

ROAD TO
**PARTY
CONFERENCE**

CONSERVATIVES, LABOUR, LIBERAL DEMOCRATS & SNP

23 SEPTEMBER - 17 OCTOBER 2023



BUILDING TO THE GENERAL ELECTION

WHAT ARE PARTY CONFERENCES?

Every autumn, the UK's political parties gather at their party conferences, determined to drive the news agenda for the few days they have the media spotlight on them.

Over several intense and busy days - often dominated by policy or personality clashes - party leaders try their hardest to grab the public's attention and set out a clear political vision.

Conference season is a central part of the political calendar, with all parliamentary business suspended while the parties discuss policy, raise crucial revenue, connect with their membership and court positive media coverage.

MPs, councillors, candidates and party members are far from the only ones in attendance. Businesses, trade bodies, interest groups, NGOs and the media all cram together to hear new policy announcements and speculate over the parties' political fortunes, as well as working the room at fringe events and receptions.

WHY DOES THIS CONFERENCE SEASON MATTER?

With the next general election expected to take place in the autumn of 2024, all UK political parties are already entering campaign mode, with focus turning to how to hold onto vulnerable seats and snatch key targets from other parties.

For the **Conservatives** the objective will be on convincing the public (and themselves) that there is still a narrow path to staying in power. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has re-established a sense of calm, coupled with relatively strong personal poll ratings, but tensions still simmer among Conservative MPs.

His first address to members as party leader will need to show he can take the fight to Labour and present a broader vision than he has so far, countering criticism that he is overseeing the managed decline of the party and instead setting up an ambitious set of manifesto commitments next year. A disciplined conference that presents a united front and strong sense of purpose to a sceptical public is an essential first step.

For **Labour**, conference presents an opportunity to consolidate their status as clear frontrunners as Sir Keir Starmer faces off against his third different Conservative leader in three conference seasons.

His five 'missions' for an incoming Labour government have guided the party's messaging this year, but have not yet cut through with the public. With Labour conference unusually following Conservative conference this year rather than preceding it, Starmer has a crucial opportunity to rebut the Conservatives' narrative and present Labour as a government-in-waiting.

Senior figures at the heart of the party are piecing together a manifesto which, despite the soothing, pro-business rhetoric, will represent a striking shift in the way the economy is run and include a mixture of priorities designed to appeal to a broad coalition of voters.

As the polls have slightly narrowed in recent months, the **Liberal Democrats** have become interesting again, with the suggestion that they could once again hold the balance of power if Labour or the Conservatives fail to secure an outright majority.

Their conference in Bournemouth will offer signs of what concessions - on policy and on electoral reform - the party could demand from Labour and showcase its plan for breaking down the Conservative blue wall in the home counties and the south.

Rounding off conference season, the **Scottish National Party** must find their footing again after a damaging year that has seen the departure of Nicola Sturgeon, a police investigation into party finances, and disillusionment among members as the prospects of a new independence referendum fades.

New leader Humza Yousaf has work to do to reassure members that the party can ride out the current storm and face down the challenge of a resurgent Scottish Labour Party.





BOURNEMOUTH

► **LIBERAL DEMOCRATS**

Saturday 23 – Tuesday 26 September 2023



MANCHESTER

► **CONSERVATIVES**

Sunday 1 – Wednesday 4 October 2023



LIVERPOOL

► **LABOUR**

Sunday 8 – Wednesday 11 October 2023



ABERDEEN

► **SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY**

Sunday 15 – Tuesday 17 October 2023

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES?

Labour is riding high in the polls, with increasing belief among its supporters that it stands on the brink of a return to government after thirteen years in the wilderness. Business is taking the party seriously once again, with more attention on Labour as delegate search for clues of what will be in the party's election manifesto

The **Conservatives** conference will also mark the start of the party's pivot towards the election, after a year focused on slow and steady delivery of Sunak's five priorities. Central to his case for another term will be his focus on the economy and a fall in inflation. This will form the backbone of the Conservative pitch to the country, alongside commitments to cut NHS waiting lists and reduce cross-channel migration from small boats.

Labour has argued over recent months that the Conservatives have run out of ideas. Labour has an outline programme for government, built around its five missions on growth, green energy, health, crime and education. They will play heavily on the centrepiece commitment to transform the UK into a "clean energy superpower" and reach zero carbon electricity by 2030, five years ahead of current government's targets. At the heart of Labour's approach across all five missions is "a new partnership" between business and a more active state.

This may not be the last party conference before the general election, but it will be the one that fires the starting gun for the long campaign and gives an idea of what the parties' answer will be to the key question: *"Why us?"*



CONSERVATIVES AIM TO KEEP THE FAITH

Conservative members will have one question on their minds when they meet in Manchester: is it all over, or is there still time?

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak must make his party faithful - and the country - believe the Conservatives are still the party best placed to tackle the challenges facing the UK.

He will point to the progress made in repairing the damage caused by the infighting of 2022, with polls showing he has slightly narrowed the gap to Labour and his personal poll rating superior in recent head-to-heads against Sir Keir Starmer.

But the task ahead is still immense. While Sunak has steadied the ship and avoided challenges to his own leadership, he has work to do to convince his members that he can turn from competent chief executive to election winner.

The local election results in May were a damaging blow to morale. The party lost over 1,000 councillors, surpassing its worst estimates, with many blaming the turmoil caused by the party at Westminster for turning voters against them. With grassroots Conservatives attending conference in force, and the Conservative Democratic Organisation - seen as a hostile to Sunak - likely to host events in parallel to the main conference, the PM faces a significant test to his message of unity.

Sunak knows he can't match the tub-thumping showmanship of Boris Johnson, who saw his party conference speeches as an extended rally to send members away feeling good.

But he will need to deliver something different - both personally and in policy terms - to show the members in the hall and the public at home, that he has a vision for what the first full term of a Sunak government would look like.

HOW IT WORKS

The formal agenda will be released in September, but the Prime Minister will close conference with his keynote speech at 12pm on Wednesday 4 October.

Unlike Labour and the Lib Dems, Conservative members have no votes on party policy. This avoids wranglings over the wording of motions, but does make for less drama and spectacle. As a result, the main conference hall is often sparsely attended other than for the set piece speeches from the Chancellor and Prime Minister.

And while there will be policy announcements from the main stage that the party will hope lead the news agenda, the carefully planned narrative can quickly fall apart as journalists look elsewhere for mischief.

The main place to look is on the fringes, through a sprawling programme of panel events, speeches and receptions. This is where ambitious backbenchers, disgruntled former ministers or off-message current ministers make news - whether deliberately or accidentally.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

Business Day will be Monday 2 October, with the chance to hear from Conservative ministers, ask questions and network with business representatives. Packages are available through the party website and include attendance at the Chancellor's keynote speech and other events.



LABOUR'S CHANCE TO SHOW IT MEANS BUSINESS

For Labour, party conference will be all about harnessing its moment in the media spotlight. They will be keen to use the "shop window" display to voters by demonstrating a united front around tightly managed messages designed to show that Labour is ready for government.

With Sir Keir Starmer's speech wrapping up conference season, the Labour leader will have the chance to respond to the Conservatives, giving him the last word as he seeks to banish any doubts that he is a Prime Minister in waiting.

HOW IT WORKS

Conference for the Labour Party plays a very different role compared to the Conservatives. Bringing together the different arms of the labour movement, including trade unions, elected officials and grassroots members, conference has traditionally served a vital role in shaping the party's policy agenda.

Under Starmer's leadership, however, there has been a centralisation of this policymaking process. Many of the key decisions and policy directions are set by a tight-knit group around the Leader of the Opposition's Office (LOTO) and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves, with the support of the now majority Starmer-backing National Executive Committee (NEC).

We can therefore expect to see conference motions used apply pressure on the leadership from the left of the party on issues such as public ownership, tuition fees, and support for trade unions, with Starmer facing criticism for abandoning pledges made during his successful leadership campaign. However, debates will be managed to allow the leadership to present their policy priorities alongside the conference motions. Expect high profile speeches from shadow cabinet ministers to promote Starmer's five key missions on growth, green energy, health, crime and education.

Starmer's first in-person speech at conference in 2021 was marred by some heckles from activists on the floor. But with the party having moved on and many of the internal disputes settled, expect to see much of the opposition

to his leadership contained to the left fringe at The World Transformed, the parallel event taking place elsewhere in Liverpool.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

For businesses wishing to attend, there are plenty of opportunities to rub shoulders with Labour decisionmakers at every level. This includes a range of fringe events, drinks receptions and panel discussions across the course of conference.

There are also specific days for business engagement - "SME Sunday" on Sunday 8 October and Business Day on Monday 9 October. Both offer additional opportunities, from sponsorship of dinners and receptions to panel discussions with senior members of the shadow cabinet.

With the stakes higher than ever, shadow ministers will be under strict instructions to stick to their scripts and avoid off the cuff policy remarks. The party's group of Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs) will be similarly under a tight guard from the party to avoid any unwanted headlines that distract from the government-in-waiting narrative. So while the party remains keen to hear directly from business, don't expect conversations to veer too far from the party line.



LIBERAL DEMOCRATS EYE THE BLUE WALL - AND FUTURE INFLUENCE

Following their success at the May local elections, the Liberal Democrats will meet in Bournemouth with a spring in their step as they prepare to draw up the party's manifesto.

In recent years, media coverage and business engagement at the Lib Dem conference has waned, with the party failing to generate cut through beyond its core membership. But with the possibility of a hung parliament at the general election and the Lib Dems once again holding the balance of power, interest in their conference and policy development is higher than for many years.

Party leader Sir Ed Davey - a veteran of the 2010 - 2015 coalition government - will seek to capitalise on the media spotlight and coalition chatter to set out the party's stall to the electorate. The tone at conference will be more hopeful than in previous years, specifically around potential success across target seats.

While unable to attract the same level of business interest as the Conservatives and Labour conferences, the Lib Dems will use their conference to focus on electioneering. Specifically, pivoting from their position of a "something for everyone party" to instead targeting affluent voters in Conservative-held seats located in the south of England: the so-called blue wall.

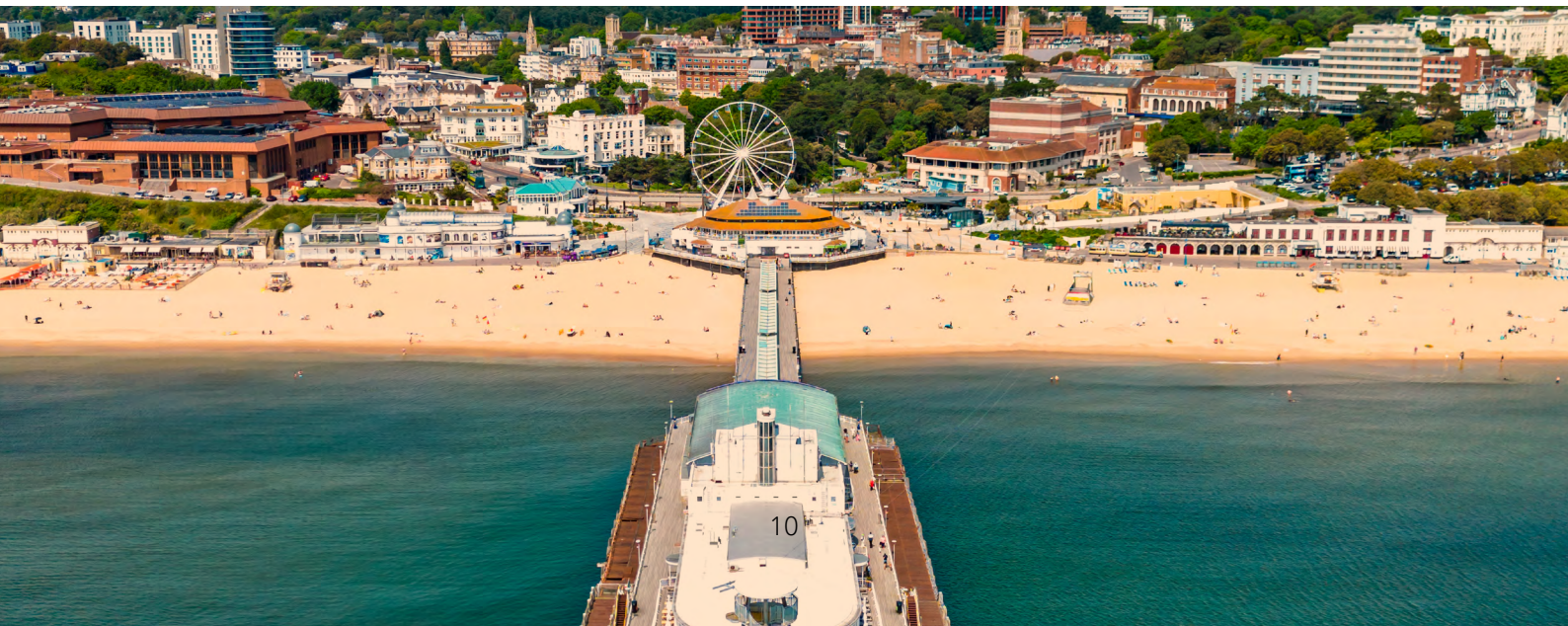
The Lib Dems will need more than the "none of the above" strategy which often helps them squeeze out the two main parties at local elections, as they look to amplify their appeal to disaffected Conservative voters, targeting "Surrey shufflers" (young families who moved to the home countries following the pandemic).

Party conference is a key marker for Davey and the Lib Dems to clearly articulate what they stand for and who they represent. But it is also likely to be pored over for signs of what conditions the Lib Dems will insist on should they find themselves holding the balance of power once more next year.

HOW IT WORKS

Organised by the Federal Conference Committee, their biannual conferences are the main decision-making body of the party. Policy is debated and voted on by all party members attending the conference. Approximately half of the conference is given over to policy motions.

For businesses hoping to engage on policy and the manifesto, it is important to be aware that the Federal Policy Committee has responsibility for preparing the party's manifesto, in consultation with MPs.



SNP LOOKS TO FIGHT ON AFTER BRUISING BATTLES

The SNP will meet in Aberdeen again this year for their conference. This follows their independence convention in Dundee (24 June), which had been postponed from March due to the SNP leadership race.

Off the back of discussions on how to hold a legally binding independence referendum, the SNP will use their October conference as a platform to kick off the 'next phase' of their independence movement and to appeal to the membership that has receded recently.

This will be only the second time SNP members have come together since the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon, a bitter leadership election and subsequent election of Humza Yousaf, and the ongoing scandal over party finances.

There are significant divisions in the party that need to be healed. This will see their conference focus on two things: coming together as a party and defining the strategic direction to safeguard seats and move closer to independence after so many false starts in recent years.

The rebranding effort under the banner of Yousaf needs to show ambition and re-instate the confidence among members that has been knocked in recent months. A lot of work needs to be done to rebuild trust in a party under whose leadership NHS waiting lists have increased

and the promise to eradicate the education gap between Scotland's poorest and richest children has not been met. The failure to establish a deposit return scheme – amid recriminations between the SNP's coalition partners the Scottish Greens and the UK Government – has added to a feeling that competence and grip have slipped under Yousaf's leadership.

Critics of the SNP paint this as part of a broader record of failures on public services over 16 years in government – a narrative that increasingly tempts voters towards Scottish Labour, whose resurgence is essential to delivering a majority in next year's general election.

HOW IT WORKS

Like Labour and the Lib Dems, for the SNP their conference is the ultimate decision-making body. The main events at conference are the policy debates, where delegates vote on resolutions which, if accepted, becomes SNP policy and can be taken forward in government or championed at Westminster.

The big-ticket item – another independence referendum – has already been debated. So expect to see the party at conference set out their latest road map to achieving this goal and the timeframe.



KEY DATES ON THE ROAD TO PARTY CONFERENCES

IN THE RUN UP TO PARTY CONFERENCE SEASON, HERE ARE SOME KEY DATES:

JUNE

- ▶ If you are planning on hosting a fringe event move quickly, with a limited number of places available.
- ▶ Buy conference tickets at the early bird discount rate if possible, given the prices steadily increase in the run up to the autumn.
- ▶ Book your accommodation early, especially for Labour given the expected high turnout.

JULY

- ▶ Deadline for booking adverts in the Labour fringe guide is 10 July.
- ▶ Deadline for submitting copy to the Lib Dem fringe guide is 14 July.
- ▶ Deadline for purchasing a Labour Party Conference ticket as a commercial visitor is 21 July.
- ▶ Receptions tend to be announced from July onwards. Most of these are usually ticketed, so you'll need to book in advance, such as for the Labour Business reception and the Labour Party Irish Society, which tend to be popular.

AUGUST

- ▶ Get those train tickets booked.

SEPTEMBER

- ▶ **Liberal Democrat Party Conference: Saturday 23 to Tuesday 26 September.**
- ▶ Conservative fringe guide published at the start of September.
- ▶ Tell your network that you'll be at party conference and get those coffee meetings arranged.
- ▶ Finalise your itinerary.

OCTOBER

- ▶ **Conservative Party Conference: Sunday 1 October to Wednesday 4 October.**
- ▶ **Labour Party Conference: Sunday 8 October to Wednesday 11 October.**
- ▶ **SEC Newgate team will be hosting dinners at Conservative and Labour Conferences, including political speakers.**

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FIVE TIPS TO MAKE THE MOST OF CONFERENCE

1 DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Before arriving at conference, make sure to read the fringe guide, tell your network you are attending and get a schedule in place. Party conferences are full of varied and interesting events, so don't miss out.

4 GET ON THE LIST

There are a range of evening parties and receptions that are the talk of the conference. We may be biased but the SEC Newgate dinners with MPs, advisers and think tankers are the place to be.

2 NETWORK

More than likely you will run into MPs, advisers, councillors and journalists in a hotel lobby, bar, or coffee shop. So be prepared to make your pitch at a moment's notice.

5 PACE YOURSELF

More likely than not, you'll feel like you'll need a few days to recover post-conference. It's a marathon not a sprint, with early starts and late finishes - make sure you look after yourself.

3 MAIN SPEECHES

If you want to hear the main speeches from the leader of the party, make sure you queue early to get into the main hall.

SUPPORTING YOU AT CONFERENCE

SEC Newgate's public affairs team is supporting clients in the lead up to party conference, developing bespoke conference programmes including the following elements:

1

ADVOCACY PROGRAMMES

Public affairs engagement and strategic advice in the run up to and during party conferences, including on how to best engage with political stakeholders and conference attendees on key business messages to achieve cut through.



2

DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Digital campaigns that could include audience targeting, support running digital campaigns, or development of thought leadership.



3 MEDIA RELATIONS

Media and external communications strategy and delivery, including messaging development; content creation; thought leadership and media and stakeholder relations to position organisations and brands effectively at party conferences.



4 EVENT MANAGEMENT

Support on the development of fringe events, dinners, receptions and 1-2-1 meetings at the conferences, including all supporting communications, content production and media relations.



5 BRAND PROTECTION

Reputational management and advice around conference attendance, which brings heightened scrutiny of business engagement and potential interactions with pressure groups.



SEC NEWGATE'S ADVOCACY TEAM

Year on year, the SEC Newgate team successfully delivers party conference engagement programmes for clients. Our team of experts have significant experience attending all party conferences.



ABOUT SEC NEWGATE

SEC Newgate's public affairs team draws on cross-party political experience to shape policy and deliver campaigns that reach the right people, change perceptions and achieve results.

In a decade defined by geo-political and domestic challenges, the ability to build strong relationships with the decisionmakers formulating policy and the legislative agenda has never been more important.

We work across a range of highly regulated sectors to deliver strategic advice and policy analysis, and knowhow to navigate the shifting political landscape.

Our engagement work embraces all tiers of government from Whitehall to Town Hall, and whether your business is focused on Members of Parliament, councillors or both, we can support you with a programme of engagement and events.

With direct experience across Whitehall, Westminster, the devolved administrations and local government, SEC Newgate's public affairs team helps shape and achieve policy change. We provide political advisory and strategic counsel to the most recognised UK and international businesses, helping them navigate the challenging political, regulatory and media landscape.

Ranked 6th

PR Week Top 150

Public Affairs
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PR Agency of the Year

Headlinemoney
Awards 2023

Shortlisted

ESG Agency of the Year

PR Moment Awards 2022

Shortlisted

Best Campaign in Wales

PRCA Public Affairs
Awards 2022

Shortlisted

Communications Agency of the Year

UK Business Green
Awards 2023

Shortlisted

Best

Integrated Agency for
Corporate and Public Affairs

PR Week CCPA
Awards 2023

Shortlisted

Consultancy of the Year

PRCA Public Affairs
Awards 2022

Shortlisted

Best Trade Campaign

PRCA Public Affairs
Awards 2022

Shortlisted



If you have any questions about party conferences, or your business is attending and would benefit from our help, please contact: partyconference@secnewgate.co.uk