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From Freddos to Frank's Law: An assessment of the Scottish Parliament public petitions system

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Abstract

The opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 saw the establishment of a public petitions system, aimed at strengthening the relationship between the Scottish public and the Parliament. In 2006 an evaluation by Professor Christopher Carman described the petitions system as 'a vital link between the public and the Parliament' (2006: 8.3-11). At the same time, Carman raised concerns about transparency and a lack of information on decision-making. This paper looks at how the petitions system works and how it has changed over time. Two decades on from the Carman Review, our conclusions echo similar concerns. Structured, consistent data on the operation of the Committee, including equalities data, is limited or non-existent. Very few petitions are now referred to subject Committees in the wider parliament, raising questions about the Committee's own capacity for scrutiny. No information is available on petitions ruled inadmissible, nor is there an appeals mechanism. Based on our own analysis, petitions now appear to remain under consideration for longer, compared to the early years of the Scottish Parliament. We conclude that, for as long as the Parliament continues to invest in a resource-intensive petitions system, it should be far more straightforward to assess its benefits.

Keywords: Public petitions, Scottish Parliament, transparency, data, equalities

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Introduction

The opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 saw the establishment of a public petitions system, aimed at strengthening the relationship between the public and the Parliament. The Committee came about on the recommendation of the all-party Consultative Steering Group (CSG), set up following the 1997 referendum on Scottish devolution. Building on a centuries-old tradition of public petitioning (Bochel, 2013), the CSG emphasised the idea of ‘civic society’ and need for a more open political system (Mitchell, 2000). In its final report to the Secretary of State for Scotland in December 1998, the group stated it is ‘an important principle that the Scottish people should be able to petition the Parliament directly’. Separate recommendations aimed at encouraging public participation included social partnerships, ‘consensus conferences’, citizens’ juries, deliberative opinion polling and citizens’ panels (Consultative Steering Group, 1998: 62).

Since 1999 the Committee has received over 2,200 admissible petitions covering a vast range of subjects. Some have led to significant legislative change. A 2014 petition on transvaginal mesh eventually led to the Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost Reimbursement) (Scotland) Act, 2022. A petition to extend free personal care to adults aged under 65 (Frank’s law) also prompted legislative change. A petition on tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland led to a Public Petitions Committee inquiry, following which the Scottish Government responded by launching a National Action Plan to tackle Child Sexual Exploitation (Bochel, 2020). Other inquiries undertaken by the Committee have looked at mental health support for young people, the A9 Dualling Project, and public participation in the Parliament. On occasion petitions are debated in the Chamber.

Most petitions do not succeed in their aims, or at least not directly. Obstacles include a lack of feasibility, resources, or political will. Sometimes it is hard to establish whether a petition in itself secured a particular outcome, or if contemporaneous events led to change. For some petitioners, raising public awareness and/or being listened to and taken seriously may count as success (Bochel, 2020; Carman, 2006).

Our interest in the petitions system was prompted by our own experiences. In June 2021 we lodged a petition ‘calling on the Scottish Parliament ‘to urge the Scottish Government to require Police Scotland, the Crown Office and the Scottish Court Service to record accurately the sex of people charged with or convicted of rape or attempted rape.’ The Committee closed the petition over four years later, in December 2025, making it the joint longest-running petition in the parliamentary session (2021/2 to 2025/6), excluding those inherited from previous sessions.

Researching the committee

To understand how typical our experience might be, we first looked for data on the time normally taken to consider a petition. This prompted our interest in how the Committee works more generally, leading us to look for data on that: for example, how many petitions it usually considers each year, demographic information on who it engages with, decisions taken, the average consideration period for petitions, reasons for closure, and most likely outcomes.

Available data sources on the work of the Committee include annual reports and legacy reports published by the Scottish Parliament at the end of each parliamentary session, that is, the period between each set of elections to Holyrood.¹ The Scottish Parliament also publishes a spreadsheet listing details of all petitions lodged in the current session (as disaggregated raw data),² and descriptive records of historic petitions lodged in previous sessions.³ Data on the work of the Committee (and wider Parliament) can also be found in the Scottish Parliament (SP) *Annual Statistics* series available online from 2009/10 onward,⁴ although these are not easy to find (parliamentary staff appeared unaware of this when we inquired about aspects of the Committee's work). We accessed copies of SP *Annual Statistics* from 1999/00 to 2008/09 from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe).

Information covered by the above sources includes the number of petitions lodged, meetings held, referrals to other subject Committees and parliamentary debates. There are, however, some discrepancies between these sources, for example, between data published in SP *Annual Statistics*, Annual Committee reports, and the raw numbers found in the Historic Petitions/Session 6 data. For example, we found that the total number of petitions recorded in SP *Annual Statistics* (up to 2024/25) show only 98% of the petitions we identified in the raw data for the same period. We cannot explain this gap. There are also some small differences between data reported in the SP reports, annual Committee reports, and legacy reports. Further, data on petitioner demographics, average petition duration, inadmissible/rejected petitions, and any change over time is either publicly unavailable or requires interrogation of individual records and/or quantitative data skills to generate.

Separately, several reviews are available. A detailed assessment undertaken by Professor Christopher Carman (2006) evaluated the operation of petitions system between 1999 to 2006 and set out recommendations. These included: a mechanism to review or 'appeal' decisions taken by the Committee; a published record of petitions ruled inadmissible and the reason for rejection; publication of all petition documentation; a petitioner debriefing system; outreach

¹ Parliamentary dates can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/spice/factsheets/parliamentary-business/dates-of-recess-and-dissolution-and-parliamentary--years-and-recalls-of-parliament.pdf>

² Petitions considered in Session 6 can be accessed here: <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions.csv>

³ Historic petitions can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.scot/get-involved/petitions/view-petitions/historic-petitions>

⁴ SP *Annual Statistics* from 2009/10 onward can be accessed here: <https://www.parliament.scot/about/accounts-and-statistics/statistics-volume>

work to increase social inclusion; and standardised data management procedures to monitor the Committee and petitions system accurately.

In 2009, the Committee undertook its own inquiry, focusing on public awareness, participation, and its scrutiny role (Public Petitions Committee, 2009a). In 2015 the Committee commissioned SPICe to undertake a further review. This revisited the commitments made in 2009, undertook a benchmarking exercise against other jurisdictions, looked at petitioner demographics, and considered petitioners' views (James, 2015). In 2022 the Committee launched a further inquiry, albeit focused on public participation and engagement with the Scottish Parliament more widely (Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, 2022; Scottish Parliament Information Centre, 2022).

Paper overview

In this paper we look at how the Scottish Parliament public petitions system works and how it has changed over time. Part one provides an overview of the system. Part two looks at public engagement and participation. Part three considers actions taken by the Committee, for example, referrals to other Committees, petition duration, and reasons for closing petitions. The findings are discussed in part four.

The analysis draws on the secondary sources outlined above. In addition, we constructed a dataset covering all petitions formally lodged, from the first petition lodged on 14 June 1999 to 1 December 2025. Parliamentary records indicate that no further petitions were lodged in Session 6 after this date. The dataset is based on two sources: the spreadsheet listing petitions considered in Session 6, and detailed 'Historic Petitions' records, both published by the Scottish Parliament (see above). The final dataset (after minor tidying) consists of 2,208 petitions.

Our analysis suggests that public engagement with the petition system has fallen over time, with some recovery from 2019/20 onward. Encouragingly, participation by women has increased (from a very low start point) particularly within the current session. At the same time, the open nature of the system means parliamentary time can and has been afforded to those that already enjoy access to policy and lawmakers. Petitions in Session 6 appear to remain under consideration longer, compared to the early years of the Scottish Parliament, despite the lower volume. Very few petitions are now referred to specialist subject Committees for consideration, which may be an exacerbating factor here.

Our findings also raise concerns about transparency. Consistent, aggregated data on the operation of the Committee is lacking, whilst equality monitoring has fallen off the radar. No information is available on petitions ruled inadmissible (other than that extracted via Freedom of Information), despite repeat calls to publish this. Nor is there an appeals mechanism, allowing for scrutiny of decisions taken.

We conclude that, for as long as the Parliament continues to invest in a resource-intensive petitions system, it should be far more straightforward to assess its benefits.

1. Petitions Committee and system

The Public Petitions Committee (rebadged the ‘Civic Participation and Public Petitions Committee’ in the current parliamentary session) is provided for in Standing Orders that set out procedural rules for the Scottish Parliament (The Scottish Parliament, n.d.). Rule 6.10 requires a permanent committee, whose remit is to consider all admissible petitions submitted to the Parliament. It is also required to keep the operation of the petitions system under review.

The Committee currently consists of five MSPs, distributed among the political parties by formula in the same way as other Scottish Parliament committees. It usually meets every two weeks, on average nineteen times a year (the Scottish Parliament sits for 35 weeks per year). Most business is held in public, with some held partly in private (only a few meetings are held wholly in private). Table 1 shows that the proportion of meetings held partly or wholly in private has increased over time and is far higher in the current session (73%), compared to previous sessions.

Table 1: Number of Public Petition Committee meetings and % held partly or wholly in private by parliamentary session (up to 2024/2025)

Parliamentary session	No. of Meetings	No. of meetings held partly or wholly in private	% meetings held partly or wholly in private
1	67	3	4%
2	70	13	19%
3	73	7	10%
4	94	31	33%
5	102	39	38%
6	75	55	73%

Source: Public Petition Committee *Annual Reports*; Scottish Parliament *Annual Statistics* (for 1999/2000 and 2020/2021 only). Most meetings with some element of private session were held partly rather than wholly in private. Excludes meetings held outside the Scottish Parliament.

Admissibility rules: what counts?

The Standing Orders set out rules on admissibility. For example, petitions must be within the Parliament’s competence and not be frivolous. For the most part, the rules are broad. Petitions can be submitted from anywhere in the world and in any language. There is no minimum number of signatures required for consideration, nor a minimum age for petitioners.

Admissibility rules have however tightened over time. In 2004 the Committee agreed MSPs should no longer be able to submit petitions on their own behalf (McMahon, 2004). Prior to this, MSPs accounted for fourteen petitions; of these, Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrat MSPs, in coalition government at the time, accounted for seven. SNP MSP Christine Grahame accounted for a further five.

In 2004 the Committee took steps to reduce the number of ‘frivolous’ petitions. In Session 2 the Committee restricted the ability of petitioners to resubmit petitions on the same or similar issue once closed, given concerns that ‘a number of petitioners who have become dissatisfied with the outcome of the Parliament’s consideration of their petitions are simply resubmitting these petitions’ (Public Petitions Committee, 2005a: 3).

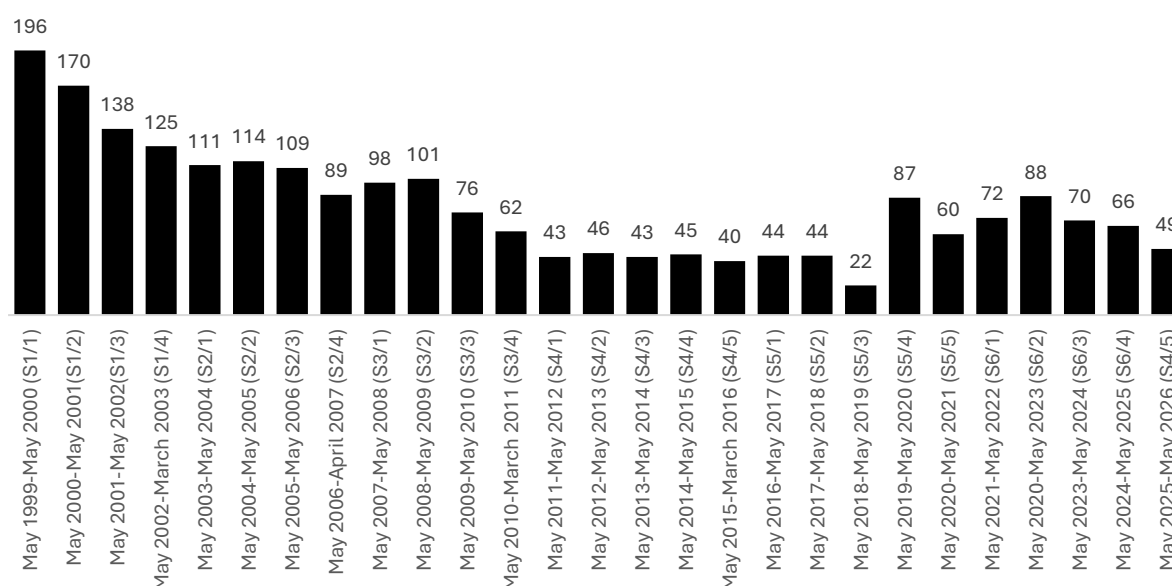
With the Committee feeling under time pressure, changes made in 2021 deemed a petition inadmissible if it was the same as or substantially similar to a petition lodged in the same parliamentary session and closed within the last year, relating to Bills under consideration, or primary legislation within the last year. The Committee also limited petitioners to two current petitions, curbing some of the extraordinary ‘serial’ activity seen in the early years of the Parliament, most notably that of Mr Frank Harvey, who lodged at least 51 petitions between 1999 and 2003.

As of December 2023, the Committee no longer accepts uninvited ‘submissions’, meaning additional material submitted in relation to a petition (for example, evidence submitted in support of a petition), other than from petitioners.

2. Public engagement with the petitions system

Public engagement can be broadly ascertained by looking at the number of new petitions lodged, with the important caveat that this does not include rejected petitions (as this data is unavailable in any comprehensive form, as discussed in part 3). Drawing on our dataset of historic and Session 6 petitions, Figure 1 shows the number of petitions lodged per parliamentary year 1999/2000 and 2025/26.

Figure 1. Number of new petitions lodged by parliamentary year, 1999/00 to 2025/26



Source: Scottish Parliament Historic Petitions and Session 6 petitions datasheet. S6 data based on ‘date opened’. N=2,208. Parliamentary years shown lasting less than twelve months indicate an election year.

Figure 1 shows that public engagement has fallen over time. Engagement was highest in the early years of the Scottish Parliament, with 629 petitions lodged in Session 1, most likely reflecting the optimism associated with its establishment (Curtice & Birtwistle, 2025: 23). Numbers remained reasonably steady until around 2008/9. Engagement was at its lowest in Sessions 4 and 5, which saw 217 and 257 petitions lodged respectively, albeit with some recovery towards the end of Session 5, from 2019/20 onward.

Petitioner demographics

Data on petitioner demographics is very limited, making it hard to ascertain who is engaging with the petitions system and how this has changed. This issue is not unique to the Petitions Committee. In 2022 the Equality & Human Rights Commission (2022: 6) stated that, to the best of its knowledge, neither the Parliament nor its Committees collected equality data on those they engage with. Striking here, as detailed below, is that the Petitions Committee previously collected equality data, but no longer does so.

The demise of equality monitoring

In 2004 the Committee introduced an equality monitoring form for petitioners. In giving evidence on this to the Equalities Committee, Public Petitions Convener, Scottish Labour MSP Michael McMahon (2006: col. 2068) encouraged other committees to do the same:

If a committee takes mainstreaming seriously, it should collect that information as a matter of course when it undertakes an inquiry.

In Sessions 2 and 3 the Public Petitions Committee published three dedicated equalities reports variously covering age, ‘gender’ (replaced with ‘gender identity’ from 2005-06, offered as male, female or ‘other’, with respondents to specify)⁵, sexual orientation, disability, race/ethnicity, language, employment status, and geographical location (Public Petitions Committee 2005b, 2006, 2008). These showed petitioners to be disproportionately older and more likely to be male (based on response rates of between 40% and 60%). Later in Session 3, the Committee integrated equalities data into its annual reports (Public Petitions Committee, 2009b: 22).

In Session 4 the Committee did not publish equality data. Instead, *Annual Reports* provided examples of petitions that were seen as ‘mainstreaming’ equalities issues. In this way, the subject matter replaced the petitioner as the focus. For example, the 2011-12 *Annual Report* cited a petition on gender-specific school uniforms (Public Petitions Committee, 2012: 11).

Following the 2015 SPICe review, the Session 4 Committee Legacy Paper recommended ‘relevant demographic information should be sought from petitioners on an ongoing basis’. It continued:

⁵ ‘Gender identity’ replaced ‘gender’ after consultation with the Equality Network (Public Petitions Committee, 2006).

... we recommend that a survey system (suitable for both online and hard copy petitions) could be used to request [anonymous] demographic data; that any such system should enable differentiation between people submitting proposals that go on to be lodged and people submitting proposals that do not.
(Public Petitions Committee, 2016: 46).

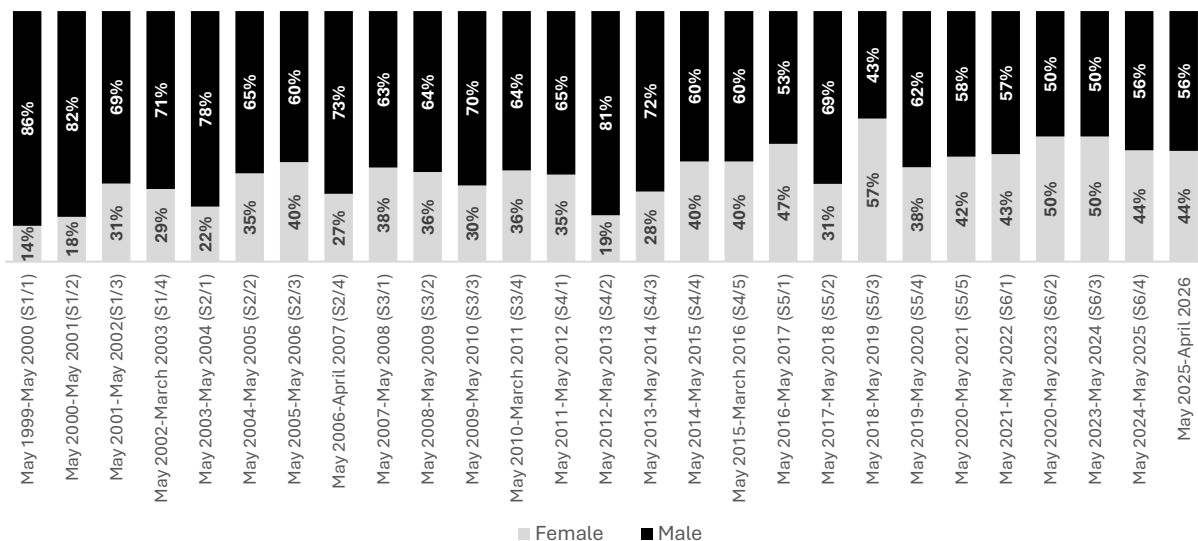
The 2016/2017 *Annual Report* stated the Committee would take this forward (Public Petitions Committee, 2017: para. 23), however this did not materialise.

Other data sources

The Carman Review (2006, 15-16) found petitioners to be disproportionately older, male, middle-class, and educated to degree level.⁶ Almost a decade later, the 2015 SPICe review found the same pattern (James, 2015: 9). Analysis by Bochel (2012: 151), based on a sample of 337 petitions lodged between 1999 and 2011, found 78% were submitted by men.

In the absence of published information, we analysed how the sex balance of petitioners appears to have changed over time, based on the most likely sex of primary petitioners, as indicated by name, title, and/or references in the petition literature. The analysis looks at petitions submitted by individuals, with either one or two named petitioners of the same sex. The primary unit of analysis is petitions, meaning multiple petitions submitted by the same person are counted as separate items, to account for the cumulative demand on parliamentary resources.

Figure 2. Primary petitioners by sex, by parliamentary year lodged - 1999/2000 to 2025/2026



Source: Scottish Parliament Historic Petitions and Session 6 petitions datasheet.

Named individual petitioners (N = 1,336). Excludes petitions submitted by or on behalf of groups/organisations and 31 individual petitions submitted by two mixed-sex petitioners. Missing cases (sex unknown) = 9.

⁶ As part of the evaluation, the Carman Review distributed 722 surveys to primary petitioners and secured a 51% usable response rate (2006: Annex A2).

Overall, Figure 2 shows the petitions system appears to be male dominated at the individual level, particularly in the early parliamentary sessions, with a gradual, fluctuating increase in female participation over time. The highest level of individual female engagement is in the current session, which has seen around 47% of petitions submitted by women, compared to under a quarter (23%) in Session 1.

Types of petitioner

Further insight into engagement can be gleaned by looking at petitioner types. Most petitions are submitted by individual members of the public, which is consistent with the aim of the system as providing a ‘vital link’ to the Parliament (Carman, 2006). Our analysis suggests this proportion has increased across the duration of the Parliament, from around 59% in Session 1, to 79% in Session 6 (to December 2025). Other petitioner types include campaign and pressure groups, community groups, community councils, resident/tenant groups, and societies.

At the same time, the system is open to organisations with access to policy and lawmakers, including trade unions, political parties, large charities, and local authorities (Carman, 2006; Bochel, 2012). We found forty-seven petitions lodged by trade unions (including subgroups and branches) over the duration of the Parliament, although this activity has fallen substantially, from twenty-two petitions in Session 1 to two in Session 6. Of the forty-seven petitions, the National Farmers Union (NFU) Scotland accounted for ten, Unison for seven and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) for five. As a measure of the access already enjoyed by these bodies, at the time of writing the Scottish Parliament lobbying register showed 985 returns for NFU Scotland, 177 for the STUC, and 99 for Unison.⁷

We identified fourteen submissions from political parties, including two from Constituency Labour Parties, one from the Scottish Green Party, and one from the Scottish Socialist Party (very small and/or now obsolete parties account for the remaining ten). The Committee also received six submissions from members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (which works in partnership with the Scottish Parliament), and one submission from a Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group (whose constitution requires at least five MSP members). Local authorities accounted for seven petitions.

For the most part, engagement by what might be termed ‘political insiders’ has fallen away, compared to the early years of the Parliament. Still, whether the Parliament intended the system to be available to those with established access to parliamentarians, occupying ‘time which might be used to consider petitions from other parts of society’ (Bochel, 2012: 152), deserves further consideration.

⁷ The lobbying register covers organisations with at least ten paid staff, as set out here in Scottish Parliament, 2018. It can be accessed here:

<https://www.lobbying.scot/SPS/LobbyingRegister/SearchLobbyingRegister>

Non-Scottish residents

As noted above, petitions can be submitted from outside Scotland. In 2006, the then Presiding Officer of the Parliament George Reid described this provision as reflecting the ‘openness’ of the system (Carman, 2006: 3.6-17). By contrast the UK Parliament petition system is restricted to British citizens and UK residents for both petitioners and signatories. Beyond the broad ‘openness’ principle, the value of the provision is unclear. When submitting a petition, individuals are asked to select a location, however this information is not collated, given that citizenship/residency is not deemed relevant. This makes it impossible to assess the amount of parliamentary time spent on such cases.

Looking back, the Carman Review identified 23 petitions submitted by eighteen non-Scottish residents. These included petitions from England, Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United States, covering issues from council tax dispute resolution to Gulf War Syndrome health care (Carman, 2006: 3.6-18). Between 2016 and 2017 an (apparently) Australian resident submitted three petitions, all calling for the decriminalisation of consensual adult incest. In each case, the petition was quickly closed. Nonetheless, the Committee expended time and resources in doing so, generating two SPICe briefings, brief consideration at three Committee meetings, and administrative work.

Do signatures count?

In 2004 the Scottish Parliament formally launched its e-petitions system, allowing petitioners to collect signatures electronically and encourage wider participation (Seaton, 2005). Signatories can be from any country and are not identified (only the petitioners name is published). Signatures are not however required, and the number generally has no direct bearing on Committee decision-making.

By contrast, the UK Government and Parliament petition system requires five signatories to lodge a petition. Signatory numbers also influence decision-making at Westminster. Petitions with 10,000 signatures receive a government response. Notably, those obtaining 100,000 signatures are considered for a debate in Parliament. Data is also published in a map format, showing a breakdown of signatories by parliamentary constituency.

3. Actions taken by the Committee

The work of the Committee is resource intensive. It involves discussions between parliamentary staff and petitioners, research across a myriad of subjects, contacting and following up on enquiries to Ministers and other public bodies, legal enquiries, records management, interactions with other committees and publication of annual and other reports. Since the start of Session 6, the Committee has sought a SPICe briefing and initial response from government for all admissible petitions.

Under the Standing Orders the Committee can (a) refer the petition to the Scottish Ministers, another committee, or any other person or body to take appropriate action; (b) report to the Parliamentary Bureau or to the Parliament; (c) take any other action which it considers

appropriate; or (d) close the petition. We asked the Scottish Parliament if it held data summarising petition outcomes as classified in the parliamentary rules. It told us that it did not (correspondence, 16 September 2025) although we subsequently found *SP Annual Reports* include data on referrals and other actions.

Petition documentation

A record of each petition is published on the Scottish Parliament website. Records include documentation such as SPICe briefings, government responses, official reports, and responses from third parties to requests for information. It does not include correspondence *from* the Committee, such as requests made for information, or correspondence to petitioners, including reasons for closure.

Referrals to other committees

The Committee has discretion to refer a petition to another subject Committee for further consideration, or for information only. We focus here on referrals for further consideration. We calculated the number of referrals per session (shown in *SP Annual Statistics*) as a proportion of new petitions lodged per session (using our dataset).

Table 2. Petitions referred to subject Committees for further consideration

Session	Petitions lodged	No. referred	% referred
1	629	224	36%
2	423	142	34%
3	337	48	14%
4	217	67	31%
5	257	41	16%
6	345	12	3%
Total	2,208	533	24%

Sources: Dataset constructed from Scottish Parliament Historic Petitions and Session 6 petitions datasheet (for number of petitions lodged per session and Session 6 referrals). *SP Annual Statistics* (Session 1 to Session 5 referrals).

Note: The Carman Review found 64% of petitions referred in Session 1 (358 out of 564 petitions in total) with the caveat that some data was incomplete (2006: 4.2-4). As seen above, we could not replicate these figures using *SP Annual Report* data, which suggests a 36% referral rate. It is possible Carman included petitions referred for information only (applying that approach, would increase the percentage shown in Table 2 by at least 16%, given the Session 1 *SP Annual Report* data appears incomplete). It is also possible that *SP Annual Reports* undercount petitions referred for consideration in Session 1 to 5.

Table 2 shows a general, though non-linear, downward trend in referred petitions, as the Committee has increasingly sought to exert greater oversight. The outlier is the current session, which has seen just 3% of petitions referred, compared to at least 36% in Session 1 (or possibly higher: see note to Table 2). To some extent, this decline may reflect intra-

committee dynamics, as indicated in the Session 5 Legacy Report, which delivered a sharp commentary on the approach of subject committees to referred items and the Petitions Committee generally:

... despite the Public Petitions Committee being a mandatory committee, it has concerns that it is not always afforded the same respect as other Parliamentary committees by both the Parliament and the Scottish Government ...

The Committee is aware that when petitions are referred to other Committees, they are not always given equal status compared to other items on a committee's work programme ...

... It should be understood that the referral of a petition to a committee is not taken lightly and there should be an expectation that any such referred petition is given serious consideration. (Public Petitions Committee, 2021: 49-51).

Length of petition consideration

Whilst the Scottish Parliament publishes tabulated data showing the date on which a petition is opened and considered from, it does not publish closure dates in the same format, making it difficult to analyse their duration. For this paper, we calculated the duration of petitions opened and closed in Session 6 only (based on calendar days) by checking individual petition records. It was not practical for us to undertake a larger piece of work, covering previous sessions, and therefore the only comparative data we have is from the Carman Review, covering the period from 1999 to 2006.

Looking back, the Carman Review reported 'the average number of days a petition is open and considered by the Parliament is 268 days' (2006: 4.3-7). We understood this to be a reference to calendar days rather than sitting days, although without clarification in the text, we cannot be absolutely certain.⁸ With this important caveat in mind, our analysis cautiously suggests the average duration of petitions has increased.

Of the 264 petitions opened *and* closed in the current session at the time of writing, the length of consideration (from date considered to date of closure) ranged from 41 to 1,618 days (the latter figure includes our own petition). The average period of consideration was 434 calendar days, around 1.6 times longer than the Carman Review, despite a lower volume of petitions lodged compared to the early parliamentary sessions. The Carman calculations moreover included petitions carried over from Session 1 to Session 2. If legacy petitions closed in Session 6 were added to our calculation, we would expect the average time taken to increase further.

At our last date of detailed analysis (6 January 2026), six legacy petitions remained under consideration. By the end of the Session, the Committee's website showed that four of these had since been closed. The oldest we noted in January 2026 was lodged by Dr Jim Swire on

⁸ We sought to obtain clarification of this point from the author, but were unable to do so.

behalf of Justice for Megrahi in 2010 and remains open with the Criminal Justice Committee (last considered in March 2026).

The 2022/23 *Annual Report* noted delays are ‘usually caused by late responses to Committee requests for evidence, or practical challenges associated with scheduling’, but cautioned the system was ‘close to capacity’ (Citizen and Public Petitions Committee, 2023: 23). This suggests it may be useful to compare the speed of responses from external organisations to the Committee in Session 6 with those in earlier sessions, with a view to identifying measures to improve response times.

Success, failure and other outcomes

At 06 January 2026, the Committee had closed 298 of the 385 petitions (77%) before it in Session 6. By the end of the Session, its website reported that, aside from the two legacy petitions noted above, only seven others remained under consideration. This implies 21% of petitions before the Committee in Session 6 were closed in its final few weeks.

The Committee is required to provide petitioners with a reason for closure but does not add these to the published petition records, making outcomes harder to track. Whilst reasons for closure can be ascertained by hand-searching parliamentary records, this is time-consuming and was beyond our capacity for the purposes of this paper. The Carman Review found the Committee closed just under a third of petitions based on a response from the Scottish Executive (2006: Table 4.3).

Whilst some petitions succeed in their stated aims, most do not (Bochel, 2016), which can be read as reflecting the difficulty in securing policy change more generally, and the political nature of petitioning (Carman, 2006; 8.2-7). Reasons for closure include a lack of feasibility and/or resources, or a simple lack of political will. In other cases (including our own), progress on the issue may be made elsewhere. For some petitioners, the opportunity to be heard in the Parliament and the attendant wider awareness may count as success (Carman, 2006; James, 2015; Bochel, 2016).

Inadmissible petitions, appeals, and transparency

The Parliament does not publish information on inadmissible petitions. Using information provided by Committee staff, Carman observed a low number of recorded inadmissible petitions (fifty between 2001 and 2003) (2006: 8.2-6). A decade later, the 2012-13 *Annual Report* stated, ‘of the 166 proposals received, 46 new petitions were formally lodged and considered by the Committee this year’ (Public Petitions Committee, 2013: 6), implying that over two-thirds were rejected. At face value this is an exceptionally low acceptance rate for even initial consideration by the Committee. No detail is provided as to why the majority of petitions submitted did not go further. The 2015 SPICe review reported a 30% rejection rate between 2009 and 2015, excluding those withdrawn by the petitioner, closed due to non-response, or related to a general enquiry (James, 2015). A recent Freedom of Information request shows that in the current session the Committee has rejected over 1,300 petitions

submitted to it,⁹ compared to fewer than 400 accepted for consideration. Rejected items range from the ridiculous ('Make Chewbaka [sic] the national animal of Scotland', 'Tell Stephen Kerr to stop his bashing of the table during PM'S questions', 'Make Freddos 10p again') to serious policy proposals.

To increase transparency, Carman recommended inadmissible petitions be published on the Committee website, along with the reason for rejection (2006: 27). Almost a decade later, the 2015 SPICe review made the same recommendation, noting other parliaments publish this information (James, 2015: 40). Thereafter, the Session 4 Legacy Paper recommended the Session 5 Committee publish the 'title and summary of the petition and the reason for the proposal not being lodged' (Public Petitions Committee, 2016: 45). This recommendation has never been taken forward.

In a similar vein, Carman recommended a mechanism to review or appeal Committee decisions. Again, this was not adopted.

One of the most mentioned concerns that petitioners had with the process of petitions consideration in the Scottish Parliament was the lack of a mechanism to review or 'appeal' decisions taken by the [Committee]. Any mechanism for appeals (or review) would need to be somewhat circumscribed, as it would not be unreasonable to expect that many petitioners who did not receive their desired outcome would 'appeal' the PPC's decision. Yet, to maintain an open and transparent system, the [Committee's] decisions should be open to scrutiny. (Carman, 2006: 26).

4. Discussion

The Public Petitions Committee faces a unique and complex workload. At the start of 2026, the Session 6 Committee had considered (or was still considering) 385 petitions, including forty inherited from previous sessions, covering an eclectic mix of issues. These include free school meals, potholes, prisoner voting, youth violence, microchipping cats, HGV speed limits, abortion, household sewage, disposable vapes, National Parks, roadside litter, dental check-ups, sexual offending, student loans, legal protections for hedgehogs and moles, and the Ministerial Code. It has rejected over 1,200 petitions. With most issues now scrutinised in-house, doing justice to this unique workload places unusual demands on the Committee's members and its clerks.

At the petition level, the workings of the Committee are generally transparent. Most documentation is published, including responses from third parties, such as government or public bodies. The Committee does not, however, publish its own correspondence. This means there is no way of examining how requests for information are made or how quickly

⁹ Petitions submitted but rejected in Session 6 can be viewed here:
https://murrayblackburnmackenzie.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/rejected_petitions_full.pdf

responses are received, or indeed, if they are simply ignored. Similarly, it is not possible to see how reasons for closing a petition are framed.

At the Committee level, it is difficult to evaluate its work. Despite a strong emphasis on civic participation, equalities data is no longer collected. Whilst our analysis indicates an increase in female participation over time, it is unclear whether petitioners remain disproportionately older, middle-class and better educated (Carman, 2006; James, 2015). A lack of data on engagement makes it hard to evaluate the value of the ‘openness’ principle, and whether this provision requires tightening, to ensure best use of limited parliamentary resources. As it stands, the system remains open to those with ready access to parliamentarians, as well as non-Scottish residents.

A lack of published data on petition closure dates makes it difficult to assess whether the duration of petitions has changed over time. Our analysis cautiously suggests the Committee has slowed down in the handling of its overall workload compared to earlier years. Both our own petition and a contemporaneous petition on mental health services ran for over 1,600 days, almost the entire five-year period between the 2021 and 2026 elections. In our case, the Convener sought to explain the lengthy period, referring to the demands placed on the system:

We have a large volume of petitions, and our practice is to do a considerable amount of work on every admissible petition by securing a research briefing, a Government response and committee consideration for each one. We also try to progress the ask in petitions on behalf of petitioners as far as we are able to do so. We are not the Government; we are a committee of the Parliament. To ensure fairness for all our petitions and petitioners, we consider them in turn, which sometimes means that there can be a wait after a petition is considered before it can be rescheduled.
(Carlaw, 2025)

As Figure 1 showed, the volume of new petitions in Session 6 has increased since Sessions 4 and 5, although it remains lower than Sessions 1 to 3. Further research is needed to ascertain whether longer consideration times are due to limited resources and pressures placed on the Committee system, purposefully longer deliberations, or other causes. Of likely relevance is the very low referral rate in Session 6. Whilst referrals are likely to prolong consideration for those individual cases, the handover of complex and/or specialist cases reduces the Petitions Committee’s own workload and creates space for others to proceed. Relatedly, a low referral rate raises questions about the depth of scrutiny the Petitions Committee can realistically undertake across so many unrelated issues, compared to dedicated subject Committees. As cautioned in the Session 5 Legacy Report, it is equally important that referred petitions are given serious consideration by subject Committees. Whether the Committee is striking the right balance between the petitions it scrutinises itself and those it refers remains a matter for further consideration.

Information on rejected petitions remains unavailable, despite repeated calls to publish this. Decision-making here is likely to be guided by clerks and the Convener, who according to Carman, exercised considerable ‘discretion, independence and influence’ in the early

parliamentary sessions (2006: 4.5-15). A lack of data here makes it impossible to ascertain how that control is exerted, in terms of the judgements about what is and is not admissible. The lack of any form of appeal system puts decisions on inadmissibility, as well as formal Committee decision-making, beyond formal scrutiny or challenge. That more of the Committee's work is now held in private adds to this overall picture.

Conclusion

The Petitions Committee undertakes scrutiny across an extraordinary range of subjects. In doing so, it elicits information from the Government and other relevant bodies, takes evidence from Ministers and other public officials, and conducts in-depth inquiries. Some petitions have led directly to significant policy change. In our own case, the material extracted at various stages has been valuable in compelling organisations to explain their actions and part of a process that ultimately led to a positive outcome (Sky News, 2025). In 2024, Jackson Carlaw MSP, and the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, won the *Herald's* Committee MSP of the Year for their 'damning' inquiry into the A9 dualling project (Herald, 2024).

Yet beyond individual petition records, it is hard to scrutinise the work of the Committee overall and assess how this may be changing. Whilst Annual Committee Reports and SP *Annual Statistics* provide some information, the available data varies over time, limiting trend analysis. Compared to the past, the emerging picture appears to be of more work done in private sessions, a relatively high proportion of submitted petitions being rejected, fewer referrals to other Committees, and slower handling despite a smaller absolute number of petitions being considered. We did not have the capacity to test how common it is to close such a high proportion of petitions in the final few weeks of the session. Whether any of this, not least the greater use of private sessions, reflects wider cultural trends in the Parliament is a further question. Our findings also raise questions about the demise of equality monitoring, the use of the petitions system by registered lobbyists, transparency, and the handling of inadmissible petitions.

As Carman observed, 'finding the proper balance between effectiveness and efficiency is not an easy task' (2006: 8.1-3). Without reliable and accessible data on the working of the Committee, that task is made much harder. That to produce much of the analysis in this paper was so labour-intensive is an issue in its own right. For as long as the Parliament continues to invest in a resource-intensive petitions system, it should be far more straightforward to assess its benefits.

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