

Council

23 April 2026

Review of the Council's Petitions Scheme

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council

Report from: Bhupinder Gill, Assistant Director, Legal and Governance

Author: Wayne Hemingway, Head of Democratic Services
Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out details of a review of the Council's Petitions Scheme and seeks approval of a revised Scheme from full Council.

The report has previously been considered by the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26 March 2026, the minutes of which are set out in section 6 of the report and by the Cabinet on 7 April 2026, the decisions of which are set out in section 8 of the report.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Council is asked to note the comments of the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in section 6 of the report and the decisions of the Cabinet, as set out in section 8 of the report.
- 1.2. The Council is asked to approve the revised Petitions Scheme to full Council, with effect from 1 August 2026, as set out in Appendix B to the report, subject to consideration being given to implementation of enhanced security for e-petitions on the Council system. (Note: Once proposed and seconded this recommendation will be taken forward without discussion for debate at the next ordinary meeting of the Council as set out in paragraph 2.2 of the report).

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. The Council's Petitions Scheme forms part of the Council's Constitution, therefore, approval of the revised Scheme is a matter for full Council.
- 2.2. Within the Constitution, the Petitions Scheme forms part of the Council Rules. Paragraph 16.2 of the Council Rules states that "Any motion to add to, change or withdraw these Council rules will, when proposed and seconded, be taken forward without discussion to the next ordinary meeting of the

Council.” This will apply in this case, therefore, if the recommendations are moved and seconded at this full Council meeting, the report will be taken forward without discussion to the July full Council meeting.

3. Background

- 3.1. Full Council adopted its current Petition Scheme on 25 November 2010 in response to provisions in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. The Act placed a new duty on local authorities to respond to all petitions and to establish a scheme for handling petitions including provision of a facility for electronic petitions (e-petitions).
- 3.2. With effect from 1 April 2012 the provisions relating to petitions in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 were repealed by Section 46 of the Localism Act 2011. The Government considered this would provide more discretion for local authorities to decide how to approach petitions locally. Full Council was advised of this at its meeting on 26 July 2012 and took the view that no change was required to Medway’s Petition Scheme as it was working effectively.
- 3.3. The Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report reviewing e-petitions on 30 January 2018 and recommended to Full Council to consider an amendment to the Council’s Petition Scheme to accept e-petitions which did not include all the personal details currently required by the scheme.
- 3.4. Full Council considered this recommendation on 26 April 2018 and resolved only to accept e-petitions which fully comply with the existing requirements of Medway Council’s constitution, i.e. where an e-petition hosted on an alternative platform is received by the Council, the petition will only be accepted when the Council is able to see a name, postal address, a valid postcode and email address for the lead petitioner as well as each signatory. In practice, this meant that the Council continued to not accept petitions from third party websites because the Council could not be provided all of the information it required, as set out above.
- 3.5. Since March 2022, the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee has considered an annual report setting out the number of petitions the Council has received and dealt with.
- 3.6. In June 2025, the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee has considered the annual report and in doing so asked officers to review the scheme and bring proposals to a future committee meeting, including reference to accepting external online petitions, whether Artificial Intelligence (AI) was a risk to the integrity of petitions, and issues around awareness of the Scheme.
- 3.7. The Scheme has been reviewed accordingly taking into account the experience and practice of administering the Scheme for over 15 years.
- 3.8. The current Scheme is attached at Appendix A and a revised Scheme is set out in Appendix B, the main changes can be summarised as follows:

- 3.8.1. The petition organiser must be a resident of Medway.
- 3.8.2. The scheme promotes the use of the petition template for hard copy petitions, to aid ease of use by potential signatories and ensure that the petition information provided is within the guidelines set out within the scheme.
- 3.8.3. It is proposed that the Council accepts petitions from third party websites such as Change.org. This is to widen access to the Council's petition scheme, providing potential petitioners with additional options for making their views known to the Council.
- 3.8.4. Petitions must request action by the Council which is within the remit of the Council. This change would align with motions at Full Council meetings and ensure that the Council is focused on areas of its responsibility when responding to requests from the public. In practice, very few petitions are received about issues which the Council does not have responsibility.
- 3.8.5. A minimum of two signatures are required to validate the petition. This reflects current practice. Where petitions with one or no signatures have been received it has been treated as a letter to the Council and been sent to the relevant service for a response.
- 3.8.6. Petition organisers who are unhappy with the response provided are given the opportunity to address the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee for a maximum of five minutes. The issue is then discussed by the Committee. This reflects current practice and aligns with time limits for speaking at other Committees.
- 3.8.7. In addition, the scheme has been rewritten to aid ease of use and accessibility by the public. It is further proposed that Democratic Services work in conjunction with the Communications Team to promote the new petition scheme to increase awareness of the scheme as an effective way to request action from the Council, increasing direct access to the democratic process.

4. Options

- 4.1. The Council can either decide to retain the existing Scheme which has been in place since 2010 (option A) or decide to approve a revised Scheme (option B). Option B is the recommended options for reasons set out in section 6 below.

5. Advice and analysis

- 5.1. Petitions provide an invaluable opportunity for the public to raise issues of concern and reflect local opinion to the Council and influence decision making. The proposed changes to the scheme widen access to the scheme, improve clarity for the user and more accurately reflect current practice.

- 5.2. It is possible that the Council will receive more petitions and a greater number of signatories for online petitions if the proposal to include petitions from third party websites is agreed.
- 5.3. It is for Members and officers to consider how much weight should be given to a petition on a case-by-case basis when making decisions.
- 5.4. In relation to AI, the Head of Democratic Services and Chief Information Officer have reviewed the Council's own e-petition platform in terms of the potential for AI to spoof or fake a petition or signatures to a petition. The Scheme requires that the user registers on the system with a postal address and enter a valid email address which provides a good mitigation. If there was a genuine concern about spoof petitions, and it was felt that a valid email address and postal address was insufficient, the service could consider putting a "prove you are not a robot" on the registration page. However, these mainly frustrate real users (e.g. having to click on all the pictures with traffic lights), so the service would be reluctant to suggest this unless there was an identified issue. This will be kept under review.
- 5.5. With regards to third party websites, officers have contacted Change.org who have advised how their platform works for users who wish to sign a petition:
 - 5.5.1. All signers need to have a valid email address.
 - 5.5.2. When signing for the first time, Change.org sends a confirmation message, and the signature will not be counted until a signer clicks on the confirmation link.
 - 5.5.3. If one person tries signing multiple times with different emails using the same device or IP address, then the system prevents the additional signatures from going through.
 - 5.5.4. If a user signs a petition while logged out of their account, they will still need to confirm their signature for it to count.
 - 5.5.5. Likewise, when starting a petition, a Change.org account is required to be created with a valid email address. If there are any petitions posted that break any of Change.org's petition guidelines, they also have the option where anyone can report them so Change.org can further review them and take appropriate action.
- 5.6. A Diversity Impact Assessment has been undertaken on the proposals, as set out in Appendix C to the report. In summary, no adverse impacts have been identified.
- 5.7. Subject to Members' final approval, the revised Petitions Scheme will take effect from 1 August 2026. This means that only petitions created from 1 August 2026 onwards will be processed in accordance with the revised Scheme, with any other petitions processed in accordance with the current Scheme.

5.8. The Scheme will be kept under review, noting that the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive an annual report.

6. Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee

6.1. The report was previously considered by the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26 March 2026. The draft minutes of this discussion and officer response to a recommendation made by the Committee are set out below.

6.2. The Head of Democratic Services introduced the report, he highlighted the proposed changes to the scheme which included acceptance of e-petitions from third party websites. He added that the scheme would also be considered by Cabinet and Full Council.

6.3. The following issues were discussed:

6.3.1. **Third Party websites** – A Member commented that some third-party websites reflected particular political views and provided push notifications promoting petitions which contained factually incorrect information. He asked whether the purpose of the change was to increase choice for the public or a decision made by the administration to promote a political stance. The Head of Democratic Services stated that the request to review the scheme had been made by the Committee in June 2025, the purpose of allowing petitions from third party websites was to widen choice, though it was for Members to consider whether this would be supported.

6.3.2. A number of Members welcomed the proposed changes to the scheme, it was commented that the addition of third-party websites was a sensible and helpful way to expand choice for the public and enable more engagement with the public. A Member commented that she had previously assisted a group of residents to organise a petition which was then refused, so anything which made the process easier for the public was positive.

6.3.3. A Member commented that he believed the proposals exposed the Council to frivolous national and international talking points instead of issues of local concern and further consideration was required to protect the Council from this risk.

6.3.4. **Petition thresholds** – The Committee discussed whether the threshold for petitions to be considered by Full Council and Overview and Scrutiny of 5% and 2% of signatures of Medway's population was too high a bar. A Member commented that the number of signatures required for a petition to reach Full Council could only be met by petitions which received national attention. The Head of Democratic Services stated that that the threshold for review by Full Council and Overview and Scrutiny had remained at 5% and 2% of Medway's population since the scheme was introduced in 2010. It was proposed that the Committee provide a comment to Council for a review of thresholds in 12 months, and this was agreed. In response to a question whether children were

included in the population figure, it was confirmed that the population threshold included all Medway residents.

6.3.5. **Lead petitioner** - A Member commented that the scheme proposed if the lead petitioner was not known then the first signature would be contacted as the lead petitioner, but it was also stated that that the lead petitioner had to be a Medway resident, further clarity was sought by the Committee whether this meant the lead petitioner could be someone from outside the area. The Head of Democratic Services stated that the lead petitioner must be a Medway resident, in practice difficulties regarding the identification of the lead petitioner only arose for paper petitions. He added that the current scheme did not restrict all signatories to Medway residents, signatories could be from anywhere, however, the change ensured that lead petitioners would be Medway residents.

6.3.6. A Member commented that petitions were a good way to engage residents, however, there was a risk that the Council would be overwhelmed with petitions. The Head of Democratic Services stated that when petitions came in the Service checked that they met the criteria and ensured there was a response from the relevant department, this was the end of the process in most cases. In the event of the lead petitioner being unhappy with the outcome of the petition, they could request a review from the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This meant that all petitions received a response and petitioners had the right to request a review by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee independent of the thresholds for consideration by the Full Council and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

6.3.7. **Security** – A Member proposed a comment to Cabinet that the Council give further consideration to enhanced security for e-petitions on the Council system. This would include a captcha to ensure that all signatories to a Council e-petition were valid. The Head of Democratic Services undertook to discuss this with the Council's software provider.

6.4. **Decisions:**

- a) The Committee considered the revised petition scheme as set out in Appendix B to the report and submitted comments to Cabinet as set out in the minutes.
- b) The Committee requested Cabinet consider adding a review of signature thresholds contained within the scheme a year from final approval of the new scheme.
- c) The Committee requested Cabinet consider whether further ICT security measures such as a captcha be added to the Council's e-petition system to enhance security.

7. Head of Democratic Services' comments

- 7.1. With regards to the recommendation to Cabinet regarding further ICT security measures such as a captcha being added to the Council's e-petition system to enhance security, officers have contacted the software supplier on this matter and an update will be provided once the supplier has provided a response.

8. Cabinet

- 8.1. The report was considered by the Cabinet on 7 April 2026, the decisions of which are set out below:
- 8.2. The Cabinet noted the comments of the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in the addendum report.
- 8.3. The Cabinet recommended approval of the revised Petitions Scheme to full Council, with effect from 1 August 2026, as set out in Appendix B to the report, subject to consideration being given to implementation of enhanced security for e-petitions on the Council system.

9. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Petition Scheme no longer fit for purpose	A Scheme which is no longer fit for purpose may lead to a reduction in the number of petitions being submitted reducing public engagement and confidence in the democratic process	Review Scheme to ensure there continues to be clear arrangements for handling petitions to ensure transparency and consistency	DIV

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

10. Climate change implications

- 10.1. [The Council declared a climate change emergency in April 2019](#) - item 1038D refers, and has set a target for Medway to become carbon neutral by 2050.

10.2. There are no direct climate change implications arising from this report.

11. Financial implications

11.1. The cost of administering and processing petitions is met from within existing budgets.

12. Legal implications

12.1. Since the repeal of the provisions relating to petitions in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 local authorities have discretion to put in place locally determined arrangements for handling petitions. Any changes to the Council's Petition Scheme would require approval by full Council as the scheme forms part of the Council's Constitution.

Lead officer contact

Wayne Hemingway, Head of Democratic Services, T: 01634 332509, E:
wayne.hemingway@medway.gov.uk

Steve Dickens, Democratic Services Officer, T: 01634 332051, E:
steve.dickens@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix A – Current Petitions Scheme

Appendix B – Revised Petitions Scheme

Appendix C – Diversity Impact Assessment

Background papers

None