

**National Assembly for Wales**  
Petitions Committee

Petitioning: bringing your issues to light



The National Assembly for Wales is the democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people, makes laws for Wales and holds the Welsh Government to account.

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### Chair's introduction

The petitions process was established to give members of the public more opportunities to engage with and influence the National Assembly for Wales.

Since the process was established, we have considered 215 petitions, held 64 meetings, taken oral evidence from 38 petitioners, and even received a petition from 30 dogs (and their owners).

As we come to the end of the Petitions Committee's term, we thought it was a good opportunity to look back at the work of the Committee. We also wanted to highlight how the process has worked and some of the frustrations we have encountered among petitioners.

At the National Assembly for Wales, we are one of the few such bodies to have a petitions system which enables the public to directly influence and shape the Assembly's business. As with any new system, it has been a learning process, but we have been keen to continually develop and improve our ways of working to make the process as effective and accessible as possible.

I have enjoyed chairing the Petitions Committee, hearing the issues which the public feel passionate about and helping them to get their voice heard at all levels of the Assembly. I would like to thank my predecessor Val Lloyd, who worked very hard to get the Committee established in 2007, and steered the Committee through its first two years. I would also like to thank my fellow current Committee members: Andrew RT Davies, Veronica German and Bethan Jenkins, along with our previous Committee member, Mike German.

Most of all though, I would like to thank all our petitioners, members of the public who felt strongly about an issue and submitted a petition. They have given their time and energy in collecting signatures, responding to our many questions and even in some cases, coming and giving evidence to the Committee. Without you, we would have nothing to celebrate. Thank you.

**Christine Chapman AM**  
**Chair, Petitions Committee**

### **What is the Petitions Committee?**

The Petitions Committee was set up to consider petitions submitted by the public. It is a cross-party committee with members from each of the four political parties represented at the Assembly:

Christine Chapman, Labour (Chair)  
 Andrew RT Davies, Conservative  
 Veronica German, Liberal Democrat  
 Bethan Jenkins, Plaid Cymru

### **What is the role of the Petitions Committee?**

We must consider any admissible petitions which are submitted by the public. This means a petition must be about an issue which the National Assembly has powers in relation to.

To do this, we can take a range of different actions, and we will often undertake a combination of:

- seeking information and views from the Welsh Government, either in writing or orally;
- seeking information and views from other organisations that may have a view or interest in the petition, for example, professional bodies, local authorities, health boards, trade unions, community groups or anybody else we feel can add value to our considerations;
- asking for more information from the petitioners either in writing or as part of an evidence session to the Committee;
- undertaking a site visit;
- referring the petition to other Assembly committees or outside organisations;
- having research and legal briefings prepared to help us better understand the issue; and
- carrying out a committee inquiry.

In practice, most of our consideration of a petition involves corresponding with the Welsh Government, petitioners and other interested bodies.

### **What has the Committee done?**

Since we were established, we have:

- held 64 formal committee meetings, and four informal meetings;
- considered 215 petitions, 95 were e-Petitions and 124 paper petitions (of those 215 petitions, 72 are still open and 143 have been closed);
- taken oral evidence from 38 petitioners;
- taken oral evidence from 10 other organisations;
- taken evidence from two Ministers.

### **Where have our petitions come from?**

People can submit petitions from anywhere within Wales or even outside Wales. There are no age or residency restrictions; this has been to make sure the process is as accessible as possible. Our ePetitions system, which was set up in 2008, has helped make the system more accessible and enabled people to show their support for a petition, no matter where they live.

**Table one:** Petitions by region

<b>Region</b>	<b>Number of petitions</b>	<b>Percentage of total</b>
Mid and West	50	23%
North	24	11%
South Central	80	37%
South East	32	15%
South West	22	10%
Outside Wales	7	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>100%</b>

Petitions can be submitted by individuals or organisations. Any petition must collect the support of either ten individuals or one organisation. An organisation can be a formally constituted organisation, such as a charity, or it can be a less formally constituted group such as a tenant and resident's association or a campaign group.

We have received 56% of petitions from individuals and 44% from organisations/groups.

### What have they been about?

Petitions have been received on almost every possible topic, ranging from public toilets to wind turbines, pit ponies to schools. We can consider petitions on any subject that is within the National Assembly's devolved powers. We cannot consider petitions on issues which are the responsibility of Westminster or other organisations such as local authorities or health boards.

**Table two:** breakdown of petitions by subject area.

Subject	Number of petitions	Percentage of total
Communities	10	5%
Economy	7	3%
Education	32	15%
Environment	25	12%
Health	40	19%
Heritage	1	Less than 1%
Legislation	6	3%
Planning	11	5%
Sport	3	1%
Transport	39	18%
Welsh language	4	2%
Other	37	17%
Total	215	100%



### **What has the Committee done?**

This is the most common question we are asked. Every petition is different, calling for very different action. Some are very specific, such as calling for improvements to road safety on a specific trunk road, while others are broader, for example calling for greater equality for the transgender community.

Yet every petition comes rooted from personal experience, with either an individual or group of people saying "this needs changing", "this shouldn't be happening" or even "this should happen". We are always acutely aware of this, and try to make sure that we do all we can to raise the issue and try to get it addressed. The outcome for each petition is as different as the petitions we considered. What we have to be clear about is that submitting a petition will not automatically lead to the aims of the petition being met, but it is an effective way of highlighting and drawing attention to an issue. What we hope to do is give you a flavour of the different sorts of outcomes through real life examples.

## “The action we called for was met”

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For some petitioners, we are pleased that the action the petition calls for is clearly met. This can be the direct result of the petition and the Committee’s involvement; sometimes it is because the petition reflects a broader acknowledgement of a change being needed; and sometimes it is a combination of the two.

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### **Ysgol Hen Felin**

This petition was submitted by a group of young people who called for the Welsh Government to provide more funding for after-school groups. They were particularly concerned about the funding available for groups like Viva which offer young people with learning disabilities the opportunity to access mainstream leisure facilities. We invited the young people to come in and tell us why this was so important and, following this, we wrote to the Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, highlighting the issue. The Welsh Government subsequently announced additional funding to support play and learning opportunities for disabled young people.

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### **National Library of Wales**

This called for funding to be provided to ensure the National Library of Wales could re-open on a Saturday. Our consideration included corresponding with the Minister for Heritage, the National Library of Wales and the Communities and Culture Committee. This clarified the factors that had led to the closure of the library on Saturdays, with the decision ultimately being reversed and the library re-opening on Saturdays from May 2010. This is a petition where work to address the issue was clearly already underway prior to the petition, but the petitions process helped to demonstrate the public’s feeling on the issue and helped put pressure on for the library to be re-opened.

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## **“It helped raise political and public awareness about our issue”**

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With many petitions, a key outcome is that it helps raise the profile of an issue with other Assembly Members, the Welsh Government and the public. The petitions process can help to put pressure on politicians to address an issue. This can be especially effective for those issues which don't have a high public profile, or impact on a group of people who are under-represented in the political process and don't usually engage with the Assembly.

This is one of the most common and important outcomes for us. It can help give a voice to those who may not always be heard.

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### **National Cancer Standards**

This was submitted by Rhondda Breast Friends, and called for all local health boards to meet the National Cancer Standards by 2009. During our consideration we have been in regular correspondence with the Minister for Health and Social Services, as well as each local health board. Much of our consideration has focused on areas of non-compliance and the factors causing this; the work that's being done to address non-compliance and public information. Even though the petition aims have not yet been met, we have continued to pursue the petition to try to ensure that the Standards are met by all local health boards as

a matter of priority. According to the lead petitioner:

**“I believe that compliance with the Standards has been given its rightful importance with the enthusiasm and tenacity of the Petitions Committee in pursuing this.”**

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### **Equality for the transgender community**

This petition calls for greater equality for the transgender community. This is an issue that does not always have a high public and political profile, yet some of the difficulties faced have a huge impact on people's everyday lives. We took oral evidence from the petitioners, who told us of these difficulties. As a result, we wrote to the First Minister, highlighting concerns about a wide range of issues, including access to health services, employment, public awareness and hate crime, and we have called for further work to help address some of these issues.

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## “The petition was just one part of our broader campaign”

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Those petitions which are often the most ‘successful’ are those for which the petitions process is just one element of a wider campaign. Often a petition can provide a focal point for making the public aware of an issue, raising political awareness and getting press coverage. For some petitioners, as well as submitting the petition, they will also organise letter-writing campaigns, protests and other forms of activity to try to get their issue addressed.

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### **Save Gwent Theatre**

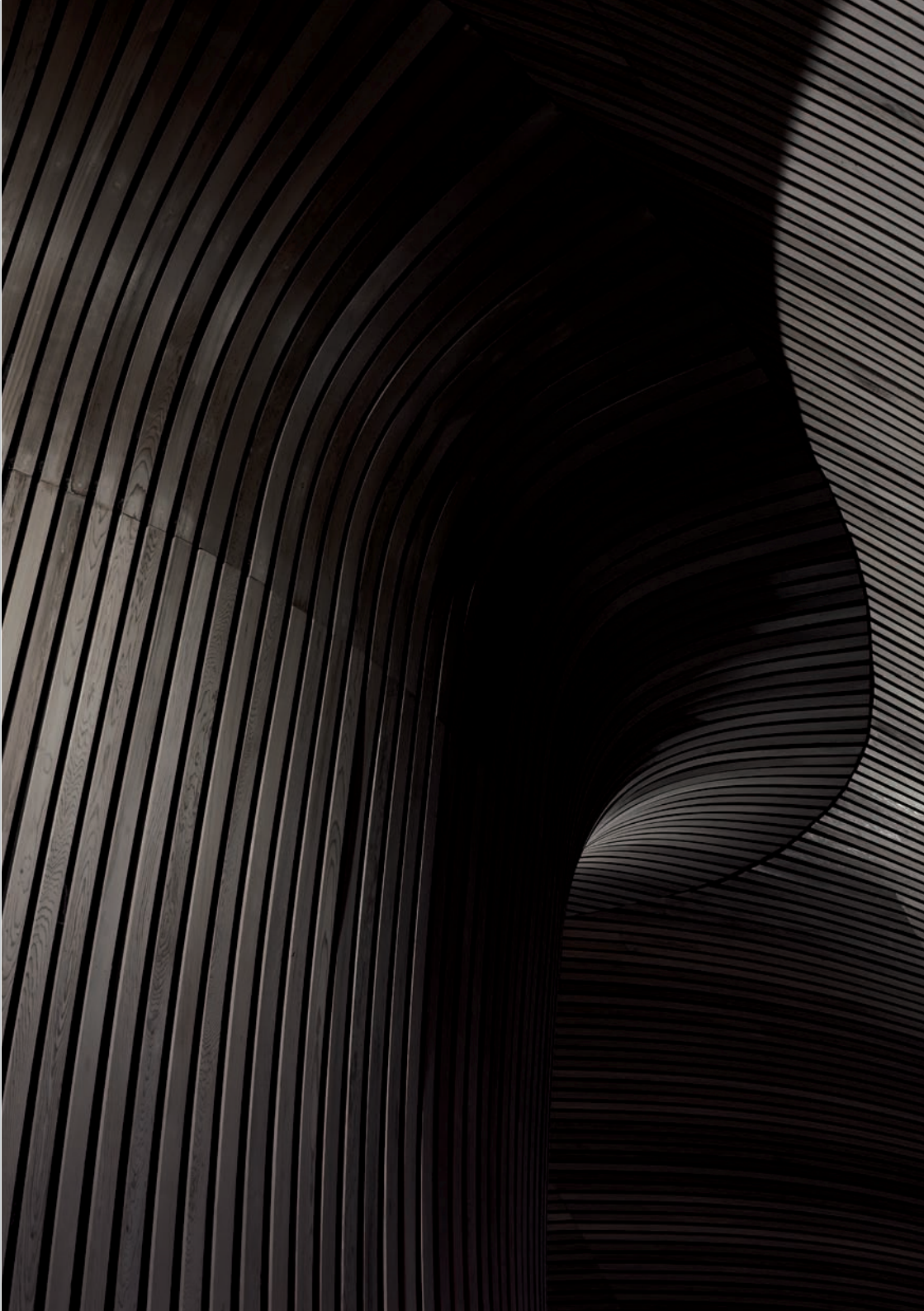
This called for funding to be reinstated to the theatre-in-education company, Gwent Theatre. The petition wasn’t the only element of their campaign; they have attended meetings, orchestrated a letter-writing campaign, with 740 letters being addressed to the Arts Council of Wales, and got local MPs and AMs involved in their campaign. The petition has been just one way in which they have highlighted their concerns and have sought to get their issue addressed. As part of our consideration we have taken oral evidence from the Arts Council of Wales and highlighted our concerns to the Minister for Heritage.

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### **Fishguard trains**

Submitted by two local young people, this petition called for more train services to Fishguard. Their petition was part of a broader campaign, which included the use of Facebook and engagement with their local Assembly Member, who has raised this issue within the Assembly. They have also been successful in getting press coverage throughout Wales on the issue. We have written to the Deputy First Minister about this issue, as well as refer the petition to the Enterprise and Learning Committee who considered it as part of their inquiry into rail infrastructure in Wales.

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## “My petition led to a full inquiry by a scrutiny committee”

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One of the most effective ways in which we can work is by influencing the work of the Assembly. This has mainly been through referring petitions to scrutiny committees and other Assembly committees which have the subject expertise to look at a petition issue in depth. This can result in an inquiry, recommendations to the Welsh Government and changes in policy.

Since 2007, we have referred 50 petitions to other Assembly committees, of which 17 lead to further detailed consideration by the relevant committee. We have been very pleased with the enthusiasm with which other Assembly committees have engaged with petitions, enabling the public to shape their work. We would like to particularly highlight the work of the Enterprise and Learning Committee, which has undertaken work on nine of the petitions we have referred.

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### **Banning Plastic bags**

This called for a ban on plastic bags. After initial consideration, including taking oral evidence from the petitioners, we felt this merited further detailed investigation. We referred it to the Sustainability Committee, which agreed to carry out a full inquiry. The Committee recommended to the Welsh Government that a levy be introduced for single use plastic bags. The Welsh Government accepted this recommendation, and from November 2011, there will be a 5p charge on all single use plastic bags. All this was the result of the petition.

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### **Carno Station: re-opening**

This called for Carno station to be re-opened. This was one of the first petitions we ever considered, and we referred it to the Enterprise and Learning Committee. The Committee held a meeting in Carno, where it took evidence from the petitioners, Powys County Council, Network Rail, Arriva Trains Wales and the Welsh Government. The Committee recommended to the Welsh Government that the Carno Station Action Group be given assistance in preparing a business case, and that guidance be issued on preparing business cases for re-opening stations. This report and the Government response was then debated by the Assembly.

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### **Pride in Barry**

This called for regeneration funding for Barry. We took oral evidence from the petitioner, and felt it was an issue that needed further investigation, so we referred it to the Enterprise and Learning Committee. The Committee held a formal meeting in Barry, taking evidence from the petitioner and the Welsh Government. This was followed by an 'open-mic' session. The Enterprise and Learning Committee recommended that Barry merited serious consideration for future regeneration support, and the report was debated by the Assembly. When giving evidence, the lead petitioner said:

“The petitioning process, which has led to our coming here, has given Pride in Barry a voice that was being stifled. So, we have to say thank you very much for a process that allows small community groups such as ours to come here and create a big noise, as we know we have done through this process. Even if you make no recommendations on this, we know that we have raised the needs and issues relating to Barry loudly in this building and have caused two Ministers to come here today to answer questions about that and to realise its importance. In itself, that is a win for us”.

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## “An unexpected surprise!”

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During our consideration of a petition, there may be outcomes which are slightly aside from the main aims of the petition. These show how the petitions process can help you in different ways from how you might expect when you submit your petition.

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### **Glamorganshire Canal**

This called for the creation of a historic trail to mark the Glamorganshire Canal. As part of our considerations, we raised the petition with both Cardiff and Rhondda Cynon Taff councils. This resulted in Cardiff Council agreeing to consider the route for possible inclusion in the Strategic Cycle Network, and Rhondda Cynon Taff raising it with the South East Wales Transport Authority (SEWTA) who have agreed to promote the route as a walking/cycling scheme. The petitioner has said:

“All your [the Committee's] efforts are extremely valuable and I hope we will make further progress in the future”.

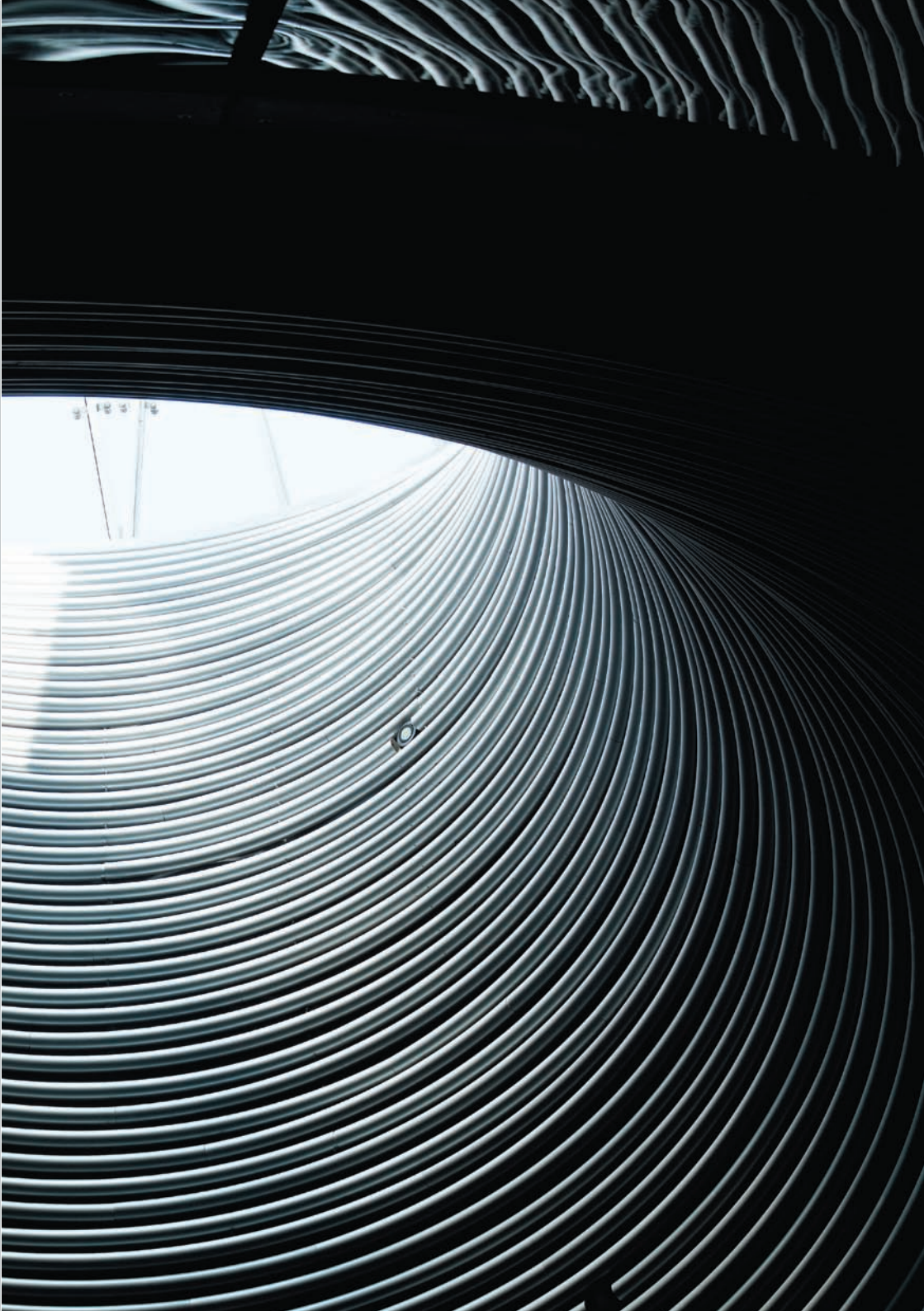
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### **Coleg Ceredigion**

This was submitted by a group of young people who called for improved rail services to Aberystwyth. As a result of the Committee’s suggestion that the petitioners should meet with TRaCC (the transport consortium for mid Wales), a travel familiarisation event was held for the petitioners. This helped with their confidence in using public transport, and the lead petitioner told us:

“I think this is an example of a petition that has successfully stimulated collaboration with local partners.”

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## **“The Committee made specific recommendations to the Welsh Government”**

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On occasion, where the issue is so specific that is unlikely to be looked at by any other committee, we have carried out an inquiry. We don't have the capacity to undertake inquiries on a regular basis, nor do we think it should be the primary role of the Committee. However, on those occasions where we feel that further detailed work is warranted, we have done so.

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### **Save the Vulcan**

This petition called for the Vulcan pub in Cardiff to be protected and preserved. While we did not carry out an inquiry, we did take oral evidence from a number of people, including the petitioners, CADW and Cardiff Council. Following our consideration we produced a report making recommendations to the Welsh Government on the protection of historic buildings which do not meet national listing criteria. We were pleased that the Government accepted both our recommendations relating to local listing.

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### **Welsh Canoeing Association**

This called for legislation to establish a statutory right of public access to and along non-tidal water in Wales. We undertook a site visit to the River Teifi in Carmarthenshire, taking evidence from a range of people, and held a formal meeting in Scotland to take evidence on the effectiveness of Scottish legislation. As a result of our inquiry, the Sustainability Committee undertook a full inquiry, recommending that a voluntary system of access agreements be introduced.

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## **Work based learning provision for vulnerable young people**

This called for improvements to work based learning for vulnerable young people. We took oral evidence from two young people, who highlighted the perilous financial situation that some young people on work based learning can be in. We brought the issue to the attention of other committees and the Children's Commissioner for Wales, who all agreed that it merited further consideration but were unable to do any work on it. As a result, we undertook a full inquiry, with a number of organisations, including the Welsh Government, providing written and oral evidence. We produced a report, making 25 recommendations, 20 of which were either accepted or accepted in principle by the Welsh Government. The report was then debated by the Assembly.

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## **What have been common frustrations with the system?**

As with any new system, there have been teething problems along the way. We have strived to continually improve the petitions process throughout the four years it has been operating, to make sure that the system is as easy to use, accessible and successful as possible. It is fair to say that not everybody has been pleased with how the petitions process has worked, but we have learnt from this and it has helped us develop and change our ways of working where necessary.

### **“I wanted to give oral evidence but the Committee didn’t invite me”**

We know that for a lot of petitioners one of the most important aspects of the process is the ability to come and talk to the Committee about their petition. We find it really beneficial to hear from petitioners, but the number of petitions we receive means we cannot do this with every petition.

In total, over the last four years, we have heard from 38 sets of petitioners on a diverse range of subjects including prostate cancer screening, ferry services between Swansea and Cork and Wyeside Arts Centre. To make sure that all petitions are treated in a fair manner, all petitioners got up to 15 minutes to present their petition, followed by up to 15 minutes of questioning from the Committee.

In addition to taking oral evidence from petitioners, we have also taken evidence from other organisations, including the Welsh Government, on 12 other occasions. We have also undertaken one short inquiry on access to inland water, and one full inquiry on work based learning provision for vulnerable young people, where we took oral evidence from seven organisations.

As well as taking evidence at the Senedd in Cardiff Bay, we have also held external meetings and been on site visits to help us understand the issues behind petitions. Our biggest external meeting was at the Catrin Finch Centre in Wrexham on 01 February 2010, where we took evidence from the People's Council for North Wales on their petition calling for the withdrawal from the West Cheshire/North East Wales Sub-Regional Strategy. We were pleased to see how many of the public came to watch the meeting, and listen to the evidence from the petitioners and the Mersey Dee Alliance. This helped us to better understand the petition and the strength of feeling about this issue.

External meetings were also held in Colwyn Bay and at the Royal Welsh Show, which again provided us with an opportunity to take evidence outside Cardiff.

As well as holding meetings, we have also been out on visits to aid our consideration of petitions, including visiting a stretch of the A465 in Merthyr Tydfil in relation to a petition calling for a relief road to take traffic away from a local school.

When a petition is submitted to the Committee, the petitioner is also given the opportunity to present the petition to members of the Committee. This is done on the steps of the Senedd building, and gives petitioners the opportunity to chat to us about the petition. You can also invite the press, and petition presentations have featured on BBC Wales, ITV Wales, S4C and Newsround, as well as local and national newspapers and online. This is a great opportunity for you to highlight the issue, and for us to find out more about the petition.

## “It’s taken so long for anything to happen”

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A common concern is the length of time that we take to consider and close petitions. As a Committee we are keen to explore all angles and issues relating to a petition, and we do not like to close petitions until we are certain that we have explored all of these elements. For some petitioners, they have felt this has demonstrated a commitment to trying to get their issues addressed, but others have felt that the process is too slow. We have worked hard to try to improve our processes to try to get swifter resolutions for the petitions, but we understand that for some petitioners this has caused frustration.

## **“Nothing has happened! The Committee hasn’t done what I want them to do!”**

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The most common concern that people have with the process is that the action that the petition is calling for hasn’t been met. We have to be clear that submitting a petition doesn’t mean that the action that is being called for will be met.

One of our members, Mike German, once described the Committee as a ‘spotlight’ not a ‘solutions’ committee. This is the best description of the Committee; we cannot guarantee that we will find a solution for you, but we hope that by shedding light on the issue we can help to get answers and find a resolution.

We do not have powers to make the Welsh Government or any other organisation take any specific action, but we can make recommendations to them if we feel it is appropriate. We often find that just through our consideration of a petition it helps to raise political awareness of an issue or even put some political pressure on for an issue to be addressed.

**The future....**

We want to encourage you to continue to submit petitions. It is an easy way to help get your voice heard, highlight issues of concern and influence the work of the Assembly. We hope that the process will continue to evolve, to make sure it is easy and accessible for anybody to tell the Assembly what they think or show what matters to them.

**How to get in touch**

If you are interested in submitting a petition, please contact us on **029 2089 8998** or email **[petition@wales.gov.uk](mailto:petition@wales.gov.uk)**

We are also happy to meet you in person.

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