



Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: [e-Petitions](#), HC 235

Wednesday 25 June 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Professor Helen Margetts](#), Director, Oxford Internet Institute
- [Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Charles Walker (Chair); Jenny Chapman; Nic Dakin; Thomas Docherty; Yvonne Fovargue; John Hemming; Mr David Nuttall; Jacob Rees-Mogg; Martin Vickers.

Questions 21-51

Witnesses: **Catherine Bochel**, Principal Lecturer in Policy Studies, University of Lincoln, **Dr Ruth Fox**, Director and Head of Research, Hansard Society, and **Professor Helen Margetts**, Director, Oxford Internet Institute, gave evidence.

Q21 Mr Charles Walker (Chair): Thank you very much. We have a distinguished panel before us to discuss e-petitions, the advantages and the potential pitfalls. Professor Margetts, you are giving us a presentation, is that right? You have five minutes so we do not suffer death from PowerPoint. Are you comfortable for your five minutes to start now?

Professor Margetts: Yes.

Chair: Are you familiar with the technology? You have had a chance to make sure it works? Ready? Here it goes. Over to you, Prof.

Professor Margetts: Thank you. The idea of this is just to show you some pictures of data that we have been drawing down from the petitions platform over the last three or four years. I hope it is the most complete picture you could get of what the data could tell you and feed into your deliberations. It might be useful to you when you are thinking about the design of any new petition system that comes up.

It comes from the previous No. 10—we have data from there, the current site, and the American “We the People” site. We have about 50,000 petitions on here, about 12 million signatures, and that

comparative data. What does it tell us? It tells us, first of all, most petitions fail completely; 95% do not even get 500 signatures; half of all petitions get only one signature. Those data give you some idea of whether you might want to think about some kind of threshold, as they have in the US. US data show a very similar pattern and so do data right across the world.

Issue is not absolutely the key to success. There were three petitions wanting to stop the badger cull: one of them got hardly any signatures, one got a medium amount and one got a parliamentary debate. So issue is not the only thing; there are other things going on here.

Time is of the essence. Petitions that are going to be successful grow very quickly. After 10 hours, if a petition does not have 3,000 signatures it is probably going to sink without trace. Successful petitions grow very, very quickly. If you were thinking of introducing some sort of deadline, as they have in the US, 30 days, for example, as they had in the US would be very harsh. You would clip off quite a lot of petitions that did get 10,000 signatures, but 100 days, you could think about it. You would not lose very many petitions that had been successful. That is another way the data could perhaps be useful.

A lot of petition signers come from social media. This graph shows Facebook. Nearly half of all people who come to the petitions platform and sign a petition come from Facebook. Quite a lot come from Twitter. That is the red line. You can see the lowest of the three there is Google Search. These are not people randomly searching; they are having these petitions put at them in social media.

Finally, just another thing—this is just a snapshot that might be useful for any discussion later—is that these data are geo-coded and time stamped. It is possible to show you a map of petition signing. There might be quite a lot you could do with this. If you are thinking of any kind of petitions committee, or anything, that could be very interesting data for that committee to process on an ongoing basis. I will stop there.

Q22 Chair: Gosh, you did that in three minutes. Dr Fox, before we go to questions, do you want to make a brief opening statement?

Dr Fox: Well, just simply that our work on this dates back two years ago when we were approached by the Backbench Business Committee to facilitate a seminar for them, a roundtable discussion, of which Catherine was part. Obviously, the committee cannot hold its own inquiries and call people, papers and records, so we facilitated it on their behalf. The paper is publicly available. It has been out there for a couple of years. I do not think anything has significantly changed in the

interim, in terms of our view and our recommendations on the data and so on. I think that has been part of the driver for this process in terms of reform, but our position is pretty much as it was two years ago.

Chair: Ms Bochel?

Catherine Bochel: I do not have anything to add to that. I think you should get on with the questions.

Q23 Chair: Excellent, right. Well, my first question is-because it is important-why is it important that the House of Commons should have an e-petition system? Can we answer that very quickly? I think we have accepted that it is probably quite important.

Catherine Bochel: I think it is very important. It is a great opportunity for engagement with the public and we do not want to miss that opportunity.

Dr Fox: I would simply add from our "Audit of Political Engagement"-which many of you will be familiar with-that petitioning is the third highest form of participation that people say they are most likely to do, after voting and contacting an elected representative. Support for both e-petitioning and paper petitions is relatively high compared to other forms of activity and, therefore, that reflects the desire and demand. Petitioning is an ancient right and e-petitions are simply the technology to facilitate that right in the modern day.

Professor Margetts: Paper-based petitions cannot be put into competition with digital petitions because people search, they are presented with these things as they go about their lives on social media. A paper petition cannot compete on that basis; therefore I believe any paper system should be transposed into this system so that they are on an even footing.

Q24 Chair: From your research, what percentage of petitioners do have a real engagement with the subject beyond just a passing interest-"Oh, it's on Twitter, sign this petition." "Oh, I'll do that"-a real, deeply rooted engagement with the area of concern as opposed to just adding their name to it?

Professor Margetts: The data cannot tell you that. You would have to use another means to do that. It is an increasingly popular activity. Research suggests that people who sign a petition go on to do something else. It might seem a really small micro act, but all the evidence suggests that micro acts that people do lead on to other acts after that, so they are likely to do more and more things.

Catherine Bochel: If I can just add to that. It leads on to the fact that people's experience of the petitions process is really important. If they have a good experience of the process, it may lead them to engage in other aspects.

Q25 Chair: What is a good experience, though?

Catherine Bochel: If people feel that they have been listened to, that they have been treated with respect and that the process is open and transparent, then they may come away feeling much more positive about the system. That may lead them to feel more positive about the wider political system.

Q26 Chair: I picked this up in your evidence and I will bring other colleagues in. People feel they have been listened to. How would they feel they have been listened to? How would that manifest itself and how would they know they have been treated with respect? Do you see what I am saying?

Catherine Bochel: Yes. First, I think you need a clear statement of purpose on the website: "If you submit a petition to this system, you can get this, this and this". Then if people submit a petition and they get that or some of that, then they might feel that is okay. If they have the opportunity to speak to a clerk, to e-mail somebody to answer their questions, if there is information on the website that tells them about the process, then they are more likely to feel they are being treated with respect.

Q27 Chair: Final question: would we have to have a massive call centre if we have millions of people signing petitions, all of whom feel they can speak to a clerk? Would we need a call centre to field these?

Catherine Bochel: No, I do not think so. I think it would largely be the lead petitioner who would have questions, if anybody has questions.

Q28 Martin Vickers: Since Catherine was one of my lecturers when I took my politics degree, I should praise her written evidence. More seriously, I take the point that has been made about involvement and people getting further involved, but signing a petition is a very small act. Even if 500,000 people sign a petition, it can take very many years for any result to come of that because it is a part of a process. Rather than feeling positive after their involvement, they can end up being frustrated and have a negative feeling towards the process. Do you think that is likely? How can we avoid that?

Catherine Bochel: I think the system needs to have some form of educative process because, yes, policy making does not happen at the click of a mouse. It does take a long time. For example, if you had

video clips on the website, perhaps from the chair of a petitions committee, saying, "This is the process. This is how long it takes. This is what you can achieve" and you also have petitioners who have been through the process saying, "Look, this is my experience of it. It does take a long time but in the end this is what I got from it"-it cannot just be a one-way thing. People have to understand that the process takes a long time.

Q29 Martin Vickers: You talk about the involvement of clerks, officials and elected representatives. What proactive role do you foresee for Members of Parliament?

Catherine Bochel: I think that depends on how the system is going to respond to petitioners and whether you are going to set a whole series of different, for example, numbers thresholds, but then have a whole series of responses outside that as well. In the "What Next for E-petitions?" report from the Hansard Society it suggested that Members of Parliament might be informed when their constituent has registered a petition, and then they can choose whether to get involved or not.

Dr Fox: Perhaps I could expand on that. We know that the geographical data are there in terms of postcodes, which can be linked to Members. When a petition is accepted, it could trigger a response to that Member to inform them that the petition has been registered and the contact details of the petitioner. That is then for the individual Member to decide how they wish to respond to that, as they would perhaps with other correspondence.

A petitions committee-if that is the direction of travel-would have Members on it; potentially, if it was the same size as a departmental committee, 11 Members. Then it is a question of what flows from the thresholds and the decisions of that committee, whether that is a debate, whether it is simply tagged on the Order Paper, whether it is directed to a Select Committee for consideration, whether the petitions committee itself looks at it. There are a whole series of activities that could flow from that and where that petition could be directed.

It comes down to what the thresholds are that you adopt for the types of activity that you might consider and at what point the petitions committee would look at it. There is a sifting process that would be done by clerks and officials, which is what happens now with other technical scrutiny committees. Then there is a Member involvement at a point at which the thresholds are reached. But every Member could be informed, through the geographical postcode trigger, if there is a petition that arises from one of your constituents.

The question is volume-your point about the call centre. I think the question is: are there things from what we have learnt for the last few years about how you can address the volume to ensure that it is a more manageable amount? Some of them are duplicate petitions, certainly from the outset. I went on the site last night to have a look. If I wanted to register today to sign a petition on, say, Iraq, when you go to the search function on the website and type in "Iraq" there are currently 900 open petitions. If you just went through the site, finding one is very difficult so there has to be some way to improve that process and also improve the search function to facilitate that.

Q30 John Hemming: Just a narrow question about the data. Obviously, it has just gone off the screen now, but we did have a lot of petitions about Hillsborough, which hit the high numbers, and related aspects of it. I presume the data there are not the number of individuals that are signing petitions but the number of signatures, so somebody could have signed 10 petitions. Is that true? Do we have the information about what proportion of people are signing the petitions rather than the number of signatures per person?

Professor Margetts: We could analyse the data from that perspective.

Q31 John Hemming: From the point of view of public engagement, the fact that somebody signs a petition every five minutes is great but I am more interested in how deep the engagement is rather than—

Professor Margetts: That would be another advantage of getting rid of too many one-person petitions on the same issue. For example, in that data you have some serial petition signers who create a petition every day. If you did have some sort of small threshold, it would not stop it but it would reduce that kind of behaviour.

Q32 John Hemming: Yes, it is a question of how you establish the threshold, of course, because obviously somebody is going to have to put it in the computer to start out with. How would you envisage the threshold operating?

Professor Margetts: In the US they have a threshold of 150. You have to get 150 signatures before the petition is publicly searchable. At the same time, it is still there on the site so they can see it happening.

Q33 John Hemming: Yes. When people link to it it is there, but it does not appear on the search unless you have—

Professor Margetts: Yes.

John Hemming: That is an easy shift, isn't it?

Professor Margetts: Yes, but they have a threshold of 150, which is quite high. You might want to go lower.

John Hemming: If we had 10 it would still make a big difference?

Professor Margetts: Yes, definitely.

Q34 Jacob Rees-Mogg: Professor Margetts, I want to follow up on your suggestion that the paper and e-petitioning system need to be folded into each other, if I understood you correctly. I think there would be a concern in doing that if you then had a threshold for the e-petition, because one of the things that is very important to maintain is the right of the individual constituent with a burning issue, who takes the trouble to contact an MP and pushes the issue to a petition, to have that right. How would you overcome that if you were to merge the two systems?

Professor Margetts: You would have to have some system for getting the paper ones. They would be transcribed on to that system. I guess it is another reason they do not do that in the US. There isn't a paper option, so that is another reason why you might want to go for a lower threshold-to say that if someone has an issue and they can get 10 people to sign would seem reasonable. Yes, if you were going to do it to 150 and you were asking them to do that, when it was non-searchable and they were obviously people who did not want to go down the digital route, then, yes, that would be a challenge. It would be a reason to go for a smaller threshold.

Chair: John is going to come in again but then I am going to go to Thomas because he has been patient.

Q35 John Hemming: Sorry; on that particular point, the First Amendment to the US Constitution gives the right to petition so I am surprised that you can't. Did they abolish that when they brought in the electronic system?

Professor Margetts: No, you can still have a petition. You still have a petition and it is still there on the site. It is just not publicly searchable.

John Hemming: I am slightly confused by that still.

Q36 Thomas Docherty: First of all-and I see you have taken the map down now-Scotland seemed to disappear off that map. Is that because you know something that we do not yet know?

Professor Margetts: Sorry, I should have explained. There has been a lot of talk of maps in various areas about this and I wanted to show you something that was possible. We are at the very beginning of mapping that data. It is a technically very complex task to do it.

Q37 Thomas Docherty: The reason I ask is that obviously the Scottish Parliament has had a petition system since, I think, inception, 1999.

Professor Margetts: Yes.

Q38 Thomas Docherty: What analysis have you made of how that has evolved over, gosh, 15 years now in terms of its success? Do people understand what it is for?

Professor Margetts: Catherine is much more expert than me on that.

Catherine Bochel: I think it is that they have undertaken research into their own system to try to improve it. They have done that in a whole variety of ways. They still get relatively small numbers. For each petition that they receive, if it is admissible it is discussed by a petitions committee and it receives a response based on that. So every single petitioner gets their voice heard, and that is the same for Wales as well. That is how the process works and I do not think that process has changed since the outset.

Dr Fox: If I could just add to that. The process hasn't changed but I think they have been much clearer from the outset about the broader objectives, which was not a quick and easy way to influence Government and subsequently Government and Parliament. They have gone for a much broader sense. In terms of Scotland, for example, it can inform the scrutiny of legislation, lead to changes in the law, be considered as part of a wider parliamentary or Government review of policy, can stimulate parliamentary debate and discussion and can result in policy changes. They are much broader about what they might consider. The petitions committee then helps direct what they think the best options are for consideration of each petition. Sometimes they do not want to consider it any further-that is it.

Something that we were very clear about in our paper two years ago is that there is a very significant difference between the volume on the gov.uk e-petition site, and Scotland and Wales. That goes partly to issues about the publicity that it attracts and the focus on it. It goes to the attraction, the way the media and other campaign groups are using the e-petition site. It also goes to how it is constructed in terms of thresholds. In Scotland, for example, when you fill in the template for your petition online, you have to indicate what other actions you have taken to address your concern, grievance, whatever it may be. That is something that a petitions committee will consider as part of its thinking about what it might do with a petition. Again, that is another type of threshold that gets you away from the one click in my bedroom of an evening where I am annoyed about an issue. Should that one-

signature petition or 10-signature petition be considered by a petitions committee here at the House? No, they could not resource it.

Chair: You would not be able to do it.

Dr Fox: No, so it is a question of thinking through-related to the data and the numbers and what we know about it-what the thresholds might be. They are going to be different from Scotland and from Wales because of the volume.

Q39 Mr Nuttall: I am concerned about the fact that hundreds of thousands of these petitioners will feel rather let down when they enter this process and they log on and they sign a petition. From the stats that were given at the outset, about half, I think you said, have just one signature. Some of those might be the same person by the sounds of it: serial petitioners. It sounds like an occupation. "What do you do?" "I set up petitions for a living." For half of them there is just one signature and I think you said 95% have less than 500. One assumes that they will not all be serial petition signers, so it is fair to assume there will be hundreds of thousands of people who sign petitions. Depending on what we decide to do, they will probably never hear anything more because there would be huge resource implications if we were to try to interact with every petition of perhaps 200, for example. I wonder what the panel of experts think we could do, to try to manage expectations on the part of the public, to try to make it a realistic expectation of what they could get out of the process. The reality is-and we have seen this over the last few years since the Government e-petition system began-very, very few of the thousands of petitions that exist hit the 100,000 threshold. The vast, vast majority never do.

Professor Margetts: There is this issue of the threshold that we have been talking about. I think those people who create a petition with only one signature would be better off being consolidated. Nine hundred petitions on the same issue is extreme. We should work against that so that their efforts are channelled into signing a petition that is going to be more successful. That is one point.

The other point that has not been mentioned so much is the question of a departmental response. At the moment, people get a departmental response after 10,000. The US is a nice example of where they have been quite creative and imaginative about making the response itself into real engagement. I expect some of you have heard about the response to the petition that the US create a death star. They managed to do a very nice response to that, which was quite serious and engaged in telling people about their space plans, space education and various things. It sounds silly, but that has been the most viewed bit of information ever on the White House website. You can see there are

ways of turning the response itself into a bit of engagement, which makes a lot of people feel that they have been taken seriously. I think that is something quite important.

Q40 Mr Nuttall: Coming back on that very quickly, does the US system technology allow it to go to each individual who signed or do they have to log back on to see it is just published on the website? Do you know if is sent out as an e-mail to everybody who has signed?

Professor Margetts: It should be able to be sent out to everybody because they have given their e-mail address when they sign.

Q41 Mr Nuttall: Yes, so it would land in their inbox. They do not have to log back in?

Professor Margetts: I do not think it does in the US but I know that there have been mass mailings of that kind here, haven't there? There were with the No. 10 site. It is possible, that is what I am saying.

Mr Nuttall: Yes, it must be possible to do it at relatively little cost.

Professor Margetts: Yes, exactly.

Dr Fox: I think our critique two years ago-and this may have changed; it will need to be checked-was that the responses were simply going to the creator of the petition. You would only know what the response was if you were checking back and looking or if the creator of the petition was very active on social media and was promoting it themselves, which they may well be. There was no proactive effort within the departmental group, from department to department that were dealing with this, to do it themselves.

Professor Margetts: It is something that could be done and it is just a matter of a bit of resourcing. I think the road pricing petitions were all e-mailed. Weren't signatories e-mailed individually? I think it was the largest mass mailing by a political leader ever. Every signer of the road pricing petition back in 2009 was e-mailed.

Catherine Bochel: That was the No. 10 site.

Professor Margetts: That was the old No. 10 site, but I am just saying it was possible then, it is possible now.

Mr Nuttall: It must be possible now, yes.

Catherine Bochel: I think you are right that there is a potential for a large number of petitioners to feel that they have not been responded to or that the system perhaps has let them down. In the three years since the system has been up and running, I think it has had about

28,500 admissible petitions and there have been approximately 170 responses. That includes debates and responses from Government departments.

I think it is important to note that, for any petition system, the vast number of petitioners are not going to get what they ask for because that is the democratic process. What is important is how those people are dealt with and how the system deals with them. That comes back to what I was saying earlier: that they have to feel that the system is treating them fairly. There has to be a transparent process. That comes down to what I think is a basic thing about the system. You have to have a clear statement of purpose at the outset, and if people feel that the statement of purpose reflects the system, then they are more likely to feel happy with that. The statement on the website currently is extremely misleading and so people are bound to feel let down. They cannot achieve what is on the website, or only a very small number can.

Chair: I am going to bring in Nic and then Martin, and I want to move things along a bit.

Q42 Nic Dakin: Is it a good idea for the House to have a petitions committee and, if it is, what would you see the parameters of its role being?

Catherine Bochel: Scotland and Wales both have petitions committees and their systems work very well. I think a petitions committee for the House is a good idea. All forms of petitions could come into that from the paper system as well as from the e-petitions system. If there were a committee staff, that would allow committee staff to keep an overview of the petitions that are coming in and perhaps, for example, broaden the range of responses that are not linked to numbers thresholds. As Ruth was saying earlier, perhaps if there is a relevant debate, a petition could be tagged to a debate. They could see if a Member has a particular interest in a specific area and pass the petition on to them. If there is a relevant Select Committee inquiry, they could forward the petition to that.

I think there is an important role for a petitions committee and also for staff. Staff could do things like check the petition very strictly for admissibility criteria and then, if it is not strictly admissible for this system, forward it or signpost it to another system—that is really important—as well as get rid of duplicate petitions, which has also been mentioned. The committees themselves could have a whole range of roles in relation to thresholds as well. Perhaps a petition that gets 10,000 signatures could be sent to a petitions committee to decide how to deal with it. Then they would have a whole range of options, as they

do in Scotland and Wales, calling Ministers before them to answer questions on particular petitions or to address issues around a particular petition, forwarding it on to another department, perhaps just saying, "We will commission further research in this area". I think there is a role.

Q43 Chair: Just quickly, how many petitions were received on average each year by the No. 10 system?

Catherine Bochel: I think in its first year it received 29,000 petitions. Initially, it responded to all petitions over 200 signatures and then it raised that to 500 signatures.

Dr Fox: Broadly speaking, I support that. I think the issue is setting the threshold at which the petitions committee engages at a level that can be resourced. That then goes to an analysis of the data: at what level can you get rid of some petitions that are bunging up the system, the serial petitioners? Then focus on the remaining volume and at what level of engagement, and you need a ladder of potential activities. It might be that at 500 or 1,000 signatures, say, the committee then asks for a ministerial response. That doesn't require the committee to sit and consider it. That could be automated and the clerks are simply doing what the officials in the Office of the Leader of the House are doing now, which is asking the departments for their response at 10,000 signatures. So you could have that. There could be a better search function and better sifting. You could simply look at which ones are relevant to the topical debates coming up in the House over the course of the next fortnight and ensure that they are noted on the Order Paper, or that there is some kind of attachment to the Order Paper that lists those to make people aware of them.

At a higher threshold, you could then be saying that it does go to the petitions committee. I don't think you can do what Scotland and Wales do; they all go. Volume-wise, clearly that is not possible. So where is the threshold at which they do go to the committee? It does not seem to me that there is a problem in saying, "This is going to be a new system in the new Parliament. We are going to pilot this and we may have to adjust the thresholds to take account of the changing volume of this and what is possible". I think building in things like requests, finding out when they register the petition what action they have taken, if any, to address their grievance-have they contacted their Member? That kind of thing-would be useful for the committee and, therefore, might influence which ones you look at.

It may be that the committee can deal with some of them quite quickly and say, "Those three or four that have come in this month, they are relevant to that Select Committee inquiry" and they are directed there.

It is for the Select Committee then to decide whether they want to note them, to respond to them or whatever. It could be that the petitions committee says, "This is a really interesting issue. We would like to take this up. We either direct it to another committee or, as they do in Scotland and Wales, we are going to have an inquiry on this. We would like to look at it in more detail and decide whether it is something that more work is going to be done on". What they do in Scotland and Wales is ask the petitioner to come in and give evidence and that is an opportunity. At least they have been heard. It is an opportunity for the petitions committee to find out more and to decide whether it really is a credible and important issue that they want to take forward. The committee then decides if that is something they want to direct to the Government for a response on that, or whatever it may be.

So there are a whole series of potential actions and avenues on a ladder of different thresholds of activity that a committee could do, and I don't think you should necessarily tie yourselves down to saying, "It will be this for the lifetime of the next Parliament" as long as it is very clearly set out from the outset.

Professor Margetts: Yes, definitely, I think it is important to institutionalise it. Having taken a look at the US system, I think it is great but it is a very small operation, very much associated with the President. You need to make it long lasting and sustainable. There are real quick wins here to be made in terms of civic engagement. Not just quick wins, I mean long-term, sustainable wins. If you can institutionalise it, bring it together in a committee that deals with all these things and is properly resourced, that is important. There are petition systems all over the world that are done on a shoestring and it is silly because that is a waste. Just by doubling the resources you could get a lot. The whole will be greater than the sum of the parts so, yes, I would recommend that.

Catherine Bochel: Can I just add something to that? When you submit a petition, it needs to be clear that it is not just about getting what you asked for at the end of the day. There are a whole series of other outcomes, all the sorts of things that have been mentioned here today. Getting your petition published on the website is an outcome in itself, because it is promoting it to a wider audience, raising its profile, and perhaps you will get some additional publicity for that, but that is an outcome in itself. All these other things that have been mentioned are outcomes. I have interviewed petitioners and said to them, "Did you get what you wanted?" and some of them will say to me, "No, I didn't get what I wanted or what I started out asking for, but I got other things and I am satisfied with that". It is important that, when they submit a petition, petitioners can see that it is not just about

getting what you have asked for. There are other things you can achieve, too, and that is important.

Q44 Martin Vickers: When setting the thresholds, should some allowance be made for the fact that many people sign petitions not knowing anything about them or caring about them? I can stand on Cleethorpes high street and approach people and say, "They are proposing to close a ward at the local hospital. Will you sign my petition of objection?" They can say to me, "I'm from Sheffield but, yes, I don't agree with closing hospital wards so I will sign it". It is irrelevant to them. Likewise, what would you do about organisations that deliberately set petitions up to undermine the Government of the day, whoever it may be, and then do mass mailings out to people saying, "Please go online and sign this" even if they care nothing about the subject?

Chair: To add on to that, how do you stop this becoming a lobbyist charter for well-funded, special interest groups just to bombard Parliament with requests for action?

Dr Fox: On the latter point, the way the system is set up now, it has to happen very quickly and you have to have a lot of contacts and a good social media network to get to the 100,000. I would argue that the 100,000 threshold for anything substantive to happen at the moment—or at least the potential for anything substantive, i.e. the debate-favours the bigger lobbying groups rather than the individual constituent in terms of the issues, which is why a degree of other thresholds for other potential actions would be useful.

Catherine Bochel: You need other actions not linked to thresholds, yes. It is really important then because otherwise the media can do this.

Dr Fox: Yes. Conversely what you have is a situation where the 100,000 threshold—which may lead to the debate, but you are not going to get anything else in terms of that without the 100,000 threshold—means that you have a much better option if you are a Daily Mail-led campaign or a Sun-led campaign or an NSPCC-led campaign where there is great effort behind it, rather than if you are the gentleman in Cleethorpes with concerns about hospital wards, in terms of getting access to time for consideration. There are other examples. Take the Hillsborough example, where there was a national campaign about a specific issue and it did not have the same sort of resonance as a big campaign led by a charity or led by a media outlet. But I would say some of those are fairly rare. A lot of the petitions that have gone over the thresholds have had a big organisation behind them somewhere.

Professor Margetts: A very important thing for any central unit-like a committee-that is overseeing this will be to use the data to solve the kinds of problems that you are talking about. For example, with your Sheffield example, it would be perfectly possible with a petition to analyse the postcode data in a completely privacy-secure, anonymous sort of way and see what percentage of people who signed that petition came from Sheffield. It would be possible to do that and then you would be able to say something else about the petition: "Okay, loads of people care about this but they aren't actually from Sheffield". It would be something the committee could think about. There are all sorts of other ways, particularly when you think of all the data that are available on social media, to be able to tell the extent to which it is being driven by big pressure groups and stuff like that.

Q45 Jenny Chapman: I really like what you said about setting up a petition being an outcome in itself, because I have caught your enthusiasm for this a little bit. What I think is one outcome in itself is how we use the e-petitions process to help people who care deeply about an issue understand the wider campaigning, lobbying, influencing process, and whether there isn't an opportunity here, if you are going on to set up an e-petition or add your signature, to provide some other kinds of information about campaigning and make suggestions to people: have you been to see your local MP about this? Have you spoken to interested charities? Have you spoken to your neighbours? Things like that that may not have occurred to people but they do this because you can do it from your bedroom late at night. So are there opportunities through this process to help support engagement in other ways?

Catherine Bochel: I think there are. That is a really good suggestion: that we make use of the website to have lots of different video clips that people can look at to see how you can engage more, not only just about this system but the idea, "Have you tried to resolve your issue elsewhere? Have you tried the local NHS trust?" if appropriate-different organisations, as well as learning about this system. The website could really facilitate that.

Q46 Thomas Docherty: I have growing concerns when I listen to this. One is that we are creating unnecessary bureaucracy. I could be wrong, but I am fairly confident the Leader of the House has indicated that it is the Government's intention that the Government would continue to provide responses at the 10,000 threshold. So why do we need a level of bureaucracy of going to a Select Committee with all that cost in order to elicit exactly the same outcome as the Government has already promised? On a more fundamental level, I am concerned from listening to you that we are going to end up undermining Parliament itself. It is for Parliament to set and decide policy, not because we reach a certain threshold. To even give the impression that by getting a certain number

of people you are shaping policy, I think that would be a huge change in this. Take the hospital example. Any MP worth their salt would, if there was a hospital issue, seek an Adjournment debate or raise it on the floor of the House. It does not need a petition to do that.

Dr Fox: If I may, I cannot speak for both of you but I suspect you are going to say the same thing. I think you are taking the endpoint of what we are proposing out of context. Nobody here is suggesting, I think, that directing it to a Select Committee or directing it in another avenue would lead to a specific outcome in which a policy decision was made or legislation was initiated or whatever. I do not think that is any different to you calling me to give evidence to this Committee, as it would be for a petitioner to be called to give evidence on their petition if that was of interest to the committee and they wanted to look at it. For example, in Scotland and Wales they bring people to the committee. They have a consideration of what the content or the call from a policy perspective is. They might send it to the department. It might have to go somewhere else if it is a more localised issue. Sometimes it does result in outcomes. Certainly in Wales there was a result where more train services were provided to Fishguard. It could have outcomes, but the number of times where it has a specific policy outcome would be very few and far between. That would not be specifically and only as a result of the petition and handing over responsibility to the petitioners, but part of the broader political process.

Our concern is that at the moment what the system implies-and what political leaders in 2009 and 2010 implied-is that an e-petition system would deliver precisely that: legislation, draft Bills and some specific outcome because it is an easy way to influence leading to a result. What you have is the worst of any world. It is easy to register it on the site, but it is not a particularly easy way to register any level of influence and it certainly does not lead to any real policy outcomes. What you want is somewhere that is mid-way. The problem is, it is direct democracy bolted on to a representative system, which just does not work. What we want through a petitions committee, through education and outreach support to that committee, using the real skills and assets of the education and outreach teams here who are quite experienced now in public engagement-which civil servants are not in the Office of the Leader of the House-is to add a degree of value to that experience and to build in information and education opportunities as well. Nobody, I think, has suggested that it would result in a direct policy outcome in which you are ceding your roles; quite the opposite. Through the petitioning process, I want people to understand that democracy is more complex than clicking a button leading to X. I want them to understand that it is complex; it is difficult; it is part of a

negotiating process and there is pragmatic compromise involved. At the moment, none of that comes through the system.

Q47 Chair: And that politics is often disappointing-

Dr Fox: Sometimes, yes.

Chair: -perhaps more so than any other walk of life. It is because there are many competing ideas. Jacob wants to briefly come in. I think we are going to vote soon.

Q48 Jacob Rees-Mogg: We are going to vote in a moment. Professor Margetts, I want to come back to you again on the actual technicalities of the system to try to ensure that Members of Parliament could be directly involved. You already have the data for where people live, the postcode data. Can that be linked through so that an MP can be automatically notified when one of their constituents has signed a petition, so that MPs would have a good idea if it was a burning issue for their constituents and could respond beyond the petitions committee if they wanted to? Or is that technically difficult?

Professor Margetts: No. It might not fall perfectly into constituencies, but it is possible. They might not want to know every time anybody signed one. They might want to know after so many people have signed one. You know what I mean; it would be rather a lot of-

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Indeed, yes.

Professor Margetts: Yes, those kinds of things are possible. It would offer new possibilities for Members to engage, to know what their constituents were thinking and worrying about, and be willing to do something about it.

Q49 Jacob Rees-Mogg: That would not be a perfectly expensive add-on to the existing system?

Professor Margetts: No, that is just using the data.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: The data that are already there.

Professor Margetts: The system is very cheap. Obviously, some of the things that we have been discussing would be more expensive, but this is not rocket science.

Q50 Chair: You are of the view that the e-petition system should reside in one place? There should not be a No. 10 prime ministerial system and a House of Commons system? What we need is a single system that is easy to access and easily navigable?

Catherine Bochel: I think it would be much better to have a single system in one place. It would be much less confusing for people.

Professor Margetts: Yes, a single system.

Dr Fox: I agree. I agree with that.

Q51 Chair: You agree. For the record, all three posit a single system and you believe a single system should be supported by a petitions committee made up of Members of the House of Commons, supported by clerks of the House of Commons?

Catherine Bochel: Yes.

Dr Fox: Yes.

Professor Margetts: Yes, but it must be properly resourced and technologically resourced in the way it is now.

Chair: Yes, okay. I thank the panel for giving us so much of their time. It is really good evidence, strong evidence, and I am sure you will follow our work closely and with great interest. Thank you very much.