

24 July 2017

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au

Inquiry into the e-petitioning system of the House of Representatives Petitions Committee

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations, and promoting issues on behalf of its constituency to government and the broader community. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of various cohorts of Australia's CALD population are heard by policy and decision makers, as well as the broader public.

FECCA commends the Committee for providing this opportunity to comment on the e-petitioning system for the House of Representatives.

Recommendations:

- **FECCA would encourage the APH to update their website to make it more accessible to the Australian public. Improvements could include:**
 - **Provision of information in languages other than English**
 - **Use of images/icons/symbols to reduce text density of webpages**
 - **Use of simple, clear, plain English instructions**
 - **Simplifying the link chain to access the e-petitions page**
 - **Providing the ability for the e-petition to be printed or saved as a document to allow users to carefully draft responses**
 - **Providing support in languages other than English via telephone or chat**

Key message:

The good functioning of Australia's parliamentary democracy is dependent upon the public input into the process of policy making and delivery and one aspect of that is the ability to petition parliament on an issue of concern. It is noted on the APH website that the right to petition Federal Parliament has been one of the rights of citizens since federation, and it is the only way an individual can directly place grievances before the Parliament. FECCA recognises

that the Australian Government has been continually working to improve access and input from the public into policy making and delivery¹.

However, FECCA emphasises that those efforts have to be fully inclusive of all Australians including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and with varying levels of literacy (including digital literacy). Last year, FECCA published a report *Digital Access and Equity for Multicultural Communities* which discusses the Australian Government move to digital service delivery and interactions with citizens. It found that many of Australia's CALD communities struggled with access to online services and processes. This was a result of a combination of limited digital literacy and limited English language proficiency. Limited understandings of Australian democratic processes (such as the ability to create electronic petitions) will also impact on CALD Australians' capacity to engage online.

Unfortunately, the website of the Australian Parliament House (APH) where the e-petitions portal exists is particularly inaccessible for CALD Australians. There is no provision of translated material online and no ability to access the information provided online in a Language Other than English (LOTE) via other means such as a LOTE specific telephone line. The webpages are text dense and do not utilise symbols or images to facilitate effective and swift communication. For users with low English language proficiency (reading) text dense webpages are difficult to interface with.

The steps to create an e-petition are not provided in simple, clear, plain English, and there are no alternative ways of generating the e-petition other than the online form. For users with lower English language proficiency it is useful to be able to print out (or save) blank forms so that responses can be carefully drafted.

There is insufficient plain English information for CALD users of the website as to whether they should submit a proposed e-petition to the Senate or to the House of Representatives. A more user-friendly interface would perhaps include some examples of petitions to each of the Houses so as to facilitate decision making.

FECCA would encourage the APH to update their website to make it more accessible to the Australian public. This is particularly imperative with regards to CALD Australians given that the ABS Census data from 2016² indicates that nearly half (49%) of all Australians were either born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas and more than one-fifth (21%) of Australians spoke a language other than English at home. For Australians born overseas just under 60% spoke a LOTE at home.

FECCA would be glad to contribute in more detail on matters relating to culturally and linguistically diverse users of digital systems such as the e-petition system for the House of Representatives. We are interested in bettering the experiences and outcomes for CALD community members as part of good citizenship and participation in democratic processes. For further information please contact FECCA Director Dr Emma Campbell emma@fecca.org.au or 02 6282 5755.

¹http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1112/12rp01

²<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Cultural%20Diversity%20Article~20>