

PETITIONS SYSTEMS: OUTCOMES, 'SUCCESS' AND 'FAILURE'

Catherine Bochel

Abstract

The use of formal petitions systems has become increasingly widespread in the United Kingdom. The systems in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament have been widely seen as models of good practice. However, one aspect that has not been explored in sufficient depth is the outcomes of petitions. This article uses petitions to the two legislatures to develop a framework to assist in understanding how 'success' and 'failure' might be judged in relation to petitions. In addition to contributing to our wider understanding of such systems, this may help political institutions think about the processes which underpin their petition systems, the ways in which they frame the systems for the public, and could help better manage petitioner expectations, including by illustrating to petitioners what they might achieve at different stages in the petitions process.

Keywords: Petitions, process, citizen engagement, legislatures, political participation

Although the United Kingdom has a long history of the use of petitions to government, their use has waxed and waned over time (House of Commons Information Office, 2010). While it is possible to identify a variety of challenges for e-petitions systems in particular, ranging from questions around trigger levels in terms of number of signatories, through data security and privacy issues, to how they relate to representative democracy (Bochel and Bochel, 2017), over the past two decades, formal petitions systems have nevertheless become an important part of political life, with systems in place in Westminster, the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament, and also in a number of local authorities. They can be seen to have been developed as a result of the coming together of a number of factors, such as: the perceived decline in political engagement (Carman, 2014; Hansard Society, 2012; Wright 2012); the recognition by parliaments of the need for greater engagement with

the public (House of Commons Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, 2004; Puttnam Commission, 2005); and the development of online systems enabling greater interactions between citizens and governments (Jungherr and Jurgens, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, there has also been a growth in research on petitions systems, including looking at subjects such as who petitions (Bochel, 2012; Carman, 2006), e-petitions (Escher and Riehm, 2017; Jungherr and Jurgens, 2010), and seeking to establish criteria against which petitions systems might be evaluated, whether political, such as the levels of engagement of citizens and policy makers, social, such as the benefits of and barriers to participation, or technical, such as their performance, usability and accessibility (Ergazakis et al., 2012). However, one area that has not been explored in any great depth is the outcomes of petitions.

Clearly, given the very large number of petitions submitted to the UK government and Parliament system, and the smaller but still significant numbers submitted to the devolved legislatures, as well as the nature of representative democratic political systems, most petitions and petitioners will not achieve the stated aim or aims of the petition that they have created. Nevertheless, this article suggests that many petitions do lead to 'outcomes' of one form or another. Given that the systems established in Scotland in 1999 and Wales in 2007 have been widely seen as models of good practice in the UK and beyond, petitions to the two legislatures are used here to develop a framework to assist in understanding the types of outcomes that can occur, and then to make some suggestions about how 'success' and 'failure' might be judged in relation to petitions.

1. The context

Historically, petitions were the equivalent of a plea to Parliament. Originally these tended to focus on local or personal grievances, but 'from the Restoration and eighteenth century period, ... it became more common to make representations or complain about matters of public policy' (House of

Commons Information Office, 2010, p. 6). In the nineteenth century, the number of petitions to the House of Commons 'rarely fell below 10,000 per session' (House of Commons Information Office, 2010, p. 7) and it was only towards the end of the nineteenth and, in particular during the early twentieth century, that the numbers of petitions presented began to decline. Today, they have regained their popularity with the public as a method of engaging with parliaments, assemblies and governments. For example, the e-petition system established by the Coalition Government in 2011 received a total of 60,818 petitions (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions>, accessed 23 March 2015). In the 2015-17 Parliament, 31,731 petitions were submitted to the collaborative UK Government and Parliament system (accessed 20 June 2018 <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions?state=published>), and in the 2017 Parliament, 11,306 petitions had been submitted by 30 October 2018 (accessed at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions>). All of these figures include both admissible and inadmissible petitions.

The systems that are in place in elected bodies today enable members of the public to raise issues and concerns on a wide variety of topics, inter-alia: arts and culture, education, sport, politics and democracy, children and young people, transport, religion, health, equality, business and economy, the environment, environmental health, animal welfare and rights. In Scotland and Wales, there are some notable examples of change for some of those who submit petitions. For example, PE1098/PE1223, on School Bus Safety, led to the introduction of the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill which was passed into law in December 2017. PE1393 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. In the National Assembly for Wales, P-03-256 Additional Trains to Fishguard, resulted in the Minister funding five additional train services a day to and from Fishguard. P-04-328 called for independent risk assessments on the UK Government Maritime and Coastguard Agency's proposed closure of several stations in Wales. The Committee published a report on the issue which was debated by the whole

Assembly. The Minister issued a public response to say that ‘she would make a commitment to challenging the MCA’s proposals’... and that ‘she would write to the UK Government to request that it commission a full and independent risk assessment, which it would be willing to jointly finance’ (National Assembly for Wales, 2012, p. 16). However, as noted above, such successes are likely to be limited to a relatively small number of petitions and petitioners, and it is therefore important to also consider what other petitions and petitioners might achieve. This matters, because, as this article makes clear, even if the petition does not achieve its stated aims, there are nevertheless a range of possible actions that can be taken by committees, and it may be helpful if those are understood by commentators and petitioners, not least in contributing to those who submit petitions seeing that their petitions have been properly considered.

In the two devolved legislatures considered here, petitions committees consider each admissible petition and make a decision on how to progress them. As discussed in greater depth below, the committees have a range of actions available to them, and in Scotland, for example, ‘Almost invariably, this includes seeking a response to a petition from the Scottish Government’ (Scottish Parliament, 2017). The collaborative UK Government and Parliament system also has a similar range of actions available to it, but because of the considerably greater numbers of petitions, the Petitions Committee at Westminster only considers those that have reached the 10,000 signature threshold which have received a response from government, and those that have 100,000 or more signatures.

2. ‘Success’ and ‘failure’ in petitions systems

There is a small but growing literature on petitions systems (see for example, Bochel, 2012, 2013; Carman, 2014; Escher and Riehm, 2017; Hough, 2012; Panagiotopoulos and Elliman, 2012), but this does not yet cover in any systematic way how it might be possible to measure how successful petitions are. As noted above, Ergazakis et al., (2012) usefully highlight the political, social and technical dimensions of systems, with the first two being the most relevant here, while Escher and Riehm (2017,

p. 152) make a case for developing judgements about petitions themselves, arguing that ‘while success in realising political voice relies on the subjective assessment of individual petitioners, it would be useful to relate those assessments to the petition and analyse its impact in terms of policy or other outcomes, even though this holds many methodological challenges’.

In many other areas of policy-related research, attempts to explore success and failure are common. For example, there is a large body of research associated with policy evaluation (Palfrey, 2012; Parsons, 2017), and there is also a considerable literature on policy success (Ingram and Mann, 1980; Kerr, 1976; Prasser 2006) and policy failure (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 1996; Bovens et al., 2001; King and Crewe, 2013). McConnell’s (2010) ‘spectrum from success to failure’ (p. 55) is perhaps one of the best known approaches, and usefully highlights many of the difficulties in defining and measuring success and failure, including the subjective nature of the process.

As noted above, petitions systems are clearly very popular as a means of political participation, but the vast majority of petitioners are unlikely to get what they ask for. In their discussion of ‘policy fiascos’, Bovens and ‘t Hart (1996, p. 146) say, ‘Our analysis suggests that the alleged ubiquity of policy failure is as much a product of social expectations and political ideology as it is due to substantive failures in public service delivery’. For petitions systems, ‘failure’ is again likely to be ubiquitous. Indeed, there are risks for the systems that they raise, and then dash petitioners’ hopes, so that it is arguably in the interests of those who operate petitions systems to try to manage petitioners’ expectations, including potentially by highlighting the full range of possible actions and outcomes that can arise. It is perhaps not surprising that analyses of the systems in the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the UK government and Parliament system, suggest that the systems face a number of common challenges, including the need to manage expectations, and to educate people more about the petitions process (House of Commons Petitions Committee, 2016; National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee, 2016; Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee, 2015).

Clearly, 'success', or otherwise, for petitions systems might be judged in many different ways, including, for example, the number of petitions submitted, the number of signatories to petitions, or the extent to which petitions are seen as being treated seriously and transparently. Where outcomes are concerned, Bochel (2012, p. 153-6) highlights the complexity of judging success, saying that

a 'successful' outcome is ... likely to depend on who you are, what role you have within the petitions system, what expectations petitioners have, the extent to which the system is fulfilling its stated aims, and so on. For example, for some petitioners, 'success' might be measured by outcomes such as policy change or getting action on a particular issue, while for others it might be the opportunity to be listened to, to have raised the profile of the issue they have submitted a petition on, or something else. Gauging 'success' and 'impact' of the systems and of individual petitions is therefore problematic.

Given these challenges, and in particular the likely subjective nature of petitioner assessments of the success or otherwise of petitions, this article focuses on outcomes for petitioners from the perspective of the systems themselves. Making this distinction between the outcomes for individual petitioners and those for the systems is important in avoiding confusion between the goals of systems and those of individual petitioners. It starts from the premise that success and failure are unlikely to be all or nothing categories, but can more usefully be viewed as a continuum. Clearly, at one end of the continuum would be outright 'success', with the petition achieving everything that it asked for, and for petitioners this would be the ultimate outcome. However, while the vast majority of petitions are unlikely to achieve this, there are nevertheless other things that might be accomplished from submitting a petition, other than complete 'failure'. Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting that there are arguably two aspects to this: 'actions', which are taken by a Petitions Committee; and 'outcomes', that are achieved for petitioners; in addition, the actions taken by committees may, of course, also be outcomes for petitioners. Drawing on research on the devolved legislatures, the remainder of this

article provides an overview of the number and types of outcomes for petitions over a twelve month period, seeks to map the characteristics of the outcomes, and develops a framework to help understand how the success or otherwise of petitions might be judged.

3. Methodology

The analysis for this article examines all petitions considered by the devolved legislatures over the period 1 March 2010 to 29 February 2011 (part of Session 3 in the Scottish Parliament and the Third Assembly in the National Assembly for Wales). During that period, 53 petitions were considered by the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee, and 37 by the National Assembly for Wales' Petitions Committee. The analysis considers the actions taken by the committees on admissible petitions, rather than those deemed inadmissible, although for those whose petitions are rejected as inadmissible this is clearly an important issue. A report by the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee suggests that the rejection rate on the grounds of admissibility in Scotland in Session 4 and in Wales in the Fourth Assembly was around 30% (2015), and notes a number of reasons why petitions submitted did not go on to be formally lodged, including: that they were concerned with a reserved issue, an operational decision, a local matter or individual case, or were otherwise not for the Parliament. In that sense, admissibility and inadmissibility might be seen as clearly linked to the parameters established for the systems as they are created and revised. The data was gathered as part of a wider research project which looked at different aspects of the systems in the devolved legislatures in the context of the development of petitions systems in the UK (see, for example, Bochel, 2012, 2013) and which continued into Session Four and the Fourth Assembly to explore the application of ideas of procedural justice to petitions systems in representative political institutions (Bochel, 2016).

While the number of petitions considered by each committee has grown in subsequent years (and indeed are frequently seen as illustrative of the popularity of this as a method of engaging with

parliaments (Hansard Society, 2017)), with, for example, in Session Four (May 2011-December 2015) the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee considering 251 admissible petitions (Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee, 2016), while the National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee considered 342 in the Fourth Assembly (National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee, 2016) the emphasis and value here is in the ability to explore the process that petitions go through and what happens to them over the twelve month period.

In addition, a small number of petitions are considered in greater depth, effectively being presented as case studies, to help explore further what can be learnt about outcomes and the petitions systems (Van Theil, 2014; Yin, 2014). These examples are drawn from the Third Assembly in the National Assembly for Wales and Session Three in the Scottish Parliament, and were selected to reflect a variety of topics of petitions, the types and nature of actions taken by the committees, and the consequent 'outcomes'.

The information analysed was collected from the websites of the Parliament and Assembly. Each of the Petitions Committees provides a list of petitions on their websites, including the title of the petition, who it was submitted by, a summary of the actions taken on each petition, and where relevant, links to the minutes of committee meetings where each petition was discussed. Each petition was coded by the main topic and by each action taken on the petition.

In order to demonstrate how this process might look in terms of the actions taken by the petitions committees, and how they have been coded for this research, one is shown here as an example. Petition PE1355 called '... on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider the need to lower the prices for travelling on public transport for all school and further education students age 18 and below'.

At its first meeting that considered the petition:

the Public Petitions Committee took evidence from the petitioners;

and agreed to write to:

the Scottish Government

Confederation of Passenger Transport

Young Scot

the Scottish Youth Parliament

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport

a number of transport operators – Stagecoach, ScotRail, First Group, Calmac.

At its second meeting that considered the petition, the Committee agreed to write to:

Stagecoach, ScotRail

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport.

At its third meeting that considered the petition, it agreed to close the petition.

Each of the above was coded as an action, although multiple occurrences of the same action, for example, writing to private bodies, such as some transport operators, were only coded once. In the example above, the Committee is therefore seen as having taken seven distinct actions. A list of the types of actions can be found in Table 2.

4. The ‘outcomes’ of petitions

As outlined above, the focus of this article is on what happens to petitions in terms of the number and type of actions taken by petitions committees, and, therefore, the ‘outcomes’ of petitions from the perspective of the systems. This both removes the subjective element that would be likely to be associated with petitioners’ judgements of whether their petitions have been successful, or not

(although further research in that area would also be welcome), and allows petitions to be judged purely in terms of what they have achieved as they progress through the systems. The analysis begins with a consideration of the number of types of outcomes for petitions in the devolved legislatures. Following that, a framework of actions taken by petitions committees and possible outcomes for petitioners will be presented to illustrate dimensions of success and failure, before a small number of individual petitions are examined in greater depth to illustrate further the variety of actions and outcomes.

4.1 Actions by petitions committees

The petitions committees in each of the devolved legislatures were responsible for considering each petition and had powers to take a number of actions in response to them. These included: writing to a wide range of bodies and individuals to seek further information; inviting organisations and individuals to give evidence to the Petitions Committee; recommending that another committee of the Parliament or the Assembly take the petition forward; conducting an inquiry; holding a plenary debate on issues related to the petition; and closing the petition.

This enables us to look at the number of actions taken by each committee. Table 1 shows that the committees took between one and nine actions on each petition considered. In the Scottish Parliament, for example, the Public Petitions Committee took one action on five petitions, five actions on 17 petitions, and nine actions on one petition. In the National Assembly for Wales, the Petitions Committee took one action on one petition, three actions on 13 petitions, and eight actions on one petition.

In total, the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee took 219 actions on the 53 petitions it considered (a mean of 4.1 actions for each petition), while the National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee took 127 actions on the 37 petitions it considered (a mean of 3.4 actions for each petition). This shows that, in general, each Committee takes a significant number of actions in response to

petitions. For those where there was only one action, at a minimum the committees wrote to ministers, a government body or another committee in the legislature.

Table 1 here

Clearly, while one indicator of activity, the number of actions taken on each petition is not necessarily a measure of its success or otherwise, and it is therefore important to consider the types of action taken. Looking in a little more depth (Table 2), it is clear that the great majority of actions undertaken by both committees involved writing to a range of bodies and organisations, including, for example, ministers within the appropriate government, local authorities, quasi-governmental bodies, trade unions, professional and umbrella bodies, and petitioners. These tended to be evidence-seeking, such as asking for a government's position on the issue raised in the petition, an organisation's views on the petition, or requesting other information on the topic of the petition, to understand how things are working in practice, or following through on the views of the petitioner.

In the Scottish Parliament, writing to bodies and individuals accounted for 89% of the 219 actions for the 53 petitions considered, while for the National Assembly for Wales this accounted for 87% of the 127 actions for the 37 petitions, although, as the table makes clear, there were also significant differences between the two legislatures, with the Petitions Committee in the National Assembly for Wales being much more likely to write petitioners about evidence gathered, for further information or to update them on progress, and more likely to write to Welsh ministers, while the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee was somewhat more likely to write to trade unions, professional or umbrella bodies, not-for-profit organisations and government bodies.

Table 2 here

In terms of what this might mean for petitioners, there are clearly a number of possibilities associated with the widespread communication with other organisations by committees in their consideration of petitions: firstly, seeking other information or views is likely to provide the petitions committees with a firmer evidence base on which to make decisions, which in turn will affect the outcomes for the petitioners; secondly, for many organisations it may be that a letter from the Petitions Committee of the National Assembly for Wales or the Scottish Parliament is more likely to elicit a (fuller) response than a letter from one, or even several, individuals; thirdly, the evidence gathered by the committee may enable petitioners to gain further information on the topic of their petition, and, especially where petitions are part of a wider campaign, it may help them progress their issue further, including outside the petitions process; and fourthly, as petitioners are given copies of the responses received by the committees, and have the opportunity to comment on them in writing, it does create the possibility for some degree of dialogue with the committee. For many petitions such evidence-gathering preceded other actions.

Among the other actions available to committees, inviting organisations and individuals to give evidence to the Petitions Committee accounted for 14 (6%) actions in the Scottish Parliament. Examples included petitions PE1365 Support for Kinship Carer Children, and PE1359 Improve mobile phone coverage in rural areas. In the National Assembly for Wales this accounted for three (2%) actions, including for petition P-03-301 Equality for the Transgender Community. Recommending that another relevant committee in the Parliament or Assembly take the petition forward in the next Session or Assembly accounted for one action (1%) in the Scottish Parliament (for PE1379 on Green alternatives to incineration), and seven (6%) actions in the National Assembly for Wales, including for a number of petitions where funding for theatres was under threat (PE-03-308, P-03-311, P-03-314), and P-03-292 on public toilet provision.

The Public Petitions Committee in the Scottish Parliament referred nine petitions (4%) to another committee or working group within the Parliament or Government, including PE1342-1349, calling for

an independent review of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, which were referred to the Local Government and Communities Committee, and PE1382, aimed at strengthening the Schools Consultation (Scotland) Act 2010, which it referred to a working group set up by the Scottish Government, whilst the Petitions Committee of the National Assembly for Wales referred one petition (1%) on the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 (P-03-304), to the Legislation Committee.

These actions clearly illustrate that an outcome is not just confined to achieving the stated aim of the petition, and that as a result, interpretations of success or otherwise have to be more nuanced. At the end of the process, when petitions have been closed by the committees, petitioners receive a letter explaining why the petition has been closed, so that they can see that it has been given serious consideration and progressed as far as the committee has been able to. As noted above, given they may not have achieved what they asked for, the committees' letters may be important in showing that the petition has been taken seriously and that relevant avenues have been explored.

One potential question relates to the costs and resources associated with the actions taken by committees, in relation to the direct costs to committees, including in terms of staff and members' time, and the indirect costs for individuals and organisations who may be asked to provide information or to give evidence to the committees. However, at present there is no evidence to suggest that the former, at least, is proving problematic.

5. A framework of outcomes

In order to help assist in understanding the actions of petitions committees and possible outcomes, and contribute to understanding different ways in which success (or the lack of it) might be judged in relations to petitions, Figure 1 sets out a framework, highlighting the stages in the petitions process, illustrating the actions that the systems can take, and what might be seen as the 'outcomes' for petitioners at each stage.

Figure 1 here

There are, inevitably, some differences in the stages, actions and outcomes between the two systems. For example, in the Scottish Parliament, petitioners must demonstrate that they have taken steps to resolve the issue raised in their petition before submission. In the National Assembly for Wales there is an optional stage where the petitioner can attend the Assembly to formally hand over the petition to the Chair and other members. This provides an opportunity to briefly discuss the petition informally with other committee members and for promotion of the issue, for example, through photographs. However, fundamentally, the two systems have a great deal in common.

As argued throughout this article, this framework helps illustrate that for many petitions there can be a range of actions and outcomes, and that 'success' is therefore unlikely to be 'all or nothing'. Rather, there may be something of a continuum from awareness raising (both within and outside the Assembly or Parliament), through gaining additional information on a topic, and having dialogue with Members (written, taking part in a roundtable discussion, or, in some cases, in giving oral evidence in a formal committee session).

5.1 Case studies

Clearly, the number of actions taken by a petitions committee is one indicator of its activities in relation to a petition, but in itself it may not be an appropriate or sufficient measure of the degree of 'success'. This section utilises a small number of case studies to explore further how the petitions process can be understood in terms of actions and outcomes in the context of degrees of success and failure.

As with other petitions, each of these was deemed admissible and published on the committees' websites, which itself might in some cases enable the promotion of the issue to a wider audience and

help to raise awareness of the subject matter of the petition. In addition, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) and the National Assembly's Research Service produce background briefing papers, which are made available online, setting out information on the petition issue, including the government's position, consultations, and announcements. This forms the bulk of the material which goes to the first committee meeting, along with information from the clerks. The petitions, along with any additional material submitted by the petitioners, are discussed by the petitions committees, which then determines its actions in relation to each petition. Petitioners can attend meetings of the committee's in person or watch online.

The first petition illustrates the Scottish Parliament's Petitions Committee taking one action, although this involved the Committee writing to the same body a number of times. PE1324, submitted on behalf of the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign, called for 'the Scottish Parliament to cancel the 'Israel's Contribution to Medicine, Science and Technology' exhibition scheduled to run in the Scottish Parliament' (*sic*). The petition was discussed at two different meetings of the Committee, and each time the Committee wrote to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) seeking responses to specific points raised in the petition and in their discussions, and received replies. They also considered additional correspondence which was sent in, for example, by the exhibition compiler, and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. The petitioner was kept up to date with the progress of their petition and was able to comment on the responses from the SPCB. The SPCB set out its policy with regards to Member sponsored events and exhibitions, stating that it believed this to be 'fair and appropriate' and did not need to be revised.

Petition P-03-312 called on the National Assembly for Wales 'to form a committee to investigate the introduction of the initiative and referendum process in Wales for devolved matters. The system to be based on the Swiss model, as advocated by the Campaign for Democracy'. This is an interesting example of the Committee seeking to clarify its remit and responsibilities. The Committee discussed the petition at two meetings and took three actions, including seeking legal guidance on whether the

Assembly had the power to adopt such a system. The Committee subsequently closed the petition on the grounds that the issue was not a devolved matter, and therefore fell outside their area of legislative competence.

While the two petitions discussed above did not achieve their stated aims, nevertheless, both were discussed at a number of meetings by the committees, getting the issues raised on the agenda, which might not otherwise have been considered by the Parliament or Assembly. In addition, the committees sought other views on the topics of the petitions, and there were opportunities for dialogue between the petitioners and the committees. This illustrates serious consideration of petitions by the committees, and that they had taken both cases as far as they could. Whilst they were not a 'success' in terms of meeting their original aims, the petitioners did, therefore, achieve different outcomes.

Petition PE1326, calling 'on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to investigate and review the compulsory purchase powers of local authorities to deal with derelict properties/land', is an example of what might be seen as a 'successful' petition. The Public Petitions Committee discussed the petition at four meetings and took five different actions. These included taking evidence from the petitioners, providing an opportunity for them to present their evidence to members and for members to ask questions about the topic of the petition, and writing to four different types of organisation, including the Scottish Government, a range of local authorities, a professional body and a not-for-profit organisation, seeking responses to points raised in the petition and during the discussion. This provided petitioners with an opportunity for dialogue, since they were given copies of the responses and could comment on these in writing. The Committee agreed to close the petition on the grounds that the Scottish Government had confirmed that it had amended its draft guidance to local authorities on compulsory purchase to take account of issues raised by the petition. The petitioner responded by saying that she was 'pleased with the amendments to the draft guidance' and

was reassured that the main points of the petition had been addressed. The petitioner also noted, that it had been 'an interesting and worthwhile experience' (PE1326/L).

PE1317 was a petition 'to ensure that the rights of school aged workers in part time employment are protected so that employers cannot impose excessive working hours to the detriment of the workers academic studies and bring about greater transparency in the distribution of tips to young workers in the hospitality trade'. The Public Petitions Committee discussed the petition at three meetings and took nine actions, including taking evidence from the petitioners, and writing to, inter-alia, the Scottish Government, the Department for Work and Pensions, HMRC, the Low Pay Commission, and the Scottish Youth Parliament. Taking these actions may contribute to producing better outcomes for petitioners because they provide the committee with a wider range of information on which to base their decision on how to progress the petition. It agreed to close the petition on two grounds. Firstly, that there was a leaflet by the Scottish Child Law Centre on 'Employment Rights for People under 16', which the Scottish Government was discussing ways of promoting. Secondly, the Scottish Government agreed to meet with the petitioners 'to see the work they have carried out and, if it is suitable, look at ways to promote it as an example of good practice in providing relevant information in a local authority area'.

P-03-303 stated, 'We the undersigned call upon the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to issue compulsory guidance to all schools (faith, state or private) concerning homophobic bullying. We strongly urge that changes are implanted quickly and urgently'. The Petitions Committee discussed the petition at four meetings and took six actions, including writing to the National Association of Headteachers, Governors Wales and Stonewall, seeking further details on examples of good practice in addressing homophobic bullying in schools. Such actions also enable the petitioner to collect further information on the topic of their petition which may help them progress a wider campaign, should they wish to do so. The outcome was that new guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government, developed with the help of Stonewall Cymru and the Welsh Anti-Bullying

Network, which was due to be published, was brought to the attention of the petitioners, along with examples of good practice; however, the guidance was unlikely to be compulsory, so in this respect it would not completely fulfil what the petitioners had asked for.

PE1317 and P-03-303 are examples of different types of outcome and 'success'. They did not achieve everything that the petitioners had asked for, but they nevertheless demonstrated to the petitioners that some progress was already being made towards achieving their aims, while in the case of the former, there was even an opportunity for the petitioners to discuss that work with the Scottish Government.

As previously highlighted, seeking to identify 'success' in relation to individual petitions is complex, and is made more challenging because success for one person may not be success for another. Individuals' judgements are inevitably subjective, and are likely to be related to their expectations. Even with regard to the small number of examples discussed here, it would be possible to argue that from a petitioner's perspective they might range from 'success' (PE1326) to 'failure' (PE1324 and P-03-312), with PE1317 and P-03-303 falling somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

Considering actions and outcomes from the perspective of the systems demonstrates that there is value in a recognition that while for many people 'success' may be achieving the stated aim of the petition, many petitions do usefully accomplish other things. As the framework and case studies show, the petitions committees consider each petition seriously, and often explore the issues in considerable depth, including through seeking information from other bodies. The binary language of success and failure is therefore unhelpful, and indeed for both systems and petitioners, the framing of what can be accomplished as a continuum, and the consequent management of expectations, is likely to be helpful.

6. Conclusions

This article looks at the process that petitions go through in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, examining what happens to them over a 12 month period, and considering the 'outcomes' of petitions from the perspective of the systems. This helps allow petitions to be judged in terms of what they have achieved as they progress through the system. The two petitions committees took between one and nine actions on each petition considered, the majority of which involved writing to a range of bodies and organisations, although they also utilised a wide range of the other actions available to them. However, although helpful in taking forward our understanding of how the committees work and the treatment of petitions, the number of actions taken on a petition may not by itself be an appropriate or sufficient measure of the degree of 'success', and the case studies explore further how the petitions process can be understood in terms of actions and outcomes in this context.

The framework shown in Figure 1 sets out the stages in the petitions process, the actions that the systems can take, and the potential 'outcomes' for petitioners at each stage. It supports the view that 'success' (or otherwise) of petitions can usefully be conceived of as a continuum, together with a recognition that petitioners can achieve different outcomes, including not only 'full' achievement of their aims, but also awareness raising on the topic of the petition, promoting the petition to wider audiences, perhaps through a debate or an inquiry, getting their issue on the agenda of the Parliament or Assembly by it being discussed by a petitions committee, being able to collect further information on the topic of their petition, and having an opportunity for written and potentially face to face dialogue with members. Assessing what happens to petitions is not, therefore, simply a matter of them 'succeeding' or 'failing' to achieve their aims.

References

Bochel, C. and Bochel, H. (2017) 'Reaching-In?', The potential for e-petitions in local government in the United Kingdom', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 20, no. 5, pp. 683-699.

Bochel, C. (2016) 'Process matters: petitions systems in Britain's legislatures', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, **22**, 368-384.

Bochel, C. (2013) 'Petitions Systems: Contributing to representative democracy', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **66**, 798-815.

Bochel, C. (2012) 'Petitions: different Dimensions of Voice and Influence in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales', *Social Policy & Administration*, **46**, 142-160.

Bovens, M., P. 't Hart and B. G. Peters (eds.) (2001) 'Success and Failure in Public Governance: A Comparative Analysis', Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

Bovens, M. and P. 't Hart (1996) 'Understanding Policy Fiascoes', New Brunswick, Transaction.

Carman, C. (2014) 'Barriers and barriers: Asymmetric participation in the Scottish public petitions system', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **67**, 151-171.

Carman, C. (2006) 'The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999-2006', commissioned by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre for the Public Petitions Committee, Edinburgh, Scottish Parliament.

Ergazakis, K., Askounis, D., Kokkinakos, P. and Tsitsanis, A. (2012) 'An Integrated Methodology for the Evaluation of ePetitions' In: Charalabidis, Y. and Koussouris, S. (eds.) *Empowering Open and Collaborative Governance: Technologies and Methods for Online Citizen Engagement in Public Policy Making*, Heidelberg, Springer, pp. 39-59.

Escher, T. and Riehm, U. (2017) 'Petitioning the German Bundestag: Political Equality and the Role of the Internet', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **70**, 132-154.

Hansard Society (2017) 'Audit of Political Engagement 14. The 2017 Report: Part One', London, Hansard Society.

Hansard Society (2012) 'Audit of Political Engagement 9. The 2012 Report: Part One', London, Hansard Society.

Hough, R. (2012) 'Do Legislative Petitions Systems Enhance the Relationship between Parliament and Citizen?', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, **18**, 479-495.

House of Commons Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons (2004) 'Connecting Parliament with the Public, First Report of Session 2003-04', HC 368, London, The Stationery Office.

House of Commons Information Office (2010) 'Public Petitions', House of Commons Information Office Factsheet P7, London, House of Commons.

House of Commons Petitions Committee (2016) 'Your Petitions: A Year of Action, Petitions Committee July 2015 – July 2016', London, Houses of Parliament.

Ingram, H. and D. Mann (eds.) (1980) 'Why Policies Succeed or Fail', London, Sage.

Jungherr, A. and Jurgens, P. (2010) 'The Political Click: Political Participation Through E-petitions in Germany', *Policy & Internet*, **2**, 131-165.

Kerr, D. (1976) 'The Logic of "Policy" and Successful Policies', *Policy Sciences*, **7**, 351- 363.

King, A. and I. Crewe. (2013) 'The Blunders of our Governments', London, Oneworld.

Macintosh, K. (2017) 'Inquiry into e-petitions: Submission No. 5', Submission to the Parliament of New South Wales inquiry into e-petitions, Sydney, Parliament of New South Wales.

McConnell, A. (2010) 'Understanding Policy Success: Rethinking Public Policy', Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee (2016) 'Review of Public Petitions Arrangements', Cardiff, National Assembly for Wales.

Palfrey, C., Thomas, P. and Phillips, C. (2012) 'Evaluation for the Real World', Bristol, Policy Press.

Parsons, D. (2017) 'Demystifying Evaluation', Bristol, Policy Press.

Panagiotopoulos, P. and Elliman, T. (2012) 'Online engagement from the grassroots: Reflecting on over a decade of epetitioning experience in Europe and the UK' In: Charalabidis, Y. and Koussouris, S. (eds.) *Empowering open and collaborative governance: Technologies and methods for online citizen engagement in public policy making*, Heidelberg, Springer, pp. 79-94.

Prasser, S. (2006) 'Aligning "Good Policy" with "Good Politics"' In: Colebatch, H. (ed.) *Beyond the Policy Cycle: The Policy Process in Australia*, Chatswood, New South Wales, LexisNexis Butterworths pp. 266-292.

Puttnam Commission (2005) 'Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye', London, Hansard Society.

Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee (2016) 'Public Petitions Newsletter', March 2016.

Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee (2015) 'Review of the Petitions Process', SP Paper 859, Second Report, 2015, (Session 4), Edinburgh, Scottish Parliament.

Wright, S. (2012) 'Assessing (e)Democratic Innovations: "Democratic Goods" and Downing Street E-Petitions', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, **9**, 453-470.

Table 1

The number of actions taken by Petitions Committees' on petitions

Number of actions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total actions
Scottish Parliament petitions	5	6	7	9	17	5	3	0	1	219

National Assembly for Wales petitions	1	12	13	2	3	3	2	1	0	127
--	---	----	----	---	---	---	---	---	---	-----

Table 2

The types of action taken by Petitions Committees' on petitions

Types of action	Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee		National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee	
	No	%	No	%
Write to a committee within Parliament/Assembly	9	4	4	3
Write to ministers within legislative body	50	23	35	28
Write to UK Government department	7	3	1	1
Write to local authority or local government body	12	6	11	9
Write to NHS Trusts/boards	3	1	2	2
Write to petitioners to seek their views on the evidence gathered, for further information, to	1	1	33	26

make them aware of current work in the area, to update them on progress				
Write to private body	6	3		
Recommend relevant committee in new Parliament/Assembly takes the petition forward	1	1	7	6
Write to quasi- governmental body	32	15	14	11
Seek legal guidance on whether the Parliament/Assembly has the power to take the requested course of action			3	2
Write to not-for profit organisation/charity	14	6	2	2
Invite body/individuals to give evidence to the committee	14	6	3	2
Petition referred to another committee/working group in legislature	9	4	1	1
Write to Trade unions, professional, umbrella bodies	26	12	5	4
Write to government body	16	7	1	1
Write to petitioners inviting them to take part in review/discussions, meet Assembly Government to discuss issue raise in the petition	7	3	2	2
Other (inter-alia, this includes writing to organisations not listed above because the numbers are very small, undertaking further	12	6	3	2

research and investigation, and agreeing to take suggestions noted in the petition into account in any review).				
Total	219	101	127	102

Figure 1

Petitions framework

Stages in the petitions process	ACTIONS systems (clerks and Petitions Committees) can take	OUTCOMES What petitioners can achieve
Before formal submission (this stage is optional) Petitioner contacts committee staff with idea for petition	Dialogue with petitioner	Advice from the clerks on petition wording Information on the most appropriate system to submit the petition to, if the petition is inadmissible to this system
Submission Petitioner submits petition (on paper or online)	Accept or reject petition	Inadmissible (rejected) petitions Reason given for rejection Advice on rewording or where relevant on the most appropriate system to submit petition to

	<p>Admissible (accepted) petitions</p> <p>Publish admissible petitions on the website</p>	<p>Promotion of petition to a wider audience to enable signatures and/or support to be gathered via online facility before formally being lodged for consideration by the Petitions Committee (not all systems require petitioners to collect signatures)</p> <p>Raises awareness of the topic of the petition</p>
Consideration	<p>Petition discussed by the Petitions Committee</p>	<p>Puts the issue raised by the petition on the agenda of the Parliament, Assembly or government</p> <p>Can attend the meeting of the Petitions Committee to listen to petition being considered, or watch online</p>
Actions	<p>Petitions Committee seeks views on the petition by writing to a range of relevant organisations and individuals</p>	<p>This may produce a better outcome for petitioners because it provides committees with information on which to base</p>
<p>Petitions Committee takes action on the petition</p>		

	<p>The clerks provide copies of responses to petitioners</p> <p>Petitions Committee considers these views before deciding on any further actions</p>	<p>their decision on how to progress the petition</p> <p>This enables petitioners to collect further information on the topic of their petition which may help them progress their campaign</p> <p>This provides an opportunity for dialogue. Petitioners are given copies of the responses received by the Petitions Committee and have the opportunity to comment in writing on these responses</p>
<p>Further Action(s)</p> <p>Petition considered by the Petitions Committee at further meetings</p>	<p>Invite the petitioners to give evidence on their petition to the Petitions Committee</p>	<p>This is an opportunity for petitioners to present their petition to members and for members to ask questions about the petition</p>
	<p>Hold formal roundtable evidence sessions with key stakeholders</p>	<p>Opportunity for dialogue</p>
	<p>Hold informal roundtable sessions</p>	<p>Opportunity for dialogue</p>

	Recommend that another committee within the legislative body takes the petition forward	Consideration of the petition by a committee which 'specialises' in the issue raised in the petition Promotion of the petition issue via another committee
	Hold a debate on the petition	Promotes issue to a wider audience
	Hold an inquiry into the topic raised by the petition	Collection of detailed evidence and scrutiny of the issue raised in the petition. This usually leads to the production of a report with recommendations to government Government response to committee report
		Achieves the aim of the petition
	Close the petition	Letter from the chair which includes the reasons for closing the petition