

Organising a petition

Using a petition as part of a community campaign

A petition is a list of names of people who want a particular change to happen. It shows that a lot of people all agree with each other, which helps put pressure on decision makers.

Is a petition useful for your campaign?

Petitions can be a useful part of a well-planned campaign.

Before you start campaigning, think through:

- ♦ What's the problem you want your campaign to address?
- ♦ What's the solution to this problem? Do you think it is possible to make this happen quickly?
- ♦ If this solution is a very big change that you are unlikely to achieve straight away, are there smaller changes that would be moves in the right direction?
- ♦ Who has the power to make the change(s) you want to see?
- ♦ How will you put pressure on these people to make the change(s)?
- ♦ What change(s) would make your campaign a success?

Petitions show that a lot of people feel strongly about an issue. This is especially useful if the number of people who agree is very large. If your campaign is unlikely to engage a very large number of people, other campaigning tools may be more useful.

A letter-writing campaign can have more impact than a very small petition. A news release can raise awareness.

A public meeting can encourage more people to get involved. See the following information sheets for more help:

- ♦ *Organising a letter-writing campaign*
- ♦ *Organising a public meeting*
- ♦ *Writing a news release*

Writing a good petition

Your petition can be on paper or online, or both. We have a list of websites that help you build internet petitions¹. There is also an example paper petition on page 5.

State clearly what change you want to make

Make this realistic and concrete. For example, rather than saying “clean up our streets,”, say “employ more street cleaners and provide more public bins”.

Direct the demand to the right people

For example, if you want to extend the opening hours at your local council-run library, direct the petition to someone in the council. If you want a change to national policy, target a government department or specific ministers or MPs. Try to identify a specific individual decision-maker or small committees to address the petition to, rather than a whole big organisation.

See page 4 for specific information on petitioning Brighton & Hove City Council and petitioning the government.

Include accurate information and evidence

To get a lot of signatures you will need to persuade people who don't already know a lot about the issue. For example, to persuade people to support a petition to install a zebra-crossing, include information about the number of people who need to cross at that place, and any accidents that have happened.

Make sure it is a clear record of people's opinion

Ask people to give their postcode, as this helps show that they are real people and, if relevant, that they live in the area affected by the issue. Include the petition text at the top of every page of a paper petition, so that all signatures are clearly below the demand.

Write clearly

People need to understand what they are signing quickly and easily. Make sure your petition is clear, accurate and concise. Do not use overly formal or legalistic language.

Collecting signatures

If you are campaigning on a local issue, you need to reach as many local residents as possible (e.g. in newsagents, schools, community centres, door-to-door).

If you want to get thousands of signatures from all over the country, think carefully about how to use social media to get as much coverage as you can.

However you collect your signatures, try to:

- ♦ Have as many volunteers as possible.

¹ www.resourcecentre.org.uk/service/internet-petition-websites

- ♦ Produce a campaign briefing for volunteers so that they can respond to any queries. See our information sheet *State your case: a community group's guide to writing a campaign briefing*.
- ♦ Make a large sign if you are petitioning in the street so that people know why you are there. Print flyers to give to everyone who you ask to sign a paper petition, explaining what the petition is about, giving the contact details for your group and inviting them to get in touch and get involved.
- ♦ If your petition is online, share it as widely as you can on social media. See our page on *Facebook for community groups* for help with getting your message out on Facebook.
- ♦ Invite people who sign your petition to join your mailing list, either online or with a paper sign-up sheet. See our information sheet *Data protection for community groups* for tips on looking after people's personal details.
- ♦ Have a date by which paper petitions must be returned to a central person or place. Give yourselves time to chase up volunteers who do not return them on time.

If your group is based in Sussex you can print petitions, fliers and posters in the Resource Centre print room. We also have folding tables, a free-standing sign and clipboards available for hire.

Submitting your petition

Get your timing right

Petitions are more likely to have an impact if they are used at a time when it is not too difficult to make the change you are asking for. For example, if you are petitioning against a new development, submit the petition before the plans are approved. You are less likely to have success if the building work has already begun.

Get your petition to the right place

Large governance organisations like the Government and local authorities have their own systems for receiving petitions. If you are petitioning one of these, you should follow their system. If your petition is to Brighton & Hove City Council or the Government, see page 4 for guidance. If it is to another local council, contact their Democratic Services department to find out how to submit a petition.

In most other cases, you should try to talk directly to the decision-maker you are targeting. This might be a headteacher, a small business owner, or the CEO of a big company. To find the right contact details, you might need to go through a switchboard or a Personal Assistant. You may have to be persistent, but speaking directly with the decisionmaker will increase your chances of success. Send your petition by email or post, and follow up with a phone call or visit to arrange a meeting.

Before you speak with the decision-maker, be clear about what you are asking for. Write down your demands so that you can refer to them in the meeting. Know in advance what "winning" would mean. A change of policy? A promise to consider it? What will you do if you don't "win" straight away? How can you use this to publicise your campaign and gain more support?

Petitioning Brighton & Hove City Council

You can present paper petitions and online petitions to Brighton & Hove City Council. It is your choice which method you use, or you can do both at the same time. If you want to use an online petition, it's easiest to use the Council's own petition website², as it will help ensure your petition will be considered valid by the Council.

When the Council receives a petition, the lead petitioner is invited to speak about it for 3 minutes at a Council meeting. You can also ask a councillor or somebody else to speak on your behalf. (Having a councillor involved in your campaign can be helpful because they could follow up your petition by making further proposals and arguments at future Council meetings.)

Before launching your petition, decide which meeting you are aiming to present it at. You can present the petition at a Full Council meeting or a Committee meeting. (Different Committees deal with different areas of Council policy).

Information about the Council structure is on their website³. If you are not sure where would be best to present your petition, a local councillor might be able to help. You could also talk to Democratic Services for advice⁴. You will need to inform the Council of the wording of the petition and the number of signatures 10 days before the meeting, so start well in advance.

If a petition receives more than 1,250 signatures, it can be debated by Full Council. This means councillors will discuss the issue for up to 15 minutes after the petition is presented.

Once a petition has been received by a Committee or Full Council, they might:

- ♦ Note it as a piece of information to consider when making decisions on the issue;
- ♦ Ask Council officers to investigate the issue and provide more information to be considered at a future meeting;
- ♦ Respond to the petitioner explaining why the Council does not intend to take the action requested;
- ♦ Decide to take the action requested.

Brighton & Hove City Council guidelines on petitioning⁵ provide more information on how to present a petition and what happens next.

Note that, if the Council is running a public consultation, or inviting responses to a Planning Application, a petition is considered as just one representation. In these cases, asking people to write individual letters can be more effective. See our information sheet *Organising a letter-writing campaign*.

Petitioning the Government

If your petition is about a national issue, you may want to present it to the Government. You can do this online via the Government petition website⁶. Your

² www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/council-and-democracy/councillors-and-committees/e-petitions

³ present.brighton-hove.gov.uk/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1

⁴ www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/a-z/a-z-pages/councillors-and-committees

⁵ www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/council-and-democracy/councillors-and-committees/setting-or-signing-petitions-and-presenting

⁶ petition.parliament.uk/

petition will automatically be submitted to the Government. They will respond to it if it receives over 10,000 signatures, and will consider a debate in Parliament if it receives over 100,000.

You could also present a petition to a particular government department. Try contacting your local MP to find out if s/he will support your petition and ask for advice on who to present it to. To find out who your local MP is go to www.theyworkforyou.com/mps/ and enter your postcode, or phone the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

Example paper petition layout

Save Anytown Skate Park		
Petition to Godrick Goofberry, Leader of Anytown Council		
<p>We, the undersigned, are opposed to the proposed closure of Anytown Skate Park, which is used by hundreds of local young people. We call on Anytown Council to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ reject the proposed plan to close the skate park ♦ fully consult with local residents on any future proposals 		
<p>Anytown Skate Park was used by over 1000 young people last year. The skate park provides a unique opportunity for young people to spend time together, socialise and keep fit. The council's own targets include encouraging young people to get more exercise and play a more active role in the community. The skate park is a key way that young people can keep fit, meet neighbours and build positive relationships.</p>		
Name	Address & postcode	Signature
1.		
2.		
3.		

More information

For more tips on running campaigns, see our sheets on:

- ♦ *Organising a letter-writing campaign*
- ♦ *Organising a public meeting*

- ♦ *State your Case*
- ♦ *Writing a news release*
- ♦ *Radio and TV interviews*
- ♦ *Local media contacts*
- ♦ *Facebook for community groups*