



Conference Report

Autumn 2024

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Policy Motions

A Fair Deal for Family Carers

Conference notes that:

- i) There are 10.6 million people across the UK who give unpaid support to someone who is elderly, seriously ill or disabled.
- ii) Carer's Allowance, the main benefit for carers, remains the lowest benefit of its kind at £81.90 per week and 1.4 million full-time unpaid carers rely on the benefit.
- iii) Those caring for family members and friends are saving the taxpayer and state over £160 billion every year.
- iv) A Carers Trust survey shows that 14% of unpaid carers had to use a food bank this year.
- v) One in seven people in the workplace in the UK are juggling work and care and 59% of unpaid carers are women.
- vi) 52% of carers who apply for flexible working have their applications refused and 72% want to work or work more if they could access flexible working.
- vii) Too many carers are currently excluded from receiving Carer's Allowance due to the eligibility criteria being set too low.
- viii) The Conservatives failed to tackle the scandal of thousands of Carer's Allowance recipients being issued disproportionate fines for overpayments.
- ix) The Liberal Democrats secured a legal entitlement to unpaid leave for unpaid carers in the last parliament.
- x) The Liberal Democrats continue to call for cross-party talks to agree a long-term basis for sustainably funding social care into the future.
- xi) Department for Education data shows that 39% of young carers are 'persistently absent', missing at least one day of school a fortnight, almost twice as high as the figure for pupils who are not young carers; young carers are also significantly less likely to gain a degree or enter employment.
- xii) The launch of the Young Carers Covenant by Carers Trust in March 2024, a UK-wide commitment to young carers and young adult carers.
- xiii) There has not been a UK Government plan for improving support for unpaid carers since 2020.

Conference believes that:

- a) The Liberal Democrats must stand up for all carers, ensure their voices are heard in this new parliament, and work to build a more caring society.
- b) We can only tackle the crisis in our NHS if we fix social care and support the millions of unpaid carers across the country.
- c) Social care is an essential service, like healthcare or education, and should be designed to ensure that everyone is able to live with independence and in dignity.

- d) Unpaid carers deserve a fair deal for their skilled work that saves the country billions every year.
- e) All carers are too often ignored by government and left to fend for themselves.
- f) No one who cares for their loved ones should be living in poverty because the government has failed to support them.
- g) Supporting unpaid carers will create a fairer society and improve gender equality.
- h) Young carers should be supported to have the same access to education, employment and life opportunities as their peers without caring responsibilities.

Conference calls on the new Government to:

1. Ensure unpaid carers are at the heart of every announcement including any cross-party talks on social care.
2. Stop prosecuting and pursuing unpaid carers for overpayments of Carer's Allowance.
3. Raise the amount carers can earn before losing Carer's Allowance to the equivalent of 21 hours a week at the National Living Wage from the current £151-a-week threshold and introduce a taper so that unpaid carers are not subject to a cliff edge removal of benefits.
4. Raise Carer's Allowance by £20 a week, reduce the number of hours' care per week required to qualify for it and extend it to carers in full-time education.
5. Introduce paid carer's leave, building on the entitlement to unpaid leave secured by the Liberal Democrats.
6. Introduce a statutory guarantee of regular respite breaks for unpaid carers, including parent carers and young carers.
7. Make flexible working a 'day one' right unless there are significant business reasons why that is not possible.
8. Proactively support the Young Carers Covenant and set out how it plans to ensure that the needs of young carers are proactively considered in its mission to break down barriers to opportunity for all young people.
9. Introduce a cross-government national All-Ages Carers Strategy, produced in partnership with carers and funded to meet its objectives.

Applicability: England only; except i) to vi) , viii) and ix) , 2. , 5. and 7., which are Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on family carers.

This built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 151 *A More Caring Society* (March 2023).

Amendments: Conference passed two amendments.

The first amendment added clauses xi), xii), h., 8. and 9. regarding young carers.

The second amendment added the reference to 21 hours a week at the National Living Wage to clause 3.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

A Fair Deal for Musicians

Conference notes:

- I) The London Liberal Democrat motion A Fair Deal for Musicians passed in February 2024.
- II) That in 2022 the UK music industry contributed £6.7bn to the UK economy, employed 210,000 people, and generated £4bn in exports.
- III) That despite this, nearly half of UK musicians earn under £14,000 per year, and Grassroots Music Venues (GMVs) profit margins average 0.5%.
- IV) That in 2023 16% of GMVs were lost: 125 spaces permanently closed to live music.
- V) That the Agent of Change (AOC) principle was included in policy guidance in 2018, but developers are not always held to account and noise abatement notices are still being issued to longstanding venues.
- VI) The House of Commons DCMS Select Committee report Grassroots Music Venues, April 2024, which recommended:
 - a) A voluntary industry levy on large venues to fund GMVs, or failing that for the government to introduce a statutory levy.
 - b) A targeted and temporary cut to VAT for GMVs.
 - c) Enshrining the AOC principle in statute.
- VII) The UK's secondary ticketing market had an estimated £1bn annual worth in 2019, with ticket touts mass-buying tickets to sporting and cultural events and then selling them on at inflated prices.
- VIII) Half of Britons have been priced out of attending live music events in recent years with ticket prices being further inflated by both 'surge pricing' and higher transaction charges.
- IX) That barriers to touring erected by Brexit have impacted 30% of musicians, with lowest earners losing 49% of EU revenue on average.
- X) That the courts have recognised that musicians have a right to practise at home for 5 hours a day, 3 on Sunday, but councils have not consistently applied these rulings, and musicians often do not have the resources to take legal action.
- XI) That music education investment is unequal and in decline, for example:
 - a) Since 2011 GCSE participation has fallen by 25%, A-level participation by 50% and Arts hub funding been cut in real-terms by 17%.
 - b) Only 15% of state schools pupils received sustained music tuition. The figure is 50% in independent schools.
- XII) Prime Minister Keir Starmer's previous calls for all children to have the chance to learn a musical instrument at school.

Conference believes that there are many challenges facing the music industry and the failure to address these challenges today will undermine the future of the music industry in the UK.

Conference reaffirms the Liberal Democrat commitment to negotiating free, simple short-term travel for UK artists to perform in the EU, and vice versa, including transport of equipment and sale of merchandise.

Conference calls on local councils to:

- a) Ensure that the AOC principle is applied in practice, in particular by:
 - i) Withholding planning permission for developments next to venues in the absence of enforceable conditions for appropriate soundproofing.
 - ii) Rigorously enforcing such conditions.
 - iii) Additionally applying the AOC principle when reviewing noise complaints about venues, even when not a new development and ensure that any extra costs on local council planning departments are fully met.
- b) Move towards providing every primary school child with two years of free small-group instrumental lessons, and a free instrument, following the example of Newham's 'Every Child A Musician' programme and for government to provide extra funding to councils so they can fund the musical instruments and classes.
- c) Commit to upholding the common law position on musicians practising at home.

Conference calls on the new Government to:

1. Reinvest in music education including:
 - a) Training and recruiting 1,000 music teachers.
 - b) Delivering an Arts pupil premium with funding of at least £90m per year.
 - c) Reverse real-terms cuts to Arts Hubs since 2011, with a 17% increase in funding followed by a commitment to annual increases in line with inflation.
2. Implement the following recommendations of the DCMS Select Committee report:
 - a) Imposing the large venue levy if not done voluntarily by September.
 - b) Reintroducing a VAT cut for GMVs.
 - c) Enshrining AOC Principles on the statute book.
3. Protect fans from being exploited by ticket touts by implementing the Competition and Markets Authority's recommendations to crack down on illegal ticket resale that include:
 - a) Prohibiting platforms from allowing sellers to list more tickets for an event than the seller is able to legally procure from the primary market.
 - b) Making platforms strictly liable for incorrect information about tickets listed on their websites.
 - c) A requirement that all secondary ticketing sites acquire a licence to operate in the UK.
4. Introduce legislation to ban the use of 'surge pricing' by ticket platforms.
5. Review the use of transaction fees with the aim of placing a cap on the amount that can be added to ticket prices.

Applicability: England only; except VI. b), VII, lines 41-44 and 2. b), which are Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and created a new culture policy with regards to musicians.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy motion *Rebuilding our Cultural, Artistic and Educational Ties with Europe* (September 2021).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment.

The amendment added lines on secondary ticketing, surge pricing and transaction fees.

Separate Votes: Conference rejected a separate vote on VI. b) and 2. b)

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Buy Now, Pay Later - Standing by Consumers During the Cost-of-living Crisis

Conference notes with concern that:

- A. The outgoing Conservative Government oversaw a devastating cost-of-living crisis which has left people's household finances stretched to breaking point.
- B. Millions of households are in arrears on their bills and, as of July 2024, the number of people seeking help with unsustainable debt through a Debt Relief Order (DRO) is at a record high.
- C. Support organisations have seen a surge in those seeking help with Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) issues, with Citizens Advice seeing a doubling of cases in May 2024 compared to the year before.
- D. The number of BNPL users has increased significantly in recent years, with frequent users of BNPL more likely to be in financial difficulty and more than two million people using BNPL to purchase groceries in 2023.
- E. While for many people BNPL can offer convenience and flexibility, it remains unregulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and doesn't meet standards set by the Consumer Credit Act 1974 for other forms of credit, leaving consumers exposed to significant financial harm.

Conference further notes with concern a number of risks arising from the lack of regulation of BNPL products, including:

- i) Misleading and irresponsible advertising, including via social media, inappropriately encouraging the use of credit.
- ii) A lack of transparency leaving many BNPL customers unaware that they are using an unregulated borrowing product, with key information about potential consequences hidden in long terms and conditions pages.
- iii) Digital design making it hard for consumers to make informed decisions - such as presenting BNPL as the default payment method when shopping online.
- iv) A lack of proper affordability assessments that take into account borrowing from different BNPL platforms, leaving users at risk of amassing large debts across several providers.
- v) BNPL providers not sharing data with credit reference agencies, leaving regulated credit providers (e.g. banks) without a complete view of a consumer's financial position when assessing their affordability - risking even higher levels of indebtedness.

Conference believes that regulation of BNPL should:

- a) Be balanced and proportionate - mitigating harms while ensuring consumers can continue to use BNPL products safely.
- b) Have the overarching aims of promoting consumer protection; affordability; transparency of information; and fair treatment of people in financial difficulty.

Conference therefore calls on the Government to:

1. Protect people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis by rapidly legislating to bring BNPL within the Financial Conduct Authority's regulatory remit.
2. Put rules in place stopping BNPL firms from engaging in harmful or misleading advertising, making it clear that that BNPL is a form of credit.
3. Bring BNPL under 'consumer duty' rules for financial products, which require that key information is clearly set out; products are designed to enable informed decisions by consumers; and that firms must consider whether users are in vulnerable situations, such as financial or mental health distress.
4. Require that fair and consistent support is available to all BNPL users who need it, including access to the Financial Ombudsman Service; clear signposting to debt support; and debt collection practises consistent with industry standards.
5. Enable the FCA to consider setting a centralised cap on BNPL late fees to promote fair and consistent treatment across platforms.
6. To prevent vulnerable consumers from amassing unsustainable debt, ensure that proper affordability checks are in place, with appropriate information-sharing across BNPL firms and other credit providers.
7. Review whether BNPL products by large online retailers, such as Amazon or Apple, should be treated in the same way as products by third-party providers.
8. Improve awareness of DROs and seek ways to expand access to the scheme, recognising that around 3.7 million UK adults in debt are unaware they can seek help through a DRO.

Applicability: Federal; except B. and 8., which are England only.

Background briefing

This motion updated and created a new policy with regard to buy now, pay later products.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024).

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

Equitable and Improved Outcomes Throughout Pregnancy and the Neonatal Period

Conference notes that:

- i) Despite healthcare advancements, significant gaps exist in access to quality maternal care, resulting in persistent inequalities across ethnicities and in more economically deprived communities.
- ii) The complexities of women giving birth have dramatically increased since the 1970s which has led to increased risk to women, significantly increased workloads for healthcare professionals especially midwives and an increased burden on the wider aspects of the health service.
- iii) The method for measuring maternity services (and therefore its requirements) has been in place since the inception of the NHS, is inaccurate as it is currently based solely on the number of women birthing at a location, ignores the volume and variety of increase to healthcare workloads as well as the complexity of mums and babies accessing care; A significant gap therefore exists in understanding the real resolution to many birthing challenges across the landscape.
- iv) 49% of maternity services are rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by the Care Quality Commission.
- v) The true scale of miscarriage in the UK is unknown because no official record of miscarriages is held.
- vi) The national ambition set in 2010 to reduce stillbirths, neonatal, and maternal deaths by 50% by 2025 is nearing its expiry, but we are not on track to meet the target.
- vii) The 2022 MBRRACE-UK report demonstrated that Black women are at almost four times greater risk of maternal mortality than White women.
- viii) Unconscious bias influences medical care and bedside manner, putting Black and Black mixed women at higher risk, and a lack of knowledge hinders the identification and diagnosis of conditions that are specific to and disproportionately affect Black and Black mixed women.
- ix) There are numerous issues regarding incomplete and inaccurate ethnicity data collection in healthcare, creating barriers when evaluating progress on equity in healthcare.
- x) Black babies are nearly twice as likely, and Asian babies are nearly 1.5 times more likely, to die during the first 28 days compared to White babies.
- xi) A Birthrights' inquiry uncovered testimony that "Black, Brown and Mixed ethnicity women and birthing people's pain [is commonly] ignored or denied, and pain relief [is] withheld due to staff not believing they were in labour".
- xii) Trans and non-binary people report that they are met with less dignity and respect when accessing obstetric services.
- xiii) Infant mortality rates in the most deprived neighbourhoods are double those in the least deprived areas.
- xiv) The 2019 NHS Staff Survey records that 40.3% of midwives reported feeling unwell due to work-related stress in the previous 12 months and 63.7% had continued to work despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties.

- xv) Of every £1 spent on maternity care in the NHS, only 1p is spent on pregnancy research.

Conference believes that:

- a) The UK must strive to become the safest place in the world to have a baby.
- b) Addressing disparities in obstetric care is essential for a fair society.
- c) The UK must work towards ending discrimination towards diverse parents during pregnancy.

Conference therefore calls for:

1. The UK Government to renew the national maternity ambitions beyond 2025, to include the four nations, and to enhance them with a clear baseline to measure progress against.
2. Modernisation of the way maternity services are measured including use of women's birthing complexity (Dependency Score), volume and variety of healthcare professional workloads and improved reporting to determine maternity services priorities.
3. Support and referral including to NHS mental health support services to be made available after every miscarriage, not just after three, and for a report on mental health service waiting times for these patients to be published annually.
4. Anyone experiencing miscarriage to have access to best-practice care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
5. All miscarriages to be recorded so that the problem is no longer hidden, national targets can be set, and the impact of interventions can be measured, in line with requests from Sands and Tommy's Joint Policy Unit.
6. Coding of ethnicity and data to be improved, surveys should avoid overusing 'other' as a category and provide a text box for people to explain what 'other' means for them, and Black and Black mixed should be clearly defined.
7. A welcoming and inclusive environment for everyone receiving maternity or perinatal care, including trans and nonbinary people.
8. The Government to ensure that the commitments made in the Workforce Plan are backed by adequate funding and include expansion of the wider maternity and neonatal workforce.
9. The implementation of the Women and Equalities Committee's recommendation that there should be a cross-Government target and strategy, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, for eliminating maternal health disparities.
10. The Government to publish annual reports on progress in reducing miscarriage and stillbirth rates among ethnic minorities.
11. Interpreters for those whose first language is not English must be available when the expectant mother is with health professionals.

Applicability: England only; except 1. , which is Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on health care with regards to pregnancy and neonatal care.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024).

Amendments: Conference passed three amendments.

The first amendment added lines ii) and iii) on growing complexities in birth.

The second amendment added a new line 2. And 9. On health disparities.

The third amendment added 11. on interpreters.

Vote on motion as amended: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Europe - Restoring Links for Young People

Conference notes that:

- i) The former Conservative Government erected significant barriers to young people with their botched deal with Europe, including removing the right of young people to move, live and work across EU countries.
- ii) The UK Government has a Youth Mobility Scheme in place with several non-EU countries including South Korea and Australia, which allows a set number of young people to live and work in those countries for a specified duration of time, on a reciprocal basis.
- iii) In April 2024, the European Commission proposed a youth mobility scheme between the UK and the EU, although the then Government rejected this scheme and the new Government has not set out any plans to take it up.
- iv) Red tape at the UK/EU border has prevented children from taking part in overseas educational trips - which according to the School Travel Forum has resulted in a 30% reduction in overseas educational visits between 2019 and 2023.
- v) The UK has not returned to the Erasmus Plus programme, even though between 2007 and 2013 the UK received over £500m more in funding from the EU for education and training than it put in.
- vi) Since the UK left the EU, holidaymakers no longer receive free mobile phone roaming - but nearly one in five are unaware that they could face extra charges.
- vii) While the Trade and Cooperation Agreement included a reference to roaming charges, UK holiday-makers have faced higher prices for roaming in the EU.
- viii) In June 2024, now-Prime Minister Keir Starmer urged the EU to look again at their proposed electronic travel authorisation scheme, which will replace passport stamping next year and is expected to add cost and delays to British holidaymakers' experience at the EU border.

Conference believes that young people should not face such barriers to travelling, living and working in Europe.

Conference reaffirms:

- A. The Liberal Democrats' commitment to fixing our broken relationship with Europe, including our longer-term objective of UK membership of the EU.
- B. The four-stage roadmap to restore our ties of trust and trade with the EU, as set out in Policy Paper 144, *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe*.
- C. Conference welcomes the new Government's changed approach to relations with the EU, but further believes that the new Government is wrong to rule out membership of the Single Market as an option in the future for fixing our broken relationship with Europe, as set out in Policy Paper 144.

Conference calls on the UK Government to:

1. Open negotiations with the EU and EEA to extend the Youth Mobility Scheme on a reciprocal basis to EU countries, with a view to:
 - a) Increasing the age limit from 30 to 35.
 - b) Abolishing the fees for these visas.
 - c) Extending the length of visas from two to three years.
2. Expand opportunities for young people to study, teach and volunteer abroad by returning to the Erasmus Plus programme as an associated country.
3. Take action on excessive roaming charges by:
 - a) Opening discussions with the EU on roaming charges, as set out in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.
 - b) Opening a consultation on UK phone company roaming charges, including exploring the possibility of abolishing such charges altogether.
4. Take steps to negotiate passport- and visa-free school trips between UK and EU member states, on a reciprocal basis.
5. Open discussions with the EU with the goal of reaching a reciprocal exemption from electronic travel authorisation schemes, with the aim of eliminating costs and reducing border delays for holiday-makers, while maintaining high standards for border security and data protection.
6. Conference commits Liberal Democrats to work and campaign across the UK with youth organisations, schools, colleges, universities and others in the public, private and voluntary sectors for the reciprocal Youth Mobility Scheme, passport and visa-free school trips and a full return of the UK to Erasmus+ as an associated country all to be in place by 2027 at the latest.

Applicability: Federal

Background briefing

This motion updated European policy with regards to young people.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), policy paper 144 *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe* (March 2022), and policy motion *Rebuilding our Cultural, Artistic and Educational Ties with Europe* (September 2021).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment.

The amendment added line 6 on wider campaigning.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Fair Votes Now

Conference notes:

- i) That public trust in British government and politics has sunk to its lowest-ever recorded level.
- ii) That the 2024 UK General Election was the most disproportionate ever, with the new Government winning two-thirds of the seats in Parliament while receiving one-third of the vote.
- iii) That more than a majority of votes cast in the General Election were for a losing candidate - at 58%, the highest in seventy years.
- iv) That turnout at the 2024 General Election was 59.9%, the lowest since 2001.
- v) That several million UK citizens are missing from the Electoral Register.
- vi) That despite around 3.5 million Britons resident overseas being entitled to register to vote, only around 200,000 are estimated to have done so, roughly the same as in 2019, despite a huge increase in the numbers eligible following the abolition of the 15-year rule.
- vii) That recent years have seen repeated ethics scandals and a failure to uphold the Nolan principles of public life, not just by the UK Government, but by the Scottish and Welsh Governments too.
- viii) That, in the previous Parliament, the former Conservative Government weakened the independence of the Electoral Commission, introduced disproportionate voting systems for mayoral elections in England, and introduced the Voter ID scheme.
- ix) The work of organisations like Make Votes Matter, Unlock Democracy and the Electoral Reform Society, amongst others, in building the case for electoral reform.
- x) That the new Government has not committed to reform of the voting system.

Conference believes that:

- a) First Past the Post underpins the adversarial and divisive nature of Westminster politics, and feeds public disillusion.
- b) The UK's electoral system leaves millions of people feeling that their votes are irrelevant and their views unrepresented.
- c) It is undemocratic that, under the UK's electoral system, not all votes count the same, which leaves millions of people feeling powerless and without a say in how the country is run.
- d) Improving our democracy is an important end in itself, but also a necessary step to building a better country with good schools and hospitals, affordable housing and safe communities.
- e) British citizens overseas maintain an active and committed interest in UK events, and that fostering a higher involvement of those citizens in elections would play an important role in maintaining links with the ever-growing British diaspora.

- f) The Liberal Democrats and Liberal Party have called for fair votes for a century, and should continue to lead the campaign for fundamental reform of the electoral system.

Conference calls on the Government to:

1. Replace the first past the post system for UK General Elections, with proportional representation by the Single Transferable Vote system.
2. Introduce the Single Transferable Vote system for the election of local councillors in England.
3. Implement the Alternative Vote system for elections for single positions such as directly-elected Mayors.
4. Ensure that the UK has an automatic system of inclusion on the electoral register.
5. Protect and strengthen the Electoral Commission, including by repealing the Government's power to designate a strategy and policy statement for the Commission and by providing adequate budget for effective communications to electors, both within the UK and overseas.
6. Scrap the Conservatives' Voter ID scheme.
7. To avoid delay in international delivery of postal ballots, to enable electronic delivery of ballot papers to those who request them, to allow voting in person at all British Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates as well as to publicise proxy voting as an alternative to postal voting.
8. Enable all UK citizens living abroad to vote for MPs in separate overseas constituencies, and to participate in UK referendums.
9. Give young people the right to vote in the first election after their 16th birthday, for UK general elections and referendums, and local elections in England.
10. Extend the right to full participation in civic life, including the ability to stand for office or vote in UK referendums, local elections and general elections, to all EU citizens with settled status, and to anyone else who has lived in the UK for at least five years and has the right to stay permanently.
11. Extend political education in secondary schools, to prepare future citizens to participate in public life.
12. Use citizens' assemblies to engage the electorate, particularly on long-standing topics such as climate change or social care.

Applicability: Federal; except 2. and 3., and part of 9. which are England only.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on electoral reform.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), policy motion *Restore Standards in Public Life* (September 2023), and policy motion *Political Reform to Tackle Sleaze* (March 2022).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment and rejected one.

The first amendment added references to overseas voters.

The second amendment would have changed the electoral system to AV+.

Vote on motion as amended: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Implementing the Recommendations of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 Report

Conference notes:

- i) The publication on 4th September 2024 of The Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 report that contains important recommendations covering multiple areas.
- ii) That in the 7 years since the Grenfell Tower Fire, the Grenfell community have repeatedly called for justice, as the Metropolitan Police and CPS have delayed the conclusion of their investigations pending the inquiry's conclusion.
- iii) The fire's disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities and the Grenfell community's unsuccessful call for the inquiry to investigate the role played by institutional Racism.
- iv) That construction industry reform in response to the fire has been ongoing, but the report has highlighted key areas for further reform.
- v) The report's recommendations regarding building standards and guidance refer to England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland building regulations are devolved matters.
- vi) The continued resilience of the Grenfell community, including victims, their families, and those from the surrounding area, as well as the overwhelming support and kindness shown by the public in response to the fire.

Conference believes that:

- A. Independent and comprehensive public inquiries enable lessons to be learned from disasters such as this, and it is vital that their recommendations be reviewed and actioned.
- B. As the report stated, earlier and more comprehensive implementation of lessons learned from previous incidents could have prevented or reduced this fire's impact and the resulting loss of life.

Conference calls for:

1. The UK Government to fully implement the Grenfell Tower Inquiry report's recommendations, including:
 - a) Establishing a legal requirement to maintain a publicly accessible record of recommendations made by select committees, coroners and public inquiries plus a description of the steps taken in response, or reasons for not accepting a recommendation.
 - b) Creating the office of the construction regulator, uniting regulatory and testing functions currently split between several government departments and companies.

- c) Uniting the responsibilities for fire safety functions under one Secretary of State and appointing a suitably qualified adviser on matters affecting the construction industry.
 - d) A comprehensive review of the Building Regulations relating to fire and the definition of 'Higher-Risk Buildings' within the Building Safety Act.
 - e) Introducing a regulatory and competency framework for the roles of Fire Engineer and Fire Risk Assessor, with the creation of relevant professional bodies and professional qualifications.
 - f) Review of how building control functions are exercised in England and Wales, particularly the involvement of commercial interests.
 - g) Review of the Civil Contingencies Act.
 - h) Creation of an independent College of Fire and Rescue.
2. The UK Government to assist other bodies noted in the report implement the recommendations as relevant to them providing funding to do so.
 3. Devolved and Local Governments to consider the recommendations applicable to their devolved responsibilities and implement these as appropriate.
 4. The Metropolitan Police to conclude their investigations without further delay, and the CPS to carry out prosecutions as appropriate to provide justice for the victims and their loved ones.
 5. An investigation into the role of institutional racism as a factor in the fire.

Applicability: England only; except 1. g) and 2 , which are Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on building safety in response to the Grenfell Inquiry.

This builds on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy motion *Safe Building Standards for all Homes* (September 2017).

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

International Development - Restoring the UK's Role

Conference notes that:

- I. The Liberal Democrats were the first UK political party to commit to the 0.7% of Gross National Income target for Official Development Assistance spending, and enshrined this target in law whilst in Government.
- II. Britain's reputation as an 'international development superpower' has been seriously compromised by the previous Conservative government, after:
 - a) Boris Johnson abolished the independent Department for International Development (DFID), merging it with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, resulting in the new department's development capability being "reduced" according to the National Audit Office.
 - b) Rishi Sunak took the decision to cut UK international development spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, which has resulted in thousands of preventable deaths and vital programmes being cut.
- III. Conflicts in the Middle East, the Sahel, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and Ukraine mean the UK's support is needed more than ever, while the UN Secretary General has made clear that progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will require a concerted international policy response which is currently lacking.
- IV. UK bilateral ODA spending has been further cut by the former Conservative Government's failure to cut the asylum backlog, resulting in almost 30% of UK ODA being spent on in-country refugee costs in 2022.
- V. The incoming Government does not have plans to re-establish an independent department for international development, and has not yet committed to restoring ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI.

Conference believes that:

- i) The British people always respond with great generosity of spirit to humanitarian disasters and conflicts in other countries.
- ii) UK ODA spending is a powerful tool for good in the world which helps the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.
- iii) The UK renegeing on its promises has created a vacuum which Russia and China want to fill.
- iv) For the UK to best play its role on the world stage, it needs to restore its role as a development superpower.
- v) An independent department is the best way to ensure that the UK is a global leader on development.

Conference reaffirms the Liberal Democrats' commitment to:

- A. Immediately reversing the international development cut, returning UK ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI.
- B. Ensuring that the use of ODA is consistent with the OECD/DAC rules/guidelines, and with UK legislation, and in particular that its primary purpose should remain the economic development of, and poverty reduction within, the partner country.
- C. Ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals, which have universal applicability, lie at the heart of the UK's international development policy.

Conference accordingly calls on the UK Government to restore the UK's development superpower status, including by:

1. Establishing an independent department for international development.
2. Immediately restore full funding for programmes supporting women and girls.
3. Creating the role of a UK Sustainable Development Goals Tsar to drive delivery of the SDGs, in both domestic and international policy, including conducting a root and branch review of the allocation of UK ODA to maximise its impact on developing countries.
4. Restoring the humanitarian relief reserve fund, increasing the UK's ability to respond to conflict, such as in Sudan and Ukraine, as well as natural disasters.
5. Addressing the increasingly severe challenges of debt distress.
6. Recognising the role of education as a force for good and committing to spend 15% of ODA on education in the world's most vulnerable areas, with a fully funded Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW).
7. Restoring the cuts to water and sanitary health programmes, and health programmes.
8. Increasing the proportion of ODA committed to tackling climate change and environmental degradation.
9. Addressing the growing global crisis of food insecurity and malnutrition by restoring our commitment to nutrition and famine relief and increasing the proportion of ODA committed to delivering life-saving nutrition interventions.
10. Tackling the asylum backlog, and accordingly ensuring that ODA is not used to cover for a broken asylum system, as took place under the former Conservative Government.
11. Taking further steps to tackle economic crime, including the use of tax havens and money laundering, by passing further economic crime legislation.

Applicability: Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on international development.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 157 *Liberal Values in a Dangerous World* (March 2024).

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

The Israel-Gaza Conflict - an immediate bilateral ceasefire and securing two states

Conference notes:

- I. The ongoing humanitarian devastation in Gaza, where now over 40,000 Palestinians are now estimated to have been killed and vast numbers have life changing injuries.
- II. That almost one year on from the deplorable 7 October terrorist attacks which killed over 1,100, many survivors are traumatised including by the use of sexual violence and there remains an ongoing hostage situation, with over 100 Israelis still held by Hamas.
- III. The clear risk of escalation across the region, with increased tensions in August 2024 raising concerns about a regional war, and increased violence in the West Bank in the context of ongoing trauma to the Palestinian people.
- IV. The role of Iran, which continues to destabilise the region including via its Revolutionary Guards, its supply of arms to its proxy terrorist groups Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, and the military responses which it threatens against Israel.
- V. Ongoing cases at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, and the UK's Government's July 2024 decision to stop potential arrest warrants which the ICC might issue, including against Israeli PM Netanyahu and Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar.
- VI. The ICJ's advisory opinion in July 2024 that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories is illegal.
- VII. The millions who have been displaced by this ongoing conflict since October 7, with almost 2 million displaced in Gaza, around 135,000 Israelis displaced from Northern and Southern Israel, and over 1,000 Palestinians fleeing their homes in the West Bank in the face of spiking settler violence.
- VIII. The conflict's impact in the UK, and applauds the work done by NGOs, faith groups, local authorities and others to combat unacceptable race and hate crime including against Jews, Israelis, Muslims and Palestinians, and to bring people together rather than divide them in the face of community tensions.

Conference believes that:

- A. Only a political and diplomatic solution, not a military one, will resolve this conflict, get Hamas out of power and deliver a lasting peace.
- B. A two-state solution is the only way to deliver the dignity and security which Palestinians and Israelis deserve.
- C. An immediate bilateral ceasefire is desperately needed, to resolve the humanitarian devastation in Gaza, get the hostages home and provide space to secure a two-state solution.

Conference accordingly reaffirms:

- i) The Autumn 2021 Federal Conference motion *Towards a Lasting Peace*.
- ii) The Liberal Democrats' commitment to a two-state solution in which Israel and Palestine both exist with secure boundaries based on 1967 lines.

Conference calls on the UK Government to:

1. Work to bring about an immediate bilateral ceasefire in the Israel-Gaza conflict, including:
 - a) Demanding the unconditional release of the remaining hostages.
 - b) Pressing for more access for humanitarian aid and essential supplies into Gaza.
 - c) Providing all necessary assistance, including aid, to UNRWA to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and ensure that the recommendations of the independent Colonna report are implemented as quickly as possible, thereby assuring that all work to support Palestinians in Gaza is of the highest possible standards and integrity.
2. Uphold the role of international law and international courts, including respecting in full the ICJ advisory opinion that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories is illegal and upholding its findings, and accordingly:
 - a) Introduce legislation to cease trade with illegal Israeli settlements in occupied territories.
 - b) Work to reduce heightened tensions in the West Bank, and accordingly including connected entities in the scope of sanctions against anyone in the settler movement that uses or incites violence, building on the work of the US and EU.
 - c) Work to end the use of arbitrary administrative detention of Palestinians by the IDF.
3. Enacting a presumption of denial for arms exports to governments listed by the Foreign Office as human rights priorities, and therefore immediately suspending arms exports to Israel, in accordance with similar decisions taken by previous UK governments of all political parties.
4. Recognising the existential threat of Iran not just in the Middle East but to Western democracies, by:
 - a) Proscribing Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps.
 - b) Conducting an audit of UK-based assets owned by Iranian officials, in order to freeze those assets.
5. Press for a two-state solution, including by:
 - a) Immediately recognising the state of Palestine.
 - b) Working with the peace-builders in Israel and Palestine who call for two-states, to wrestle control away from the extremes.
 - c) Working with the international community to identify future democratic leaders of Palestine, with a view to having swift elections in Palestine as soon

as possible in the hope of uniting Gaza and the West Bank under one democratically elected voice.

- d) Investing in peace, such as via the International Fund for Middle East Peace, and using trade as a tool for peace, ensuring that Palestinians and Israelis benefit.

Conference further calls on Liberal Democrats to engage with all their ALDE and Liberal International sister parties to secure a two-state solution based on 1967 lines in the region, including Israel's Yesh Atid party.

Applicability: Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and created a new policy with regard to the current Israel-Gaza Conflict.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024).

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

National Nature Parks

Conference notes that:

- I. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world and one of the least densely forested countries in Europe with only 14.5% of the country covered in woodland, compared to the European average of 35%.
- II. The Office for Environmental Protection found that the actions of the Conservatives in government fell "far short" of what was required to leave the environment in a better state than they found it.
- III. The Glover Review outlined that National Parks and National Landscapes (formerly Areas of Outstanding National Beauty) have not done enough to protect the natural environment.
- IV. One in six species are threatened with extinction from Britain.
- V. A BBC investigation found that almost 32,000 public rights of way are obstructed, with the number of path blockages increasing year on year.
- VI. The government has set a deadline of 2031 for all rights of way in England to be added to an official map, but data gathered by the BBC suggests nearly 8,000 requests to get public paths and bridleways added to the map have not been processed - and some date back to the 1980s.

Conference believes that:

- i) Everybody should be able to access a healthy environment; open green spaces, clean blue rivers and the beauty of Britain's coastlines.
- ii) We need our protected landscapes to lead the restoration of our natural environment.
- iii) Local authorities are key to unlocking the potential of protected landscapes for nature's recovery, including with community engagement.
- iv) We must support farmers, who have a vital role in tackling climate change and the nature crisis, to ensure they can contribute to the restoration of the including woodland, heathland and moorland, particularly upland peat. This will support the recovery of natural flood protections, carbon storage and thriving ecosystems whilst also providing high-quality food for the table.
- v) Rights of Way must be recorded clearly to be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

Conference reaffirms Liberal Democrat pledges to:

- A. Create a new designation of National Nature Parks.
- B. Work with existing National Parks and National Landscapes to improve their work to restore nature and transform them into National Nature Parks, with stronger duties on National Park Authorities to create and protect carbon sinks.

- C. Plant 60 million trees a year to improve air quality, enrich public spaces and help us reach net-zero.
- D. Strengthen the Office for Environmental Protection and provide more funding to the Environment Agency and Natural England to help protect our environment and enforce environmental laws.
- E. Designate 16 new National Trails, thereby doubling the current total.
- F. Empower Local Nature Recovery Strategies to identify a new Wild Belt for nature's recovery.
- G. Work with our European neighbours to tackle the nature crisis, including applying to join the European Environment Agency (EEA).
- H. Make sure that the UK has the highest environmental standards in the world.
- I. Properly fund Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) and support farmers with the restoration of woodland, peatland and waterways, the creation of natural flood protections and the management of land to recover species and carbon storage, while producing food for the table.

Conference resolves to:

1. Create at least three new National Nature Parks to the existing 10 National Parks in England.
2. Provide the National Parks budget with an additional £50m a year to support new and existing National Parks to become National Nature Parks.
3. Ensure any new National Park has a clear duty to manage protected areas for nature's restoration with a need for special protection of areas of woodland, heathland and moorland, and of the creation and maintenance of natural flood protection.
4. Launch a consultation to determine which new areas should become National Nature Parks, giving natural landscapes priority for the shortlist.
5. Call on the Government to provide funding to:
 - a) Establish new walking routes, including routes through National Parks.
 - b) Ensure local authorities can maintain existing walking routes.
 - c) Rights of Way must be recorded clearly to be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.
6. Support greater access to National Nature Parks via the promotion and maintenance of walking routes and cycleways plus frequent public transport options from nearby towns and cities and within the Park, to reduce private vehicle use and consequent problem parking over time.

Applicability: England; except G., which is Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on the nature parks.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 156 *Tackling the Nature Crisis* (September 2023).

Amendments: Conference passed two amendments.

Amendment one added references to rights of way

Amendment two added clause 6. on cycleways and parking.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Our Plan to Save the NHS

Conference notes that:

- A. The UK's population is ageing and that has a profound impact on how we design our health and care services.
- B. The United Kingdom is lagging behind its peers when it comes to people's health - it is 29th in the global obesity rankings, has the worst healthy life expectancy in Western Europe, and according to one study has the worst mental health in the world.
- C. The Conservatives have hollowed out community services like GPs, dentists and mental health, public health and social care leading to people seeking care in far more expensive urgent and emergency settings.
- D. Health inequalities have become more stark.
- E. There are still more than 6 million people on NHS hospital waiting lists, double the number since 2015.
- F. The number of fully qualified GPs in England has fallen by almost 500 since 2019, despite the previous Conservative government's promise to increase the number by 6,000.
- G. More than 100,000 patients in the last year waited longer than the NHS target of 62 days to start urgent cancer treatment - the worst on record.
- H. 9 in 10 dental practices are no longer accepting new patients and people are being forced to spend hundreds if not thousands on private dental care with some even resorting to DIY dentistry.
- I. Half a million people are on waiting lists for care in residential settings or at home and one in 10 care staff positions are vacant.
- J. On average, patients have to wait more than half an hour for an ambulance to respond to emergencies such as heart attacks or strokes.
- K. Over 1.35 million (53%) of those inactive because of long-term sickness reported that they had a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety and the cost to the UK of poor mental health is estimated to total £120bn every year.
- L. There are huge vacancies across the NHS and social care, and retention rates are poor too.
- M. The NHS estate is facing a record £12 billion backlog of repairs and the primary care estate and mental health estate is in need of significant upgrading too.
- N. The new Labour government has brought forward only two pieces of legislation on health for this parliamentary session, and none on social care.

Conference believes that:

- i) The previous Conservative government ran our NHS into the ground, neglected health and care services, and let patients down.
- ii) Health and wealth are two sides of the same coin.

- iii) Enabling people to access the health care they need as soon as they need it, is not only better for health outcomes, it's also better for the public purse.
- iv) Adopting an 'invest to save' approach will drive investment in community services and help shift the focus to prevention.
- v) Improving the health of the nation is just as important as providing access to health care when people need it.
- vi) Mental health should be put on the same footing as physical health.
- vii) Community-based care in non-institutional environments should be expanded where appropriate - physical health checks in pharmacies as well as community mental health provision are important pillars of modern health services that are efficient, preventative, and accessible to all communities, involving the right professionals in the right spaces.
- viii) The NHS cannot be fixed unless social care is fixed too, and reform cannot wait any longer.

Conference calls on the new Government to:

1. Bring forward a plan to save GP services including increasing the number of full-time equivalent GPs by 8,000 to ensure everyone has the right to see a GP within seven days, or within 24 hours if they urgently need to.
2. End DIY dentistry and 'dental deserts' by guaranteeing access to an NHS dentist for everyone needing urgent and emergency care, and fixing the broken NHS dental contract to bring dentists back to the NHS from the private sector.
3. Boost cancer survival rates and introduce a guarantee for 100% of patients to start treatment for cancer within 62 days from urgent referral.
4. Increase the Public Health Grant so that local authorities can improve the health of their communities and prevent ill health.
5. Fix the life-threatening crisis in our ambulance services by ending excessive handover delays and increasing the number of staffed hospital beds.
6. Improve early access to mental health services by establishing walk-in mental health hubs for young people in every community and introducing regular mental health check-ups at key points in people's lives.
7. Prioritise the proposed bill brought forward in the King's Speech to finally reform the Mental Health Act.
8. Implement a ten-year plan to invest in hospitals and the primary care and mental health estate and IT systems to move from the scandal of crumbling roofs, dangerous concrete, life-expired buildings and incompatible, failing digital infrastructure and therapeutic environments that promote recovery.
9. Introduce free personal care, a higher Carer's Minimum Wage, and a workforce plan for social care and to provide sufficient funding to local authorities to cover the increased costs of social care resulting from these measures.
10. To introduce a fair funding deal for hospices and to include palliative and end of life care services in priorities and planning guidance for the NHS to ensure a whole system response to the growing need for these services.

11. Provide the resources and support for cross-party talks so that they can report as soon as possible and well before the most common time of between two and four years.

Applicability: England only.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on health and social care.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), policy motion *Boosting Cancer Survival* (March 2024), policy motion *40 New Hospitals* (March 2024), policy motion *Transforming the Nation's Health* (September 2023), and policy paper 151 *A More Caring Society* (March 2023).

Amendments: Conference passed two amendments.

Amendment one added references to community care and non-hospital care.

Amendment two added references to hospices.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Reforming Sunday Trading Laws

Conference notes that:

- i) Liberal Democrats support liberalising markets where possible, to maximise the choice and freedoms of consumers and businesses alike.
- ii) Restrictive trading laws can hinder market forces in achieving their aims, and can be based on outdated social norms, as is the case with Sunday trading laws
- iii) The trend on trading laws on Sunday has moved from an outright ban, with exceptions, on buying and selling (under the Shops Act 1950), to more open trading hours under the Sunday Trading Act 1994
- iv) Over the course of the last century, the significance of Sunday as a day of rest has been decreased, with weekends now being used by many in the UK as an opportunity to carry out errands such as shopping, which Sunday trading law reform would support.
- v) A liberalised Sunday trading system already exists in Scotland, where a package of bills allows for protection of workers' rights alongside these liberal trading laws.
- vi) Sunday trading laws were suspended during the 2012 Olympics, where trading laws were suspended to give opportunities to retailers to 'cash in' on the Games.
- vii) The benefits of liberalising Sunday trading laws were already supported by a 2006 study commissioned for the Department of Trade and Industry.
- viii) Sunday Trading Laws already exhibit a certain degree of subsidiarity, with powers being given to Scotland to regulate their Sunday trading hours.

Conference reaffirms:

- a) Its commitment to a market system that uses regulation to balance business and workers' rights and freedoms.
- b) That businesses and individuals should have the opportunity to decide, to the greatest extent, their operating hours, to promote their competitiveness.
- c) Its commitment to devolution and subsidiarity.

Conference calls for:

1. The UK Government to devolve powers over Sunday trading to devolved governments or local authorities as appropriate, empowering communities to regulate their own Sunday trading hours and Sunday trading laws.
2. The UK Government to extend Sunday trading hours as an interim step before the devolution of powers set out above can be implemented.
3. The UK government to couple any reform with appropriate measures to protect workers' rights, ensuring that retail workers can reject requests to work on Sundays with no adverse consequences.
4. Local authorities and devolved governments to liberalise Sunday trading rules in their own areas of responsibility

Applicability: England and Wales.

Background briefing

This motion updated employment and economic policy with regards to Sunday trading.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment and rejected one amendment.

Amendment one added reference to retail workers being able to turn down working on Sundays.

Amendment two would have given councils greater flexibility in reforming trading laws.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Reversing Cuts to Bereavement Support

Conference notes that:

- I. Losing a parent is one of the toughest moments it is possible for a child to experience.
- II. Nothing was brought forward in the King's speech that would legislate to improve the lives of bereaved families or kinship carers, and the new Labour government has made no plans to increase funding for support.
- III. Since 2017, the Conservative Government has cut funding for Bereavement Support Payments by around 50%.
- IV. Ed Davey MP successfully pressured the Conservative Government to ensure cohabiting couples are eligible for the Bereavement Support Payment—previously only married couples or those in civil partnerships were eligible.
- V. Around 26,900 parents die each year in the UK, leaving 46,300 dependent children.
- VI. Kinship carers are most often women, in particular grandmothers.
- VII. 141,000 children are in kinship care.
- VIII. Children growing up in kinship care have better educational and emotional outcomes than children in unrelated foster care, but worse than children in the general population.
- IX. An estimated half of the children in kinship care are there because their parents have had problems with drugs or alcohol, have died, gone to prison, or are abusive, neglectful, or unwell.

Conference believes that:

- A. The Conservative's cuts to bereavement support payments were cruel and short-sighted.
- B. The Conservatives' cuts to bereavement support payments in 2017 have had an adverse impact on families who have lost a loved one.
- C. Providing financial support for families that have lost a parent is critical to ensuring that families are not left struggling to pay the bills at such a difficult period of time.
- D. Kinship carers play a critical and often unsung role in children's lives and ensure more young people can grow up in a loving, stable home.

Conference calls on the Government to:

1. Double the funding for Bereavement Support Payments, reversing the Conservative party's cuts since 2017.
2. Use this extra funding to extend the amount of time that people receive payments for beyond the current 18 months and increase the size of payments.
3. Pass Christine Jardine MP's Bereavement Support (Children and Young People) Bill that would ensure that children and young people are aware of what support is available to them following the death of a parent.

4. Support the education of children in care, extend Pupil Premium Plus funding to children in kinship care, and guarantee any child taken into care a school place within three weeks, if required to move schools.
5. Appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children and Young People with specific responsibilities for closing the gaps in support for children who have lost a parent or both their parents.
6. Support children in kinship care and their family carers by:
 - a) Introducing a statutory definition of kinship care.
 - b) Building on the existing pilot to develop a weekly allowance for all kinship carers.
7. Make care experience a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 to strengthen the rights of people who are in or have been in care.

Applicability: England only; except 7., which is Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on kinship carers, as well as creating new policy on bereavement support.

This built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 151 *A More Caring Society* (March 2023).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment.

The amendment added references to kinship carers employment rights and weekly allowances.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Supporting Disadvantaged Children

Conference notes that:

- i) The previous Conservative Government has left the education sector in a shocking state - with schools facing inadequate funding; headteachers struggling to recruit and retain staff; school buildings crumbling; and pupils' education being affected.
- ii) Children from less well-off homes start school already behind their classmates, and gaps only widen further through primary and secondary school.
- iii) The attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils who have never received free school meals has widened considerably following the pandemic and over 10 years of progress has been wiped out.
- iv) The attainment gap, which is based on average GCSE English and Maths attainment nationally, widened from 3.84 last year to 3.95 in the latest results from 2023, where a gap of zero would indicate that there is no difference between the average performance of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils.
- v) By the end of secondary school (key stage 4), disadvantaged pupils are 19.2 months behind their peers - a gap which has widened since 2019 by 1.1 months.
- vi) The attainment gap has now widened every year since 2020.
- vii) Sir Kevan Collins, the then adviser to the former Conservative Government, acknowledged that children needed £15 billion to bridge the educational gap created by the pandemic but only a third of the recovery programme that Sir Kevan called for was delivered.
- viii) That funding for tutoring, through the National Tutoring Programme, will finish at the end of this academic year.

Conference further notes that:

- A. Early years education for children below the age of four has a positive impact on the life chances of disadvantaged children, yet disadvantaged children spend significantly less time in pre-school than children from more affluent backgrounds.
- B. Small group tutoring is highly effective and can give pupils four months' additional progress over the course of a year.
- C. For every £1 spent on tutoring, £6.58 in economic returns is generated.
- D. There are also many spill-over benefits of tutoring including improvements in children's confidence and school attendance.
- E. The National Tutoring Programme had a positive impact on levelling out access to tutoring, with 35% of working-class Year 11 students receiving private or school-based tutoring, compared to 36% of students from professional homes.
- F. Accessing tutoring through schools will be much harder from September as schools will be expected to pay themselves from Pupil Premium Funds.
- G. The squeeze on school budgets will mean that many schools will be unable to continue offering tutoring.

Conference calls on the Government to:

1. Invest in high-quality early years education and close the attainment gap by giving disadvantaged children aged three and four an extra five free hours a week and tripling the Early Years Pupil Premium to £1,000 a year.
2. Increase school and college funding per pupil above the rate of inflation every year.
3. Introduce a 'Tutoring Guarantee' for every disadvantaged pupil who needs extra support which would:
 - a) Be focused on prioritising children from low-income backgrounds, with low prior attainment or with additional needs or who are young carers.
 - b) Enable an estimated 1.75 million disadvantaged young people each year to get additional tutoring help and support.
 - c) Empower headteachers, who know their children the best, to set up tutoring in a way that works for them and their pupils, use their own teaching staff, recruiting tutors themselves or choosing from quality-assured external providers.
4. Introduce a Young People's Premium, extending Pupil Premium funding to disadvantaged young people aged 16-18.
5. Ensure no child is hungry in school by expanding free school meal eligibility to all children in poverty.
6. Introduce a Young Carers Pupil Premium so that schools have the proper resources to support pupils who are young carers.
7. The establishment of a Commissioner for Tackling Educational Disadvantage who shall be tasked with identifying centres of excellence for tackling the disadvantage gap, promoting best practice within the education sector and producing evidence led guidance on the effective spending of Pupil Premium funding.

Applicability: England only.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on children and their welfare.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), policy motion *Investing in our Children's Future* (September 2023), and policy motion *A Child Maintenance Service that Works for Children* (September 2023).

Amendments: Conference passed two amendments.

Amendment one added reference to a Young Carers Pupil Premium.

Amendment two added clause 7 on establishing a Commissioner for Tackling Educational Disadvantage.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Tackling Child Poverty

Conference notes that:

1. Children are the most likely group in society to be in poverty.
2. DWP figures for 2022/23 show 3.6m children living in absolute poverty after housing costs.
3. 1.6m children in 440,000 families are affected by the two-child benefit cap and in over 59% of these families at least one parent is in paid work.
4. Abolition of the two-child benefit cap would take 300,000 children out of poverty.
5. The impact of the cap is greater on families with an ethnic minority background.

Conference welcomes the establishment of a Ministerial Taskforce on Child Poverty, and notes that the organisations invited to the initial meeting with the Secretary of State have called for the abolition of the two-child benefit cap.

Conference calls on the Government to immediately abolish the two-child benefit cap.

Applicability: Federal.

Background briefing

This motion updated welfare policy with regard to child poverty.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 150 *Towards a Fairer Society* (March 2023).

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

Tackling the Prisons Crisis

Conference believes that:

- i) Keeping communities safe is one of the most important responsibilities for any government.
- ii) Reducing reoffending is key for cutting crime, keeping people safe and ultimately saving public money.
- iii) To achieve these aims, the effective rehabilitation of offenders should be a core priority of the prison system.

Conference notes with grave concern that years of neglect and mismanagement from the previous Conservative Government has plunged our prisons into crisis - leaving them overcrowded, understaffed and unable to properly rehabilitate offenders.

Conference further notes that:

- A. England and Wales' prisons are dangerously close to capacity - with a prison population of 87,453 as of July 2024, compared to an operational capacity of 88,864.
- B. Reoffending rates remain high, with 75% of ex-inmates reoffending within nine years of release, and 39.3% within the first twelve months. It is estimated that reoffending costs our society more than £18 billion a year.
- C. Incidents of violence and self-harm in prisons are on the rise.
- D. Violence against prison staff has also soared, with an average of 23 attacks recorded every day last year across England and Wales.
- E. Issues with staff recruitment and retention have persisted, with English prisons running red regimes due to falling below minimum staffing levels at least 22 times in 2023.
- F. The growing backlog in our criminal courts - which skyrocketed under the previous Conservative Government - is directly contributing to prison overcrowding. Remand populations have risen by 84% to a record high of 16,458 people as of March 2024, accounting for nearly 20% of the total prison population.
- G. The previous Conservative Government has left the probation service overstretched, under-resourced, and unable to provide the quality of supervision needed.
- H. Although there are meant to be limits on how long people can be held on remand, the previous Conservative Government refused to admit how many people had been in prison on remand for longer than six months.
- I. After years of failing to respond to the growing prisons crisis, the previous Conservative Government finally introduced emergency measures to ease prison overcrowding in November 2023 - including delays to sentencing and an Early Release Scheme which saw violent prisoners with a history of domestic abuse and stalking released early, despite assurances the scheme would only be available to low-risk offenders.

- J. The new Government has been forced to take further emergency steps to tackle the prison overcrowding crisis, including plans for some prisoners to be released after they have served 40% of their sentence in England and Wales, rather than the current 50%.
- K. 2,852 people remain incarcerated under indeterminate Imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentences, a system the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has called on the UK government to urgently review due to its lack of safeguards and higher rates of self-harm among IPP prisoners compared to the general prison population.
- L. 33,700 prisoners in England and Wales in March 2023 were sharing cells; in 2024, 11,018 cells intended for single use were used by two inmates, and remand prisoners, who are not convicted, can also be made to share with other remand prisoners - involuntary cell sharing can pose mental and physical risks to prisoners as well as greater loss of dignity.

Conference reaffirms the Liberal Democrat commitment to cutting reoffending by taking a holistic approach to rehabilitation - spanning sentencing, prisons and community supervision and including a full range of rehabilitative services.

Conference therefore calls on the new Government to:

1. Tackle the backlog in criminal courts to reduce the number of people in prison on remand, including by prioritising case hearings where the defendant is currently on remand.
2. Bring forward an urgent plan to recruit and retain more prison officers.
3. Ensure that no violent prisoners are eligible for an early release programme, including perpetrators of domestic abuse.
4. Put cutting reoffending at the heart of their plan to end the prisons crisis, including by:
 - a) Improving the provision of training, education and work opportunities in prison.
 - b) Ensuring that every prison has a 'through the gate' mentorship programme.
 - c) Introducing a plan to improve the rehabilitation of people leaving prison.
5. Implement a presumption against short sentences of 12 months or less to facilitate rehabilitation in the community.
6. Bring forward a new strategy for the prisons estate to ensure that all prisons are fit for purpose and able to provide the rehabilitation services needed to cut reoffending and to actively reduce involuntary cell-sharing by prisoners, especially those on remand.
7. Ensure that probation services have the resources they need to properly cope with an increased workload due to early release schemes.
8. Set up an expert committee, in line with recommendations from the House of Commons Justice Committee, to advise on how to urgently bring forward a resentencing exercise for all IPP-sentenced individuals.

9. To develop and expand restorative justice schemes as an effective alternative to short custodial sentences.

Applicability: England only.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on prisons, specifically with regard to prison overcrowding.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), and policy paper 138 *United Against Crime* (September 2019).

Amendments: Conference passed three amendments.

Amendment one added a reference to IPP sentences.

Amendment two added details on single-use cells holding multiple prisoners.

Amendment three added a reference to restorative justice.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

The Clean Water Authority

Conference notes with concern that:

- A. Regulators and the former Conservative Government have not held water companies to account for their failures to maintain and improve water quality and create sustainable funding structures, whilst also stifling innovation within the industry.
- B. Water companies want to increase customer bills by an average of 33% by 2030 to fund improvements to infrastructure, when they have paid out millions in bonuses to executives and failed to make sound investments.
- C. The Conservatives in government repeatedly voted against providing Ofwat with more powers to hold water companies to account and end the sewage scandal.
- D. Labour have pledged to increase Ofwat's powers but keep the existing regulator in place.
- E. Water company bosses in England and Wales received £54 million in benefits, bonuses and incentives since the 2019 election - in which period, sewage was dumped 1.5 million times, lasting over 11 million hours.
- F. Millions of litres of water are lost every day through leaks and two of Britain's biggest water companies do not have complete maps of their sewer pipe network.
- G. The quality and frequency of water monitoring is inadequate; there is no requirement on water companies to record the volume of sewage spills and water companies are self-monitoring pollution incidents.

Conference believes that:

- I. As a point of principle, customers should not bear the brunt of costs for infrastructure improvements on account of the failings of water companies.
- II. Water companies should be more transparent about how bill payers' money is spent to restore customers' trust that water companies will invest in the system to reduce leakage, sewerage flooding and pollution.
- III. Nobody should be in water poverty.
- IV. Effective regulation and investment to maintain and upgrade water infrastructure are key to restoring the natural environment and mitigating the risks of climate change, including flooding and water shortages. Ofwat has failed to be an effective regulator.
- V. Local authorities need more powers and resources to monitor the health of our waterways, hold water companies to account and work with them in catchment partnerships to prevent discharges and upgrade infrastructure.
- VI. Citizens should be able to hold water companies accountable directly.

Conference reaffirms calls for:

- a) Meaningful targets and deadlines to be set for water companies to end sewage discharges.

- b) Water companies to publish 25-year investment plans to encourage sound investment and promote the use of nature-based solutions.
- c) The implementation of a ban on water bonuses until sewage spills end and leaks are fixed.
- d) The transformation of water companies into public benefit companies.
- e) A new Blue Flag status for rivers, streams and lakes.
- f) A single social tariff for water bills to help eliminate water poverty within the next Parliament.

Conference resolves to:

1. Replace Ofwat with a new regulator, the Clean Water Authority, taking on the relevant powers from the Environment Agency and working with Natural Resources Wales.
2. Provide more funding to regulators including the Clean Water Authority, the Environment Agency, the Office for Environmental Protection and Natural England to improve regulation and the enforcement of environmental laws.
3. Strengthen regulatory powers and resources for the new Clean Water Authority to:
 - a) Mandate that water companies publish publicly accessible live time data on the recorded volume, duration and number of sewage spills.
 - b) Set legally binding targets to prevent sewage discharges into bathing waters and highly sensitive nature sites by 2030.
 - c) Revoke the licence of poorly performing water companies swiftly.
 - d) Fine top executives of water companies and initiate prosecutions.
 - e) Increase water monitoring with new Sewage Inspectors, including unannounced inspections, with the aim of ending water companies' self-monitoring.
 - f) Better regulate the ownership of water companies.
 - g) Reform water companies to put local environmental experts on water company boards.
 - h) Lead the transformation of water companies into public benefit companies.

Applicability: England and Wales.

Background briefing

This motion updated and developed policy on the water industry, sewage and water courses.

It built on existing policy as set out in the general election manifesto *For a Fair Deal* (2024), policy paper 156 *Tackling the Nature Crisis* (September 2023), and policy motion *Are you Drinking What We're Drinking?* (March 2024).

Amendments: Conference passed one amendment.

Amendment one added references to industrial pollution of rivers, and clarified responsibility for the maintenance of inland waterways.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion as amended.

Standing Order Amendments

Rationalising the Reference Back Procedure

Conference notes that:

- i) While the ability to refer back a motion under discussion is an important part of conference procedures, due to the ease of submission compared to that of amendments, the procedure can be abused to submit references back which would be better dealt with through amendments.
- ii) This matters, because a motion referred back rather than amended must be brought back to a future conference, keeping other items off the agenda.
- iii) Therefore there is a strong case for harmonising the submission requirements and deadlines for references back with those for amendments.
- iv) This will also allow conference members to see and consider references back in advance of the debate rather than at the last minute during the debate.
- v) The FPC's power to request references back of motions without the preliminary vote, contained in SO 11.3, has hardly ever been used and is unnecessary.
- vi) The standing orders relating to votes on reports are currently inconsistent with Article 6.5 of the constitution, which requires that reports should be approved, rejected or referred back with recommendations, whereas the standing orders allow only for approval or rejection.

Conference therefore agrees to the following amendments to conference standing orders:

1. In SO 11.2 (Reference back (moved by a voting member)), delete a) and b) and insert:
 - a) A request to refer back a motion under debate may be submitted by any of the bodies or groups listed in Standing Order 1.3 b) for business motions and 1.3 d) for policy motions. The deadline for submission of such a request shall be the same as that for amendments to motions. In exceptional circumstances, the chair of the debate shall have discretion to accept a request for a reference back if it is received in writing after this deadline.
 - b) The submission shall state to whom the motion is to be referred and shall include a statement of the reasons, including reasons why voting against the motion would not achieve a similar result, not exceeding 150 words.
 - c) If more than one request is received with respect to a motion, the Committee (or the chair of the debate in the case of requests received after the deadline) shall decide which to take. No more than one request may be taken with respect to any motion.
2. In SO 11.2 c), lines 6-7, delete 'two minutes' and insert 'three minutes'.

3. Delete SO 11.3 (Reference back (moved by the Federal Policy Committee)).
4. Delete SO 12.5 (Approval or rejection of reports from Federal Party committees or sub-committees) and insert:

12.5 Approval, rejection or reference back of reports from Federal Party committees or sub-committees

- a) Any report tabled by a Federal Party committee or sub-committee must be submitted for approval by the conference and must be voted upon accordingly. A voting member may move the rejection or reference back of any part of the report or the report as a whole.
 - b) A voting member wishing to move a rejection shall submit a speaker's card prior to the commencement of the consideration of the report, stating the section(s) which they wish to have rejected. All moves to reject a report must be debated (except that the chair shall have discretion to choose between moves to reject the same part of the report), at the conclusion of the question session. The person who made the request shall speak and the mover of the report, or their nominee, shall reply. The chair may allow other speakers, and shall determine the time given to all speakers.
 - c) A request to refer back any part of the report or the report as a whole may be submitted by any of the bodies or groups listed in Standing Order 1.3 b). The deadline for submission of such a request shall be the same as that for amendments to motions. In exceptional circumstances, the chair of the debate shall have discretion to accept a request for a reference back if it is received in writing after this deadline. A proposal to refer back shall include a written statement of the reasons, not exceeding 150 words, including reasons why rejecting the report would not achieve a similar result, together with any recommendations to the committee. The Committee or sub-committee tabling the report or, in the case of late submissions, the chair, shall decide how many references back to take if more than one is submitted. The representative of the body or group that submitted the request shall speak and the mover of the report, or their nominee, shall reply. The chair may allow other speakers, and shall determine the time given to all speakers.
5. Delete SO 12.6 (Receipt of reports from other bodies) and insert:

12.6 (Receipt of reports from other bodies)

- a) Any report tabled by a body other than a Federal Party committee or sub-committee must be submitted for receipt by the conference and must be voted upon accordingly. A voting member may move not to receive, or to refer back, any part of the report or the report as a whole.
- b) A voting member wishing not to receive a report shall submit a speaker's card prior to the commencement of the consideration of the report, stating the section(s) which they wish not to receive. All moves not to receive a

report must be debated (except that the chair shall have discretion to choose between moves not to receive the same part of the report), at the conclusion of the question session. The person who made the request shall speak and the mover of the report, or their nominee, shall reply. The chair may allow other speakers, and shall determine the time given to all speakers.

- c) A request to refer back any part of the report or the report as a whole may be submitted by any of the bodies or groups listed in Standing Order 1.3 b). The deadline for submission of such a request shall be the same as that for amendments to motions. In exceptional circumstances, the chair of the debate shall have discretion to accept a request for a reference back if it is received in writing after this deadline. A proposal to refer back shall include a written statement of the reasons, not exceeding 150 words, including reasons why not receiving the report would not achieve a similar result, together with any recommendations to the body or group tabling the report. The Committee or, in the case of late submissions, the chair, shall decide how many references back to take if more than one is submitted. The representative of the body that submitted the request shall speak and the mover of the report, or their nominee, shall reply. The chair may allow other speakers, and shall determine the time given to all speakers.

Applicability: Federal.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

Constitutional Amendments

References Back by Federal Policy Committee

Conference resolves to delete Article 7.7 of the Federal Party constitution.

Applicability: Federal.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

Business Motions

Membership Subscription and Federal Levy

Conference notes that:

1. To continue to freeze the existing minimum membership rate of £15, except for members from before 2022 for whom it shall remain £12.
2. To continue to freeze the £6 minimum for those in receipt of or entitled to state benefits, and the £6 minimum for members of the Young Liberals.
3. To continue to freeze the £3 minimum 1 year introductory rate for members directly recruited by the Young Liberals.
4. That nothing in this motion shall prevent a State Party from setting via their internal procedures higher recommended or minimum subscription rates or from introducing additional concessionary rates.
5. That the Federal Levy shall remain 50 per cent.

Applicability: Federal.

Vote on motion: Conference passed the motion.

Report Questions and Answers

Federal Conference Committee Report

Q1. Submitted by Richard Younger-Ross

Would the committee urgently review its total ban on leaflet distribution outside the conference centre as it restricts the rights of groups to campaign within the party on issues and amendments etc raised at conference?

Answer by Nick da Costa

Leafleting is permitted away from private property (usually just the area right outside the entrances) and attendees have at times felt intimidated by those leafleting aggressively as they try to enter the venue so giving attendees the opportunity to bypass leafleters without having walk through a scrum of leafleters achieves that.

Q2. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

and

Q3. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Nick da Costa

Opportunity: commercial income and we have already re-invested into improved production in the auditorium for conference attendees etc

Challenge / Risk: increased competition between parliamentarians for speaking slots at conference and in debates.

Q4. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What prompted the move of Spring Conference from York to Harrogate?

Answer by Nick da Costa

York is great, but has limitations e.g. around fringe space and FCC has been committed to looking at other conference venues for some time. Harrogate is offering a more competitive package for 2025 including a subsidy which has made it possible. Harrogate was a hugely popular Spring venue when we used to go there (last in 2009) and we are excited to be bringing the Liberal Democrat Conference back. It'll also be nice to go to a venue where the MP is a Liberal Democrat.

Q5. Submitted by Gareth Epps

Following the reference back at Bournemouth, what progress has been made to deal with vexatious proposals to amend the Constitution / Standing Orders?

Answer by Nick da Costa

Earlier this year we conducted a consultation exercise around a number of possible ways forward. FCC was due to discuss which options to put to this conference, but the calling of the general election made that impossible. We will return to the topic after conference, with a view to submitting options to one of next year's conferences.

Q6. Submitted by Toby Keynes

In Reports to Conference, can each report for a committee/function that does not have its own conference report session please state how members can raise questions?

Answer by Nick da Costa

Any questions to other committees, i.e. those who report into the Federal Board, should be directed through the Federal Board.

Q7. Submitted by Alisdair Calder McGregor

How does FCC intend to fulfil its legal duties with regards to protecting members in light of a recent Federal Appeals Panel (FAP) ruling which has permitted an individual who assaulted another party member to attend conference?

Answer by Nick da Costa

FCC takes its role very seriously, and we retain the ability to remove people from Conference for behaviour which would contravene the terms and conditions of attendance and conference and the members code of conduct. We would encourage anyone who has been subject to behaviour which is contrary to the members code of conduct to make a complaint via the independent complaints system. Regarding the FAP ruling, once this has been published, we will consider what the next steps are about formalising a process.

Q8. Submitted by Alisdair Calder McGregor

What action has FCC undertaken or considered undertaking to improve accessibility in Fringe events?

Answer by Nick da Costa

All official fringe venues are fully wheelchair accessible. Feedback from the Access Forum and any other feedback received is continuously reviewed. If there is specific feedback from members about what would make attending fringe events more accessible to them please encourage them to get in touch.

Q9. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by Nick da Costa

All Liberal Democrat members have unlimited access to the Health Assured Support Helpline at 0800 028 0199 and a range of other resources such as a website and an app.

Q10. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Nick da Costa

We can always do more and go further on this. In the lead-up to the last committee elections, I met with LDCRE to host a zoom on encouraging LDCRE members to stand for FCC. I will continue such work moving forward.

Q11. Submitted by John Grout

National and Regional Conferences have had some good ideas lately, such as quick-fire policy pitch sessions and rotating Exhibition stand slots. How can members help FCC bring such innovations to a Federal Conference?

Answer by Nick da Costa

Some of these ideas are interesting, and we will be working with others to see which of these might be possible, pending the space available and input from other colleagues - for example FPC.

Q12. Submitted by John Grout

What are the main hurdles to the reintroduction of the Conference Creche, and how might these be overcome?

Answer by Nick da Costa

The cost of providing a creche is disproportionately more expensive than uptake. We found at the time it was a very small group of people that used it, and on some days it was used for an hour or so, or not at all. Often there was just one or two children in there. After removing the creche service, children are welcome in all parts of the conference venue, we provide a complimentary carers pass (where someone is looking after a child) and parents can apply to the access fund for contributions to child care arrangements over the conference period. Parents and carers can find details about local child minders via: www.childcare.co.uk. No members have applied to the access fund for monies for child care in the last 6 years

Q13. Submitted by William Barter

Motions for this conference were rejected due to planned submissions to a future conference by party spokespeople. Could a list of known upcoming proposals be placed on the website so that members can use their time and effort fruitfully?

and

Q14. Submitted by William Barter

FPC working groups undertake consultation of members ahead of making policy proposals. However no such consultation happens for spokespeople -led policy. Can FCC ensure relevant contact details are made available to members well ahead of motion submission deadlines so that members can provide similar input into spokespeople-led proposals?

and

Q15. Submitted by Josh Lucas Mitte

When FCC has rejected a motion because the party's spokesperson is bringing one soon, have the proposers been invited to contribute to the spokesperson's motion?

Answer by Nick da Costa

From time to time, party spokespersons produce spokesperson's papers and accompanying motions. Should the FCC select the motions, they are then debated at conference by members, with the opportunity for amendments. I know that when spokespersons have undertaken comprehensive reviews of significant policy areas, they often undertake wide consultations: most recently, Richard Foord and Jamie Stone's nuclear weapons paper. Process of these papers isn't a matter for the Federal Conference Committee, but the Chief Whip informs me that for the forthcoming spokespersons' paper, all members are encouraged to let their views be known, and the spokesperson will consult widely.

Federal Policy Committee Report

Q1. Submitted by Michael Kilpatrick

How is it possible that Section 20 of the Manifesto included no content whatsoever from the 'England in a Federal UK' policy from a Policy Working Group in 2021, and did not offer a 'Fair Deal for England'?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Thank you for this question Michael.

This is of course an area where you take a big interest and you've been a powerful moving force behind the party talking about it.

It's an important area and FPC did discuss what we say about this in the manifesto.

We have had a strong general drive to make the manifesto shorter, for we think good reasons, and we've flagged that to conference through the process. Inevitably that means that there are a lot of things – including things that conference decided during the last parliament – which didn't make it to the manifesto. Obviously they still remain our party policy.

On this issue, complexity is an issue here. It is, as you know better than anyone, quite a complicated area, and outlining it, even summarising it meaningfully, in just a few words is very difficult. We did in fact try this, but I'm afraid it just came out as very wordy. The battle to keep the word count down happened in almost every area of the document, and overall we think it was worth it to make it a more accessible and coherent paper, and which is as close as we can be to where voters are.

So we went with the approach of some more high-level commitments to bringing power down from Westminster and Whitehall – which is definitely there in that section, but I'm sorry it wasn't in the level of detail that you and perhaps some others would have liked. I'm afraid that was true of many many areas of the manifesto, where particular members of the party would have liked a lot more detail – from voting systems to animal rights.

Q2. Submitted by Tony Vickers

The term 'National Nature Parks' didn't feature in the policy paper Tackling the Nature Crisis last autumn but first appeared in the manifesto. Does that make it Party policy to commit to creating them?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Thank you Tony for the question.

This is a good old fashioned “yes and no”!

Very strictly speaking, appearing in our manifesto doesn't make it “party policy”. But of course it will be widely seen as that externally, and this policy was well received.

But in fact as you say although the term National Nature Parks wasn't previous approved by conference, support for the idea is pretty clear in the environment paper, and the farming one, that conference agreed a year ago. And happily there is a motion at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning entitled "National Nature Parks", so if that is passed then by this time tomorrow it will be, in every sense, party policy. Of course that is for conference to decide!

Q3. Submitted by Gareth Epps

Will FPC review the policymaking process and whether the slow, deliberative policy paper process is still fit for purpose?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Thanks Gareth and I think I should say first that there may be people listening who don't know that you and I have been having this conversation in many different contexts for many years.

Your question here did prompt FPC to discuss it again this week.

Several committee members stressed that full FPC policy working groups are only one piece of weaponry in our armoury – most policy motions approved by conference don't come through it and are done in a faster and more agile way – as motions from local parties, 10 members, or from spokespeople.

But the committee did also think that there is also a role for the approach of in-depth and doing it comprehensively, in the way that policy working groups do. This is something that that process does well. And some members pointed out that there is perhaps especially a role for this after the last few years which have seen a lot of poor government policy made up on the hoof if at all – I'm not talking about our party!

So I don't sense a strong impetus at the moment for wanting to fundamentally change our current processes. But we may look at it again.

I'd say myself that the central thing I think I've learned about this from thinking about it over many years is that ultimately it is a trade-off – between consulting widely as many members as possible, which takes time – and doing things swiftly. The approach you take depends on where you want to make the judgement in balancing those things. I do think we have a great strength that when we do agree our policies, especially on big, complex and difficult topics, the party as a whole has been able to feed in the full diversity of views from across the party, and that we shouldn't remove that too lightly.

Q4. Submitted by Michael Berwick-Gooding

Please can it be explained why our fiscal rules in the Manifesto were not identical to those we had passed in York in the Pre-Manifesto?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Thank you Michael.

The pre-manifesto set out the "current account balance rule" – that day to day spending not be exceeded by tax revenue, and this was in the final manifesto. We also developed that a

bit further and the manifesto said that we would also want to see national debt falling as a share of GDP. Both these two elements were also basically the same as we said in 2019.

So we didn't opt for different rules, we just further developed and elaborated on our fiscal rules as we did with all other aspects of policy between pre- and final manifesto.

Q5. Submitted by Michael Kilpatrick

Do Lib Dems believe in evidence-based policy, and if so, why did the Manifesto suggest that scrapping VAT on children's toothbrushes acts to prevent tooth decay when evidence shows that VAT cuts are not passed onto consumers?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

We would empower and encourage the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to keep a very close eye on retailers to make sure that the VAT cut gets passed on.

Q6. Submitted by Michael Kilpatrick

Do FPC not consider that they have a duty to consult the membership to verify the accuracy of policies included in the Manifesto, particularly policies written by officially-sanctioned Working Groups, to avoid glaring omissions or inaccuracies?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

We are very pleased to have consulted members and others extremely widely on our policies. All our policy working groups use a wide range of party consultation mechanisms, including a formal consultation session at a federal conference. And of course the final debate at conference. We also consulted very widely on the manifesto, including through conference formally debating several drafts, as well as various online electronic consultation mechanisms which involved about 20,000 members. All this has made for a manifesto that the party can stand solidly behind, as it has done through this General Election.

Q7. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

What can be done in the event that an otherwise fully satisfactory motion is not placed on the agenda for conference due to ongoing FPC work on the subject area, how can their views be reflected (after input by federal conference) in party policy?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

FPC seeks input widely across the party on pretty much everything it works on and brings to conference. Members are always encouraged to contribute their views to FPC's policy working groups (to policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk), and they always run at least one formal consultation session at a federal conference, as well as frequently other specific consultation mechanisms. Any relevant motions submitted for conference will also be fed in to the development of policy papers.

Q8. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

How can FPC ensure that it makes the necessary changes to its policy output due to the change of government and do it at a sufficient pace for effective opposition?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

We have announced our Policy Review as our mechanism for this. This held a lengthy consultation session at this conference and will consult the party in other ways before proposing a fresh direction for our policy development next year. All policy development work under way at the moment was initiated in awareness of and taking into account the likely change of government.

Q9. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Our most important piece of work has undoubtedly been our manifesto for the election. The opportunity was to promote individual policies and a narrative which supported winning votes for the party, and we are very pleased that there is evidence that it did this. Less obvious but perhaps even more crucial and difficult was ensuring that nothing in it drew unwelcome attention which caused us to lose votes. This also seems to have gone well, as a result of a lot of careful discipline and hard work.

Q10. Submitted by Josh Lucas Mitte

Have we polled policy lines against what our spokespeople say, as sometimes to voters what we say does not seem to support our policy goals?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Our party's values are very clear, as are our policies decided by Conference. As a party and our spokespeople seek to present these in as appealing a way as possible, which draws on a range of research to do this as effectively as possible.

Q11. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

We try to operate in as open a way as possible, which support different members' different needs, but are very open to any specific suggestions, especially from members of the committee such as yourself.

Q12. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

Over the last year the committee has expanded to include an excellent representative of the Young Liberals. The committee also seeks to review the impact of all the policies we propose for their impact on equalities. We seek to operate in as open and inclusive a way as possible.

Q13. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

The Commons Party is responsible for appointing a number of members of FPC, and we are looking forward to them sending us a strong group of new members of the committee. We always see this as an important dialogue, and opportunity both for us to be better informed in our work, and also to influence their work in Parliament. Clearly committee members will continue to speak up with their own points of view.

Q14. Submitted by Jim Williams

In surveying public opinion, what kinds of qualitative sources will the policy review use to not only identify what the priority issues should be, but also why they matter to people and how they affect people's lives?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

The policy review group is looking forward to working on these questions.

Q15. Submitted by Jim Williams

Since the Board's strategy review will be conducted iteratively over the coming years, how will the FPC ensure that its policy priorities continue to harmonise with the party's strategy after the completion of the policy review exercise?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

FPC will of course continue to keep in touch with developments in the Board's party strategy as it evolves. The party's broad strategy has generally not prescribed major changes to the specifics of policy development plans.

Q16. Submitted by Jim Williams

How far will the policy review build upon the FPC's welcome recent trend towards policy-making structured around the outcomes that people want to see, rather than around the traditional divisions of responsibility of Whitehall departments?

Answer by Jeremy Hargreaves

The policy review group is looking forward to working on these questions.

Parliamentary Party Reports

Q1. Submitted by Josh Price

In the new Parliament, what policies is the Party in both Houses going to prioritise in Private Members Bills?

and

Q18. Submitted by Gareth Epps

With two new MPs coming second and third in the Private Members' Bill ballot, are there plans to engage members and voters (in Gloucestershire and beyond) in choosing meaningful legislation?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

Our party has a proud history of making a real difference through Private Members' Bills. Most recently Wendy Chamberlain's Carers Leave Act illustrates how these are a golden opportunity for opposition parties when used correctly.

In reality, very few PMBs pass or even get debated. In both the Commons and the Lords, a random ballot is held each session (so about once a year) to determine the order in which parliamentarians can bring forward a piece of legislation of their choice. The top 20 are the key slots and this year, Roz Savage, Max Wilkinson, Wendy Chamberlain and Danny Chambers were able to secure one of those in the Commons.

The Lords group also submitted bills reflecting policy commitments made at the general election as well as our broader political and legislative priorities. The successful submissions drew on topics including family reunions for refugees, home school education registration and support, and recognising the state of Palestine.

While we will continue to campaign on these issues in both Houses as the PMB process allows, it is an unfortunate truth that it remains easy for a small number of opposing Parliamentarians to filibuster these bills. Consequently, there's a delicate balancing act between pushing forward ambitious policy and knowing what one can actually pass.

Q2. Submitted by Ella Jayne

How do you think the role of the House of Lords will change now we have a larger Commons parliamentary party?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

Our peers have impressive backgrounds and extensive knowledge in local government, business, the arts, and science and our new cohort of 72 MPs will continue to benefit from their experience and support, as well as the wider party.

In the last Parliament, the Liberal Democrat Lords Group stepped up to support the Party in carrying the heavy legislative burden. Importantly, they worked hard to amend and improve disgraceful Conservative legislation whilst advancing Lib Dem priorities and ideals. Now there is a larger Commons parliamentary party, the work of the Lords' team will adapt.

The two Houses will work together to use the new lease of life, the fresh ideas, the varying campaign priorities, to continue delivering for the country, and for Liberal Democrat members who want to see an effective and constructive opposition.

Q3. Submitted by Douglas Munro

The Parliamentary party dramatically increased post-election. What operational changes are taking place to meet this challenge?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The Parliamentary party has expanded dramatically post-election, growing from 15 to 72 members—an unprecedented scale of change. This growth requires us to adapt to a new level of complexity, where the increase in size brings new operational demands.

Despite this shift, our core model proved effective during the election. Many successful elements are staying the same. Where possible, we are retaining the strategies that contributed to our success, while also adapting to the new scale and opportunities. Our focus remains on making the right decisions, not just fast ones. Over the coming year, we will experiment, review, and refine our processes to ensure we implement changes that support long-term success.

Among the key adjustments are the expansion of the Commons Parliamentary Advisory (CPA) team and the Policy Advisory Unit to strengthen policy and casework support for MPs. We are also embedding technology solutions and have used new Parliamentary room allocations, skillfully negotiated by Munira Wilson, to promote cross-team collaboration. While I can't speak for every team, I know Campaigns, Media, and others are aligning their structures to meet this new challenge. With these changes, we have a unique opportunity to make a significant impact.

Q4. Submitted by Adam Robertson

With the Conservatives fighting for the soul of Conservatism with Nigel Farage, is the Parliamentary Party prepared to be part of the Official Opposition if the opportunity arises?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The Conservative Party may be grappling with internal conflicts, but our focus is clear: we are here to be the responsible opposition to the Labour Government. In these initial weeks, our team of 72 has shown remarkable dedication, stepping up to this role with impressive resolve.

We are highly visible in departmental questions, holding ministers to account more effectively than Conservative MPs, and we are a stronger voice in Parliament than Nigel Farage, and other Reform MPs, could ever be.

Each week, Ed has the opportunity to question the Prime Minister directly during PMQs. So far, he has effectively spotlighted critical issues such as the injustices faced by carers and

the urgent need to fix our broken NHS.

Regardless of the Conservatives' direction, our team in Westminster remains committed to providing the careful scrutiny and responsible opposition essential to a healthy democracy.

Q5. Submitted by Rebecca Jones

Now the party has won 72 seats, what will the parliamentary party do to advance trans rights in Parliament?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

With 72 seats, the Liberal Democrats are well-positioned to advance the rights of the whole LGBT+ community - including trans people - in Parliament. This strengthened presence gives us renewed leverage to press the government on these issues.

We will continue advocating for a comprehensive ban on all forms of so-called “conversion therapy,” building on the work of Baroness Lorely Burt and her Private Member’s Bill in the last Parliament. Ensuring that any new legislation is fully inclusive of trans people remains a top priority for us.

Reducing the unacceptably long wait times that trans people face when accessing healthcare is also crucial. Our Equalities Spokesperson Christine Jardine and Health Spokesperson Daisy Cooper have been actively pushing the NHS to establish the new regional centres for young people as swiftly as possible, as we work to ensure that young trans people get access to the high-quality healthcare they deserve.

Q6. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for the parliamentary parties since last conference given the general election?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The General Election has undoubtedly been the biggest opportunity for the parliamentary party, as we now have the largest Liberal Democrat presence in a century. Every part of our team was focused on electing more MPs, and this effort has paid off with historic results.

This growth gives us a unique opportunity to lead as the largest third party in a hundred years, especially as the Conservatives’ internal struggles leave a vacuum for us to provide necessary scrutiny and attract voters dismayed by the lack of vision presented by both the official Opposition and Government. However, this also presents challenges—Parliament is not accustomed to such a strong third-party presence, so we must actively assert ourselves to achieve the visibility we deserve.

Q7. Submitted by Stephen Harte

With a record number of new staff to recruit managed by new MPs, what steps are we taking to ensure best HR practice?

and

Q8. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of Members of Parliament and their staff?

and

Q9. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have you taken to improve diversity and inclusion in the Parliamentary Parties and staff in Parliament?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

To support MPs in managing HR effectively, the Party has provided a best practice guide, developed in consultation with existing staff, the Whips Office, the Campaigns team, and HQ. While MPs are individual employers responsible for their own staffing decisions, they have access to substantial support from both the Party and Parliament.

On diversity, all Federal Staff undergo mandatory training on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EEDI), including unconscious bias, which is refreshed every two years. In addition, “Project Stellar”—a development programme for prospective MPs from ethnic minorities—has already proven successful, with three members of the cohort now sitting as Liberal Democrat MPs. Organisations like the Young Liberals, the Racial Diversity Campaign, and Liberal Democrat Women also work to attract talent from a wide range of communities, with many members going on to join the Party’s staff.

Mental health support is a top priority for the Party. We believe that ensuring physical safety is foundational to mental well-being, which is why the Party led and won a vote in Parliament on risk-based exclusion of MPs, with a focus on safeguarding.

MPs and staff have access to 24/7 mental health support services, provided through HQ and Parliament, as well as designated pastoral staff representatives who offer ongoing support. As leaders in the Party, MPs are committed to upholding standards of respect and dignity in all interactions with staff.

Q10. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

Having had time to reflect, are you satisfied with the Lib Dem response to the riots?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The riots this summer were appalling, and our party condemned them unequivocally from the outset. There is no place for Islamophobia, racism, or any form of hatred in our society, and we remain committed to standing firmly against such prejudice.

We also provided constructive opposition by suggesting steps the government could take to prevent similar events in the future, including calls for an inquiry into the use of social media to organise riots and incite violence.

Our response also had to recognise the fear experienced by many in minority communities and the long-lasting impacts they faced. Addressing Islamophobia and racism has been central to our party’s values and approach, which is why we have urged the government to

appoint a new Adviser on Islamophobia and adopt a formal working definition of it. Equally important was ensuring our party members and affected communities knew that support was available. Ed's message to members outlining our response included mental health resources accessible to all members. Similar resources were also signposted for our councillors, who were providing on-the-ground support via the LGA.

We aimed for a response that balanced clear condemnation, constructive opposition, and tangible community support. However, we recognise that there is always room for improvement. Our Equalities team maintains regular communication with our diversity AOs and welcomes feedback and suggestions on how we can continue to strengthen our response.

Q11. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

Having been impressed by the effectiveness of the the parties staunch defence of the elderly during the cost of living crisis (triple lock & WFA), what are the prospects for success for using the same political skill for standing up other generations by applying the triple lock to things that affect them (e.g. minimum wage, maintenance loans, disability living allowance)?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The triple lock stands as one of our proudest achievements from our time in Government. It put an end to the derisory 75p state pension increases and helped bring the UK closer in line with many international peers who offer more generous state pensions.

While in government, Ed Davey also ended the practice of enforced retirement at 65, giving older people the option to continue working if they wished. However, many pensioners cannot supplement their income and deserve to live with dignity.

Those who are no longer of working age face inherent disadvantages as they cannot boost their income through employment. With around 2 million pensioners living in poverty, the triple lock has been crucial in providing them with needed financial stability.

We have consistently defended the uprating of working-age benefits whenever questioned by previous Conservative Governments. Additionally, we have pushed for policies such as the reintroduction of maintenance grants for disadvantaged students, a 20% higher minimum wage for those on zero-hours contracts, scrapping the two-child limit to support struggling young families, and raising the carer's allowance by £20 per week.

Significant increases in support for all age groups remain central to our platform, and we must continue campaigning for a fair deal for all generations.

Q12. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

With the election of Layla Moran as chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, how much success do you expect her to have in challenging the flawed Cass review and the even more flawed implementation of its recommendations and what can Lib Dem MPs especially the at time of writing health and education spokespeople (Daisy Cooper and Munira Wilson) do to support her in that?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The Liberal Democrats have long urged the Government to establish new specialist services and to recruit and train more specialist clinicians, ensuring that children and young people receive the appropriate, high-quality healthcare they need without delay. This will remain a top priority as we scrutinise the government's next steps.

Our spokespeople team has been advocating for these changes since well before the Cass Review's publication, pushing ministers and NHS leaders to tackle unacceptable wait times and expedite the opening of new regional clinical centres. This commitment will continue into the next Parliament.

Q13. Submitted by Simon Hughes

In this parliament which specific issues and subjects are regarded as matters of personal conscience with no requirement for MPs and peers to follow any party policy?

and

Q14. Submitted by Simon Hughes

Will both Chief Whips undertake that all relevant Standing Orders governing rights of Liberal Democrat parliamentarians to vote according to conscience will always be public documents?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

Currently, there are no specific Standing Orders in the Commons that regulate conscience matters, leaving such decisions to the discretion of the Chief Whip, who has consistently relied on precedent and consultation with colleagues. Free votes have included the smoking ban and abortion.

Certain subjects, where cross-party consensus exists or where party policy explicitly supports a free vote—such as assisted dying and abortion—are always treated as matters of personal conscience.

However, society's understanding of morality continues to evolve, particularly in a technological age that brings unprecedented ethical questions. We are also proud to be a party ahead of that curve, pushing society to be better. Prescribing a fixed list of conscience matters, therefore, could unintentionally suggest that other issues fall outside the scope. We intend to continue approaching these issues flexibly, making thoughtful, collective decisions as new questions arise.

Q15. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you ensure our 72 new MPs work best with our federal party and its bodies/committees?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The Party has a strong recent track record of collaboration between MPs and the Federal Party and its bodies. There is a well-established connection across the Party that we will

continue to build upon.

For instance, Wendy serves on the Federal Conference Committee, which successfully delivered this autumn's conference. Among our group, we have experienced members like former Federal Campaigns and Elections Committee Chair Lisa Smart, former Party President Tim Farron, and myriad colleagues who have been part of HQ, ALDC, and other Party bodies.

In the last Parliament, we placed significant demands on our 11 MPs. With 72 MPs now, it will be much easier to work across the Party, supported by new, energetic colleagues who can deepen and broaden these connections

Q19. Submitted by John Grout

Can our Parliamentary groups resolve to consult the party's registered SAO groups (such as Lib Dem Women, the Lib Dem Disability Association, LGBT+ Lib Dems, etc.) prior to meeting un-recognised or external groups which may be lobbying intensively but may also have agendas inimical to Liberal values?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

Members of both Houses make every effort to consult registered SAO groups like Lib Dem Women, the Lib Dem Disability Association, and LGBT+ Lib Dems. As Parliamentarians, we also have a responsibility to engage with a broad range of voices while remaining firmly aligned with our Liberal values.

The commitment of Liberal Democrat Parliamentarians to championing the most marginalised and advancing equality and social justice is evident in their actions, whether it is through advice surgeries, interactions on the doorstep, or debates in Parliament. This dedication remains steadfast, regardless of who we hear from or engage with

Q16. Submitted by Judith Bailey

The Party is planning to produce a spokesperson's paper on the Cass Review. Can the Parliamentary Party commit to hearing voices from all sides of this debate including from parents who chose talking therapies for their gender distressed children rather than medicalisation?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

Our Women and Equalities spokesperson Christine Jardine is producing a paper on LGBT+ policy. This will cover issues including healthcare for children and young people who are struggling with their gender identity.

There will be a period of open consultation. Participation details will be published in due course.

Q17. Submitted by Judith Bailey

Does the Parliamentary Party accept the recommendations from the Cass Review?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

The Liberal Democrats have long advocated for improved specialist healthcare services for children and young people struggling with and exploring their gender identity, long before the Cass Review. We fully acknowledge that the current system is failing young people through inadequate standards of care, excessively long waiting lists, and a toxic debate surrounding these issues.

We support the NHS's plan to establish more specialist services and adopt a holistic care model, as recommended by the Cass Review.

However, we recognise the concerns of many young trans people and their families regarding the report and its implications. The Liberal Democrats are clear: the Cass Review must not be used as a justification to restrict access to the high-quality healthcare that all children and young people, including young trans people, deserve.

Q19. Submitted by Brandon Masih

What evidence was used by health spokesperson team to agree on announcing support for zero-rating HFP sunscreen and that it would deliver savings to consumers?

Answer by Dick Newby and Wendy Chamberlain

This campaign, which garnered cross party support and the backing of numerous cancer charities, aims to improve access to sunscreen. Sunscreen, despite the potentially life-saving impact of SPF protection, is taxed as a cosmetic, adding 20% to its cost. At a time of increased cost-of-living, these margins can make all the difference. We believe in empowering and encouraging the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to keep a very close eye on retailers to make sure that the VAT cut gets passed on.

Federal Board Report

Q1. Submitted by Leon Duveen

Can the Board explain why any group that is not an Affiliated Organisation (AO) and has stated aims that are against Party principles is allowed to have a stall in the Exhibition?

Our Conference is a private gathering of Liberal Democrat members, not a public forum open to all. With this in mind, what measures will be taken to make sure that any group, even if it includes Party Members that is not an AO and has aims that are against Party principles can be refused?

Answer by Mark Pack

The context for this question is that Federal Conference Committee (FCC) decided to decline a stall from a group of party members who are not an official party body and who strongly oppose some of the party's stances.

However, the party's legal advice, including from a specialist in discrimination law and considering the points raised at FCC in favour of the decision, was that this would be illegal and we would, at great cost, lose any resulting court case.

To simplify the legal situation greatly, the issue is that we are required to be consistent in how we handle views that are protected under equality law with how we handle other views.

I find it personally very frustrating that the law does not give us greater scope to make political judgements over what we want to have happen at our events, but alas the law is not as we would wish.

So we could choose, for example, to ban any stand at conference which in any way disagreed with party policy - but that would require us to ban stalls such as those from Young Liberals to name just one group that sometimes disagrees with the party's leadership... and indeed has done so with some success!

We really don't want to go there.

And I know that people, including on FCC, have therefore hoped that instead we could think about concepts such as values rather than policies and so find a way to distinguish between those they might wish to have here and others.

But I am afraid that the consistent legal response to those different attempts has been that it would be illegal to refuse the group that FCC wished to turn down.

As I said, I regret that - and alas therefore I think we do need to acknowledge that when the legal advice is clear, the appropriate course of action is to follow it which is what our finance committee chair did in declining to authorise the costs of refusing the stall.

On a couple of points of detail as the question mentions the party's official Associated Organisations. We have charged commercial rates for the stall that has prompted your question. They are not an AO and did not get the AO rates.

I am sorry that I know you - and others - find this situation unhappy.

We are, though, planning to have a debate on the policy that they disagree with at our spring conference. I hope and expect that will give the whole party a very clear opportunity to express where the overwhelming majority view is in the party, which is our strong support for trans rights and for our trans and non binary colleagues.

They are the ones who truly represent who we are as a party.

Q2. Submitted by Adam Robertson

Will the Federal Board be changing its structures and strategy to ensure that the Party is looking a party ready for power, or being able to react quickly if political developments happened within the centre of British Politics?

Answer by Mark Pack

We made significant changes to how the Board, and the party more widely, is run during the last Parliament. In particular, after over three decades of people saying the Board and its predecessor were too large, and it creeping up in size, Conference agreed to reform it from 41 members to 16. Other changes included making our Vice President responsible for working with ethnic minority communities a full voting member of the Board, and having a much more joined-up strategy process across the party.

Having a more effective and more joined-up approach to running our party should serve us well in this new Parliament. One of the benefits of that in the last Parliament was that we were able to respond swiftly and flexibly to political opportunities that arose, most notably first as the chance of winning by-elections opened up and then as the Conservative campaign flopped during the general election.

The Labour government - and indeed the next Conservative leader - will no doubt create new opportunities for us. We are keenly open to those and will adjust our plans swiftly in response.

Of course, you might expect me to think that these changes have worked well. But the key verdict will be from our general election review and I hope all parts of the party will be ready to take on board any recommendations they make for further improvements.

Q3. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What efforts are being made to harmonise the National, Devolved, Regional and Local campaigns we run, to make sure that successes in one election can transfer well to others?

Answer by Mark Pack

This is a very important point as progress at each level of election helps progress at the others. We need to see all these different elections as part of one combined opportunity to grow and win more power to turn our policies into action that changes people's lives. We also need to consistently appeal to people across different levels of election in order to build a large core vote of people who consistently support us, providing the robust foundations for long-term success.

Of course, targeting is still vital to win under the election rules in place. But alongside that we need both a top-down and a bottom-up approach to making the most of the interconnected mix of elections.

The top-down element is the need to plan budgets and staffing to support the full cycle of elections, repeating our 2019-24 success of early investment in our field campaign team.

The bottom-up element is supporting, encouraging and motivating local teams to play a full part in every election in the cycle, rather than viewing some as ones that are ok to largely sit out. Playing a full part may be campaigning to win, or helping a target seat or building up the local infrastructure.

We need to make full use of each opportunity. But that can be tiring, and expensive - which is why helping local teams with their capacity and commitment to each election is a necessary part of this.

Get that right, and we can get more Lib Dems elected to change people's lives.

Q4. Submitted by Janet Grauberg

Strategy - in terms of developing a new strategy, how are local parties and other party bodies going to be engaged in the process?

Answer by Mark Pack

This is a very good question, and getting the practical work going on developing our strategy is top of the list for the post-conference tasks.

We will be most successful at this if the work is rooted in listening to, learning from and then getting buy-in from our grassroots. Part of this will be via our general election review, details of which - including how to contribute to it - are at www.libdems.org.uk/ge-review.

As part of the process of evolving our strategy, the Board will also be presenting an item, if Federal Conference Committee (FCC) agrees, to our Spring Federal conference, for discussion. There will also be regular updates via my monthly report backs on the party website and in our email updates for members.

Q5. Submitted by Jim Williams

A tide of anti-Tory sentiment helped the Party deliver a record-breaking number of Liberal Democrat MPs this year. How will the Federal Board's strategy review ensure that any lessening in anti-Tory sentiment does not result in fewer Lib Dem MPs at the next General Election?

Answer by Mark Pack

Incumbency, incumbency, incumbency.

We need to support our MPs in delivering on the mandate on which they were elected - NHS and social care, the cost of living and the environment, sewage in particular. Handily, concentrating on this will not only repay the trust voters put in our MPs but also provides a

strong platform for us to use across the country to hold the Westminster and devolved governments to account.

We can also strengthen the incumbency efforts of our MPs by taking local council elections seriously right from the start of this Parliament and making good use of our enhanced national profile to promote the same themes.

Q6. Submitted by Jim Williams

Every Lib Dem gain in this General Election was achieved from second place. Our success this year leaves us with only 27 second-place seats. How will the Federal Board's strategy review ensure we bring more seats within reach of returning a Lib Dem MP?

Answer by Mark Pack

We did the very best possible thing with our second places after the 2019 election: turning nearly all of them into first places.

That leaves us with the unusual situation of an abundance of first places and a paucity of second places.

The answer to that is the long-term support for places in third, or lower, to move up into second and first themselves. There are many places with promising local election results and growing teams that are strong contenders for becoming target seats if they continue to grow.

Supporting them, while not forgetting the importance of the top tier of seats, will be an important balancing act again. As with other answers, taking each round of devolved, local and other elections seriously during this Westminster Parliament will be vital to achieve that.

Q7. Submitted by Jim Williams

Evidence and experience suggest that it is wise to avoid being a junior coalition partner. Looking ahead over the next two to three General Election cycles, how ambitious will the Federal Board be when setting long-term Party aims?

Answer by Mark Pack

There should be no limit on our ambitions, but they must be rooted in what we can realistically deliver. We got that right in 2024, after failing to do so in 2019. In 2019 our ambitions over-reached our ability to deliver winning campaigns on the ground, and even very well funded last minute activity could not make up for that. In 2024, by contrast, we were all able to scale up the reach of our ambitions as the political situation just kept on getting better.

We need to see more about both how the Labour government and the next Conservative leader perform therefore before we can start to sensibly calibrate the scale of our ambitions for this and the next Parliament. But the objective regardless should be the same - to get more Liberal Democrats elected so that more of our policies can be enacted to change people's lives and make our country more liberal and more democratic.

Q8. Submitted by Christine Headley

Will the Board consider ways of providing support to candidates and campaigners to promote wellbeing and avoid burnout?

and

Q9. Submitted by Caron Lindsay

Will the Board consider improving support for candidates and campaigners from marginalised groups who are subject to abuse when representing the party?

and

Q10. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by Mark Pack

There is a common thread running through these three questions about how we best support each other. Although there are some specific features of being a candidate or a committee member, both of these roles - and other roles in our party - can put individuals under significant stress and worse.

We have support services available for members, see www.libdems.org.uk/getting-support-when-you-need-it. In addition, during the election campaign there were regular check-in calls with candidates and in the last Parliament we introduced changes such as a parental leave policy for committee members.

There were however, I know, some serious problems during the election and the Board will listen carefully to any recommendations the election review makes as to how we can improve support. If anyone has personal experience of things not working well during the campaign, I would very much encourage them to submit them to the review and of course I am always very happy to hear directly from members too.

Q11. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

and

Q12. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How did Board work well, or less well, with Federal Committees and Bodies, during the General Election campaign?

Answer by Mark Pack

The general election was both the biggest opportunity and the biggest challenge!

For Board members, both as members of the Board and in our other roles in the party, there was a need to get right having enough oversight to be sure that things were being done right without getting sucked into trying to micromanage other people.

Due to the reforms since 2019, such as clearly delineating the different roles of leader, CEO and president, the different parts of our governance structures, including federal committees and other bodies, worked together much more smoothly each with a good understanding of their own role in the combined campaign.

Zoom has also proved a huge boon, as it makes it practical to bring together different people regularly to hear feedback and share information.

Q13. Submitted by Sarah Lewis

Which Federal Committee is accountable (and on what timeline) for providing a comprehensive and transparent response to the recommendations of the General Election Review; and under what circumstances will these recommendations be referred to Conference?

Answer by Mark Pack

The Board is responsible. We have asked the review to conclude by the end of this year if possible so that Spring Conference next year can consider any recommendations that would be for Conference to decide on. Things that fall into that latter category include any recommendations that require a business motion to implement or any alterations to the constitution or other rules set by Conference.

Spring Conference next year will also be an opportunity to hold the Board to account for what we are doing in response to the report.

Q14. Submitted by Rebecca Jones

What is the Board doing to ensure trans people are free from transphobia within the party such as misgendering?

Answer by Mark Pack

There is no place for transphobia, prejudice or discrimination of any kind in our party. Our party's definition of transphobia makes this clear.

One of the Board's priorities over recent years has been improving the complaints system, to ensure it makes the right decisions as swiftly as possible on individual cases. This is hugely important to protecting people within the party from any sort of discrimination, including trans people.

I also welcome changes that other parts of the party has made, such as Federal Conference Committee (FCC) introducing the ability for people to include their pronouns on conference passes, and our equalities spokesperson, Christine Jardine, regularly meets with trans people to hear their concerns and better understand the challenges they face.

Q15. Submitted by Alisdair Calder McGregor

The party has consistently failed to deal with bad actors abusing the complaints process to terrorise party members who are also members of sexual and gender minorities. By soft pedalling for years, the party has emboldened these bullies in the hope they will go away. Instead, they have made the situation worse by using party funds to try and set precedents in court to undermine equalities legislation and our commitment to a fair and equal society. As we have seen with recent far right riots, treating the purveyors of hatred gently is tearing the fabric of our society apart. Does the party recognise the damage it is complicit, through inaction, in doing, to the fabric of our society and what is it planning to do about it?

Answer by Mark Pack

I am sure you will appreciate that I can't comment on any individual cases, to respect confidentiality and the independence of the complaints process.

But I can say that in recent years, we've been putting in a lot of work to try to get the disciplinary process right - from more training our adjudicators to clarifying parts of the process.

We have done our best to listen to members' experience of the complaints process and feed that into our reforms throughout. If there's any particular feedback about the process you'd like to share, I am always open to hearing from members.

Q16. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Mark Pack

The Board is responsible for filling a significant number of posts throughout the party, some of which also have a place on the Board (such as appointing the chair of the Federal Elections and Communications Committee, FCEC).

We have introduced a more rigorous process of public advertisements with clear job descriptions, shortlisting and interviews to select the names to recommend to the full Board. Through that process we do our best to follow best practice from the recruitment world, including those steps which help improve diversity.

Although the number of applications, and the number in particular from outside those who are already well known in the party, has improved, the pool of applicants is not as diverse as it should be. That is a continuing challenge for this Parliament and I hope everyone across the party will proactively consider who to encourage to apply for party roles when they come up.

Q17. Submitted by Pete Dollimore

Does the Board see emerging technology such as AI as an opportunity or a risk? How will we harness it for best effect?

Answer by Mark Pack

Both. It is very likely that at the lower-key end, such as improved spelling and grammar checking, that AI will become widespread without people even really noticing that they are using it. How much it takes off for more high profile tasks will depend on how quickly it continues to improve and how public acceptance evolves. It will be the public and the algorithms that set the boundaries for what is useful and acceptable for those in politics to do with AI.

Q18. Submitted by Tony Vickers

Why, after 24 years as a recognised AO, is ALTER no longer listed as one on the Party website?

Answer by Mark Pack

The party website lists those party bodies which have migrated from our old AO/SAO structure to the new Affiliated Organisation structure, along with newly created Affiliated Organisations.

Previous AOs and SAOs were given a very long lead-in period, with support, to migrate to the new structure, and I hope that any which have not done so do so soon. As and when they do they will be added to the website.

Q19. Submitted by Mark Johnston

Party standards: What steps are the Board, the Board's Disciplinary Sub-committee and the Senior Adjudicators taking to ensure infringements of equality law are not repeated? Have all the relevant officers had suitable legal training for this purpose?

Answer by Mark Pack

We are not aware of any infringements of equality law that have occurred as part of the operation of our current disciplinary system. Where cases raise matters of law, the Senior Adjudicators Team would seek the appropriate legal advice.

Q20. Submitted by Leon Duveen

The Media (especially the BBC) don't seem to have caught up with the fact that we no longer have a duopoly in UK politics. What actions have or will be taking to ensure that we get the exposure (especially on in the broadcast media) that having 72 MPs (30% of opposition MPs) merit?

Answer by Mark Pack

Both our MPs and our press team are very active in trying to secure more coverage. If you ever spot unbalanced coverage, it is also helpful to contact the relevant media outlet direct to point that out.

Q21. Submitted by Sarah Lewis

As part of the annual review of AOs, will the Federal Board give consideration to the role of AOs in formulating an adequate Party response to events of particular concern to specific communities within our Party's membership e.g. the racist/Islamophobic riots of Jul-Aug 2024?

Answer by Mark Pack

The Federal People Development Committee (FPDC) carries out the annual reviews on behalf of the Board, and I will pass your suggestion to its chair, Claire Hudson. Thank you for making it.

I know also that both our party spokespeople and party committees welcome input from our Affiliated Organisations (AOs), both directly and via the Party Bodies Forum.

Q22. Submitted by Josh Lucas Mitte

Many branches made detrimental sacrifices to support target candidates, has allocating part of MP's tithes to the regions been considered to support such local parties?

Answer by Mark Pack

Tithing arrangements are set by our state parties, so this question would best be addressed to your state party.

Q23. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Mark Pack

There are two main areas. First, the huge increase in our Parliamentary Party means a natural shift in the centre of gravity within the party, with much more time and attention now drawn to our MPs. That makes it all the more important for us to be properly joined up in our approaches to tasks such as budgets and strategy.

Second, the new MPs mean several hundred additional staff and that brings both opportunities and risks. For the Federal Party, it means an important role in providing the right services to MPs and their teams to help them make the most of these opportunities.

Q24. Submitted by Katherine Howells

Complaints Report states 7 respondents were sanctioned with a warning. How many of these were issued on dismissed complaints and does the Federal Board consider it equitable to issue a sanction on a complaint that is dismissed?

Answer by Mark Pack

All of these seven cases were determined using the complaints process rules that were in force before March 2024 and had been reported to Conference. These provided (in paragraph 2.1.1) an option for cases to be 'dismissed (with or without a Warning)'. In cases of Warnings, there was still a right of appeal. However, this was changed in the version of the rules in place since March 2024 and also reported to Conference. These set out in paragraph 2.1.1.1 the situations in which a Warning can be issued and a case then terminated, including the Respondent's right of response, and how that is different from a simple dismissal of a case.

Q25. Submitted by John Grout

Given the severe challenges of the decade so far (Covid-19, social media changes, Conference cancellations, tech re-platforming), how do the Board and FPDC intend to support and nurture the party's community of AOs going forwards?

Answer by Mark Pack

Our Affiliated Organisations (AOs) are an important part of the Liberal Democrat family and I know there were many productive discussions about this at the Party Bodies Forum meeting held in Brighton. Both the Federal People Development Committee (FPDC) and others will be following up on the suggestions made by AOs at the meeting.

I encourage all AOs to engage with the Party Bodies Forum, both for mutual support and as a way of engaging effectively with our Federal Party committees along with other parts of the party. They can do so by contacting abi.bell@aldc.org

Q26. Submitted by Zoe Hollowood

Do the accounts presented within the FFRC report include the English, Scottish and Welsh parties or are these separate entities? Do they get consolidated into a parent entity?

Answer by Mark Pack

The Federal Party and the three state parties have separate accounts, which are not consolidated.

Q27. Submitted by Jacqueline Harris Baker

Given a non diverse group of MPs what will the mechanism be to ensure that the parliamentary party represents the interests of the entire nation?

Answer by Mark Pack

We have more to do as a party to improve our diversity, and it is welcome that in many respects we took an important step forward with our Parliamentary Party at the general election. But there is more to do, and alongside that I am sure the whole Parliamentary Party will continue to speak for the interests of all parts of our country.

Candidate selection rules are the responsibility of our state parties, so the specific point about mechanisms is best addressed to your state party candidate chair. I do though hope that all three state parties will give careful consideration to what steps will best help improve our diversity through this new Parliament.

Q28. Submitted by John Grout

As we are now over the halfway point of the current party committees' term, how does the Board feel the new constitutional arrangements vis-a-vis the Federal Council are working? Are they working as intended, and is there scope for improvement in the Board's view?

Answer by Mark Pack

As the Federal Council's role is to scrutinise the Board, the best verdict on how it is going probably does not come from the Board itself!

But from the Board's point of view we have developed a constructive working relationship with the Council, with a number of Board members attending each of their meetings to discuss a wide range of subjects. I believe we have met all of the requests from the Council to discuss topics. We are certainly grateful for the hard work that volunteers on Federal Council put in, particularly its chair, Antony Hook.

Q29. Submitted by Helen Baxter

In the Federal Finance and Resources Committee report, the Balance Sheet (page 19) isn't consistent with the Balance Sheet as per the audited set of 2023 accounts submitted to the Electoral Commission. Is this perhaps an older version? In addition, the net assets should agree to the total funds and the heading should say "as at 31 December 2023".

Answer by Mark Pack

The audited accounts at the Electoral Commission are correct. The version of the Balance Sheet in the report was an earlier draft sent in error. The net assets should of course agree with the total funds.

Campaign for Gender Balance Report

Q1. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

Answer by Julia Cambridge

We all got a shock on the 22nd of May. This was a quick election in terms of the timetable, so that was the first challenge.

Candidates had booked holidays, were still raising funds, were still gathering vital data and running campaigns then suddenly we had a general election date. Another of the many challenges was just the weight of support that was needed, which at times meant the CGB mentors and core team were flat out. Opportunities included the learnings that new mentors could get from supporting women at the most hectic and pressurised of times.

Q2. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by Julia Cambridge

CGB are not a committee as such. We consist of three officers appointed by the Federal Board. Because of our small team we work closely together and support each other. Mental health is an important topic which CGB recognise as an area where it's important for us to link up and signpost help, be vigilant for signs of stress and anxiety and to always keep communication channels open between us and women, often doing a difficult, isolating and mentally exhausting job.

Supplementary question by Ulysse Abbate

Will you consider bringing back All Women Shortlists to improve gender balance?

Answer by Julia Cambridge

CGB might in the future advocate for this however that decision is down to Conference. If it returns it will be through a mechanism where a motion has had majority support at Conference. Personally I think there is a crisis in the regions and I'd use Scotland as an example. With the Scottish Parliament elections coming up and ahead of that list selections this is a region where I hope there is some form of arrangement where top list places in winnable areas are reserved for the highest placed woman.

Q3. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Julia Cambridge

The three officers who power CGB are not a committee and are selected, from those who have applied via a national advert, by Federal Board members who vote. At present three women hold the posts, one with a disability.

Q4. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Julia Cambridge

CGB work with women. Of the 72 we have 32 women which includes 22 newly elected women. The opportunities are that several of those have approached CGB offering help moving forward to inspire and support a new generation of women candidates. The risks are that the example of these new women, some with smaller majorities, might heighten expectations of winning to a new field of candidates. It will be down to CGB to manage expectations whilst still encouraging women to aim high.

Federal Communications and Election Committee Report

Q1. Submitted by Caron Lindsay

How can the federal party ensure that we build on our Westminster success at the Scottish and Welsh elections in 2026? What support will they make to those vital campaigns?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

This is important. There is a huge opportunity. They're different because they have proportional representation, which requires different skills. The federal campaign team put a lot of effort into Wales and Scotland to increase our presence. It's important to build on that success. Both have senior campaign managers in place planning for those elections. There will be plenty of support for those campaigns.

Q2. Submitted by Adam Robertson

In Suffolk, we are potentially facing a 1981 result of ZERO seats at the next County Council Election. For areas such as Suffolk to succeed electorally could 'Special Measures' be considered to help Suffolk?

And

Q11. Submitted by John Grout

The targeting strategy obviously worked well this year in terms of seats, but left many local parties looking at disappointing results having helped their neighbours win. When will the cavalry arrive for these local parties, many of which face Labour?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

Local elections where the party is facing challenging circumstances. I understand your concerns. I live in West Yorkshire, it's been tough since 2010. It's important that we put more emphasis on revitalising activity in Labour facing areas. We have to hold what we have and expand our targets. It's important for teams on the ground to show ambition and campaign. Help will be given to increase capacity.

Supplementary by Adam Robertson

Suffolk has gone backwards in seats at each county council election. There's maladministration. How can the party help to professionalise Suffolk?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

Sorry to hear that things are bad. The best way to counter that is to start knocking on doors, and find people who want to make a difference. Don't wait for organisations to change. Find out the local issues.

Supplementary by John Grout

In Reading we helped in Wokingham and Newbury. We were being told it was close in Wokingham but they won very easily. We could have achieved strong second places with better messaging.

Answer by Kath Pinnock

No one knew how well we were going to do. Canvassing data moved in the last few weeks. What we have to do is to pivot to new places, near where we won last time.

Q3. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since the last conference given the general election?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The greatest opportunity was the general election. Generally, a GE only occurs every 4 or 5 years. Thus any opportunities for growing our Parliamentary Party had to be seized. That was successfully achieved!. The biggest challenge was keeping to the carefully focussed strategy whilst being flexible enough to expand the targeting informed by the data but mindful of the scarce resources available.

Q4. Submitted by Josh Lucas Mitte

Many campaign staff will leave the party to work for the new MPs, how can FCEC ensure we retain expertise knowledge as we approach the locals?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

Having 72 MPs means there are many more job opportunities for campaigners. Some have indeed moved from the campaign staff to working for an MP. These campaigners may have changed their role but they are still campaigning for the Lib Dem “family”. There are now opportunities for new keen campaigners to join the field team and learn the skills needed for the next GE.

Q5. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The well-being of committee members is important. They have access to the expertise within the HQ staff team.

Q6. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The members of FCEC are nominated by various Party bodies such as the Welsh and Scottish Lib Dems, the English Party, ALDC, and the Parliamentary Party to name some of them. The consequence is that the diversity of the committee depends on others. I am though very keen to have a committee that is as diverse as possible so that we hear a range of perspectives from across the Party.

Q7. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The MPs will have a nominee to serve on FCEC. It will be their role to inform and hear the views of the Commons Parliamentary group. The risk is that the strategy becomes one of keeping the representation we have. The opportunity is to grow further at every level in the Party.

Q8. Submitted by Simon Hughes

How many 2024 UK General Election Liberal Democrat a) candidates and b) elected MPs define themselves as from a UK ethnic minority?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

This is a great question and one on which the Party needs to continue focussing attention. There are 5 MPS who identify as being of an ethnicity which is not “white British”. Information concerning candidates is incomplete, unfortunately. What i do know is that much more needs to be done if the Party is to reflect the diversity of the country.

Q9. Submitted by Oliver Jones-Lyons

With lack of parliamentary representation no longer an excuse, how can we achieve all important press coverage going forward?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The HQ media team has worked very closely with the parliamentary team to produce news stories based on parliamentary research for eg. the sewage crisis. I am confident this will continue. Local, Regional and State Parties also have a role to play in helping to increase media coverage. Where we now have MPs local papers will be more willing to publish stories. Where our parliamentary coverage is limited, local parties have a crucial role to play in using data acquired by the national team to stimulate coverage.

Q10. Submitted by John Grout

How does the party intend to retrench and recover in Labour-facing urban areas where we have been losing ground to the Green Party lately?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The key is to always stand a candidate in local elections at every level. Without a candidate voters who may wish to support us turn to other parties such as the Greens. That way of voting may then become their default rather than for the Lib Dems. The flip side of always standing a candidate is never to make pre-election arrangements with other parties. The report on the consequences of doing deals with the Greens by the much-missed Lord Andrew Stunell explains that pre-election deals enable the other Party to grow, often at our expense. The history of the Liberal Party from 1920 clearly demonstrates that.

Q12. Submitted by John Grout

In the last Parliament we campaigned successfully on a platform of being “not-the-Conservatives”. What plans to FCEC have to re-focus on positive reasons to vote Lib Dem, and on what we stand for, particularly in the context of a Labour government and insurgent far-right?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

General Elections are a watershed after which parties have to re-assess their policy positions and messaging in the light of the changed circumstances. For FCEC, the next electoral challenges are the local elections in 2025 and the State elections in 2026. The results of these will form the backdrop for the next GE. The Labour government is already providing a helping hand to our campaigns with its decisions on the winter fuel allowance and the potential for changes to the single person’s council tax discount.

Q13. Submitted by Brandon Masih

What lessons have been learned from local elections on the growing strength of the Green Party where we have intentionally stood down for them?

Answer by Kath Pinnock

The question is similar to number 10. Hence the repeat of the answer. The key is to always stand a candidate in local elections at every level. Without a candidate voters who may wish to support us turn to other parties such as the Greens. That way of voting may then become their default rather than for the Lib Dems. The flip side of always standing a candidate is never to make pre-election arrangements with other parties. The report on the consequences of doing deals with the Greens by the much-missed Lord Andrew Stunell explains that pre-election deals enable the other Party to grow, often at our expense. The history of the Liberal Party from 1920 clearly demonstrates that.

Federal International Relations Committee

Q1. Submitted by Adam Robertson

How effective have our Liberal Sister Parties have said the 'Cordon Sanitaire' has worked in their country against the Radical Right, as we may need to potentially have one against Reform?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question, which relates to one of the most important and relevant issues facing liberal parties across Europe at this moment in time. How should we deal with the rise of populist parties of the far right and far left? As you point out in your question there are some who argue that we should remember the history of our continent and maintain a 'cordon sanitaire' to not engage with these parties – certainly not enter into coalition government with them or be in a government that relies on their support. Taking this line - by preventing the far right from entering into government - it is argued that we do not offer credibility or respectability to their policies, which are often anathema to our liberal values and all that we stand for. I would say that this is the position that has been adopted by most of our sister parties in Europe – certainly until recent years - and is preferably the line argued most strongly by the Liberal Democrats.

However, there are others, who argue that it is better to expose the far-right to the realities of government, show the public their incompetence and the toxic nature of their extreme policies and by doing so reduce their public support. It is also claimed that the act of being in government often forces these extremist parties to moderate their policies and it also hopefully reduces their support and influence with the general public.

In recent years – as the percentage vote of the far-right and far-left has risen in elections - it has become more and more difficult to form coalition governments that exclude them or do not rely on their support in some way to govern. Germany with its memory of Nazi atrocities has so far managed to exclude the AfD from coalition governments, but that is proving harder to resist at regional and national level. The General Election scheduled to take place next year will be a major test of Germany's ability and willingness to maintain the 'cordon sanitaire' theory.

In the Netherlands we currently have a Government that includes our sister party VVD and the populist far right party PVV, for which the VVD have come under much criticism, not least from our other Dutch sister party D66 and many members of the VVD itself. The VVD have argued that they managed to prevent Geert Wilders, the PVV's Leader from being Prime Minister – as his party won the largest vote and he would therefore have normally been offered that position – and they secured the agreement of the PVV to uphold the rule of law, continue support of EU membership and support Ukraine in the war against Russia and watered down their anti immigration policies. VVD also argue that to deny including the PVV in government, would be somehow undemocratic and acting against the will of the Dutch electorate. We have seen in several countries how support for parties of the far-right

increases if voters feel that they are being treated 'unfairly' and excluded from power. Is that a lesson for us in dealing with Reform here in the UK?

In Sweden, our sister party Liberalerna, is a part of a coalition Government that is supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, which has raised concerns from our other Swedish sister party Centerpartiet and many of their own supporters. These are all breaches of the 'cordon sanitaire' – the latest example being the new coalition in France between Macron's Renaissance Party and the centre-right which has the support of the far- right National Rally. The real test will be how this situation influences the French government's policies and impacts on the result of the next Presidential elections.

The real concern amongst the member parties of ALDE – the Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe- which includes the Liberal Democrats, is to what extent these coalition governments or governments supported by the far-right are enacting policies which go against our liberal values. Immigration is the most contentious issue – as far right parties and our own recent Conservative Government in the UK attempted to demonise refugees, alongside backtracking on LGBT+rights. Both key areas of the fight for liberal values. As these situations arise ALDE has developed a process whereby a mission is established to look at how the governments were formed and report back on the policies being enacted and overall monitor whether as liberals we should have grounds for serious concern. There is a process whereby a political party could be suspended from ALDE, whilst the mission is taking place, or they could even be expelled from ALDE should sufficient grounds be found. It is essential that we have a process that treats all sister parties equally, and for parties that enter into such partnerships and coalitions to understand that there could be real repercussions for their actions and also that we should not allow the process to be exploited.

Our sister party ANO in the Czech Republic presented a problem for some time. Last year its Leader Andrej Babis was said to have issued statements supporting the far-right opponents of our sister party in neighbouring Slovakia –Progresivne Slovensko – during their General Election, which resulted in a narrow victory for the far-right. An ALDE mission was set up to look into ANO's activities, which was ongoing at the time of the European Elections in June, where it became evident that ANO had adopted many of the policies and rhetoric of the far-right – especially on immigration. We were due to discuss how we should deal with ANO at the ALDE Council meeting in June in Vilnius, where I should add that the Liberal Democrats would have supported taking a strong line against the infringement of our liberal values. However, ANO resigned from ALDE just before the meeting took place. The example of ANO should be a lesson to ALDE that we need a process to act swifter and more vigorously when our rules and values have been so obviously breached to a point where a member of the liberal family has adopted far- right policies and in effect rendered itself no longer liberal.

Our recent success in the General Election in June will hopefully set an example for our sister parties on how to be successful electorally whilst standing up for our liberal values and challenging the policies and rhetoric of the far-right. Liberal parties need to be seen to be listening to the concerns of their electorates and to be dealing with the issues which are of most concern to them. In so doing we are better able to take on and defeat the policies promoted by the populists and parties of the far-right and far-left.

As you can see from my answer to your question – the situation with our sister parties across Europe are many, varied and ongoing, which do not give a really clear answer as to the best way for to deal with far-right parties and reduce their appeal to voters – especially when they have grown to a size where excluding them a coalition government or nor relying on their support is a major challenge. The situations as they arise need be clearly monitored and it is of great assistance that our liberal parties can rely on each other’s support and advice in ALDE and Liberal International.

Q2. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question. I believe that the biggest challenge and opportunity for FIRC since the last Conference in the run up to the General Election, was ensuring that our Party maintained its commitment to internationalism as one of its core values and that our distinctive positions on key foreign policy issues – from the War in Ukraine to the Israel/Gaza conflict – were included in our manifesto and given voice during the General Election campaign. We recognised the importance of listening to voters and concentrated our campaign message on their main areas of concern – from the environment preventing dumping sewage in our rivers and on our beaches, to offering ways to deal with the cost-of-living crisis, to solutions dealing with the problems in our health and social care service. However, it was also key to develop and articulate our policy to develop a closer relationship with Europe for instance, which resonated well with voters and helped develop our distinctive electoral proposition. In the run up to the General Election when all our efforts were geared towards securing us the maximum number of MPs possible, it would have been easy to have become distracted and try to push international policies up the agenda. I feel that we got the balance just right and now with our 72 MPs, we are as a Party in a much better position to raise our liberal perspective on international issues in Parliament and in the media and it is already evident that our liberal voice and view of the world is now being heard to a much greater extent than before July. I am proud of the small part my committee played in helping us secure our success in the General Election and its role in helping us to build on our strengths going forward.

Q3. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

With events in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan ongoing, what is your committee doing to engage with our sister parties in the Caucasus to bring peace and democracy to the region?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question relating to the events in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan as these countries in the Caucasus, who were part of the former Soviet Union, are all struggling to enjoy better relations with the West, whilst Russia tries to exert control over these independent countries – regarding them as still belonging to its sphere of influence. In addition to these countries you have mentioned, I would also add Moldova and the states of the Western Balkans to your list, as they too are liberal democracies under threat from Russia and their proxies.

The Liberal Democrats are uniquely positioned amongst the political parties in the UK – through our membership of ALDE and Liberal International- to have regular dialogue with liberal parties in these countries and we have taken on the key role in ALDE of coordinating dialogue between parties from outside the EU. At the recent ALDE Congress in Estoril, the LibDems convened a meeting for all political parties from non-EU countries to discuss how we can support one another going forward, which is likely to become a regular fixture of future ALDE Congresses. A number of us Lib Dem’s met earlier this year with Georgia’s President Salome Zourabichvili on her visit to London and I have a regular dialogue with the several liberal parties in Georgia. Baroness Sal Brinton who was recently re-elected to a further two-year term as Vice President of ALDE is the champion of human rights and the voice of non-EU parties in the ALDE Bureau. We have had several bilateral meetings with Ukraine’s Servant of the People over the past year to look at ways to assist them improve their ability to support LGBT+ rights, their citizens with disabilities and strengthen governance in local government. We hope to be able to take the same approach with our sister political parties in the countries in the Caucasus and elsewhere. After our success in the General Election, which returned again us as the third largest party, we are now in a position from next year to receive funding from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which we can employ to help support our sister parties and liberal movements in these countries. The Lib Dems will be able to guide our sister parties in their development and help them take on the challenges and threats to their democracies posed by Russia.

Q4. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What advice would you give members looking to become involved in the international side of the party but who don’t know where to start?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you again for your question. For those members who have an interest in international politics and wish to become involved, but who do not know where to start, I would suggest in the first instance to consider joining one of our two main international AOs the LibDem European Group LDEG or Liberal International British Group LIBG. LDEG focuses mainly on

European issues and LIBG on the wider world. Both AOs hold regular debates and webinars and offer real opportunities to network with other like-minded party members and develop relations with members of our sister parties

I would also recommend applying to become a member of the LibDem delegation to the ALDE Congress, which takes place each year in a different city hosted by one of our European sister parties. As Chair of FIRC I lead our ALDE delegations and welcome new delegates and strive to ensure that our delegations reflect the diversity of society. We have very good feedback from past delegates, who have enjoyed the opportunity to witness European politics at first hand, to engage in debates and often make lifelong friends. I first became involved in international politics in our Party by joining LDEG and becoming a member of the Lib Dem delegation to the ALDE Congress in Amsterdam – so am proof that it works.

Q5. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question. The mental health of party members is a really important issue. From our perspective on FIRC I try to ensure that all members feel able to get involved in debates, have their opinions heard and respected and that they all feel valued for their contributions. I try to give feedback wherever possible. On a practical level I always ensure that meetings last no longer than 2 hours and are finished by 21.00 or 22.00, as we have several members based overseas.

As we only officially meet six times a year mostly online, it is a challenge to know what may be going on in members' lives but I try to ensure that we spread workloads and that there are opportunities for members to take on tasks and projects where they are able to use their experience and knowledge and passion for certain topics. We aim to be a collaborative team. It is important that no one is taking on too much work and feeling under undue pressure. We compliment the usual online meetings with one or two Away Days a year, which allow members to develop a closer bond, and several members are also members of our delegations to ALDE and Liberal International which further help to strengthen those relationships. If I am aware that a member is struggling in some way, I will try to speak with them privately. I am aware that there are options and channels in the party to support the mental health of members, but it is probably a service that could be better promoted and always improved.

Q6. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question. Diversity is a really important issue, and I try to encourage that FIRC is diverse in its membership. One of the key challenges is that 8 members of our committee, including myself, are elected by party members in the Federal Elections – so the actual make up of the elected members is somewhat out of our hands. Obviously, we can encourage party members to stand for election and hopefully when casting their votes that members will take on board the need to try to elect a diverse committee. However, I am able to encourage party members to join our delegations to ALDE Congress, and in fact we have been very successful in making sure that those delegations are diverse and reflect the diversity of society. Not only does it enhance our debate and send a strong message to our sister parties, but it will hopefully encourage members from all backgrounds to put themselves forward for election to FIRC and to the ALDE Council delegation next year. It is a project that is ongoing and for which we shall reap the benefits in the future. As a member of our ALDE delegation I would hope that you recognise our efforts and agree that we have been somewhat successful. The delegates that party bodies send to FIRC is also out of my hands – although I would encourage them to also consider the diversity of my committee when making their choice of representative. As we encourage and recognise the importance of diversity throughout all aspects of our party – starting with recruiting new party members to electing our MPS – it will help diversify the membership of Federal Committees like FIRC.

Q7. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by David Chalmers

Thank you for your question. In July I wrote to all 72 MPs congratulating them on their election to Parliament, outlining the work of FIRC and offering to meet up with them and find ways to engage with our Committee. I was pleased that many responded and over the last few weeks I have met up with all our spokespeople on international areas and am now doing so with the members of select Committees and APPGs and their teams. I expect that we shall build up a strong working relationship and I hope that many MPs will take up our offer to join our internal debates and webinars on important international issues and in the long term join our delegations ALDE and Liberal International. We have just recommended Pippa Heylings MP to the Liberal International Climate Justice Committee and Bobby Dean MP to the Liberal International Fair-Trade Committee. I can only see huge opportunities ahead as with our 72 MPs and the Liberal Democrats returned as the third party in Parliament, that we have much greater opportunity to raise our perspective on international issues in the House of Commons and in the national media. The only risk is that with greater responsibility that we shall need greater support and a reinstated International Officer to enable us to contribute to the international work of our Parliamentarians and ensure that the voice of party members is heard and included in international debates and policy.

Federal Council

Q1. Submitted by Abrial Jerram

Can you elaborate on the mechanisms, other than calling in and overturning decisions, that Federal Council members use to scrutinise the work of the Federal Board?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

Calling in is the primary mechanism for scrutiny. It is important to understand that call-in does not signify the council necessarily disagrees with a decision. It signifies we want to have a good look at the issue.

We can call in and overturn a decision but can also call in and then decide not to overturn and/or to make comments instead. The other mechanism available to us is this seek to discuss matters without a call-in. I mentioned in the written report some topics that the council has asked to discuss with the president and senior officers in the next few months.

Q2. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

The council gave comments and input into the general election strategy well in advance of the early summer election. Many council members were clear that the general election was the most important strategic event facing the party in our three-year term.

A general election outcome can also require important decisions to be made. A hung parliament was not indicated by the polls but, as we know from past elections, things can change in the course of an election campaign. If there had been a hung parliament the board might have been called upon to make certain decisions. The council was clear that it would fulfil its constitutional function to scrutinise any board decisions and identified a date shortly after polling day when we would have been available to meet to do that.

We are very much looking forward to seeing how the poor develop strategy for the new political situation on the challenges of the next few years and to provide our scrutiny to that.

Q3. Submitted by Toby Keynes

Is FC concerned, not just about how the party conducts litigation, but why it so often faces litigation from current and ex members, some of them dedicated and long-standing, in the first place?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

Litigation is important.

We are fortunate to live in a country where everyone is subject to the law and where people and organisations can access independent court in they believe that the law has been infringed.

That was once a revolutionary idea. I am proud to be in a party whose Liberal and Whig forebears can claim credit for establishing that principle. Whenever a dispute is litigated it is good management, whether we win or lose, for an organisation to consider whether there are any lessons to learn from the underlying facts of the case. There may be no, a few or many lessons to learn, depending on the case.

Q4. Submitted by Gareth Epps

From the report, it is not clear what work Federal Council has done. Is there a strategy or programme in place?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

What we have done is to review every single board decision and make a collective decision as to whether we wish to call in any decision and to overturn it. Most decisions have not attracted 13 requests to call-in and none have reached 26 members wishing to overturn it. You could infer that the council has generally been satisfied with the Board's approach.

I would strongly resist any suggestion that having not called in or overturned more decisions is a sign of inaction. The 40 members of the council many of whom have extensive responsibilities elsewhere, have diligently reviewed all of the decisions and the papers behind them and sometimes even without a call-in have had frank exchanges of views and discussions with senior party officers.

I think that can sometimes be a sense among some liberals (bearing in mind that dissent and challenge are arguably inherent to our philosophy and political history) that success should be measured by how hard you're rocking the boat. However, if the boat is going in broadly in the correct direction it is actually best not to rock it for the sake of doing but to concentrate on helping to row hard towards the destination.

Strategy follows objective. The objective given to us is to scrutinise the Board's work.

It is fundamentally up to each of the 40 members of the council, who you elect, to make a personal judgement about how they want to do that. The approach I encourage is to read the papers and decision notice from the board as soon as they come out, think about these strategically and decide what to call in based on where we can add value.

So, if I had to sum up the strategy in two words it might be "sustained diligence."

But it is, as I say, fundamentally up to each member how they perform their role.

We have a plan which I think will take us up to Christmas to proactively look at a number of matters, so I mentioned in the written report. Any council member can request to add something to our plan but also any party member who thinks we should look at something can contact me, one of the two vice chairs or any other council member.

Q5. Submitted by Gareth Epps

Does the Federal Council have a work plan in place?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

See above.

Q6. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

The party has elected a very diverse committee in terms of location, age and other characteristics.

All our meetings are online which means there is no barrier of travel costs and we would assist with technology if anyone who needed help.

Meetings usually start at 7:30 which was arrived at by balancing the needs of different members, especially those with work and childcare commitments.

Meeting dates are set a calendar year at time so members can plan and not be ambushed by dates that may conflict with other obligations.

Our standing orders commit us to make any reasonable adjustments to enable participation by a member, of course this is also a requirement of the Equality Act.

Q7. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer by Cllr Antony Hook

The MP's and Lords send three representatives to the council who have all been active participants, whom we really value and I am certain that will continue. The party strategy will doubtless evolve in light of the different situation since the general election and we look forward to participating in that.

Federal Appeals Panel

Q1. Submitted by Christopher Johnson

What would you say the biggest opportunity and biggest challenge have been for your committee since last conference given the general election?

Answer from David Graham

We're not a committee, we convene a panel if there is a dispute. The biggest challenge has been getting through the caseload. Don't have a full complement of personnel with none from Wales. The general election delayed many matters.

Supplementary question by Christopher Johnson

If you're under strength what are you going to do?

Answer from David Graham

We aren't responsible for membership, we rely on the Federal Board to supply applicants. Each state has a different system. We may need to look at changing how we are structured. There are issues with quorate numbers.

Q2. Submitted by Gareth Epps

A decision potentially impacting personal safety at Conference has been issued. It is not in the Panel's report nor on the Party website. Why not?

And

Q3. Submitted by Alisdair Calder McGregor

What legal advice did FAP obtain prior to ruling that an individual who assaulted another member of the party should be permitted to attend conference, and how does it envisage that the party and Federal Conference Committee should uphold their legal duties with regards to protecting members without the power of justified exclusion?

Answer from David Graham

A case panel of the panel made a decision last week. There's a process where parties are invited to ask for redactions before the report is published. The time period hadn't expired. We've spoken to the parties. Last Autumn conference at glee club a member allegedly threw a shoe. The following morning they were asked to leave by the stewards. A few days after the conference the chief steward told them that they had been banned from two subsequent conferences. They appealed that decision to the FCC who dismissed the appeal. They then appealed to us. What we ruled was that the chief stewards don't have the ability to ban people from future conferences. FCC and stewards don't have the ability to take disciplinary action and the process was unfair.

We didn't take legal advice but there are three qualified lawyers on the panel. This was a decision taken after the close of conference regarding future conferences.

Supplementary question by Gareth Epps

Could you say more about the circumstances for the delay?

Answer from David Graham

I've referred to issues earlier. It's not within our remit to tell the FCC how to run conference. Stewards have authority to police events but not to punish people. If conference wants to give them that power it can.

Supplementary question by Alisdair Calder McGregor

You said you have a responsibility to treat people fairly. Putting people at risk of physical assault, do you agree there does need to be a power of future exclusion?

Answer from David Graham

We review decisions. It would not be appropriate to comment. Maintaining safety at the event is the stewards responsibility, there is a disciplinary process.

Q4. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to support the mental health of those on your committee?

Answer from David Graham

The Federal Appeals Panel is not a committee as such, and does not hold regular committee meetings. We are available to discuss any issues arising with other volunteers' health. It would be inappropriate to comment on any private discussions. We have not taken any particular mental health-focused action.

Q5. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

What actions have your committee taken to improve diversity and inclusion on your committee?

Answer from David Graham

Members of the Federal Appeals Panel are appointed by the Federal and State Parties for a 5 year term (or in the case of persons chosen to fill a casual vacancy, for the remainder of the 5 year term), and does not itself select its members. The Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Panel have encouraged the Federal and State parties to widely advertise vacancies and have made themselves available to discuss what is involved with prospective applicants. A large amount of material is published on the Party website so that all members can see what we do.

Q6. Submitted by Ulysse Abbate

How will you manage working with our 72 new MPs? Are there areas you can see opportunities and risks?

Answer from David Graham

The Federal Appeals Panel does not work with our MPs in their capacity as such. Our remit is to resolve disputes brought to us pertaining to matters within the scope of article 22 of the Federal Party constitution. This question does not appear to be relevant to our work.