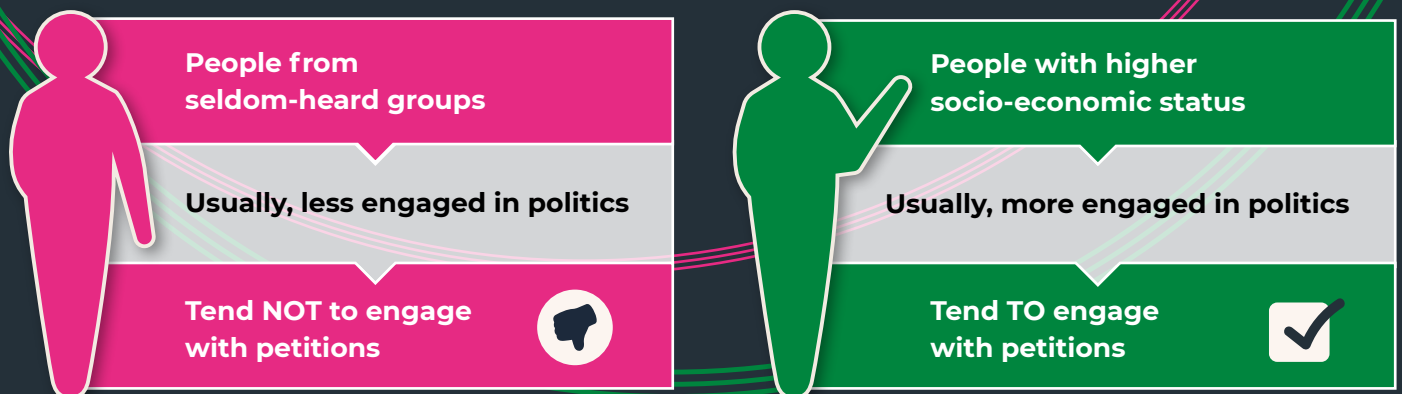


Breaking barriers to engagement with parliaments

Millions of people regularly engage with petitions, using them to make their voices heard in parliaments. To facilitate this, many parliaments have developed new processes to make petitions more effective. However, these tend to be used by a limited group of people.







These new processes can amplify democratic unfairness: those who are already involved gain tools to engage more deeply. In addition, the value and reach of petitions to parliament are not always clear. This can increase frustrations with democratic processes rather than enhancing engagement.

'Seldom-heard' groups

Parliaments often refer to **'hard-to-reach'** groups, including individuals less likely to engage in politics, like those from low socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities. However, this term is criticised for implying these groups are challenging to find. **'Seldom-heard'** places the responsibility for engagement on parliaments and acknowledges the underrepresentation of these groups in decision-making conversations. While we use 'seldom-heard' here for simplicity, experiences differ among groups.

Research overview

This co-designed* research project sought to:

-  understand people's experiences and perceptions of petitioning and politics
-  recognise key barriers to engagement
-  identify enablers to make petitioning accessible to a wider and more diverse demographic
-  improve the petitioning experience

6 focus groups across England and Wales with petitioners and people who had never petitioned before, including participants from seldom-heard groups

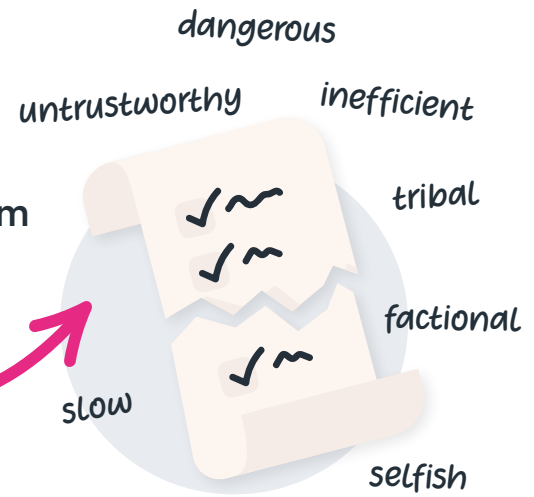
18 interviews with parliamentary officials and representatives of community organisations

Our **six** key findings

1 There is deep **mistrust** of politics across society and a wide disconnect among seldom-heard groups from the political system

Although everyone who took part in the research identified core issues they felt strongly about, **they did not see those issues as being related to politics**. Participants also held very negative perceptions of politics and politicians. As a result, they did not view politics as a route to try to solve core issues affecting them.

Positive experiences with politicians didn't alter these perceptions. Seldom-heard group participants felt politics wasn't for them, despite expressing interest in it.



2 People aren't familiar with **petitions to parliament**, or misunderstand how multiple platforms work



This includes politically engaged individuals who were unaware of how petitions to parliament can directly influence decision-making. There was **misunderstanding** about Change.org's connection to parliament or government, and petitions were seen as pointless. Non-petitioners were surprised that petitions had caused policy changes.

Petitioners had **mixed perceptions**. Despite positive interactions, petitioners found that:



the process is difficult to engage with, disjointed and unclear



if they got involved in petitioning, it was because they cared strongly about an issue rather than to engage with politics



the language is challenging to understand

3 Seldom-heard groups experience significant **barriers** to political engagement

Seldom-heard groups often experience intersecting inequalities which exacerbate each other, making it extremely difficult to engage in politics. We identified specific barriers that preclude these groups from engaging in politics, but our findings are relevant for engagement with all citizens.

Barriers include:

limited knowledge of the political system

insufficient campaigning skills for successful petitions

low awareness of petitioning parliament

low confidence to engage with official processes

Seldom-heard groups can be further affected by:

poverty

language barriers

illiteracy

low IT literacy

IT poverty

isolation

disability

4 Community organisations are important **intermediaries** between parliamentary staff and seldom-heard groups

Organisations that work with seldom-heard groups are important because they have:



built long-term relationships with these communities



a good understanding of the groups' circumstances and challenges



direct access to these groups



gained trust within the groups

Hence, they are well-positioned to raise awareness of petitioning among these groups and help them start a petition, just as they help with access to other services.



However, **these organisations may not think of facilitating engagement with petitions.** They might be unaware or unconvinced of their value and often lack the capacity or resources for this role. Interviewees proposed a buddy system with community engagement “champions” to raise awareness about petitioning and its value.

5 It's important to manage **expectations**, which shape perceptions

Managing expectations was a recurring theme in our research, shaping perceptions of petitioning effectiveness. This requires clarity of process.

“Help(ing) people understand the process...is managing expectations.”

parliamentary official



Managing expectations and ensuring clarity of process are intimately linked to improving petitioning websites, resources, communication and language across all channels, with the aim of making petitioning more citizen-focused and therefore **more inclusive and accessible** to citizens from all walks of life, including seldom-heard groups.

“You’ve got to have that clarity, otherwise people’s expectations go up here and they’re just going to be massively deflated by the end of it, so there’s huge potential here for real positive change.”

focus group participant

6 Parliamentary citizen centred **services** are important but links with petitions staff aren't strong enough

Petitioning processes can't be considered solely through the actions of the officials directly involved. **Other citizen centred services play a key role** (e.g. communication, education, engagement and participation within each parliament). However, we found that links between these other services and petitions (committees) staff are not always well established.



Recommendations for citizen-focused parliamentary petitions systems

Increase awareness of petitioning parliament

- 1** **Develop or deepen collaboration** with community organisations to better understand the needs of diverse seldom-heard groups and demonstrate the value of petitioning. This could be done through:
 - a. parliaments' citizen centred services (e.g. education, participation)
 - b. staff (committee) supporting the petitions process
 - c. an 'engagement champions' scheme based in community organisations
- 2** **Produce materials** specifically aimed at disseminating the value of petitioning to all citizens, giving particular attention to explaining how the system works and how petitioners can build their campaigns. Materials should be issue-based, using stories from diverse past petitioners, not procedure-led.
- 3** **Develop close collaborations and more systemic cooperation** between petitions staff (committee) and the parliamentary citizen centred services. This could include building pools of:
 - a. case studies (illustrating different outcomes from a petition)
 - b. stories of diverse petitioners (representing various demographics and issues)

Enhance the experience of petitioning

- 4** **Develop clear integration** between websites hosting e-petitions and parliamentary websites supporting the processing of petitions, so petitioners can easily access information explaining how the system works.
- 5** **Transform communications from parliament-led to citizen-focused.** This may include:
 - a. reviewing language across all communication channels (digital and non-digital)
 - b. introducing Easy Reads, infographics and other audio-visual materials
 - c. introducing more regular communication with petitioners
 - d. ensuring all materials are easy to understand for the general public

"In order to expand the use of petitioning beyond the usual suspects and to enhance the petitioning experience, parliamentary processes need to adopt more citizen-focused communications, consider procedures in place from a citizen's perspective and be more proactive in disseminating the value of petitioning."

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Dr Blagovesta Tacheva, University of Leeds

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