

Report to: Overview Committee

Date of Meeting March 2025

Heading/Title: Update Paper on the Introduction of an Online Petition Scheme

Cabinet Member(s): Communications & Democracy (Cllr Sarah Jackson) and Council and Corporate Coordination (Cllr John Loudoun)

Director: Governance (Melanie Wellman)

Author and Directorate: Andrew Melhuish, Corporate Lead Democratic Services & Scrutiny

Contact Details andrew.melhuish@eastdevon.gov.uk

Key decision: No

If a Key Decision has it appeared on Forward Plan: N/A

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

1. Introduction

1.1 On 13 July 2022 the Cabinet referred the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting (9/6/22) to the Overview Committee, to progress the recommendations, which were:

- To consider a petition platform within the Council's website
- To publicise the Council's petition scheme via the Council's weekly press release.

2. Background

2.1 At the Overview Committee on 30 May 2024 councillors received a briefing note and presentation setting out details of the current scheme and the committee were notified that a report setting out proposals for the introduction of an online petition scheme would be presented at a future meeting.

2.2 The Council currently operates a petition scheme allowing members of the public the ability to submit petitions as a way that people can let the Council know their concerns.

2.3 The traditional methods of petitioning can often be time-consuming and inaccessible to many community members. An e-petition platform would

modernise this process, making it more convenient and efficient. The ability to submit an online e-petition would ensure that the Council offers the public a range of methods for submitting a petition.

- 2.4 This update paper looks at the potential to provide a facility through the Council's website to allow the submission of online petitions to enhance the current offer of submitting petitions in paper form or via email. Alternatively, members of the public can give their petition to their local councillor who will deliver it on their behalf, or a petition can be presented by a member of the public at a Council meeting.
- 2.5 The Council's petitions scheme has been in place since 2010 and was adopted following the requirements under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 for local authorities to have in place a petition scheme and having arrangements for receiving e-petitions. This was repealed by the Localism Act so currently there is no legislation requiring councils to adopt a petition scheme or to respond to petitions/e-petitions. Nevertheless, the Council has a long track record of listening to and working with residents. So, whilst it is no longer a requirement to have a petitions scheme, Councillors recognise that petitions should still be considered, but that in doing so there are realistic parameters established to ensure such a Scheme is fit for purpose for our current governance arrangements. An online petition scheme can address these challenges by providing a user-friendly platform that allows citizens to easily submit and support petitions on matters of public interest.

3. Petition Scheme (existing)

- 3.1 You can submit a petition on the following issues:
- Issues which relate to the Council and/or the services it provides to local people
 - Matters which affect local people or local communities in East Devon more than the general public nationally
- 3.2 The petition scheme also sets out the relevant triggers to a petition and its proposed course of action. The current scheme allows for petitions to be submitted in paper form, via their local ward councillor or by scanning the paper documents and emailing to the Council.

4. Objectives of an online petition scheme

- 4.1 The primary objectives of the online petition scheme are as follows:
- **Enhance Engagement:** Encourage active participation from a broader demographic by providing an easily accessible platform.
 - **Increase Transparency:** Ensure that the petition process is transparent and that citizens can track the progress of their petitions.
 - **Streamline Processes:** Reduce the administrative burden associated with traditional paper-based petitions.

5. Proposed Features

5.1 The online petition scheme will include the following key features:

- **User Registration:** Secure registration process to verify the identity of petitioners and supporters.
- **Petition Submission:** Easy-to-use interface for submitting petitions, including guidelines on format and content.
- **Support Mechanism:** Functionality for citizens to sign and support petitions online.
- **Progress Tracking:** Real-time updates on the status and progress of each petition.
- **Review and Response:** A structured process for reviewing petitions and providing timely responses from relevant authorities.

6. Implementation Plan

a. Platform Development

- Work with the Council's Digital Team and Strata to design and build an online petition form. Adjoining authorities are using this method so this could be used by East Devon and requires limited resources to deliver it.
- Ensure the platform meets high standards of security, usability, and accessibility.

b. Stakeholder Engagement

- Promote the scheme through various communication channels to raise awareness and encourage participation.

c. Support

- Offer ongoing technical support to address any issues that may arise.

d. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Establish a monitoring system to track the usage and effectiveness of the online petition scheme – this could be through an annual report submitted to Overview Committee.
- Regularly review and update the scheme based on feedback and performance data.

7. Conclusion

7.1 The introduction of an online petition scheme represents a significant step towards modernising the Council's approach to engagement. By using digital technology, we can create a more inclusive, transparent, and efficient petition process that empowers citizens to actively participate in the democratic process.

8. Next Steps/Recommendations

- 8.1 To request the Corporate Lead Democratic Services & Scrutiny works with the Digital Team and Strata to deliver an on-line digital platform for the submission of petitions by members of the public with implementation of an online petition form by 30 May 2025.
- 8.2 To review the current petition scheme at a future meeting of the Overview Committee to ensure that the scheme remains fit for purpose and to submit an updated petition scheme to the Constitution Working Group to review at their meeting on 22 April 2025.