



ConsultationResponse

FROM THE RSPCA IN WALES

Petitions Committee Consultation – Review of the National Assembly for Wales Petitions System July 2015

Having regularly engaged with the work of the National Assembly for Wales' Petitions Committee, RSPCA Cymru is delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the consultative process reviewing the existing system. We have opted to submit a written response to this consultation; rather than via the Petitions Committee's [SurveyMonkey tool](#).

The Petitions Committee provides a hugely accessible and useful vehicle in raising issues which matter to the general public in Wales. Further to this, issues concerning animal welfare are exceptionally pertinent within the Committee's on-going deliberations. In recent years RSPCA Cymru has worked with the Committee on a host of issues, including – though not limited to – large animal rescue in North Wales, the establishment of an Offender's Register for animal abusers and the regulation of animal sanctuaries.

Indeed, the low threshold necessary for issues to be considered by the Committee is one of its notable strengths. It provides a guaranteed outlet for a single organisation, or a small number of individuals, to ensure an issue can be aired; even if that issue is receiving little political traction elsewhere. Additionally, petitions gaining a large number of signatures can demonstrate the sheer strength of feeling which exists on a topic, and – given the immense importance many people in Wales attach to animal welfare – this would very often be the case on issues under RSPCA Cymru's remit.

Given Wales' maturing democracy and, in recent years, the growing number of topics of devolved concern and the busier legislative landscape, the maintenance of an accessible vehicle to raise issues is key and, indeed, offers – where necessary – an important route to highlight issues related to animal welfare. Building upon this, the Petitions Committee's decision to review existing structures is most welcome, and RSPCA Cymru has identified a number of areas in which animal welfare issues could be further advanced through the Committee's structure with some subtle amendments to the current format.

LODGING PETITIONS ON ISSUES ALREADY CONSIDERED

Presently, a petition may not be put forward or presented to the Committee if a similar issue is already being considered, or a petition has been closed on that particular for topic for less than twelve months. Whilst avoiding duplication is vital, this can sometimes present difficulties. One such example would be surrounding non-stun slaughter; an illegal method

of slaughter in Wales, and across the rest of the European Union, but permissible under religious exemption.

Recently, RSPCA Cymru, in conjunction with the British Veterinary Association, has been gathering signatures to a petition urging the Welsh Government to end non-stun slaughter exemptions. This has attracted significant public support and media interest, and garnered – already – over 3,400 signatures. However, as a petition on this issue was already live, the Petitions Committee was not an avenue RSPCA Cymru or the BVA could explore in this instance.

Whilst signatures could – in some circumstances – be added to a petition already lodged with the Committee, there may be instances where this is inappropriate or the wording carries sufficient differences; and a new petition would thus be needed. Additionally, the petition is likely to be closed to additional signatures; or its progression could be stifled whilst the Committee awaits requested information from, for example, the petitioner. Indeed, at the Petitions Committee session on 14 July 2015, during deliberation of '*P-04-399 Slaughter Practices*', grouped with another petition, it was noted that the Committee was awaiting additional information from a petitioner.

The issue of non-stun slaughter became increasingly prominent in the public's mind after its initial consideration by the Assembly's Petitions Committee, including widespread UK media coverage and a HM Government e-Petition, backed by RSPCA, amassing well over 115,000 signatures.

Feasibly, a Petition could be launched, and subsequently be closed, or sit dormant under the Committee's remit. Later, an event linked to that topic could occur, a shift in public opinion could take place or Welsh Government policy could change. However, the vehicle of the Petitions Committee to re-raise the issue is effectively blocked for at least twelve months, and possibly longer in circumstances where a Petition remains live but is not being actively considered, including in situations where additional information is awaited from a potentially inactive petitioner.

To mitigate these situations, we would encourage the Petitions Committee to consider the feasibility of an appeals mechanism whereby a Petition can be considered even if one on a similar issue has already been lodged within a one-year period, if a clear, justifiable reason for doing so can be demonstrated to the Committee.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS – HOSTING A PETITION

With animal welfare a near-fully devolved competence, RSPCA Cymru regularly runs campaigns which contain a legislative or policy ask. Whilst these campaigns often involve supporters responding to consultations or writing to political decision-makers, petitions are another outlet regularly deployed to gather support and momentum for particular animal welfare matters.

At this time, RSPCA Cymru is gathering support – as referred to above – for a petition against slaughtering animals without prior stunning. Pertinently, with regards to this consultation, we are also collecting signatures calling for a ban on the use of wild animals in

circuses in Wales, which has been lodged with the Petitions Committee, and will be open to the public to sign until October.

Signatures are collected through "campaign actions", hosted on the RSPCA website and built via the Engaging Networks platform; technology which – in their own words – is "used by many of the world's leading charities to power their digital strategies".

RSPCA Cymru would encourage the Committee to explore developing technology to potentially "link up" campaign actions, such as the one referred to above, with the Petitions Committee system. This could mean that those signing the RSPCA petition on their website are, with their consent, automatically signing the petition on the Assembly's website also. This would enable the Committee's web pages to demonstrate an up-to-date number of signatures a petition has received from an appropriate electronic external source. Instead – in the absence of such compatibility – prior to the e-Petition closing on 9th October, those that have signed the petition on the RSPCA website have consented to have their signature "exported" to the Assembly website; most likely via a printed out data set.

Whilst a satisfactory arrangement was confirmed with the Committee prior to the aforementioned circuses petition being formally lodged, some initial concerns were expressed with regards to data capture. However, hosting a petition through an external website should not be a barrier to utilising the democratic outlet of the Petitions Committee if assurances as to the electronic vehicle being deployed can be given. Indeed, online mechanisms for gathering petition signatures tend to have significantly more safeguards than traditional handwritten signatures, which are routinely accepted by the Committee. RSPCA Cymru's online petitions can effectively be regarded as a safe, secure electronic clipboard for signatories; which allows the Society to keep members of the public updated with regards to the campaign issue in hand, whilst simultaneously benefiting from the democratic outlet provided by the Petitions Committee.

RESIDENCE OF SIGNATORIES

Largely, for RSPCA Cymru campaign actions seeking legislative or policy change in Wales, a decision is made to only allow individuals based within Wales to participate. Where an individual in England, for example, attempts to take such an action through RSPCA channels, they will usually be redirected to a suitable alternative in line with appropriate legislative competence. For example, if an individual based in England attempts to sign the aforementioned petition related to non-stun slaughter, they will be referred to materials in relation to the UK Government's work in this area for England.

The Welsh Government has on occasion specified within consultation summaries the number of stakeholders responding who are, and are not, based in Wales; thus clearly distinguishing their importance and emphasising the necessity of RSPCA Cymru taking the approach it does. As such, the Petitions Committee may wish to consider the feasibility of placing restrictions on where signatories for live Petitions derive from. This would also tackle a perceived discrepancy whereby the Petitions Committee accepts submissions on devolved matters only; yet accepts signatures from those not living under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly for Wales. Indeed, a petition lodged with the Committee could be flooded with signatures from another continent, thus giving a disproportionate impression

as to the level of support a particular issue or initiative has in Wales; even if very few of the signatories are from Wales.

Already, members of the public must provide their postcode when signing a petition online. A similar geographic denominator could easily be required by the Committee whereby signatures are collected by hand. However, should this be deemed impractical, an alternative could be for the Committee to consider whether the ten required initial signatories should be from individuals based solely in Wales.

PROGRESSING PETITIONS

As stated, RSPCA Cymru closely follows the work of the Petitions Committee where animal welfare is concerned. As such, we understand that, in many instances, the first action undertaken by the Committee when a Petition is considered is often to write to the appropriate Welsh Government Minister to gather their views. However, though often a hugely important approach, we would encourage the Committee to more frequently implement alternative actions, particularly where the Welsh Government's viewpoint is already known.

Short inquiries – which the Petitions Committee does hold – are often a powerful outlet to exploring an issue; and we would urge, within the challenging time constraints presented, for this mechanism to be utilised more readily for notably prominent issues, particularly those potentially denied debate or a fair hearing elsewhere. Generally, the Petitions Committee should look favourably upon being adventurous in how it progresses petitions; including referring them to appropriate bodies, undertaking consultations and even polling.

RESPONSIBLE AREAS

The Petitions Committee is considering whether to accept petitions on issues beyond the remit of the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales.

One of the challenges faced by RSPCA Cymru in Wales is outlining to our supporters where competence lines on particular issues. Since the 2011 referendum on the National Assembly for Wales' law-making powers, animal welfare is a near-fully devolved competence, aside from issues such as animal experimentation and hunting. Despite this, difficulties understandably exist in ensuring people in Wales passionate about animal welfare lobby the correct responsible body. The situation can be made more complex by, for example, the National Assembly for Wales consenting to refer issues back to the UK Parliament via legislative consent memorandum; as happened further to the suspension, and dropping, of the Control of Dogs (Wales) Bill by the Welsh Government.

RSPCA Cymru believes it has a responsibility to educate its supporters on where responsibility lies in relation to animal welfare; and would be eager that any changes to permissibility rules through the Petitions Committee did not make that process more difficult.

Similar arguments could apply with regards to matters which are the responsibility of Local Authorities, such as planning matters. Indeed, many Local Authorities have their own mechanisms for members of the public or other interested stakeholders to raise a matter

with Council decision-makers; and the Petitions Committee could potentially use its position to promote their existence rather than compromise its own channel.

PETITIONS FROM OTHER PUBLIC BODIES / RESTRICTED ORGANISATIONS

We understand the Committee is considering whether to accept petitions from other public bodies, and other restricted organisations. RSPCA Cymru does not believe it appropriate or relevant for us to offer a firm opinion on this. However, regarding our remit, one of the issues most commonly raised by public bodies in lieu of their animal welfare commitments is a lack of resources from the Welsh Government. As such, the Petitions Committee may wish to consider how a situation could be avoided where allowing public bodies to submit petitions leads to constant, potentially politicised discussions in relation to funding.

IN SUMMARY

RSPCA Cymru looks forward to continuing to work closely with the National Assembly for Wales' Petitions Committee, including its Members and staff in the future. We firmly believe the Committee offers a key and influential tool in on-going endeavours to ensure legislative and policy change in relation to the welfare of Wales' animals. We feel this role can be enhanced by implementing some of the aforementioned, subtle changes to the Committee's existing processes.