

## RPP02 Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Assistant Director, Welsh NHS Confederation

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | Petitions Committee

Adolygiad o'r Trefniadau ar gyfer Deisebau | Review of Petitions Arrangements

Ymateb gan: Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Cyfarwyddwr Cynorthwyol, Conffederasiwn GIG Cymru | Evidence from: Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Assistant Director, Welsh NHS Confederation

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# Welsh NHS Confederation response to the Senedd Petitions Committee request on our views on the public petitions process

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## Introduction

1. The Welsh NHS Confederation welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Petitions Committee providing our members views on the public petitions process during the Sixth Senedd and to inform the work of the Committee in the Seventh Senedd.
2. The Welsh NHS Confederation represents the seven Local Health Boards, three NHS Trusts (Velindre University NHS Trust, Welsh Ambulance Services University NHS Trust and Public Health Wales NHS Trust) and two Special Health Authorities (Digital Health and Care Wales and Health Education and Improvement Wales). The twelve organisations make up our membership. We are part of the NHS Confederation and host NHS Wales Employers.

## General views

3. Over a number of years, the Welsh NHS Confederation and our members have worked closely with members of the Petitions Committee and also with Senedd staff, in particular the clerking team. Through proactively engaging with and liaising with Committee members and the clerking team during the Sixth Senedd, we hope that it has supported the Committees work and ensured that Committee members received the information that they required in a timely manner from NHS organisations.
4. Our members recognise and believe that the Petitions Committee fulfils an essential role in our country's democracy. It is important that all Welsh citizens have the opportunity to voice their concerns if they have issues with the actions of any public body. It is also important that organisations, including third sector organisations and membership bodies, have an opportunity to raise concerns and issues with the Senedd through the Petitions process.
5. We know that a significant number of petitions relate to health and NHS services. This is not surprising due to the significant public interest in health and care services, both at a local and national level, and health and social care accounting for over 50% of the Welsh Government budget. With a high percentage of petitions considered by the Committee

relating to health, it is important that the Committee continues to work closely with NHS organisations in Wales and also the Senedd Health and Social Care Committee to ensure that the key issues raised by the public can be considered by the Senedd.

## Questions posed by the Petitions Committee

### **How we seek your responses to petitioners' issues and concerns: Are the timescales right? What has worked well in the Sixth Senedd? What has not worked well or could be improved?**

6. NHS bodies welcome the opportunities to respond to the public and the Committee's request, as it is one measure many NHS bodies use to help them test if the decisions that the organisations Board has made has been supported by the public or by the local community.
7. Our members have said that the engagement that they have had with the Committee in the Sixth Senedd has been positive. NHS organisations who have been involved in petitions have received several communications from the Petitions Committee and the requests have always been polite and well set out. It has also been very helpful, following the feedback that we at the Welsh NHS Confederation provided the Committee Clerks a couple of years ago, that all correspondence from the Committee to NHS bodies gives a clear deadline/ date so that they are fully aware of when they require to provide the information to the Committee. With requests that did not have deadlines, most NHS bodies would respond within 20 days (similar to a Freedom of Information Request) and sometimes the Committee was requesting a reply sooner. In addition, in relation to deadlines, the Committee has always been understanding when extensions have been requested to provide information, especially if there are developments within the organisation which relates to the petition.
8. An area that could possibly be improved is the communication and awareness around when a particular petition closes. There have been instances in the Sixth Senedd where a petition has been discussed on a number of occasions by the Committee over 12 months or longer period. There does not appear to be a clear process or criteria for closing a petition, as most issues may not be resolved to the complete satisfaction of the petitioner. With some petitions the issues raised could take months, and sometimes years, to resolve, and this leads to numerous correspondence between the Committee and NHS organisations, with sometimes no clear resolution or update. It may be helpful for the Committee to consider a criteria or process which would clarify the process/ criteria for the closure of a petition; in the same way the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales or Commissioners do.

### **How should a future Petitions Committee best engage on recurrent policy issues which underpin the petitions we receive?**

9. Our members recommend if there are recurring policy issues or themes, these could be considered as a more thematic debate rather than focused on an individual petition that has more than 10,000 signatures.
10. While the Petitions Committee is the most appropriate way to ensure that petitions receive proper attention, it would be useful for the Committee to receive more oral evidence than it presently takes from those being asked to respond to a petition. This would ensure that petitions are considered in more detail and that members of the Committee can ask questions of relevant parties or individuals. By receiving more oral evidence this will hopefully ensure that petitions can be considered more thoroughly and

are not open as long as some are currently, with some having been open for more than a year before being completed by the Committee.

## **Are there particular areas of accountability and decision-making in Welsh public life that the Committee could usefully focus its attention on?**

11. Our members believe that the Committee should consider petitions on all matters that relate to the Senedd's powers, including issues relating to local authorities.
12. While local authorities have a range of scrutiny and engagement processes and structures in place to consider issues that citizens have raised, the same could be said for other public sector bodies, including the NHS, who have a range of legislation and policies that they have to comply with in relation to engaging with local citizens and making decisions of a strategic nature. To ensure that all the Senedd and Welsh Government powers and responsibilities are consistently considered and scrutinised, we recommend that the Petitions Committee and the Senedd should consider petitions on matters for which individual local authorities have responsibility for. With so much partnership working taking place between local authorities and other public sector bodies, including health, through structures like the Public Service Boards and Regional Partnership Boards, this change will align local authorities with the process for other public bodies.
13. The opportunity for petitioners to raise concerns with the Senedd about functions the local authority is responsible for provides an opportunity for petitioners to express their views and is an important part of the democratic process. It is important that the Committee can consider petitions relating to local authorities' operational responsibilities because some of their decisions will have an impact both on the local community but also national (for example, planning applications relating to major developments could impact on the wider community, both economically but also people's health and wellbeing).
14. Furthermore, it may be useful for the Committee to consider petitions that relate to cross-border issues, for example if someone has received healthcare in England but is resident in Wales, because the Senedd could be an additional avenue for citizens to raise an issue of concern.
15. Across the breadth of health and care services, there is significant cross-border flow of patients between Wales and England. In 2023-24, around [60,000](#) Welsh residents were admitted to hospitals in England. This can largely be attributed to factors of geographic convenience and/or lack of provision in the patient's own area. It would be useful that any concerns or issues raised about the care they received in England which has been commissioned by a Welsh NHS organisation be considered by the Petitions Committee.

## **Do you have any other general observations about the Senedd Petitions process or standards for petitions? For example, how we gather evidence, or the priorities chosen by Members for its in-depth inquiries, engagement or visits.**

16. We support the current Petitions process and the standards for petitions.
17. There are mixed views across our membership in relation to the thresholds involved. On the one hand some members support the threshold of 250 signatures prior to the Committee considering the petition and 10,000 signatures for a Plenary debate seems a sensible approach. However, others have raised that there is significant difference in the

signatory threshold, with the need for the number of signatures between a petition being considered by the Committee and having a debate being extremely wide. Also, some of our members have flagged that the validation of these signatures can sometimes be problematic.

18. In addition, it would be beneficial to require petitioners to outline what actions they have taken locally to try and resolve the issue being petitioned. This will ensure that the Committee is not the first avenue that the petitioner has taken.
19. Finally, as previously highlighted, there appears to be no clear process or criteria for closing a petition, as most issues will likely not be resolved to the complete satisfaction of the petitioner leading to further correspondence. Perhaps the Committee should consider a criteria or a process which would clarify this process or criteria for closure.

### **Is there anything missing from the way the Committee has traditionally engaged, or the particular groups or individuals engaged with?**

20. While our members don't believe anything is missing from the way that the Committee engages with the public, it is vital that the Senedd and the Committee raises awareness of the work that they do and increases engagement with the public to ensure better outcomes for petitioners.
21. The Committee could work more closely with the Senedd engagement team and the other Committees to ensure that the public has an opportunity to feedback their views and concerns.

### **How might the rules around Senedd petitions need to change to support any improvements that you would recommend?**

22. The rules around Senedd petitions could be changed to make some improvements in one or two areas. The process for submitting a petition is clear. However more could be done to raise awareness of the existence of the Petitions Committee and the guidance and support available for anyone wishing to set up a petition.
23. It would benefit public sector bodies if they were made aware of any petitions submitted relating to any of its services, as on occasions our members have not been aware of a petition until such time as the Committee asks for a response. On other occasions, our members have been told by a group that they have submitted a petition but cannot find any evidence of that petition on the Petitions Committee website.
24. Furthermore, when a health-related petition comes before the committee, there may be merit in passing the issue earlier to the Senedd's Health and Social Care committee for consideration. Doing so would reduce the need for the petitions committee to ask for further information to understand the context. For example, a petition regarding the temporary closure of a ward in one health board led to protracted correspondence between the petitioner, the committee and the health board. While the health board understood that this, to some extent, is inevitable, the outcome was that the Petitions Committee did eventually pass the matter to the Health and Social Care Committee to consider as part of their business.
25. It would also be useful to have links from the Petitions Committee website to the inquiries that other Senedd Committees are considering to ensure that the public is aware of other avenues that they can provide feedback and evidence to. This will hopefully prevent duplication.

26. There are many avenues for the public to raise issues with the Senedd, the Petitions Committee being one, though it should not become a 'catch all' for complaints by the public. We have regular correspondence from elected members who in turn can also raise issues directly with Ministers on the floor of the Senedd.
27. It would be useful to have a clear and easily accessible list of the petitions that the Committee has considered during the Senedd term, since 2021, to ensure that the public are aware of what has and is being considered to prevent duplication.
28. Finally, the "[heat map functionality](#)" provides useful insights to understand the degree of interest and impact of Senedd petitions. These maps are currently based on current constituencies, and it would be helpful to understand the plans to revise these given the changes in Westminster and Senedd constituencies. Specifically, if data is only presented based on the 16 new Senedd constituencies we would lose this granularity of insight, for example Powys Teaching Health Board will be represented by a new larger Gwynedd Maldwyn constituency which also includes significant portions of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, and a new larger Brycheiniog Tawe Nedd which includes parts of Swansea Bay University Health Board. Functionality to continue to view data based on local administrative geographies (e.g. local authorities or health board areas) would be beneficial.

## Other comments

### Service redesign

29. A number of petitions that the Committee considers relate to Local Health Board service redesign or changes and it is therefore vital, as highlighted above, that the Committee requests that the petitioner outlines what actions they have taken locally to try and resolve the issue being petitioned to ensure that the Committee is not the first avenue that the petitioner has taken.
30. Given the scale of the demands placed on NHS services due to demographic changes, as highlighted in our Senedd election briefing "[Building the health and wellbeing of the nation: the Welsh NHS Confederation's calls for the 2026 Senedd election](#)", service change is an immediate priority and challenge for NHS Wales, especially shifting services from acute hospital based services to community and primary care. This will inevitably mean that difficult choices have to be made on what services are provided where and when. Prioritising services and spending mean that the people of Wales, NHS staff, partners and politicians must be prepared to support new and different ways of delivering services.
31. Part of the responsibility of the NHS in Wales, especially in these economically challenging times, is to be open about the difficult choices we face. Given the scale of the demands placed on the NHS, change is an immediate priority and challenge. Service change is a complex and sometimes difficult process, and it is important that petitioners are aware of the process that Local Health Boards have gone through before contacting the Petitions Committee.