

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 21 January 2026
2nd Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE2198: Establish a standardised and fair public participation process for all Scottish councils

Introduction

Petitioner Wilson Chowdhry

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce new legislation or amend existing legislation in order to:

- 1) require all local authorities in Scotland to adopt, within a specified timeframe, a set of minimum standards for public participation processes (questions, deputations, petitions) that ensure such processes are accessible, transparent, fair, inclusive and consistent across Scotland;
- 2) designate a new or existing body to oversee and monitor compliance with such standards and either take or recommend action when these are not met.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2198>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 30 October 2025.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 95 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
January 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2198: Establish a standardised and fair public participation process for all Scottish councils

Petitioner

Wilson Chowdhry

Date Lodged

30 October 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce new legislation or amend existing legislation in order to:

- 1) require all local authorities in Scotland to adopt, within a specified timeframe, a set of minimum standards for public participation processes (questions, deputations, petitions) that ensure such processes are accessible, transparent, fair, inclusive and consistent across Scotland;
- 2) designate a new or existing body to oversee and monitor compliance with such standards and either take or recommend action when these are not met.

Background information

The petition does *not* ask the Scottish Government to interfere with local authorities' democratic mandates, but simply to ensure that fair, transparent and accessible participatory processes are set out and implemented consistently across Scotland's local communities. Existing laws (such as the Community Empowerment Act) mandate participation but do not always define standards or enforce consistency.

Clackmannanshire Council does not allow deputations or public questions on any matter. In Dundee, RAAC homeowners and campaigners in Dundee have been blocked from speaking at meetings, as councillors failed to respond to repeated requests to raise RAAC as an agenda item. In England, many councils allow public questions without a linked agenda item, helping generate debate and enabling deputations. In Scotland, even when deputations are permitted, responses can be incomplete or entirely ignored, with no formal route for follow-up except at future meetings. Some councils assist the public by advising when they may speak; others provide confusing schedules and expect residents to navigate council calendars alone. The lack of consistency across councils deters meaningful participation and leaves communities without a voice.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2198

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on PE2198 Establish a standardised and fair public participation process for all Scottish councils

Local government in Scotland is the sphere of government closest to local communities¹. Councils operate independently of central government - although they receive much of their funding from the Scottish Government - and they are accountable to their electorates for the services they provide.

The petitioner calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce new legislation or amend existing legislation in order to:

1. require all local authorities in Scotland to adopt, within a specified timeframe, a set of minimum standards for public participation processes (questions, deputations, petitions) that ensure such processes are accessible, transparent, fair, inclusive and consistent across Scotland;
2. designate a new or existing body to oversee and monitor compliance with such standards and either take or recommend action when these are not met.

Background

Across Scotland, councils engage with communities and individuals through a variety of mechanisms. [According to COSLA](#), local government is “committed to improving the ways individual people, and communities of people, can be involved in decision-making that affects them”.

In terms of community or individual involvement in council meetings, each local authority publishes its standing orders on its website. These may set out how deputations, questions and petitions are handled. A look at a random sample would suggest that most councils’ standing orders include provisions. It is up to councils themselves to develop, publish and update their standing orders, in line with relevant legislation.

Since the passing of the [2015 Community Empowerment Act](#), “community participation bodies” such as community councils and development trusts, have had the ability to submit “participation requests” to their local authority. The aim of the legislation was to ensure a route for engagement and dialogue.

Individuals and community groups can also speak to their councillors at surgeries, or they can email them with concerns/suggestions. Almost all wards (except for Arran) are represented by more than one councillor, increasing the chances of people having an elected representative willing to take on their concerns. Councillors have a key role in supporting community engagement and participation. An [Improvement](#)

¹ Community councils exist in many areas of Scotland but are not a sphere of government.

[Service briefing](#) sets out the ways in which they can become community leaders. For example, councillors have a role in:

- Advising people how to present a petition to the council, deliver a presentation, speak to a committee or how to ask the right questions;
- Providing advice on council policy and procedures;
- Providing contact details for other organisations, groups or individuals that could potentially help;
- Helping people to access the information that they need.

Despite various efforts from local authorities to include individuals and communities in decision-making, [data from Scottish Household Survey](#) shows that only 18% of people surveyed in 2023 agreed with the statement, “I can influence decisions affecting my local area”. This is down from 22% in 2011.

Participation requests and the Community Empowerment Act 2015

The petitioner says that the Community Empowerment Act 2015 mandates participation but does not always define standards or enforce consistency. The Scottish Government [published guidance in 2017](#) for both public service authorities and community participation bodies. But is up to local authorities themselves to interpret the 2015 legislation and ensure compliance with guidance.

In 2020, the Session 5 Local Government and Communities Committee conducted [post legislative scrutiny of Part 3](#) of the Community Empowerment Act. It found a low number of participation requests had been submitted since 2017 (when the Part 3 provisions were enacted). The Committee was unconvinced that this demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with council services; indeed [figures produced by local government itself](#) would suggest otherwise. As such, the Committee recommended:

“Work therefore needs to be done to make the participation request process appear less remote from communities and more real. Knowledge is power, and a lack of awareness or understanding of the process has been a practical barrier. The right to make a request has often not been publicised sufficiently, yet those [public] bodies least successful at raising awareness of the participation request process, and explaining how to use it, might be those who need it most.”

The Committee therefore recommended:

“...that the Scottish Government works with public service authorities covered by the Act, and with COSLA, to ensure communities are aware of their rights to challenge and influence decisions and services. This will involve understanding and removing barriers to the use of participation requests where these could lead to improved outcomes for the local communities involved.”

In [its response to the Committee](#), the Scottish Government stated it would continue to work with the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) who are funded by the SG to raise awareness and promote participation request activity, and to

ensure people know their rights to make requests. It also committed to “look to work with COSLA to provide the necessary support to local authorities to encourage an uptake in these requests”.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published findings from its [own review into Part 3 of the 2015 Act](#). It found that since legislation was introduced in 2017, 96 requests were received by local authorities. Of these, 53 were granted and 25 were refused (it’s unclear what happened to the other 18). As the petitioner mentions RAAC, it is worth pointing out that 5 participation requests have been submitted relating to housing issues over the past 7 years.

The review also found:

- There is patchy implementation of, and adherence to, the participation request legislation by Public Service Authorities including continued low annual reporting.
- Strengthening the Participation Requests Statutory Guidance and promoting a set of participation requests principles has been proposed as a more practical approach than implementing legislation to introduce a local review and/or national appeals process for participation request.

As a result of the review, [the Scottish Government committed](#) to work with SCDC on updating participation requests principles and exploring the need to update participation requests statutory guidance.

Local Governance Review

Since December 2017, the Scottish Government and COSLA have been working together on a [Local Governance Review](#) (LGR). Its aim is to “ensure Scotland’s diverse communities and different places have greater control and influence over decisions that affect them most”. This has involved various consultations and events across Scotland. The Scottish Government’s [Programme for Government 2025-26](#) confirmed it would conclude the LGR by April 2026 and publish “a blueprint for models of democratic community decision making”.

Verity House Agreement

The petitioner states that “the petition does *not* ask the Scottish Government to interfere with local authorities’ democratic mandates”. But any legislation that aims to change how local authorities run their operations – community engagement, standing orders, etc - may well be perceived as exactly that.

The [Verity House Agreement](#) was signed between the Scottish Government and local government in summer 2023. It set out various principles, including “respect for each other’s democratic mandate” and “the maxim “local by default, national by agreement””.

It is possible that should the Scottish Government wish to explore the petitioner’s requests, they would do so in partnership with local government.

A monitoring body

The petitioner calls for a new or existing body be designated “to oversee and monitor compliance with such [national] standards and either take or recommend action when these are not met”.

Although not a monitoring body as such, the Accounts Commission aims to hold councils in Scotland to account and help them identify and make improvements. It operates independently of councils, the Parliament and the Scottish Government. The Commission has various responsibilities, including:

- Securing the external audit of local government accounts and the audit of Best Value and community planning.
- Making recommendations to Scottish ministers and local authorities.
- Carrying out or promoting national performance audit work to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Coordinating the scrutiny of local government in Scotland.

Best Value reports already look at how councils engage with communities, although SPICe is not aware of reports specifically highlighting concerns with how council meetings are run in terms of petitions and deputations.

Greig Liddell

Senior Researcher

9 December 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 27 November 2025

PE2198/A: Establish a standardised and fair public participation process for all Scottish councils

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.

Requiring all local authorities in Scotland to adopt, within a specified timeframe, a set of minimum standards for public participation processes (questions, deputations, petitions) that ensure such processes are accessible, transparent, fair, inclusive and consistent across Scotland would require changes to legislation. This could be feasible, however the Scottish Government does not have any current data to assess whether this would be practical or desirable to mandate across all local authorities.

The [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#) outlines a number of statutory duties local authorities need to meet with regard to public participation processes.

Local authorities are entirely separate entities from the Scottish Government. Their powers are set out in statute and, it is up to each local authority to manage its day-to-day business, tailored to local needs, ensuring all statutory duties are met. The Scottish Government has committed to respecting local government's democratic mandates as part of the Verity House Agreement and believes that locally elected representatives are best placed to consider what works well in their local community. It would be a matter for local government to consider whether standards for public participation processes are required over and above what the Community Empowerment Act enforces. Ministers would consider any proposals that local government or COSLA, as the national association of Scottish Councils, made on this. You may wish to take this proposal to COSLA for their consideration.

To designate a new or existing body to oversee and monitor compliance with such standards could be achievable but, identifying the required resource and budget is essential to make this approach practical.

There is currently no single organisation or body that provides oversight of either the quality or impact of participatory engagements undertaken by governments. In 2024, consideration was given to expand the [National Participatory Budgeting Strategic Group's](#) remit and function to oversee democratic innovations undertaken by the Scottish Government. However, this work is paused due to a lack of resource and capacity to provide a secretariat for the group and to provide strategic support.

Establishing a National Centre for Participation in Scotland was a recommendation that the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy working group (IPDD) endorsed in 2022 to ensure Scotland builds the infrastructure necessary to embed a participatory democracy in Scotland. The IPDD working group could advise on how to organise a central oversight body. The group involved expert practitioners, both domestically and internationally.

There are examples of Centers of Expertise in other governments, such as France, which has the [Institute for Dialogue and Citizen Participation](#). The French Government requires teams to engage with this Centre when their participation plans reach a certain level of public engagement.

The Open Government team are considering how and who could develop a national strategy for public participation as part of Scotland's next Open Government Action Plan (2026 -2030).

What, if any, action the Scottish Government is currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?

A range of empowerment methods are already available in Scotland to support implementation of standards for public participation that align with open government values.

As part of the Open Government Partnership Scottish Government has produced [progress reports](#) on the Open Government Action Plan 2021-2025 that outline key actions being taken that address the issues raised by this petition. COSLA representatives have been a key partner throughout. Open Government will continue to work with COSLA to ensure that improvements to public participation can become widespread.

In 2022, the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy (IPDD) working group published its [recommendations](#) on how Scottish Government could deliver on its commitments to embed participatory and deliberative processes in its work. These recommendations outline a set of values, principles and next steps that would support implementation of standards for public participation across local authorities.

In January 2025 Scottish Government published a report [Public participation in policymaking: exploring and understanding impact](#). The research project examined how public participation can have meaningful impact on policy making. Recommendations set out in this report reinforce the recommendations of the IPDD working group.

Further guidance has been published in collaboration with civil society to support high-quality public participation. The [Participation Handbook](#) was published in March 2024 – developed for SG officials but relevant to public bodies.

In 2024, Scottish Government published [guidance for the payment of expenses and compensation](#) for time for people taking part in participatory processes – this will minimise financial barriers to involvement and is of particular importance for inclusively involving marginalised groups.

Public services play a vital role in delivering for children, young people and their communities and the Scottish Government are committed to working in collaboration with partners in the public service to deliver a revolution in children's rights. Full realisation of children's rights requires proactivity on the part of all public authorities, not only services or those working directly with children and young people. The

Scottish Government is working to support workforces to ensure they can implement a children's human rights approach (which includes participation) in practice, every day so that children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Statutory guidance has been published to support public authorities in the implementation and operation of their duties under [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#) (section 18) of the UNCRC Act as necessary. The statutory guidance aims to ensure all public authorities are aware of their duties and how to fulfil them.

There is also non-statutory guidance and resources to help public bodies take a children's human rights based approach: [The Right Way hub](#) (run by the Scottish Youth Parliament); [Children's Rights Skills and Knowledge Framework](#); [Decision-making: children and young people's participation](#).

A [Children's Rights Skills and Knowledge Framework](#) was launched to further build the capacity of public authorities to take a children's human rights approach.

The Open Government team are considering how and who could develop a national strategy for public participation as part of Scotland's next Open Government Action Plan (2026 -2030).

Scottish Government has committed to developing a Trust and Transparency Strategy through the Open Government National Action Plan 2026-2030. Through COSLA, local authorities will be able to support the development of this strategy. There is an opportunity for the strategy to provide support for local authorities in adopting standards for accessible, transparent, fair, inclusive, and consistent participatory practice.

As well as the above, the [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) are good-practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement, and improve what happens as a result. The Standards, originally launched in 2005 were updated in 2016 to ensure that they were fit for purpose to support the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. The Standards continue to be a key resource in the wider work supporting and promoting community engagement and community development in Scotland.

In 2017 the Scottish Government introduced [Participation Requests](#), Part 3 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to provide a mechanism for community groups to have greater involvement in, and influence over, decisions and services that affect their lives. A [review](#) of participation requests was published on 31 March 2025 and found that they have encouraged Public Service Authorities such as local authorities to be more accessible and transparent by using alternative engagement methods before a formal legislative route needs to be explored. The review identified the need for better understanding of their use and a set of participation request principles will be created.

The Scottish Government also supports [participatory budgeting](#) as a tool for community empowerment, which helps to build on the wider development of participatory democracy in Scotland. The Scottish Government continues to fund COSLA to help local authorities reach the target of having at least 1% of their budget subject to participatory budgeting.

The [Democracy Matters](#) process which is being led jointly with COSLA is designing new arrangements which strengthen community decision making at a more local level. Removing barriers to participation and ensuring everyone who wants to can have their voice heard. A blueprint outlining proposed reforms will be published before the end of this parliament.

Open Government

Petitioner written submission, 27 November 2025

PE2198/B: Establish a standardised and fair public participation process for all Scottish councils

I thank the Scottish Government for its written submission of 27 November 2025. However, the response does not adequately address the democratic gaps and inconsistencies highlighted in my petition, nor does it recognise the structural failures that leave citizens without meaningful, reliable or fair participation channels across Scotland's 32 local authorities.

My rebuttal addresses several key areas of concern.

1. The Government's Claim of "Insufficient Data" Is Not a Basis for Inaction

The Government states it lacks data to assess whether mandating minimum standards across councils is "practical or desirable."

This is deeply troubling. A lack of data on how councils operate their petition, deputation and public question systems is not a justification for avoiding reform. It is evidence of a major oversight in governance.

My petition presents clear examples of inconsistent, inaccessible and opaque procedures across different councils. These inconsistencies harm democratic participation, particularly for marginalised groups.

A national baseline becomes *more* necessary precisely because there is no comprehensive dataset.

The absence of evidence is not an excuse for maintaining a flawed system. It is a reason to examine it.

2. Council Autonomy Cannot Override Citizens' Democratic Rights

The Government places heavy emphasis on council independence and the Verity House Agreement. However, autonomy must not be used to justify unfair, inconsistent or exclusionary practices.

Across Scotland today, councils:

- reject petitions on arbitrary grounds
- impose inconsistent signature thresholds

- delay responses indefinitely
- block deputations without clear criteria
- limit or prohibit supplementary questions
- fail to provide accessible routes for participation

These barriers undermine the spirit of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and disenfranchise citizens.

Local autonomy does not supersede fundamental democratic rights. National baseline standards protect citizens, especially when local practices fall short.

3. COSLA Cannot Act as a Substitute for National Accountability

The Government suggests I “take this proposal to COSLA.”

With respect, this is unrealistic and inappropriate.

COSLA represents the interests of councils, not the public.

It has no authority to require councils to adopt consistent and fair procedures, nor does it have a track record of initiating democratic reforms that reduce council discretion.

If national standards require voluntary acceptance by councils, then Scotland will continue to experience a postcode lottery of democratic rights.

Only Parliament can address this deficit.

4. The Government’s Cited Initiatives Do Not Resolve the Core Problem

The Government provides a long list of initiatives, such as Open Government work, participatory budgeting, children’s rights guidance, deliberative democracy, etc. However, none of these:

- regulate petitions
- regulate public questions
- regulate deputations
- ensure accessibility
- enforce transparency
- provide consistent procedure across councils

These programs, while important, are irrelevant to the democratic failings my petition identifies. Fair petition rules cannot be replaced with handbooks and non-binding guidance.

5. Resource Constraints Cannot Justify Democratic Inaction

The Government notes that creating a national oversight body was “paused due to lack of capacity.”

However, ensuring that local authorities follow fair, transparent procedures is a core democratic duty, not an optional project dependent on surplus funding.

If Scotland has resources for multiple participation frameworks and strategies, it must also prioritise the foundational democratic rights of its citizens.

6. Democracy Should Not Be Determined by Geography

Today, a citizen’s ability to be heard depends entirely on where they live:

- some councils allow 20-signature petitions, others demand 500
- some allow digital petitions, others do not
- some allow deputations, others routinely block them
- some allow follow-up questions, others forbid them
- some provide timely responses, others ignore submissions

This is a democratic lottery and it is incompatible with a modern, fair and transparent Scotland.

National standards would not undermine local democracy. **They would protect it.**

Conclusion

The Government’s response does not adequately address the structural issues the petition raises. It relies on:

- deference to local autonomy,
- an acknowledged lack of data,
- unrelated participation initiatives, and
- the suggestion that COSLA should lead reform.

None of these provide meaningful safeguards for citizens.

I respectfully urge the Committee to recognise that without national baseline standards:

- fairness cannot be guaranteed,
- transparency cannot be enforced,
- accessibility cannot be assured, and

- participation rights will remain inconsistent and vulnerable.

Minimum standards for public participation are not an attack on local government. They are essential protection for democracy itself.