Council. The recent introduction of the Modern Gov committee management system enables an e-petitions function to be switched on. This function is tried and tested and widely used by local authorities in the region and nationally. The adoption of an e-petitions scheme to run alongside the existing paper-based scheme has been supported by the Member Working Group on the Constitution.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no financial implications associated with introduction of e-petitions as the functionality is already available within the Modern Gov committee management system and can simply be activated at no additional cost.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no legal implications associated with introduction of e-petitions.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no climate change implications associated with introduction of e-petitions.

10.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no significant equality implications associated with the introduction of e-petitions. The e-petitions functions is being introduced alongside the existing paper-based petitions scheme and so it will become easier for members of the public to start and share a petition. An initial equality impact assessment screening form has been completed.

11.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 Running the Modern Gov e-petitions function alongside the existing paper-based scheme would increase access whilst not disadvantaging those people who do not have ready access to IT. It would also mean that all other forms of e-petitions could be directed that way, through our expanded scheme. This can be done at no additional cost as the functionality is already in place and merely needs to be enabled.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 12.1 That the Executive recommends to the Chief Executive Officer under his emergency delegated powers, for onward recommendation to the meeting of the County Council on 16 February 2022 that the e-petitions function in the Modern Gov committee management system be enabled and run alongside the existing paper-based scheme.

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