

How to submit a policy motion to Liberal Democrat Federal Conference

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Liberal Democrats are rightly proud that our party's policy is made by our members voting at conference, and any small group of members can submit a motion for consideration for the conference agenda. This guide to doing so has two sections. The first, very short, section sets out the formal practicalities of submitting a motion. The second section offers advice on how to maximise chances of the motion being selected for debate.

It is written by someone who has many years' experience of selecting motions at the Federal Conference Committee (FCC), so is able to set out the way in which (rightly or wrongly) the committee considers how to select motions.

Formal submission process

This is really pretty simple. You need to complete the online form at <https://www.libdems.org.uk/submit-motions> which will also tell you the relevant deadline. For spring conference this is usually in very early January, and in late June for autumn conference.

You will need:

- the text of the motion
- the name and contact details of the drafting contact to discuss it with (you!)
- the names of who will propose it at conference if selected, and who will summate the debate on it
- the names, local parties and membership numbers of 10 or more members who support it being debated at conference. Local parties, regional parties, state parties and bodies with "Specified Associated Organisation" (SAO) status are also entitled to submit motions.

Submitters are strongly advised to submit their motion for drafting advice by the earlier drafting advice deadline, about two weeks before the final deadline.

How to maximise chances of a motion being selected for debate

The Federal Conference Committee considers all motions submitted and selects some for the conference agenda. Many more motions are submitted than there is time for conference to debate: although the time available and the number submitted obviously vary, it is not unusual for 40-50 motions to be submitted for perhaps 8-10 slots.

When it comes to select motions for debate, FCC will want to select motions are on **important issues**, are **well thought-through**, **written appropriately**, and **party members are likely to want to support** (even if they are radical). FCC members do not select on the basis of whether they personally would vote them at conference if they are debated.

Important issues: Conference debating time is limited, and as a political party our objective is to highlight the most important issues which embody our values, will help us to succeed as a political party, and which give the public a good idea of the sorts of things which are important to us.

It will also help if a motion is on an area where we have a clear gap in recent policy, and haven't discussed much at conference recently. Motions which help to do this will do well.

Inevitably this means that less salient issues which may be important to some party members, and

which might well not be controversial within the party, will struggle to be selected for their own motion at conference. Sometimes this will be a marginal decision, and at another conference with more time available or fewer other motions submitted, it may make it. In other cases, they are simply never going to be important enough.

There may however be other routes to getting a point to become policy. Policy papers produced by the Federal Policy committee (FPC) from time to time cover wide areas of policy (e.g. education, health or defence). The working groups writing these always consult extensively on these and suggesting to the working group in a relevant area that they include specific points, can be a good way of getting less high profile and more detailed points to become party policy. It may also be that another motion on a larger area may be selected for debate at a conference, in which case an amendment can be submitted to it.

FCC does also often like issues which, although not philosophically ground-breaking, can support well campaigning in local communities and would appear well in a local Focus leaflet. A good example was a motion calling for 20 mph speed limits in residential areas. The motion linked this problem and the solution to well to Liberal Democrat principles in the usual way for a motion, then leading to a simple and clear demand which was a strong local campaigning point.

Well thought-through: this is probably the way in which it is possible to make the biggest difference to a motion's chances of selection.

Firstly, a motion is probably unlikely to proceed if it is not based on a good basic knowledge of the area it covers. This doesn't necessarily need to be in-depth expert knowledge, but simply saying that a specific area doesn't work well and should be generally re-organised to achieve some particular objective is unlikely to be good enough.

Secondly, you should make sure you know some of the background of party policy in this area. A glance at the most recent General Election manifesto may be the easiest way to get a quick view of this. Comments or speeches by the spokesperson, and any recent motions to conference relevant to it will probably also help. If these are not easy to find, then asking someone involved in the party's policy should give you some pointers. You could ask for guidance on the FPC's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/groups/federalpolicycommittee/>

This is not at all to say that your motion necessarily needs to restate previous party policy or agree with it. Motions which simply re-state existing policy are unlikely to be selected, and conversely those which have new or interesting proposals, which may lead to an interesting debate with amendments and speakers both for and against, are more likely to succeed. But if you do not at least understand why something has been previous party policy, then your own motion is unlikely to proceed.

It is also worth finding out any recent motions on this at conference over the last couple of years or planned for the couple. FCC is unlikely, for example, to select a motion covering the main issues in transport, if the previous conference approved a comprehensive policy paper on transport, or one is coming to the next conference.

Most importantly of all, it is worth being in touch with others in the party involved in this area. They are likely to give very useful advice about why policy is what it is, and the context and history of the party debate on it. Before reaching its decisions on motions, FCC also seeks advice from those most involved in particular policy areas in the party, and it will be helpful if they have some idea of what you are proposing, especially if it is radically new, before it is submitted.

Written appropriately: the motion itself then needs to make its points well. Reading through the agenda for the most recent conference (available at https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference_papers) will give a very good idea of broadly what is expected in a motion, including of length and level of detail. There is no formal required structure for motions, and different structures are used. But a good structure is:

Conference notes: *outlining briefly the current situation in this area, and what the problem is*
Conference believes: *setting out some Liberal Democrat principles relevant to our solution to it*
Conference calls for: *what specific things we would do or change to bring this area more in to line with a Liberal Democrat approach*

The 'calls for' section is the most important to get right. A common reason for motions not being selected is that they contain a lot of criticisms and a detailed description of the problem but are thin, unclear or entirely negative in their conclusions. This needs to contain proposals which are specific, and are practical things which could actually happen. A few substantial points which make for a coherent plan is probably also better than a long list of small changes. You should also consider whether they are going to be very expensive: while it is not a definite bar, conference is unlikely to vote for very large or uncostered commitments, especially outside our core campaigning policy areas.

There are no official word limits, but you would be wise to keep your motion to under 500 words. Some facts and figures may be useful to set the scene, but a motion with nothing else in will be difficult to read. If quotations are included, then they should be kept short. References to reports, White Papers, draft bills etc. should be written on the assumption the audience haven't read them and some basic explanation is needed.

Check that any factual points are accurate - motions that have inaccuracies are less likely to be selected. You should also not rely on a single source, especially if it is a newspaper article or a campaign.

Motions which effectively simply identify a problem but then call for someone, perhaps such as the party's FPC, to develop a solution, will not be selected: the aim is for motions to create policy, not call for someone else to do so!

In general motions should set out information and proposals, rather than make the case for it at length, which FCC will regard as "speech points". FCC sometimes takes speech points out of a motion, but it will be a stronger motion if they are not a significant part of the motion to start with.

I cannot recommend strongly enough making use of the FCC's drafting advice service. FCC and conference do expect motions to be written in a certain way, and it is very depressing that many motions with good positions on good topics continue not to be selected because of unsuitable drafting. Often this is because a drafter feels that they "don't need someone else to tell them how to write". But conference motions do need to be written in an appropriate way and using this service (and then following its advice!) is a simple and easy way of avoiding this problem.

Party members are likely to want to support: FCC will not only select motions which it is absolutely certain will be approved by conference - it is for conference to debate it, consider amendments and vote for or against. But with limited time for debate FCC will not put motions on the agenda unless it believes there is at least some significant support within the party for a proposal. An easy way of starting to demonstrate this is to have the motion submitted by more than 10 members, even just a few more. While it is certainly not binding, it is more difficult for FCC to ignore a motion signed by 400 members than by just 10. But it will also be powerful to discuss it widely around the party, perhaps in online forums, as well as with party members especially

involved in that area, including with representatives such as relevant councillors, MPs, peers and party committee members.

It may be worth also saying here that FCC sees its role very much as acting on behalf of members and conference attendees and allowing conference to debate the high quality proposals which it wants to. It is independent, and although it does consult others in the party including the Leader's office on proposed motions, it takes its independence very seriously. Nothing is more likely to get something selected on the agenda more quickly than it being told that "the Leader does not want this on the agenda"!

So in summary, motions which are well thought-through, realistic and practical proposals, based on a good understanding of both the area concerned, and the background of party policy in that area, with at least some level of support across the party, and are written up into a well-written motion, stand a much better chance of being selected!

What if it is not selected?

Even motions which do all the things above may not be selected. Often this will be simply for reasons of limited conference time for debate. An FCC member will write to the submitters of all motions which were not selected, following the motion selection meeting, and will give brief reasons. It is worth following their advice: if they say that a motion such as that it is frankly unlikely ever to be selected, then this will be true and it may be worth exploring other routes. However often they may suggest re-submitting the motion again for a future conference, perhaps with some specific changes and following discussion with other relevant parties to that issue. Some motions debated at conference have been submitted a number of times before they were finally selected for debate. In some cases, following other routes such as submitting ideas to a future working group or an amendment to a future motion, may be a good route.