

Simple Guide to the Policy Process in the Liberal Democrats

Summary

The Liberal Democrat policy process can be summarised very simply as policy proposals which have been approved by the party conference. This is the only way that proposals can become Liberal Democrat policy.

Any ten voting representatives can propose items to conference, and every conference does approve policy motions proposed in this way. However, in practice many motions, particularly in major areas, do come from the Federal Policy Committee (FPC), which are also subject to a further earlier process of their own.

This guide sets out fully how the Liberal Democrat party policy process works.

Federal Policy Committee

The Federal Policy Committee (FPC) is responsible under the party's constitution for overseeing policy-making within the party.

It is made up of 15 members directly elected biennially by conference representatives, 3 English councillor representatives, Scots, Welsh and English state representatives, an MEP, a Peer, the Party President, Leader and 4 other MPs. It is chaired by the party Leader, assisted by three Vice Chairs (one of whom is an MP).

Most of its work consists in commissioning and then approving policy papers in specific areas. These will usually tend to be quite large policy areas (such as Health, or Schools), though they may well cross boundaries between different government departments, and may occasionally be on smaller areas.

Policy working groups

Policy papers are prepared by working groups set up to write each paper, who work for about a year on it. FPC appoints a chair of the group, and about ten other members, who will include relevant spokespeople from the House of Commons and if appropriate other Parliaments, and other party members. Members of working groups are chosen from a list of party members who have volunteered to be considered for working groups, and FPC will do its best to ensure that the membership of the group is as balanced as possible, and that all major relevant interests are represented on it. Any party member may volunteer at any time to be part of policy working groups, by contacting the Policy Projects Team.

Each working group will take evidence from a range of experts in the area concerned, as part of preparing their recommendations. They also undertake extensive consultation within the party, including by publishing a formal consultation paper, through a website (accessible at <http://consult.libdems.org.uk>) and by holding a consultative session at federal party conference. The chair and members of the working group may also be invited to speak at regional or local party events, and any party member may contribute their views by writing to the working group chair c/o the Policy Projects Team.

The Federal Policy Committee keeps in touch with the working group's progress during its work. Once the group have finished their paper, it will be discussed by MPs and the Shadow Cabinet, before coming to the FPC for final amendment and approval. The final decision on the content of policy papers and accompanying policy motions rests with the

FPC, who finally submit them to party conference. The motion formally endorses the paper as policy, and contains its main proposals (amendments may also be submitted to other items in the paper). Only the motion is subject to vote at conference, but if approved the accompanying paper also becomes formal party policy.

Manifestos

The Federal Policy Committee also has responsibility under the Constitution for preparing the party's manifestos for General and European elections, in consultation with MPs (for a General Election) or MEPs (for European elections).

The FPC will usually start the work of preparing manifestos about two years before the election, by appointing a Manifesto Writing Group to do the detailed preparatory work. FPC then keeps this under discussion with the writing group, and usually (but not always) publishes a Pre-Manifesto document about a year before the anticipated election, which is submitted to party conference for approval. (The unpredictability of the date of General Elections inevitably means that this process is slightly different in each Parliament.) The pre-manifesto will normally form the basis of campaigning in the months leading up to the election.

Following approval of the pre-manifesto the FPC does further confidential work building on that, before agreeing and publishing the final manifesto at the start of the election campaign.

The policy content of manifestos will be closely based on existing policy, and only in unusual circumstances will the manifesto contain policy which is different from existing policy agreed by conference, usually when a new situation has arisen. The Liberal Democrats are the only party to publish a full 'Costings Supplement' alongside the manifesto, outlining fully the cost implications of the manifesto's proposals.

Other work of the Federal Policy Committee

The FPC may also undertake other work. In the first year of the current Parliament (2005-6) it carried out a major policy review and planning exercise, entitled *Meeting the Challenge*, looking at the overall state of Liberal Democrat policy and needs for development through the rest of the Parliament. This was subject to wide consultation within the party, as well as eventual approval at Conference. At the time of writing it seems likely that FPC will undertake similar review exercises at the start of future Parliaments.

Party Conference sometimes 'refers back' individual policy motions from Conference to the FPC, for further consideration. FPC will do further work in such areas as requested, before usually bringing a motion back to a subsequent conference.

FPC has responsibility for representing the party's policy to external organisations, such as ELDR (the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, the Europe-wide grouping of which the Liberal Democrats are a part) and Liberal International. In practice it works closely with the party's International Relations Committee (IRC) to do this.

FPC has also recently decided to hold a one-day policy conference in January of some years, to consult party members on current policy priorities.

Conference

Federal Conference meets twice each year, over a weekend in March and a week in mid-September; although the autumn conference is longer and higher-profile, they have equal status to make policy.

Each local Liberal Democrat party is entitled to send a number of members as voting representatives, depending on the local party's size; only voting representatives may vote on motions, although any party member may attend.

About half of Conference's time is devoted to debating policy motions, which if approved become policy. There are also a limited number of 'business motions' relating to the administration of the party, which if approved are binding on the party.

The remainder of conference's time is taken up with other items. These include set-piece speeches from Shadow Cabinet members and other leading figures, Question and Answer sessions with the Leader and other leading figures, themed discussions on issues of interest, and 'Urgent Issue' discussions, in which conference may discuss a current live issue, but without a motion or vote. None of these items are voted on, and things said during them do not become party policy.

Federal Conference Committee

Under the party's constitution the party conference, including selection of the agenda, is managed by the Federal Conference Committee (FCC), assisted by party staff in the Conference Office and Policy Projects Team.

The FCC comprises 12 members elected directly biennially by conference, 2 members appointed by the FPC, and 2 by the Federal Executive (FE); the Party President, Chief Executive, and Commons Chief Whip. It elects its own Chair and two Vice Chairs who take a leading role in running conference. FCC is almost entirely responsible for all aspects of organising the conference, including practical arrangements as well as selecting motions and amendments for debate.

Policy motions

Policy motions set out the general approach and specific actions that Liberal Democrats would take in a specific policy area. Their scope may range from fairly broad areas (such as 'Health') to relatively specific individual areas (such as 'Maritime Piracy').

Any ten voting conference representatives may submit a policy motion for debate; local parties, regional and state parties, or the Federal Policy Committee may also do so, as may Specified Associated Organisations (SAOs), certain interest groups within the party.

Only the Federal Policy Committee may submit full policy papers to conference; other than this FPC's motions must go through the same selection process as motions from any other submitter. In practice however it is unlikely that FCC would not select for debate a motion accompanying a policy paper from the FPC (although it has on occasion required that they be heavily re-drafted).

There is no fixed format for policy motions; however a motion will normally set out (a) some criticism of the existing position in the area concerned; (b) some general beliefs and principles guiding the Liberal Democrat approach in this area, and (c) specific proposals to

do something differently in the area concerned.

Anyone considering submitting a motion is very strongly advised to take up the offer of drafting assistance from the Policy Projects Team in advance of the submission deadline; informal advice at an early stage of preparation is also available and advisable, either from the Policy Projects Team or a member of the FCC. The submission deadlines are currently early January (for spring conference), and mid-May (for autumn conference).

Selecting motions for Conference

From among the motions submitted, FCC will select some for the agenda for the Conference; pressure of time means that it is not possible to debate all those submitted, and FCC is also keen to maintain a high standard of motions on the agenda.

FCC is accountable to conference, and regards its role as facilitating conference to debate the issues that conference representatives wish to debate, in an informed and coherent manner. FCC members select motions on this principle, rather than on the basis of their own personal views on specific topics. Although it seeks advice from other relevant bodies and individuals within the party, FCC takes its decisions independently of them and of the Leader.

FCC will generally be inclined to put motions on the agenda which are politically salient and have specific well-thought-through proposals to make.

FCC will generally be unlikely to put motions on the agenda which are of only narrow interest, have been subject to debate at conference recently or are in substantially the same area as work being done by a policy working group, or are ill-informed or vague. A significant number continue to be rejected because of poor drafting.

If FCC rejects a motion, the proposer will receive detailed feedback from an FCC member concerning the reasons for its rejection; often further work means that it can be successfully submitted again for a future conference. Motions which are successful are placed on the agenda which is mailed to all conference representatives.

Amendments

Normal policy motions, and topical motions, are open to amendments, which any group entitled to submit motions, may submit. FCC will then select those to be debated, on the same principles as for motions. Conference representatives may also request a 'separate vote' on any specific lines within the motion – in effect this is very similar to an amendment to delete those lines from the motion. Such requests should be submitted at this stage.

Topical motions

Topical motions are on subjects on which have arisen since the normal deadline for policy motions. FCC may also specify that it would allow motions on certain subjects that they have identified, to be considered as topical motions. Topical motions must be submitted by a second deadline – the same as the deadline for amendments to normal motions. They are then open to amendment. Topical motions only apply at autumn conference; at spring conference there is only one deadline for policy motions. FCC will select topical motions for the final agenda on the same basis as normal motions, with the additional requirement that they be genuinely topical, ie that they could not reasonably have been submitted by the original deadline.

Emergency motions

Emergency motions may be submitted for either autumn or spring conference, by a deadline in the week before conference. They must relate to an issue which has come up since the deadline for topical motions. Emergency motions are subject to a different procedure for selection than normal or topical motions: subject to being in order as genuine emergencies, FCC may not reject them for debate. Submitted emergency motions which are in order will normally be put into a ballot for conference representatives to decide which issue they would like to debate, with only the winning one or two being debated. FCC may also put one or two emergency motions directly on to the agenda. Emergency motions are not open to amendment and should generally be short and focussed clearly on one specific issue. They are commonly on specific foreign affairs crises.

Timetable for run-up to Conference

Spring Conference

For spring conference constitutional amendments must be submitted by a deadline in mid-November. An early skeleton agenda document containing these is circulated to conference representatives in December.

All policy motions must be submitted by a deadline in early January. Following motion selection by FCC, the final agenda is circulated in February.

Amendments to policy motions, emergency motions, and suggestions of topics for Urgent Issue discussions must be submitted by a deadline in the week prior to Conference itself.

Autumn Conference

Policy motions must be submitted by a deadline in mid-May. The preliminary agenda containing successful motions which have been placed on the agenda, is circulated in June.

Topical motions, and amendments to motions on the preliminary agenda, must be submitted by a deadline in mid-July. The final agenda is circulated in August.

Emergency motions, and amendments to topical motions must be submitted by a deadline in the week prior to conference. Suggestions for Urgent Issue discussions must be submitted by the same deadline.

Debate at Conference

The debate at conference on all policy motions will be structured by the chair in the following way. The structure is the same for all policy motion debates, although the time allowed for it will vary depending on the topic and the extent of interest in it: generally debates will vary between half an hour for a small motion on a specific issue, to up to two hours for a major new policy paper. The debate is chaired by an independent chair appointed by the conference committee and assisted by a member of the conference committee as their aide.

The proposer of the motion speaks first, and has longer to speak than other speakers –

generally about twice the normal length. The proposer of any amendments will speak next, in order (so proposer of amendment one, then proposer of amendment two, etc).

There will then be a general debate. Any conference representative may submit a speaker's card; the chair will endeavour to call as balanced a range of speakers as possible, so that as many points of view as possible are represented in the debate.

At the end of the debate someone supporting each amendment will summate the discussion on it (again in order). Finally, a supporter of the main motion will summate the debate as a whole.

After all the speeches voting representatives will vote on any amendments and separate votes, and then on the motion as a whole. Almost all votes are counted simply by a show of hands, but if it is close this will be done by a formal counted card vote.

Reference back

A conference representative may move a motion during the debate to 'refer back' a motion for further work, usually to the Federal Policy Committee (though it need not be). If this is moved, Conference will hold a short debate on this. If the move to refer back is defeated the debate continues in the normal way; if conference votes to refer a motion back then debate ceases at that point.

Responsibility for making policy: "Applicability"

The Liberal Democrats are committed to a federal structure for the United Kingdom, where many powers are devolved from Westminster to the nations/states of the UK. The party constitution therefore sets out a federal structure for the party, in which each state party (Scotland, Wales and England) has responsibility for making policy for areas which we would wish to see controlled at state level.

The federal party has power only to make policy in areas which Liberal Democrats would wish to see policy made at UK-wide level (which may be different from the current actual division of powers between the nations/states and the UK); only the Scottish party may make policy in areas which Liberal Democrats would wish to see powers exercised at Scottish level; and similarly in the case of Wales. In the case of England, the English party has 'passed up' powers to make policy in all areas to the Federal Conference.

The 'applicability' of all policy proposals and motions is marked clearly on them (such as 'England only', 'Federal' (i.e. UK-wide) etc.).

Spokesperson's papers

Party spokespeople in the House of Commons sometimes write papers on policy questions in their own area. These are generally shorter and in more specific areas than full policy papers, and are usually done more quickly (for example in about six months). These have no status as official party policy, although they often form the basis for a policy motion which the spokesperson then submits to conference, which if it is approved does then become policy (although the accompanying paper does not).

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