

How to write a conference motion

The Scottish Conference Committee selects the agenda for each conference from amongst the motions submitted by members and local parties.

Before every conference the Committee rejects a fair number of motions because they are badly written – for example because they're not clear, or they raise a problem without suggesting a solution, or they propose solutions without explaining the background. The better your motion is written, the more likely it is to be selected.

1. What does the Committee look for?

A motion should be easy to understand, logically argued and well presented. If the Committee finds it difficult to understand the purpose of a motion or to follow the case it argues, it is likely that conference will also have problems. Equally – though this is harder for anyone drafting a motion to predict – the motion should be in a subject area where it is desirable for the party to develop new policy or make its existing policies or achievements known. Other things being equal, a shorter motion usually has an advantage over a longer one.

2. What features will reduce the chances of a motion being chosen?

A motion's chances of being selected will be reduced if: it is unnecessarily long (e.g. a long shopping list of detailed points); uses too many words to convey its message; is incoherent or unclear in parts; or seems to be making a speech (try reading it aloud); or if it says nothing new, restates existing policy, is on an area of policy which has recently been fully debated by conference or is about to be subject of a policy paper debate.

3. How should we go about deciding what our motion should say?

Generally, motions should be drafted around the three Ps:

- the Problem(s) which need to be solved;
- the Principle(s) which underlie the solution; and
- the Proposals which must be the heart of the motion.

4. Useful words

Relatively few words provide the introduction and links in a motion. The preamble or introduction should describe the problem being addressed by the motion, usually using words such as conference 'condemns', 'denounces' or 'rejects'. The problem may be linked to a 'failure', usually of the government. The motion can then 'reaffirm', 'recognise', 'declare' or just list the principles that apply. Proposals are usually introduced by 'affirms', 'believes', 'calls for', 'recommends', 'proposes', 'urges', 'demands', 'insists', or 'resolves'.

5. Sample motion

The following is an example of a relatively well-drafted motion (from the March 2006 conference):

"Conference notes the UN report on Guantanamo Bay published on 15th February 2006, and in particular its call for the US Government to 'close the Guantanamo Bay detention

centre facilities without further delay' and to 'refrain from any practice amounting to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment'.

Conference further notes that the UN commission said that:

- a) Photo evidence alone – corroborated by testimony of former prisoners – had shown detainees were shackled, chained, hooded and forced to wear headphones and goggles. This treatment is supposed to disorient individuals so that they are susceptible to interrogation and reliant on guards.*
- b) Some of the interrogation techniques used at the detention facility itself, particularly the use of dogs, exposure to extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation for several consecutive days and prolonged isolation, caused extreme suffering.*
- c) Such treatment amounts to torture, as it inflicts severe pain or mental suffering on the victims for the purpose of intimidation and/or punishment. Conference condemns Tony Blair's assertion that Guantanamo amounts to an anomaly.*

Conference therefore calls on the leadership of the Liberal Democrats to:

- 1. Make their support for the recommendations of the UN widely known both within and outside parliament.*
- 2. Make a firm commitment to raise key objections with the US Embassy in London.*
- 3. Keep up the pressure on the Prime Minister to distance himself and his administration from Guantanamo."*

Motions drafting advice

If you are drafting a motion, we could help. Policy staff will provide comments and advice (on drafting only, not on political content). Accepting advice will not guarantee selection, and declining to accept it will not necessarily mean the motion will be refused – however, the record shows that people who have used the service have had a better chance.

Motions must be sent by the advertised deadlines, usually 8 weeks before conference to Party HQ. For further information and advice please call us on 0131 337 2314.