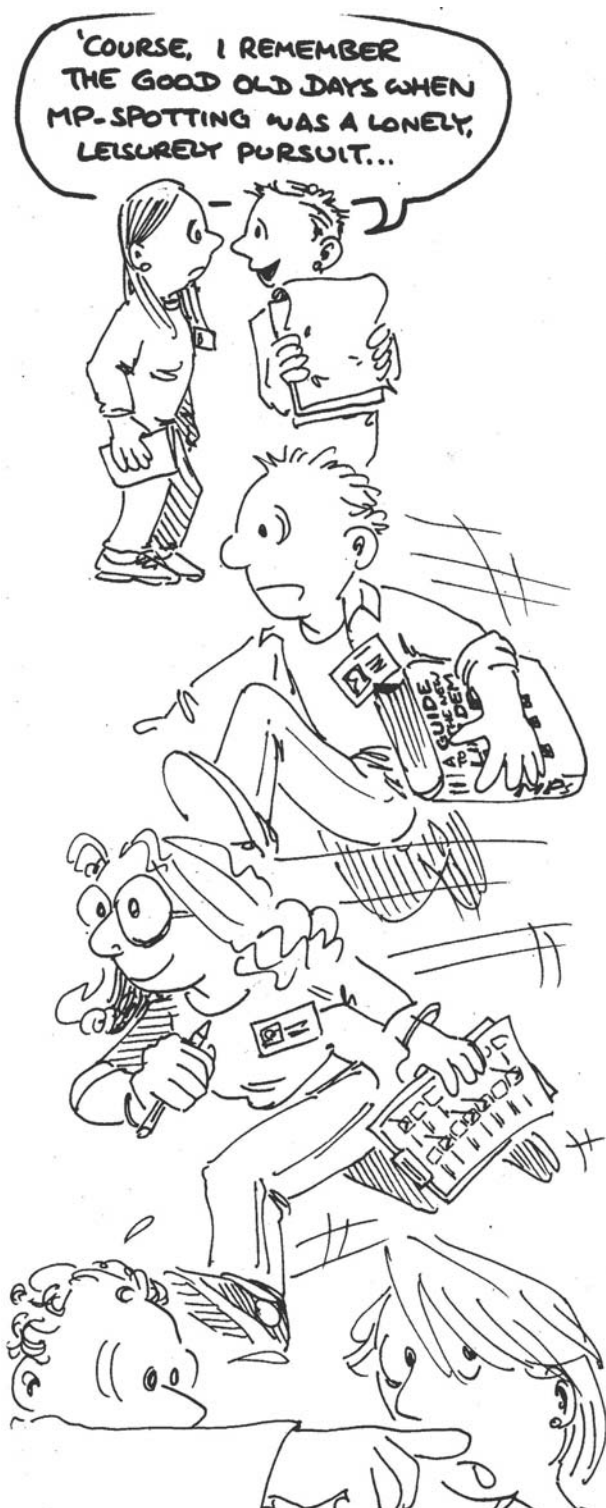


First-timer's guide to conference



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First-timer's guide to conference

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1 Introduction

If you've never attended the Liberal Democrat Federal Conference, but have decided you would like to, this guide is designed to help you make the most out of your first – and subsequent! – visits.

In many ways, conference lies at the heart of the federal party. It's the democratic forum for policy development and party strategy, it's our best chance to promote our vision and values to the outside world and it offers a huge range of opportunities for discussion and the development of political and campaigning skills. It's also enormously enjoyable!

You'll meet interesting and helpful people, hear inspiring speeches, get involved in making policy, take advantage of training sessions – and above all, have such a good time that you'll want to come again.

2 Before you go

There are two conferences each year: a weekend one in the spring and a five-day one in the autumn. You can attend either or both. There is a cheaper rate if you register for both at the same time (joint registration is only available up to a certain date – see registration form for details) – and the earlier in the year you register, the less you pay.

Any member of the party may attend as either a voting representative, a non-voting representative, or a day visitor. At an autumn conference you additionally have the option of registering for the weekend only.

Each local party has an allocation of voting representatives (related to the size of its membership), which are elected at its AGM, for the following year. Only voting representatives can vote in debates in the main conference hall. In all other respects, voting and non-voting reps are the same: they register for the whole (or weekend in Autumn) of conference, receive conference papers, and they can all speak in debates.

If you're not sure if you want to come to the whole of conference, or can't spare the time, you can also attend as a day visitor. Day visitors pay a daily fee, don't receive papers (although they can be bought in addition or downloaded from the website) and can't speak or vote – but it's a good way to get a 'taster' of

conference. Note that day visitors can only register on-site, not in advance.

The conference website (<http://www.libdems.org.uk/conference>) provides information about registration, accommodation, travel and disability access, as well as venue information, important dates and deadlines and much more.

Check out the *Democracy in Action* section on the Conference pages of the Lib Dem website for useful information on how to speak in debates and how to hold the party to account.

3 Registering

You can register on-site at conference, but you'll find it much easier (and cheaper) to register in advance. Either register online or print off and fill in the applicable registration form and send it off together with your registration fee.

This will entitle you to:

- A copy of:
 - (i) The Agenda, containing the entire programme for conference, including the text of all the motions to be debated, the keynote speakers, Q&A sessions, etc.;
 - (ii) Directory & Fringe Guide
 - (iii) Training programmeIn autumn these are three separate documents; in spring they are combined into one. Together these documents provide you with all the information you need about participating, including maps of the conference centre and the various hotels being used for fringe meetings and training.
- Please note that the autumn Agenda does not contain specific timings for the conference programme. These are emailed out in *Conference Extra* one week before the event. *Conference Extra* is not published at spring conference – all the relevant information is contained within the *Agenda and Directory* or *Conference Daily*.
- Copies of the policy and consultation papers to be debated, and reports of the party committees and parliamentary parties, for approval by

conference. *You will not receive these if you chose the "Green Pack" option when registering.*

- Your photo pass.

Conference documentation

You are given a choice on registration whether to receive a 'Full Pack' or a 'Green Pack' option of Conference documentation.

The "Full Pack" includes the Agenda, directory & fringe guide, training brochure, full set of policy papers, full set of consultative papers and reports to conference. The 'Green Pack' option means you will receive only the Agenda and Directory (including fringe guide) and training brochure. All other papers will be available to view online.

Please help us in reducing the amount of paper printed at conference. Tick the 'Green' option.

The Agenda and Directory, and the Training programme, are your essential guides to managing conference. Read them carefully! Highlight which sessions and debates you want to hear, which speakers you would like to listen to, and which fringes you wish to attend. There will probably be clashes, but remember that you can move in and out of sessions to get a taster, or decide to stay for a full session and really get involved. Once you've found your feet, you will probably change your timetable. It is still a good idea to have an idea of the range of options available before you arrive, so that you don't feel completely overwhelmed.

Voting status

If you have received a non-voting badge when you think you should have received a voting badge please contact the Membership Department on membership@libdems.org.uk, as the Conference Office is not able to verify voting/non voting status.

4 Where to stay

The conference hotel (or hotels) are the focus for most events outside the main conference centre. As the networking hub (usually at the bar!), the main conference hotel will never be cheap. However, we always try to ensure that conference venues have a wide range of accommodation to suit everyone's budget.

We work with local accommodation partners for each venue we go to – check out the accommodation section of the appropriate conference for their details and how to book.

5 Getting there

Protecting the environment is a theme that runs throughout all Liberal Democrat policies, and one we carry into the management of conference. So we print all our documents on recycled paper, issue you with recyclable bags, make sure there are recycling bins throughout the conference centre, and add a £1 carbon levy to all registrations which is used to offset the greenhouse gas emissions associated with holding the conference. We also encourage people to travel to conference either by public transport or, if not, in shared vehicles. If your local party has not organised a minibus or shared cars, why not do it yourself? It would be a good way of getting to know people – and would probably save money as well.

6 On arrival

If your photo-pass has not arrived in advance of conference, go to the registration desk at conference to collect it or have it re-printed. You must wear your pass at all times to enter the conference centre, and move around within it. Note that you do not require a photo pass to access any of the hotels for fringe or training sessions – a party membership card will suffice.

For registrations received after the cut-off date for the mailing, conference documentation is available for collection together with the recyclable Delegate Bag at the designated delegate bag collection point (please see the Directory and venue map for details).

New documents can be collected from the Information Desk, as they become available, like the *Conference Daily*, which is also available from the Conference hotels.

7 Help!

If you have any queries or complaints at any time during the conference, there are a variety of options:

- The information section in the Agenda and Directory contains entries on almost everything, arranged alphabetically. Look there first.
- *Conference Extra* (autumn conference only) contains the specific agenda timings for all the debates, speakers, Q&A etc. and any other useful information available just before Conference starts. It is emailed out a week before and is available in hard copy from the Information Desk on the first day of conference.
- Make sure you pick up each day's *Conference Daily*. This contains up-to-date details of all amendments, emergency motions, changes to speakers or timings – you will always need it to understand what's going on. It is available from the Information Desk and from the stewards in the hall.
- *Stewards* are easily recognisable in their stewards' shirts and wearing large badge holders – similar to the FCC - just in a different colour. They are responsible for making sure that everyone knows where they're going, that fringe meetings start and finish on time, that speaker's cards are given out and processed in the conference hall, for counting any close votes and much more. Together with professional security staff, they also look after security in the conference centre and the conference hotels.
- The *Information Desk* is staffed by experienced stewards; if you're not sure who to ask, go there.
- The *Federal Conference Committee* (FCC) is elected to run the conference, choose the agenda and chair the debates. FCC members have large badges with the letters 'FCC' prominently displayed. They're the right people to ask about conference procedures, debates and speaking.

8 Stewards and security

Like all major events, we need to be careful with our security. Stewards, supplemented by professional security staff, are in charge of all the entrances to the conference centre. If you have a bag, they will need to search it; in particular, make sure you don't bring in any sharp objects. At peak times, such as when the conference hall opens in the morning, or after lunch, or before particularly popular sessions (such as the leader's speech), this means that there will be queues – please make sure you allow extra time to get in. Security applies to everyone – even the party leader gets searched! – so everyone's cooperation is appreciated.

Stewards are responsible for letting people in and out of the auditorium, and for ensuring that you travel safely around the conference centre. They will want to look at your photo-pass, so please be patient and let them do their job – they're all volunteers who do a difficult job very well (and if you're interested, we're always looking for more stewards!). To find out more or to register as a steward go to www.libdemstewards.co.uk.

9 Must do's for first-timers

Ideally, you should be able to buddy up with someone from your local party until you have found your feet, but the speed of conference often makes this unmanageable. So there are a few key events for first-timers at conference:

- *First-timers' Reception*– this is held on the first night of conference, run by the FCC. It gives you the opportunity to meet other first timers, and ask the more experienced party members who are there for advice and support. The FCC will also take you briefly through conference procedures and what you can expect throughout the conference – and there's plenty of time for questions. Don't forget – even the leader was a first-timer once!
- *Exhibition* – you can find representatives from different Lib Dem associations, such as Liberal Youth and if you find one for you, it's a good way to meet other Lib Dems at Conference (further details see 14 Exhibition)
- *Rally*– held on the first evening. This is a good opportunity to see key members of the party putting across a

key party message, or talking about major policy issues.

- *Leader's speech* – Held on the last day and the formal close to Conference. It always attracts a great deal of media interest and a packed hall. You are well advised to arrive early to get a good seat.

10 In the hall

If you decide that you'd like to speak during a debate, don't be put off by the fact that you're a first-timer; chairs of debates usually try and call one or two first-timers in each debate.

In order to be called to speak, you need to hand in a speaker's card. You can obtain a card from stewards in the hall or from the Information Desk. Fill it in with details about you and your background, and a rough idea of what you're going to say (whether you're going to speak for or against the motion, focus on one particular area, etc.). Do make sure you hand in the card well in advance – preferably the previous day. The chair and aide team for each debate plan who they're going to call well in advance, so don't leave it to the last minute.

Also make sure your speech sticks to the time available (time limits are published in the Agenda) – if you run over, you'll be cut off!

A traffic light system will tell you how much time you have left – the amber light comes on when you have sixty seconds left, and the red light when your time is up. Speaking for the first time can be daunting, but once you've done it, you'll never look back. And the audience in the hall is always supportive of first-time speakers.

'Intervention' microphones are used during long debates. Representatives can speak for one minute from microphones situated in the middle of the hall. It's a first-come, first-served system – just go and sit in the seats reserved for interveners, and follow the steward's instructions. Although an intervention speech is very brief, it's a good way to make a really punchy point – and it's less intimidating than giving a longer speech from the rostrum.

11 Consultative sessions

The first morning of conference (or afternoon in the case of spring) are usually taken up with consultative sessions. These are relatively informal sessions organised by the Federal Policy Committee to discuss policy papers, which are in the process of being drafted, or by parliamentary teams to discuss topical issues.

They usually take place in the main conference hotel but check the Agenda for the exact locations as this may vary in some venues. Feel free to drop in to one or more, and stay as long as you find them interesting. If you have particular knowledge of the issue, feel free to contribute to the discussion.

12 On the fringe

Fringe meetings vary from major debates sponsored by national newspapers through discussions on specialised subjects organised by NGOs, or businesses, or internal party groups to internal party debates about issues of the moment. The fringe takes place first thing in the morning, at lunchtime and in the evenings (until late), once the main auditorium sessions have ended for the day.

Fringe meetings take place in the conference centre and surrounding nearby hotels (see the map in your Directory) – allow time for getting there. Many fringe events attract audiences larger than the rooms can hold, so aim to arrive early for the ones you particularly want to attend.

The fringe programme has grown enormously in recent years, so you'll often find yourself spoilt for choice. Decide early on which ones you want to go to, and stick to your decision.

Many fringe meetings provide refreshments as an added incentive to get you there. You may manage to go through the entire conference without having to go out for a meal, though you may find a diet of finger buffets rather repetitive!

13 Training

Training sessions are run by the party's Campaigns Department, the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC), the Campaign for Gender Balance, the Parliamentary Candidates' Association (PCA) and other party bodies. For the autumn conference, a separate training programme is sent out with the Directory (for the spring, the training sessions are included in the Agenda and Directory). Just like the fringe, there is a wide range of options available, including public speaking, chairing and managing meetings as well as policy topics. Details of how to sign up for the training are in the programme.

The training runs throughout the day, so double-check for any clashes with sessions you wish to attend in the main hall. And once again, allow time to get to and from the venue.

14 Exhibition

The exhibition gets bigger and better every year, with commercial, NGO and party body stands. Many stands have competitions and a good supply of free goodies! The exhibitors really enjoy talking to representatives – it's why they are there – so if there is something you are particularly interested in, go and talk to them. You will probably meet like-minded fellow reps at those stands as well.

Party stands are a bit different: the majority are there either to sell you something or persuade you to join them. Sales tactics vary from the very soft to the very hard sell, but don't let that put you off! The advantage they all have is that the people running the stands have probably been to dozens of conferences and know as much as anyone else about how they operate. Never be afraid to ask for advice.

Usually, the main refreshment areas will be in the exhibition, so it's possible to kill two birds with one stone. The refreshment areas are also good places to button-hole people you want to talk to – everyone from MPs and councillors to local eccentrics.

As one of the main sources of income for the conference, the exhibition is crucial to the success of the event, and we hope that all reps will take time to enjoy it, talk to those working in the area and see how their commercial or party experience could benefit their local party.

15 The last night ...

... is Glee Club night. This usually starts around 10pm, and takes place in the biggest room we can find, generally in the main conference hotel. The Glee Club is basically a compèred sing-song, together with guest appearances from the party's great and good; their sketches and jokes vary from the hilarious to the embarrassing, though you'll probably find that the more you drink, the funnier they get. All the songs are in the *Liberator Songbook* (available from the *Liberator* exhibition stand or at the event), many of them being traditional and dating back many years. It's not compulsory – but it's uniquely Lib Dem and the cash bar generally has a range of discounted drinks!

16 Socialising

Liberal Democrats are very friendly people, and even more so at conference. Even outsiders, such as lobbyists, campaigners and journalists, who go to all three main party conferences, say so. Conference is an ideal time to meet fellow Lib Dems who, like you, have taken a long weekend or a week off to debate, listen, think, talk, eat and drink Lib Dem politics.

This may well involve staying up too late, chatting in the hotel bars, pinning down that MP who's been eluding you all week and generally getting to know people. It's a time to catch up with someone you might have met during a campaign, someone you have emailed but never met, or someone you thought you'd never get an chance to talk to.

One of the reasons that our conferences are so successful and people return year after year is because of the friendships that are made and renewed once or twice a year.

And next time you come, it won't be as a first-time rep but as someone who's confident enough to show someone else the ropes. Good luck – and enjoy yourself!