

Federal Policy Committee Work Programme on Europe

The spring 2021 conference instructed the FPC to ‘carry out a programme of work, including consulting widely within the party, to determine the best possible future framework for the UK–EU relationship across all policy areas, with the aims of: (a) demonstrating the benefits to UK citizens and businesses of a much closer relationship compared to the government’s inadequate measures; (b) recommending roadmaps for the UK to rejoin the Customs Union, Single Market and other EU agencies and programmes as appropriate; and (c) maximising public support for eventual UK membership of the EU.’

The FPC has appointed a small group, chaired by Duncan Brack and including representatives of the parliamentary party, the Federal International Relations Committee and the Liberal Democrat European Group, to implement the conference instruction. We have decided to approach our task through a series of conference motions and papers rather than one big one. Since we cannot realistically cover every possible relevant topic through conference motions, we are also encouraging our parliamentary spokespeople to put forward proposals for closer and stronger relationships with the EU in their spokespersonship areas.

We organised a consultation session at conference in September, and we are collaborating with the Liberal Democrat European Group in organising these regional events, in order to give party members a chance to tell us what they think are the priority policy areas we should address, what the possible solutions within each area are, and the messages the party should use in promoting closer cooperation between the UK and EU. This is our initial list of key topics –

Cultural, artistic and educational ties

We thought this was a good topic to begin with, so the FPC submitted a motion to conference on ‘Rebuilding our Cultural, Artistic and Educational Ties with Europe’. The motion called, among other things, for the UK to rejoin the Erasmus Plus scheme, to establish a European cultural fund and to improve the Youth Mobility Scheme. It was passed without opposition.

Trade

The key topic is obviously the trading relationship between the UK and EU. For next year’s spring conference we are planning a motion on Single Market and Customs Union membership. This is such a complex area, covering, among other things, freedom of movement, social, health and environmental standards and the Northern Ireland Protocol, that we’ll be accompanying it with a short paper, to be published alongside the conference agenda. There is no doubt about the party’s commitment to rejoining the Single Market and Customs Union – that was made clear at spring conference this year– but there are many issues to consider about the practicalities, the phasing and the impacts. Among other things, this should provide at least partial solutions to the recent supply-chain problems, including shortages of HGV drivers and staff in the transport, farming, food and catering and care sectors.

Climate change and energy

The FPC’s policy paper on carbon pricing, which was approved by conference, includes the proposal to link the UK Emissions Trading Scheme with the EU ETS, thus increasing the effectiveness of emissions trading; and rejoining the EU ETS would be a requirement of UK entry to the EU in any case. Other potential areas for cooperation include working together with the EU in international climate negotiations; meeting emissions reduction targets jointly with the EU (in the same way as EEA countries do); and promoting greater interconnection with EU energy networks.

Natural environment

Potential areas for collaboration include re-adopting EU standards in areas such as pollution control, water, air, chemicals, biodiversity, waste, genetically modified organisms and environmental impact assessment (most of this would be required under Single Market membership in any case, but this approach could be adopted in advance); working with the EU on its new measures to require businesses to protect the environment, and human and labour rights, in their supply chains; and working together with the EU in international biodiversity negotiations.

Rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU

This topic covers guaranteeing EU citizens' rights in law, including physical proof of settled status; automatic upgrading for those with pre-settled status; strengthening the Independent Monitoring Authority; and reiterating our commitment to the European Social Charter. We could also urge the UK government to ensure that EU member state governments are upholding the rights of UK citizens.

Crime

Issues under this heading include police and security cooperation, including access to the Schengen Information System (information-sharing for security and border management); rejoining Europol and Eurojust and the European Arrest Warrant; and arrangements for the reciprocal nature of judgements, for example under the Lugano Convention, which clarifies which national courts have jurisdiction in cross-border civil and commercial disputes and ensures that judgments taken in such disputes can be enforced across borders.

Science

Key aspects include alignment and co-operation as far as possible with EU science programmes such as Horizon Europe; participation in satellite systems including Galileo, EGNOS (the pan-European satellite navigation system) and Copernicus (the EU's Earth observation programme); participation in Euratom; and measures to improve access for EU nationals to UK academic institutions.

Health

Topics include workforce issues such as recognition of professional qualifications, scrapping the Immigration Health Surcharge, improving visa routes; agreement on health insurance cards (EHIC/GHIC) with EEA member states; cooperation with the European Medicines Agency; and the possibility of joint pandemic preparedness exercises between UK and EU in the future.

Foreign affairs, security and development

This heading covers a wide range of issues, including cooperation over security challenges such as those posed by Russia or China; the impacts and possible strategies towards unstable regions such as Afghanistan or the Middle East; and cooperation over development challenges, including Covid vaccination and climate finance. Other possibilities include coordinated use of 'Magnitsky sanctions' targeted on individuals responsible for human rights violations or corruption; and the creation of a shared forum for European states to address foreign and defence policy issues.

Comments on this paper are welcome, either in person at the LDEG regional events and conference on 30 October, or by email to policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk .
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