

Autumn Conference 2024 - Perth

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Start: 09:30 Welcome

09:35 S1: Spokesperson Questions & Votes

Questions: No questions were put forward.

Votes:

Youth Homelessness Initiatives: Report Accepted

Rural Policy Working Group: Reports Accepted

Additional questions for written answers

Ian Dyck, Argyll, Lochaber & Bute

Brian Whitney

09:40 SC1: Winter Fuel Payments

Conference notes:

1. The SNP Government had been preparing to replace the Winter Fuel Payment with Pension Age Winter Heating Payment but has now proposed replicating the changes recently announced by the UK Government and delay the introducing of the Winter Heating Payment until 2025-26.
2. That the cut to Winter Fuel Payment was announced without prior notice or consultation with affected groups.
3. While some, fortunately, can afford to lose these payments many cannot. Around 900,000 pensioners will be £300 worse off this winter and average bills are set to rise by £149.
4. Winters in Scotland are colder and often longer than in the rest of the UK, with many people in rural Scotland having no access to mains gas, meaning higher fuel costs than in non-rural areas.
5. Liberal Democrat MPs have led the fight against the cut in Winter Fuel Payment in Westminster, standing up for pensioners who will be impacted by these changes this winter.

Conference believes:

1. Restricting the benefit to those who receive Pension Credits (PC) or other social security benefits, will see some pensioners who just fail to qualify for PC worse off than those who do.
2. The UK Government has made a grave mistake in its decision to cut Winter Fuel Payment
3. That while the Scottish Government may not be able to bring in its proposed Winter Heating Payment, it has other levers and powers at its disposal to help pensioners this winter, such as the possibility of a social tariff for gas and electricity.

Conference calls:

1. On the UK Government to reverse their decisions to cut Winter Fuel Payment for 2024-25 and to consult with organisations supporting older people before announcing changes for any future years.
2. On the UK Government to carry out work to ensure that everyone who is eligible for Pension Credit receives it.

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3. On the Scottish Government to explore other options it has at its disposal to help pensioners through this winter.

Amendment

Insert under Conference Believes:

4. That whilst the winter fuel payment must remain universal, it should be declared as a taxable benefit for the purposes on income tax for those in the Higher, Advances and Top rates on income tax in Scotland, and for Higher and Additional income tax payers in the rest of the UK.

Cards:

Mover: Christine Murdoch, Dunbartonshire - called

Summator: Caron Lindsay, West Lothian - called

Move Amd: Daniel Coleman, Dundee - called

Guy Grieve, Edinburgh NE & Leith - called

Penelope Carruthers, Edinburgh South – called

Scott Simpson, East Dunbartonshire - called

Lorna Cammock, Rutherglen - called

Elizabeth Wilson, East Lothian - called

Votes:

Amendment: Carried

Motion as amended: Carried

10:20 S2: Report on Rural Policy Working Group

Announcement by Claire McClaren - Spokesperson for Agriculture, Remote & Rural Communities

As a party we are committed to food production through agriculture, crofting, and marine activities.

We recognise the importance these sectors have in continuing environmental custodianship, securing food security within Scotland and the further UK and their considerable contribution to rural economic activity. We further recognise the readiness of these sectors to adapt to new practices laid out in recent Scottish Government Legislation, such as The Agriculture & Rural Communities Bill 2024 and anticipated Land Reform Bill.

Rural communities are a crucial part of our social and environmental landscape, we further recognise the importance to secure and allow these communities opportunities to grow from the secure foundations generations have built.

Changes to Agriculture and Crofting support have not been clarified by Scottish Government, resulting in current industry uncertainty. This is threatening food security, environmental improvements, and rural economic progress.

It is necessary that the party's Scottish policy reflects the needs these sectors have and create a fit for purpose policy for a Scottish Parliamentary Election. We recognise it is necessary to form a Rural Policy Working Group as part of the Policy Committee.

My speech will further outline more reasoning and details to validate the importance of the above.

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10:25 Mini Motions: Justice and Policing

MM1: Mentorship programs in every Scottish prison

Presented by: Adam Harley

Policy Suggestion:

We recommend the adoption of through-the-gate mentorship programs in every prison in Scotland.

Policy Benefits:

Reduced Reoffending Rates: Through-the-gate mentorship programs provide continuous support for individuals transitioning from prison back into society. This guidance helps address the root causes of criminal behaviour, reducing the likelihood of reoffending and contributing to lower recidivism rates.

Preventing Prison Overcrowding: By lowering reoffending rates, mentorship programs help reduce the number of people cycling back into the prison system. This contributes to alleviating overcrowding in Scottish prisons, which can improve living conditions, safety, and the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts within the prison environment.

Improved Rehabilitation and Reintegration: Mentors offer emotional support, practical advice, and life skills that aid in the rehabilitation process. By helping individuals find housing, employment, and education, these programs facilitate smoother reintegration, enabling former prisoners to lead productive lives.

Cost Savings for the Criminal Justice System: By reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration, mentorship programs decrease the long-term financial burden on the criminal justice system, lowering prison costs and the need for re-incarceration. This creates savings that can be reinvested in other community and rehabilitation services.

MM2: Reform for young offenders

Presented by: Duncan Dunlop

Early intervention is proven to be effective in reducing youth convictions and reducing imprisonment globally. It is the principle of this motion that by addressing youth offending and making reforms we can have the widest impact on justice and offending in adulthood.

We make the following proposals for discussion as part of the mini motion.

We believe there should be a national framework that prioritises diversion from the formal justice system. We want to see more emphasis on directing young people into support from Social services, education and mental health support. In the Netherlands this has reduced offending by tackling root causes of crime.

We also propose raising the criminal age of responsibility. It is currently 12 which still remains below international standards, such as the UN rights of the child. Initially we ask for it to be raised to 14, however we would like the policy committee to consider if this should be 16. This would be in line with what where we understand adult responsibilities begin.

We also suggest that for low-level non-violent crimes a Community Justice referral System this would allow cases to be dismissed in favour of more individual focused approaches such as rehabilitation and community interventions, this would mean that a young person does not have a criminal record and we give them a second chance.

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At the heart of this proposal is a liberal approach to justice around young offenders. We can't always understand the circumstances around young people and criminal acts, what we seek to do is to provide every opportunity to divert young people away from crime and give every opportunity to succeed.

MM3: Mental Health Assessments

Presented by: Isobel Knights

Our party values mental health and making changes to improve Mental Health. We have led the way in call for change across society in better mental health.

We need to reflect this also in calling for changes in our prisons around attitudes to Mental health.

This we believe should start with mandatory mental health assessments for all offenders entering Scotland's criminal justice system. It is reported that many offenders have underlying mental health conditions, by providing early identification we can offer treatment and interventions. This would aim to provide support to reduce reoffending.

We also propose the use of Forensic Psychiatric facilities for those with severe mental health disorders or addiction. This would differ from our current system that is implemented through the prison healthcare systems which often lacks capacity or through the use of high security or medium security psychiatric units, in combination with healthcare wings. These are reactive and focus on when a prisoners mental health deteriorates.

We would suggest consider a model such as Maßregelvollzug that is used in Germany. It provides a therapeutic and rehabilitative model from day 1. It is specifically designed around offenders with mental illness or addiction. The focus is towards long-term recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegrating into society.

MM4: Fixed Speed Camera Installation

Presented by: Lewis Younie

Policy suggestion:

We recommend the devolution of fixed speed camera installation and placement powers to councils so that they may choose to install cameras where communities consider it necessary, while preserving the police's leading role and existing powers.

Policy benefits:

Improved Safety: People should feel safe within their communities, not intimidated by those carelessly driving and using towns and villages as a racetrack.

Empowered Local Authorities: Giving local authorities the power to challenge and reduce anti-social driving through targeted measures recognises their local expertise and interest in improving road safety alongside the overstretched Police Scotland.

Indicative Votes

MM1 Mentorship Programmes - to be taken forward

MM2 Reform for Young Offenders - to be taken forward

- Sep vote re Age of Criminal responsibility - to be taken forward (mixed views)

MM3 Mental Health Assessments - to be taken forward

MM4 Fixed Speed Camera Reform - to be taken forward (mixed views)

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11:25 S3: Report on Youth Homelessness Initiatives

Announcement by Paul McGarry - Spokesperson for Housing and Homelessness

As a party we have shown time and again our commitment to supporting those who are disadvantaged in our society. As a party we have on four occasions brought policy debates on the subject of homelessness. Today I am providing a report on two principle commitments that we are making specifically around youth homelessness. We are reaffirming a policy and also extending an existing policy our party has previously supported.

Reaffirming Our Policy: Tackling Youth Homelessness through access to support and opportunities.

Our party remains committed to tackling youth homelessness. We appreciate, there are many factors that can lead to a young person becoming homeless and we seek to provide policies that break the cycle of homelessness, and ensure that a level playing field is created providing necessary opportunities that create a foundation for a person to move on and have positive outcomes.

We will maintain a focus on mediation and reconciliation with families as a key strategy to prevent young people from experiencing homelessness. Where possible all agencies should support in keeping young people connected to their families where it is safe and possible.

We want to create opportunities for young people experiencing homelessness and provide the chance to move on and achieve the skills and training they need to fulfil their potential. I reaffirm our commitment to having specialist centres throughout Scotland, including the extension of existing services. These will not only provide a safe place to stay but also provide access to advice, training and opportunities. Our goal is to ensure that any young person facing homelessness has the resource and support they need.

Extending Aftercare for Homeless Young People

In addition to our existing commitments, I am today announcing a policy that we have supported in principle for some time but we are now bringing formally to conference.

We will call for the extension of Aftercare. This is a provision currently available to those who are care experienced until they reach 26. This is a provision we had a long history campaigning for before its introduction, and indeed was part of Alex's work before he became an MSP. We propose extending this to include any young person who has experienced homelessness. We recognise the disadvantage experienced by young people in families that are homeless or in temporary accommodation.

All young people who have faced the challenges of homelessness deserve continued support to ensure their long-term stability and success.

Addressing the Growing Need

We cannot overlook the severe disadvantages faced by young people who find themselves in temporary accommodation. Under the current government, the number of young people in such circumstances has regrettably increased. It is our duty as a party to act, providing these young people with better opportunities and striving for a level playing field.

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It is a liberal principle to demand equality and provide an individual with every opportunity to succeed irrespective of their circumstances.

Our commitment to extending support and creating new centres is a step towards ensuring that no young person is left behind. By bringing these policies to conference, we seek to engage our members in this mission and make Scotland a place where every young person has a fair chance to thrive.

Policy Proposals

1. Reaffirmation of Youth Homelessness Mediation and Support
 - o Establish new centres across Scotland to provide supported accommodation, advice, and training for homeless young people.
 - o Focus on mediation and reconciliation with families, ensuring agencies work to keep young people connected with their families where safe and possible.
2. Extension of Aftercare Support
 - o Extend Aftercare, currently available to care-experienced individuals up to age 26, to any young person who has experienced homelessness for longer than 6 months and is assessed to have been disadvantaged.

Recognise the disadvantages faced by young people in temporary accommodation

I ask you to note my report and accept the policy proposals suggested.

11:35 Introducing our new MPS:

Susan Murray MP and Angus MacDonald MP

Hosted by Christine Jardine MP

LUNCH: 12:00-13:00

Adams Restaurant

FRINGES: 13:00-14:00

14:00 SC2: Reducing the harm caused by smoking

Conference notes:

1. The harm caused by tobacco, with over 8,000 smoking-related deaths every year in Scotland, meaning it is the most preventable cause of ill health and premature death.
2. The annual cost to NHS Scotland of treating smoking-related diseases is estimated to be between £300m and £500m each year.
3. The Scottish Government's target is for smoking prevalence among the adult population to be 5% or lower by 2034, and that Public Health Scotland reports that 15% of adults were cigarette smokers in 2022.

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4. The new UK Government will legislate to gradually increase the age of sale for cigarettes, meaning it will be an offence to sell tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009.
5. Agreement has been reached with devolved governments, meaning that a four nations approach will be taken subject to the Scottish Parliament giving its consent.
6. Reports suggest that the Prime Minister is also considering separate tougher rules on outdoor smoking in England.

Conference believes:

1. In John Stuart Mill's harm principle that says individuals should be free to act as they wish unless their actions cause harm to another.
2. State interventions to reduce smoking should be evidence-based.

Conference calls for:

1. The Scottish Liberal Democrat party to A) support OR B) oppose the introduction of an escalating age limit on the purchase of tobacco products.
2. The Scottish Liberal Democrat party to A) support OR B) oppose further restrictions on outdoor smoking rules.
3. The new UK Government to introduce a levy on tobacco company profits to help fund healthcare and smoking cessation.

Cards:

Mover: Adam Harley,, called
Summator: Jenny Marr, called
Ian Dyck, Argyll, Lochaber & Bute, called
Chris Young, Highland, called
Fraser Graham, Edinburgh South, called
Daniel Coleman, Dundee, called
Elise Marten, Edinburgh West, called
Malcolm Wood, Edinburgh West, called
Drummond Begg, Midlothian & Scottish Borders, called
Noah McGarry, East Dunbartonshire, called
Trevor Mason, Aberdeenshire East, called
Fiona Dryburgh, Central Scotland, called
Tim Brett, North East Fife, called

Votes:

Principle 1 – Escalating Age Ban: Option B – Oppose
Principle 2 – Restrictions on outdoor spaces: Option A - Support
Motion as a whole: Carried

14:40 SC3: Addressing the Shortfall of ANS teachers and PSAs

Conference notes that:

1. The Scottish Government's pupil census shows the number of pupils identified with additional support needs (ASN) has doubled over the last decade, rising from 132,000 in 2013 to 259,000 in 2023.

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2. The teacher census shows the number of ASN teachers has decreased by 12% (392 teachers) since 2013, falling to 2,898.
3. The Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee undertook an inquiry into additional support for learning. It's report, published on 14 May 2024, stated that "there was strong evidence to suggest that the majority of ASN pupils are not having their needs met".
4. There have been devastating cuts to education budgets made by some councils, following derisory settlements from the Scottish Government, which are expected to lead to job losses for ASN staffing with harmful long-term impacts upon pupils. Glasgow City Council is cutting 450 classroom teachers over 3 years, with NASUWT and Scotland's Children and Young People's Commissioner among those warning that this will be felt acutely by pupils with disabilities and additional needs.
5. The attainment gap in the pass rate between disabled and non-disabled learners widened at both National 5 and Higher level this year.
6. The National Deaf Children's Society in Scotland report that there has been a steep decline in qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs), and evidence from Edinburgh University indicates that there has been a significant decrease in the numbers of Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTVI) trained in Scotland.

Conference believes that:

1. Every child has a right to a good education, the right to achieve their potential and be supported to have a positive school experience.
2. The statutory requirement to identify and make provision for the extra support and resources some pupils need to achieve their potential must be respected.
3. Cuts to teacher numbers will not only affect ASN pupils but have a wider impact on all pupils. Teaching staff are already over-stretched and violence in schools is increasing. Teachers have minimal non-class contact time and are expected to cater for large classes with wide-ranging needs often without pupil support assistants.
4. The presumption of mainstreaming cannot be delivered without the resources also being in place to support teachers, pupils and families.
5. The distinct needs of children with a sensory impairment (blind, deaf and deafblind children) can only be met by being able to access support from a teacher with additional specialist qualifications.

Conference calls for:

1. The Scottish Government, Education Scotland and COSLA to jointly develop a national strategy to enhance the training, recruitment and retention of ASN teachers and PSAs. This should:
 - a. include consideration of career progression for trained specialist teachers.
 - b. focus on the needs of each individual pupil by establishing a guaranteed minimum level of support staff.
 - c. include a national workforce plan for specialist teachers for children with a sensory impairment, with clear pathways for teachers who want to specialise, and bursaries for funded places for teachers studying to obtain the mandatory qualifications.

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2. The Scottish Government to provide job security for educational staff by ensuring proper, stable working conditions and putting an end to the culture of short-term and zero hours contracts.
3. Local authorities to use the direct funding coming from the Scottish Government for additional teachers and classroom support assistants to enhance ASN provision and reverse the steep decline in qualified teachers of deaf children and young people and qualified teachers of the visually impaired.

Cards:

Mover: Charlotte Olcay, Ettrick Roxburgh & Berwickshire, called

Summator: Amanda Clark, Perth & Kinross

Eugene Clarke, North East Fife, called

Brendan Fox, North East Fife, called

James McMordie, Midlothian & Borders, called

Euan Davidson, Edinburgh West, called

Lorna Cummock, Rutherglen

Malcolm Bruce, Aberdeenshire West, called

Pauline Flannery, Edinburgh South, called

Votes:

Motion: Carried

15:10 Fundraiser

15:15 LEADERS SPEECH:

Alex Cole Hamilton MSP

15:45 EM1: Emergency Motion: Employers' National Insurance hikes

Mover: Christine Jardine MP

Conference Notes:

- That the UK Government have not excluded GP practices or private and third sector social care providers from the recent hike in Employers National Insurance.
- That estimates from the Institute of General Practice show that the average GP Surgery could face £20,000 in additional costs due to the changes to national insurance, an equivalent of 357 appointments per surgery.
- That this is on top of a 62% reduction in transactions allowance by the Scottish Government since 2022-23.

Conference believes that these additional tax burdens on health and social care providers will add an unacceptable, additional burden to a system already at breaking point.

Conference therefore calls on the UK Government to exempt all health and social care providers including GP surgeries and social care companies from the hike in Employers National Insurance.

Cards:

Mover: Christine Jardine MP, Edinburgh West, called

Summator:

Jacqui Bell, East Lothian, called

Jeff Goodhall, Aberdeenshire East

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Votes:

Carried Nem Con.

16:10 SC4: Gender Balance in our Candidate Selections for the next Scottish Parliament Elections

Conference notes:

1. That of the 31 Liberal Democrat MSPs elected to the Scottish Parliament since its inception, only four of them have been women.
2. All of the Lib Dem MSPs elected in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2016 were men, while of those elected in 2021, only one of the four elected is a woman.
3. Successive opinion polling and the results of the 2024 General Election suggest the party could dramatically increase its representation at the next Scottish Parliamentary elections.
4. The efforts being undertaken by the party leadership and key stakeholders to encourage more women to stand for the Scottish Liberal Democrats at all levels
5. The party has successfully improved the representation of women among our elected members in the past through gender balance mechanisms in both Westminster and the European Parliament.
6. That conference previously agreed to use a system of gender balanced lists for the 2021 Scottish Parliament election which would have seen an additional four women MSPs elected had our vote share increased marginally.
7. Those mechanisms employed by the party for the selection of Holyrood candidates have now timed out and the party has no current mechanisms to achieve a more balanced representation of women in our next Scottish Parliamentary group.
8. Section 104 of the Equality Act 2010 allows the party to introduce gender balance mechanisms in the selection arrangements for candidates in certain circumstances. The circumstances are:-
 - (a) that the arrangements apply to a relevant election. Relevant elections include Scottish Parliamentary elections.
 - (b) the purpose of the arrangements is to reduce inequality in the party's representation in the body concerned. Inequality in the context of gender balance means between the current number of male and female MSPs.
 - (c) the arrangements are a proportionate means of achieving that purpose.

Conference believes:

1. That given the possibility of a significant increase in our MSP group, it is imperative to do all we can to improve the gender balance of that group through encouragement, training and the introduction of a gender balance mechanism for the next Scottish Parliament Election.

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2. As there is currently a 3:1 male to female ratio, the Party can put in place selection arrangements intended to reduce that inequality as afforded under the terms of the Equality Act 2010.

3. That selection arrangements are an appropriate and necessary means of reducing gender inequality among Liberal Democrat MSPs.

Conference resolves:

1. To alter the arrangements for the selection of candidates for the regional lists so that the four regions closest to returning a Liberal Democrat MSP based on the 2021 election results see the highest placed woman in that contest ranked at number 1 on that list. This would apply to the following four regional lists:

- North East Scotland
 - Highlands and Islands
 - Mid Scotland and Fife
 - Lothian
2. The remaining four lists would be selected under normal arrangements with no changes.
3. This arrangement would be disapplied following the conclusion of the next Scottish Parliament election.
4. Constituency selections will proceed based on current arrangements.

Cards:

Mover: Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP, Edinburgh West, called

Summator: Christine Jardine MP, Edinburgh West, called

David Evans, Aberdeenshire East, called

Lauren Buchanan-Quigley, Dunfermline Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath, called

David Adamson, Midlothian & Scottish Borders, called

Jill Reilly, North East Fife, called

Jenny Marr, Midlothian Tweeddale & Lauderdale, called

Rosemary Bruce, Aberdeenshire West, called

Daniel Coleman, Dundee, withdrawn

Caron Lindsay, West Lothian, called

Marion Ewenson, Aberdeenshire East, called

Outi Bourke, Dundee, called

Flora Sharp, Edinburgh West, Not called

Mell Sullivan, Aberdeen City South, called

Yi-pei Chou, Aberdeenshire West, called

Trevor Mason, Aberdeenshire East, called

Elizabeth Riches, North East Fife, not called

Susan Murray, East Dunbartonshire, called

Artie Khovanov, Edinburgh South, called

Ross Carruthers, Perth, Not called

Christine Murdoch, Dumbarton, Not called

Tom Leatherland, Dunfermline & West Fife, Not called

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Votes:

Motion: Count required. For: 66 Against: 52. Motion is Carried