



First-timer's guide to conference

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1. Introduction

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

Conference lies at the heart of the Scottish 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 is 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 one day conference in the autumn. You can attend either or both. There is often a cheaper rate if you register for both at the same time and the earlier you register, the less you pay.

Any member of the party may attend. Every member who registers to attend conference has a right to vote.

3. Registering

You can register on site at conference itself, but you'll find it much easier and cheaper to register in advance. All members are sent a registration form well in before conference usually accompanying a newsletter. Please complete the form with the appropriate registration fee and if you haven't been before please send us a passport photo of yourself for your conference ID badge. You can also just ring Party HQ and we can take your booking over the phone. Your ID badge will be available for collection on arrival at conference

Six weeks before conference you will be sent a copy of our conference agenda containing the text of all the motions to be debated as well as information on keynote speakers, Q&A sessions, training sessions, etc. To reduce the amount of paper printed for conference and spend less on postage, we are increasingly sending out such information by email. Hard copies of the full agenda will be available for collection at the conference venue. However you can request that a hard copy be sent to you by post in advance.

4. On arrival

You will be able to collect your ID badge from the registration desk on arrival at the conference venue. You must wear your badge at all times to enter the conference centre and move around within it. Copies of the agenda, daily Conference Bulletin, speaker's cards and any other related papers will also be available at the registration desk. The Conference Bulletin contains up-to-date details of all amendments, emergency motions, changes to speakers and/or timings plus other useful information.

5. 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 and are also responsible for letting people in and out of the auditorium. They will want to look at your ID badge so please be patient and let them do their job. They also have to make sure everyone knows where they are going, that fringe meetings start and finish on time, that speakers' cards are given out and processed in the conference hall, for counting any close votes and much more. Stewards are easily recognisable in their yellow stewards' shirts.

6. 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 registration desk. Fill it in with the details about yourself 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 to increase your chances of getting selected as the chair and aide team tend to plan the order of the debate in advance.

Also make sure your speech sticks to the time available (time limits vary but will be made clear to you.) If you run over, you will be cut off!

When your name is called, make your way to the stage. The podium on the stage has a traffic light system which 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 may be used during long debates. Members can speak for one minute from microphones situated in the middle of the hall. If the chair calls your name out for the intervention mic, make your way to the nearest mic and wait your turn (often several names are called out together). Stewards are on hand to help if you are unsure of anything. 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 podium.

You will find members of the Conference Committee in the hall. They can be identified by their distinctively coloured badges and can be approached with any comments or queries.

They are also keen to hear what you thought of conference so please fill in the feedback form which will be distributed at the end of conference.

7. On the fringe

Fringe meetings tend to be one hour interactive meetings during the lunchbreak or in the evening. How they run varies from major debates sponsored by national newspapers through to discussions on specialised subjects organised by the voluntary sector or businesses or internal party groups to internal party debates about issues of the moment. Often there is a panel of 'experts' giving short speeches on the set topic before the chair opens up a Q&A session with the delegates.

Fringe meetings take place in the main conference venue. 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!

8. Training

Training sessions are mainly run at spring conference by the party's Campaigns Department, the Association of Scottish Liberal Democrat Councillors and other party bodies. There may be training sessions at our autumn conference if time allows. Just like the fringe there is a wide range of options available including briefings for local party officers, help with taking photos and updating your website, fundraising, candidate selection, etc.

Training sessions run throughout the day, so double check any clashes with sessions you wish to attend in the main hall.

9. Exhibition

The exhibition gets bigger and better every year with commercial, charity and party 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 members at those stands as well.

Party stands are a bit different: the majority are there either to sell you something (usually a raffle ticket!) or persuade you to join them. Sales tactics can 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 about how conference operates. 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, MSPs and councillors to candidates.

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 members will take time to enjoy it.

10 Socialising

Scottish Liberal Democrats are very friendly people and even more so at conference. Conference is an ideal time to meet fellow Lib Dems who, like you, have come along to debate, listen, think, talk, eat and drink Lib Dem politics.

This may well involve staying up too late, chatting in the hotel bars and generally getting to know people. It's 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 a chance to speak to. One of the reasons that our conferences are so successful and people return year after year is because of friendships that are made and renewed once or twice a year.

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

11 Further information

If you need any further information about conference at any point, please do not hesitate to phone Party HQ on 0131 337 2314 where we will be happy to answer any questions you may have.