

Dacorum Borough Council

Petition Scheme

Dacorum Borough Council and its partners recognise the value of citizens communicating their needs and concerns about issues in their local area. Petitions have a long tradition and can be useful in suggesting levels of support for various propositions. The Council has, therefore, introduced this scheme to assist in the effective use of petitions in appropriate circumstances, and Council staff will offer advice and assistance to interested persons as to how best to make use of the scheme in order to achieve their aims.

A INTRODUCTION

- 1 The scheme was approved at the full Council meeting on 18th July 2018 and is available to view on the Council's website at :- (www.dacorum.gov.uk.)
2. The purpose of the scheme is to establish a clear process for petitions submitted to the Council to be handled.

The scheme sets out:

- how people who live, work or study in Dacorum can organise or sign a petition and secure a statutory response
 - how specific responses can be triggered by achieving prescribed levels of signatory support
 - who will do what and to what performance standards
 - how the Council will monitor the effectiveness of the scheme
3. The Council officer responsible for the scheme, and its operation, is the Scheme Administrator, whose name and contact details are Cassy O'Neil, Corporate Support Manager, Forum, Marlowes, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 1DN
Telephone: 01442 228000; E-mail cassie.oneil@dacorum.gov.uk.
 4. The Council will encourage use of the scheme, both within the public sector and voluntary organisations who are delivering local services and also beyond in the wider community.

B ABOUT PETITIONS in DACORUM

1. The Council, and its partners recognise that petitions are one of the methods by which citizens can communicate to the Council their needs and concerns about issues in their local area. Petitions can be an effective way of expressing levels of support for various propositions and therefore the Council will encourage their use in appropriate circumstances. Council staff will provide advice and assistance to interested persons as to how best to make use of this scheme.

Such advice and assistance may be provided by the different departments of the Council, but enquiries should, in the first instance be directed to the Corporate Support Service, The Forum, Marlowes, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 1DN. Telephone: 01442 228000; E-mail: cassy.oneil@dacorum.gov.uk.

2. 'Early resolution' or 'mediation' provision.

The Council places importance on the opportunity offered by petitions, to seek solutions and agreements to issues identified by Petition Organisers. If this can be accomplished before the period set aside for the petition, then the Council may seek agreement with the Petition Organiser to withdraw the relevant petition.

3. Petitions to the Council should be about matters relating to one of its functions. However, the Council will also consider petitions relating to improvements to 'the economic, social or environmental well-being' of Dacorum, or any part of it, to which the Council or any of its partner authorities could contribute.
4. Potential Petition Organisers who need advice as to whether it would be appropriate to address a petition to the Council or to Hertfordshire County Council will be offered guidance. At first instance, the relevant contact point should be the person specified in Paragraph A1.

C SUBMISSION of PETITIONS

1. Petitions may be submitted to the Council in the following ways:-
 - On paper
 - In person
 - Electronically, through any on-line ePetition system as long as names and valid email addresses are provided.
 - Electronically by e-mail (here each sheet of signatures has to be scanned in full as an exact replica of the original copy. Original copies must be retained for one year).
2. In every case, a Petitions Organiser must identify his or her self and provide such details as will assist the Council or other service providers to make contact to discuss the petition.

If the lead signatory wishes to relinquish their role then another signatory can, and must, be elected as lead signatory

3. The Council will formally acknowledge and respond to such Petitions as meet the criteria shown in Paragraph 5 of this Section.
4. The Council will also issue a formal acknowledgement within **10 working days** of receipt of all Petitions.
In all cases, formal acknowledgements will indicate how the Council proposes to handle the issue, and where appropriate, to outline what it may be possible for the Council to do in response.
5. To be a valid petition, a petition must:-
 - Be initiated by a Petition Organiser whose details have been supplied to the Council
 - Relates to the Council's functions or to wider economic, social or environmental issues applicable to Dacorum
 - Not be vexatious, abusive or otherwise inappropriate. This may include matters which have already been the subject to significant debate where the views of the public have been clearly expressed.
 - Not related to matters excluded from the scheme. These include any matter relating to individual planning or licensing decisions, for which other established processes exist and any other matters for which a statutory or other right of appeal or challenge is available
 - Not concern a matter which is subject to ongoing legal proceedings
 - Obtain a minimum of 50 valid signatories, from persons who live, work or study in the Council area. Signatures from others (tourists for example) may be considered valid if relevant to the issue of the petition.
 - Not be a duplicate or near-duplicate of a similar petition received or submitted under 12 months previously.

The Scheme Administrator will be responsible for deciding if the Petition is deemed to be valid and his decision shall be final with no right of review.

6. In the period immediately before an election or referendum the Council may need to deal with the petition differently; if this is the case we will explain the reasons and discuss the revised timescale which will apply.
7. To ensure the Council understands the level of local support for a petition, it reserves the right to seek to verify each signature appended to a petition and verify that it is from persons who live, work or study in the Council area. This can be significant when establishing whether a petition has obtained the requisite number of signatures to trigger specific processes.

In the case of ePetitions, the Council requires signatories to append their email addresses. Failure to provide this information may lead to the signature not being counted.

Unless otherwise agreed following discussions with the Petition Organiser, an ePetition will remain open for signatures for 90 days.

8. As each petition is received, or created online, the Council will log each one, and publish details on its website. For any petition relating specifically to a Council Ward or Wards, the relevant elected member will be formally notified and asked for comments.

D. RESPONDING TO PETITIONS

1. Upon receipt or submission, the Council will assign the petition to a Responding Officer, who will take responsibility for investigating the issue and advise on the action to be taken by the Council.
The name of the Responding Officer will be notified to the Petition Organiser at the time of the acknowledgement.
2. Among the actions the Council will undertake are one or more of the following:-
 - Taking the action requested in the petition
 - Considering the petition at a Council meeting
 - Holding an inquiry
 - Commissioning relevant research
 - Organising a public meeting
 - Mounting a wider public consultation
 - Meeting with the Petition Organiser or representatives of the signatories
 - Providing a written response outlining the Council's views on the subject
 - Referring the issue to one of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees, or
 - Referring the issue to one of the Council's relevant ordinary Committees
 - Consulting statutory partners and local service providers
 - Instituting discussions with the voluntary and community sectors
 - Make representations to any other external body
 - Take no further action on the matter
3. Under normal circumstances, the Council will expect to provide the Petition Organiser with a response detailing which of the actions specified in D2, or any other initiatives it intends to take, within 28 days of receipt.

4. If a Petition has, or acquires 1,000 valid signatures, the issue will be debated at a meeting of the full Council (i.e. a meeting to which all the elected members are summoned to attend).

At the full Council meeting, the Petition Organiser, or someone nominated on his or her behalf, will have the right to speak about the petition, normally for up to 2 minutes. Reasonable advance notice will be provided to ensure that any preparation can be undertaken in time.

The Mayor will decide upon the amount of time to allow for the debate on the petition, and will take account of the degree of public interest in the issue, the level of support given to the petition and the number of elected members wishing to express their views on the subject.

The Council accepts that it will not normally be sufficient for such a meeting merely to 'take note' of the petition, and that there should be a decision taken as to what other steps (including, but not restricted, to the actions specified in Paragraph D2) should also be taken as a response. When considering what steps in D2 may be appropriate it is important to note that it would not be appropriate for a committee or group containing the same members who made the original decision to consider a petition relating to that decision.

The Petitions Organiser will be formally notified in writing of the decision taken at the Council meeting. This will take place within 5 working days.

5. References to 'threshold' numbers of signatures in paragraphs C5 and D4 confer a clear entitlement under the provisions of the scheme. However, the Council accepts that there are situations where issues may be of considerable significance to a small number of stakeholders, and where the absolute number of signatures for a petition may be less appropriate a measure of relevant support.

In these circumstances the Scheme Administrator is authorised to substitute for the thresholds in the paragraphs referred to above, revised numbers that take account of the specifics of the case. When this occurs, the entitlements operate as for the rest of the scheme

6. At the end of the process of considering the petition, the Scheme Administrator will formally write to the Petition Organiser to confirm the Council's response. This communication will normally outline the steps taken by the Council to consider the issue and will refer to the involvement (where applicable) of the Council's elected members.

In the case of an ePetition the response will be distributed by email to the Petition Organiser.

A copy of the response to all petitions will be posted to the publicly accessible website and available to view for a period of 6 months from closing the petition.

The letter will also identify the Responding Officer who handled the issue and highlight his or her involvement where appropriate.

This formal response will be despatched within 90 days of receipt or submission of a petition, and a copy will be published both on the Council website.

F REPORTING

1. The Council will report progress in addressing issues raised through petitions by updating the web-site regularly, and by ensuring that the status of each petition is accurately shown.
2. In addition, the Council will prepare an annual summary detailing all petitions submitted, the signatures each attracted, and the Council's formal response to each. This report will be presented to the Finance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee each year and published on the Council's website.