

# Pat's Petition: A new approach to online campaigning

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and all other group members<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Pat's Petition* was originally an e-petition submitted on the UK Government's website asking the Department for Work and Pensions to 'stop and review the changes to benefits and services which are falling disproportionately on disabled people, their carers and families'. All e-petitions are submitted by an individual, in this case Pat Onions, and aim to reach 100,000 signatures for the possibility of debate in parliament.

*Pat's Petition* was a small group formed of volunteers, all with firsthand experience of the issue as disabled people and/or carers, who had no previous experience as a group or in reaching out online to a wider community for petition signatures. The petition reached over 62,600 signatures and ended on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2012. At the time, it was the 12<sup>th</sup> most successful petition out of the 10,294 closed petitions.

While the group continues to press for change, it is helpful to reflect on the learning of their first year; specifically the development of the group and the use of e-petitions. This learning may be of use to other campaigners, to people thinking of online campaigning and also to those interested in online groups.

This reflective account draws on the experiences of the individuals concerned and the private resource of communications between the group. It looks back on their experience from October 2011 to November 2012 when the petition closed, and reflects on the story of *Pat's Petition*.

**Keywords:** disabled people, email campaigning, groupwork, user led groups, Welfare Reform Act 2012, service users, online petitions

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## **Identity of group members**

Some members of the group behind Pat's Petition have always wished to retain their anonymity. The core group has been 7 people, who are here referred to as core group 'members'. There is a wider group of supporters, including key charities, independent campaigners, academics, and other disabled people and carers, who have taken an active part in promoting the petition and offering advice. These are referred to throughout as 'supporters'. 'People who have signed Pat's Petition' include all these plus the thousands of people who signed the petition and possibly promoted it to their friends and colleagues. Pat's Petition could not have happened without each of these different levels of support and involvement.

## **Context of the group**

In July 2010, Iain Duncan Smith and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) presented the consultation *21st Century Welfare* (DWP, July 2010). This document set out how they proposed to make work pay, enabling people to move from benefits into paid work while still supporting those in greatest need. It clearly reassures that:

We do not aim to reduce the levels of support for people in the most vulnerable circumstances but it is clearly important that we ensure support is well targeted, is fair to those on low pay and that the right money goes to the right people. (DWP, July 2010, p.3)

Nonetheless, there was concern from disabled people that this would involve cuts and changes which had the potential to leave them disadvantaged.

The consultation resulted in the white paper 'Universal Credit: welfare that works' (DWP, November 2010). After many amendments and discussions, in March 2012 this became the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which introduced significant changes to the benefits system including Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payments, the 'bedroom tax', benefits cap and time limits to contributory Employment Support Allowance (ESA), all of which were seen by disabled people as likely to affect them disproportionately (Kaye, Jordan & Brown, 2012).

Welfare reform had started a few years earlier under Labour: ESA had been introduced in an earlier Bill. It therefore felt to disabled people that there was no real opposition or debate to the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

This reform was in addition to the biggest cuts in state spending since World War II. The Coalition government had announced £83bn savings to be made over four years (Hoban, June 2010) with a plan to cut 490,000 public sector jobs (Hansard, 20 October 2010, col. 951). This involved a whole range of cuts to services, including social care, which are essential for disabled people. Other changes included the end of legal aid, which could be essential at a time when people may want to appeal decisions; the end of the Social Fund, a grant seen as a lifesaver when people have emergency payments to make; and changes to payments of Council Tax benefits such that local authorities faced a further shortfall in budgets. In March 2011, up to half a million people demonstrated in London against these cuts (TUC, 2011).

On 11 May 2011, on the first anniversary of the Coalition government, an estimated 8000 disabled people and carers marched, again through central London, to highlight the impact of spending cuts on disabled people. This Hardest Hit demonstration was repeated on 22 October 2011 in streets across the UK (Hardest Hit, 2011).

However, all these demonstrations required people to be physically present. For many disabled people, this had proved to be impossible for reasons including anxiety at being in a large crowd, lack of energy to follow the demonstration, the costs of attending which might include employing a supporter or travel costs for a carer, and the lack of accessible transport. A small group of disabled people and carers felt strongly that there needed to be other options to include people who could not attend a march. They were keen that this would be inclusive of all disabilities and carers, something that wouldn't take too much energy, and something that people could do from their home. The recently created Government e-petitions site (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk>) seemed to suit their purpose.

In August 2011, the Government Digital Service had delivered its very first product: the e-petitions site. This allowed any petition which achieved more than 100,000 signatures to be considered for debate by Parliament. In the following year, 36,000 petitions would be submitted, with 47% rejected and 15,600 valid e-petitions opened, and just 10 would achieve the 100,000 signatures (Herlihy, 2012). However, in

October 2011, this site was still new. Core group members had mixed feelings on the power of e-petitions:

*Look at the most successful e-petition – the European e-petition on a referendum. What did it achieve? In real terms absolutely nothing. But as far as putting down a marker – firming up the No Europe campaigns – persuading all political leaders that this is a lobby they need to look out for – it achieved a lot. (Email, 27 October 2011)*

As this new site appeared to be the Government's preferred way of working, they agreed that they would create a petition that emphasised all the changes and cuts faced by disabled people and their carers.

## **The work of the group over the twelve months**

### **Submission and first months**

The initial discussions took place between Pat Onions, Rosemary O'Neill and Frances Kelly. All had been part of CarerWatch, either as organisers or through writing blog posts. All had experience as disabled people and/or carers across a range of disabilities. They quickly brought in others, to add various skills and experience, including contacts, image editing and writing skills. The group came together at the point where they tried to find the wording for the petition to ensure that it was inclusive of all disabled people and also carers. Discussions were focussed on agreement of the wording.

The initial stage of forming the group was overtaken by a decision on when to submit the petition. At that time, the government's site was still new, and the group were unsure how unique their petition needed to be. The emails show concerns that there might be duplication, or that their wording might not be appropriate, or that someone else may submit something similar. They made a quick decision to submit their petition on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2011, after the group had been together for only a fortnight. These two weeks were the main period for forming the group. Once the petition was submitted, their goal was clear, to reach 100 000 signatures. Conversations then moved from defining the petition to how to promote it.

The petition was submitted on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2011, and the group anticipated that it would take anything up to a week before approval. They expected to be able to use this week to share the idea with other organisations and campaigners, heading for a launch date of 7<sup>th</sup> November. However, to their surprise, it was accepted and online within hours.

In this first week, the group started to organise itself more clearly. They developed a Google group to enable easier communications. They pulled together lists of potential contacts, across all disability and carers groups, and other groups interested in welfare reform. They started to think about how to manage their lists of contacts and who should take on specific roles. On the whole, people volunteered for roles, offering to do tasks with which they were confident and comfortable.

Their strategy was to achieve some success with numbers so that the petition would reach the front page of the website and attract attention.

*if you look at the petitions most of them fade away with very low numbers. Quite a few get to around 5000 like the 'disabled children' one but get absolutely no notice or attention. The ones that get notice are the few at the top which you see when you first surf in. These ones get in the press. They seem to be 10,000+.  
(Email, 30 October 2011)*

They understood that they might need to achieve this initial number by themselves, and that getting other key supporters on board might not be achievable until after some level of success. From the start there is evidence of group members asking each other about where they fit with other organisations and campaigners.

They were clear that they needed a list of supporting organisations to add legitimacy to the petition, so that it reached beyond their anonymous group of volunteers. They pursued a range of contacts, asking for statements of support as well as agreement to promote the petition. Each supporting statement was then added as a post to their website (supported by CarerWatch). Over the next few months, they gathered a list of 50 supporting organisations (as shown on the Pat's Petition website at <http://carerwatch.com/reform/>) plus many individuals, including Bishops and MPs as well as people with no specific affiliation.

The group watched and commented on the petition's rapid progress,

with the initial successes counted by pages with the aim to get to page 1. There were slight fluctuations as they jostled for position with other petitions, but within 11 days they soon rose from page 444 to page 4:

- November 3: *Out of 444 pages we have now made it to page 86 and we haven't even started yet.*
- November 7: *This morning we were on page 87 - we are now on page 19.*
- November 11: *steaming up page 4 now*

As the numbers of signatories increase, they started to note the actual numbers, plotting them out on a graph to view their progress.

This brought the group together, reminding them of their common purpose and offering something to celebrate. It provided a clear reminder that their efforts were having an effect. This was particularly evident on New Year's Eve, December 31<sup>st</sup> 2011, when they reached what had initially been proposed as the magic number of 10,000 signatories. They had thought that this number would provide the foundation for other organisations to take up the challenge on their behalf.

### **The long haul**

Between January and October 2012, the group continued to promote the petition with the help of some key organisations and supporters. There was disappointment that numbers didn't rise as quickly as hoped, and they started to make plans for other ways of being effective, including discussions around a cumulative impact assessment of their own.

There were some key dates that saw the petition attract a significant number of signatures. These could be seen to relate specifically to information being mailed out to an organisation's supporters. For example, when the TUC sent information about the report 'Responsible Reform' (Campbell et al, 2012) and suggested that a key action was to sign the petition, there was an immediate effect related to the time of distribution. However, on the whole, there are very few cases where this happened. Effort put into writing to national newspapers, commenting on popular blogs, emailing hundreds of small organisations, appearing on television, promoting regularly on social media, attending Party conferences or making links with topical issues, seemed to have little immediate effect to the rate of numbers signing. Numbers continued

to increase throughout this period, but not at a rate which would offer success.

During the final days of August and into September, there was a change in the rate of signatures, but the group could not work out exactly what caused it. There was a possibility that it was linked to the success of another petition (about the West Coast Mainline franchise decision (McKillop, 2011) – which reached 100,000 within days of its launch, bringing many new people to the website and who then clicked on other petitions). Or that it was linked to various newsletters all with a September distribution. It could also have been an effect of the Paralympics or people returning from a summer break. But it is impossible to find out exactly what caused the change in the rate of signatures.

### **The final days**

In the final days, supporters started to make public comments about the petition suggesting

*our only chance now is if we get organised.*

*have you approached the disability websites to ask if they can link to the petition?*

*... approached the main#Disability websites/FB/twitter acc's to ask if can include a link to petition*

*(Email comments from supporters, 29 October 2012)*

Few people outside the core group appeared to understand the work involved in reaching this point, as these were all actions that had been tried repeatedly in the previous twelve months. People coming new to the petition did not recognise the effort that had preceded it.

While the imminent deadline did have an effect on the rate of signatures, it was too late for them to reach a successful 100,000. As one supporter suggested:

*there really is a limit to what individuals with no resources can achieve. (Email from supporter, 30 October 2012)*

Although another said,

*It's been an incredible achievement gaining that many signatories. (Email from supporter, 12 November 2012)*

At the close of the petition, 10:12am on 1st November 2012, it reached 62,168 signatures. While the group assumed this would be the end, the numbers did continue to rise. On 3 June 2013, 6 months after the deadline, yet another signature was added to bring the total to 62,716. In October 2013, this became 62,720.

### **Postscript**

Shortly after the close of the petition, the group heard that one of their seven had died suddenly. This was unexpected and caused great shock to the group. Out of respect, they stopped activities for several days to reflect on their loss and time together, before continuing with their group activities, knowing that her memory would always be with them.

### **Reflections on the success of Pat's Petition**

While the final figure was short of the 100,000 target, the group succeeded on several levels. They worked well together, and brought attention to the cumulative impact of the reforms on disabled people and carers.

The group often comment on how they have worked successfully together. When a new person joined the group in November 2011, they tried, but found it difficult, to explain:

*The most remarkable thing about us is we all seem to get on and we get a lot done but how – I've no idea. It seems to proceed by chat. All any of us care about is seeing those numbers go up. (Email, 20 November 2011)*

This common goal was one thing which drew the group together with one purpose and no distractions. They had one ambition – to reach 100,000 signatures. And a month later, another comment highlights another quality that seemed to help:



*Now I know why we work so well together...you make me laugh! (Email, 23 December 2011)*

Throughout the year, the group congratulated each other on working together so well, but acknowledging that they were unclear how it happens. They didn't refer to any evidence, or attempt to alter their methods. They measured their success by the number of signatures, but weren't sure how they were achieving them:

*it has worked so far, just difficult to work out which bits are the ones that are working well. (Email, 27 December 2011)*

From the start, a view frequently expressed in their communications was:

*Above [are] just thoughts and I will go along with whatever is decided' (Email, 26 October 2011)*

emphasising that the whole group needed to come to a collective decision and that the person was confident to offer opinions without worry of rejection. None of the group members took priority over any other. Opinions were offered and the group came to a democratic agreement on the way forward. There was no formal contract or group rules, although there is an unwritten rule around respect and confidentiality. The group are respectful of each other's impairments and situations.

At the start, there is little evidence of the group members introducing themselves to the others, although some conversations were continued privately outside of the group, as people clarified their personal interests and background with each other. While these personal conversations were short (a couple of emails in length) and explanatory, they helped to build relationships and trust between group members who had not worked together previously.

The group members are the same people throughout the year, with people occasionally needing to be absent, for personal reasons, ill health or computer failure.

*Think of the group like a shoal of fish or a flock of birds, sometimes just one or two and at others one large group all gathering to head in the same direction. (Email, 27 December 2011)*

*commitments and health will dictate who is around. I think we are used to that.  
(Email, 28 December 2011)*

Group members provided frequent support to each other when faced with any setbacks. Early on there was an agreement that they would not air any frustrations in public and that any criticism would remain confidential within the group. Whether it was petition-related, when numbers didn't rise as quickly as they hoped, or if it was about setbacks related to personal situations, group members always offer hope, support, an opportunity to talk, and encouragement to take some time out.

*Everyone is so positive and helpful and concerned for everyone else - as we all know it doesn't happen often - just great good fortune. (Email, 28 December 2011)*

The above quotes, from 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> December, are from a conversation where they reflected on how the group was working with an aim to improve it, but they conclude:

*it was logical that if you start off on instinct and just do it by instinct and never have a management meeting - it seemed logical that you could improve things by some deliberate management but perhaps you can't - perhaps management is just not necessary if you all speak openly - bring up problems as they arise - don't take offence - and get on with it. (Email, 28 December 2011)*

This last point raises an essential factor – that the group have a common purpose on which they are agreed. It perhaps also helped that they had a definite timeline.

The discussions overlook some factors which may be important. All group members are women; all are disabled and/or carers; all have previous experience of a variety of groups; all were selected because they brought something to the group in terms of skills or contacts. These factors may all be essential, and were all assumed as a given for this group.

Over the year the group learnt more about creating a wider group of people who had signed a petition. This included the challenges of disability campaigning. These challenges also brought the group together as they struggled to make sense of them and find solutions.

One key challenge, inherent in using any online e-petition site, was that all signatories needed access to the internet via suitable equipment. There was no way of signing the petition without online access. This immediately emphasised digital communications, and promoting through social media and online sites so that a clickable link could be included to make it easy for people to sign the petition. However, disabled people are three times more likely never to have used the internet than people with no disability (ONS, May, 2012).

The group itself communicated by emails. The archive of the whole year consists of a significant number of emails, of between 1000 and 3000 emails per month, for the 12 month period. Without internet access and email, this group would not have been able to develop. Every member had to be confident with email and have access to the necessary equipment.

An advantage of email and social media is that the communications could happen at times to suit each individual. It is evident that all members of the group have their own routines, contributing at times that suit them best, around health, paid work and/or caring commitments. There is often someone online and this helped them to get the message out through social media to a wider audience at various times of the day.

Use of technology extended to specific needs around accessibility. For example, Pat Onions, who is blind, has a screen reader (referred to as 'Jane') so that she can listen to all emails and reply.

*Not being able to read or write for 27 years, and now having Jane, is almost indescribable'. (Email, 4 November 2011)*

Pat frequently refers to her frustrations at trying to keep up with so many emails and the time it takes her to reply. Over the year, the group develops their understanding of how to make it easier for her, for example by sending attachments as PDF documents which can be read by Jane; making sure they use a consistent name for themselves and steer away from using aliases; and keeping topics in line with the subject heading.

This also emphasises one challenge of the government website: it's inaccessibility to people with a range of needs. The Captcha, used on the site to reduce spam, included an audio alternative that many found impossible to decipher, and which attracted particular criticism:

*[people] have tried but are struggling with the Captcha, and the sound option isn't helping some of them. We can't find a way around it - I can't ask to do it for them... that would invade their anonymity. Sorry this has only just come to light, but it may be a real reason why the count is low despite the link being just about everywhere' (Email from supporter, 30 January 2012)*

But ownership of equipment and accessibility were not the only suggested challenges of using the internet. People also had concerns around providing personal information on a government website. Disabled people can be scared to go out of the house, use a computer or take an active part in campaigns in case it is viewed as evidence of capability for work. Common sense may tell us there is a world of difference between being able to access the internet from a mobile phone in bursts of ten minutes while enduring pain, and the repeatable and reliable effort required for employment. But while the possibility of losing essential benefits exists, this can feel too much of a risk.

*disabled people are often too paranoid to fill in details at a gov[ernment] website, or can't access a computer or haven't an email address. (Email, 27 December 2011)*

*I suspect that the other huge obstacle to the petition is that claimants are required to give their full name and address to sign it. I'm willing to bet that around 80% abandon the process at that point for fear of making themselves a target. (Email from supporter, 14 November 2011)*

One concern expressed at the start and returned to at several points over the year, is that the government site does not allow the group members any access to a list of signatories or their contact details. The group considered other petition sites including 38 Degrees, Avaaz and Change.org, but felt it was important to use the site developed by the government, despite this frustration at not being able to contact supporters.

*It has to be the government website for it to be fully recognised' (Email, 30 October 2011)*

There are 3.2 million people receiving Disability Living Allowance and 2.3 million people receiving Incapacity Benefit / Employment Support

Allowance, (DWP, Feb, 2013). These disabled people, together with family, friends and staff were all natural supporters for the petition. The group were clear that they might not be able to persuade a wider cross section of the population, at a time when the media's rhetoric referred regularly to 'welfare scroungers' and hate crime related to disability was rising. However many disabled people were clearly unaware of the extent of the changes, assuming only the fraudulent would be affected. Many people erroneously assumed they would be okay.

The group's website (<http://carerwatch.com/reform/>) shows an extensive list of supporters including the National Housing Federation, Mind, Scope, National Family Network, ECDP, rethink mental illness, the Bishop of Oxford, the National Pensioners Convention, Inclusion Scotland, RNIB and many more. While the list may sound impressive, there were many challenges in obtaining that support. Some people emailed that their organisation offered their backing, but when asked to confirm that this could be made public, they then had to check with managers or wait for the next committee meeting. Other organisations felt unable to assist, mentioning that it was 'too political' or 'controversial'. Some organisations offered to send one tweet or put it on their Facebook page. While this showed a welcomed level of encouragement, there was concern that this was potentially tokenistic and that it would be important to follow up to request more actions. There was surprise that some organisations from outside the disability field were keen to be involved, while some within the disability world didn't respond.

The group also wanted to reach across the wide spectrum of beliefs around solutions. They had purposefully refrained from including a solution in their initial petition wording; they asked the government to 'stop and review'. They hoped that this would encourage people and groups with a variety of solutions to engage in conversations and build the petition.

*Normally we stay away from petitions because they're ten a penny, but this one's worded really well and all the added pressure we can get, the better. (Email from supporter, 7 November 2011)*

But they felt that many organisations could have done more to help, and that people outside their group, seeing the list on the website, might

assume they were receiving a lot of support from funded organisations.

*People don't realise. They see the name & logo and assume [a specific organisation] are pulling out all the stops and giving us tons of publicity backing. (Email, 15 November 2011)*

However, they did not take their inability to gather this support as a personal failure.

*getting the lobby to work together is a gargantuan task – it seems structured not to work together' (Email, 26 May 2013)*

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of reflecting on the year of Pat's Petition was to enquire if there was any learning which could be passed to other groups who may want to start a similar undertaking. While the petition was certainly of its time, when the government petition site was still quite new, and while welfare reform was making its track through parliament, there may be some learning for other interest groups. Despite questioning themselves throughout the year, the group could still draw no conclusions as to why or how they succeeded in forming their group. The most likely factor was that they had a clear goal and a defined timeline so that individuals knew exactly what they were getting involved in. They were a small group of people who had experience in a variety of other groups and who were very familiar with the issues. They also had a tolerance and maturity to prioritise their mission. All this produced a high level of trust within the group.

It could be said that their mission did not succeed; they did not reach the 100,000 signatures. But they did raise the issues to a wide audience and have made strong links with organisations, MPs and individuals. Their request for a Cumulative Impact Assessment was taken up by Liam Byrne MP in his motion for the Opposition Day debate on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2013 (Hansard, July, 2013).

The group's work continues in many ways. As a group, they continue to work towards achieving a Cumulative Impact Assessment of all the changes and how they affect disabled people and carers. They continue

with their website, and have a petition on Change.org so that they can link to supporters. The WOW petition submitted by Francesca Martinez, is a direct descendant of Pat's Petition.

One group member summed up some tips for other groups which are thinking of using a petition to promote an issue:

*Don't rely on outside bodies, you have only got your team. If you get help from outside that is a bonus but you cannot depend on it. Concentrate on the required outcome (100k sigs), it is not about personal glory. With disabled people in the team, there will be times when we cannot do the job, can't be relied on, when there is no motivation etc in comparison to able bodied/minded people (politically incorrect, I know). Similarly with carers there will be times when the people they care for call them away from the task. Use twitter throughout the campaign – and get as many tweeters on board as possible. And fb [Facebook] tho it appears to be harder to promote stuff as widely now as it was then. Try to get famous people to sign/support. People will then automatically support. Same with media coverage. (Email, 26 May 2013)*

This general list emphasises the assumptions made over a year previously; that the group are volunteers who face their own challenges, and who can pull together to get their cause noticed and taken up by a wider group. But in practice, at that point in time, this did not create the success of 100,000 signatures. It is impossible to guess whether the same techniques would work now that the petition site is more established, although a useful comparison may be a similar story when the WOW petition reaches its conclusion.

The last words need to go to Pat herself:

*I do think as a group of 7 women we were, and still are, unique. I don't think that could ever happen again and we are justly proud of that. (Email, 26 May 2013)*

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The majority of quotes included in this piece are from a private archive of the emails sent over the lifetime of the petition. Emails are from group members to each other, unless stated as being from a supporter.

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