

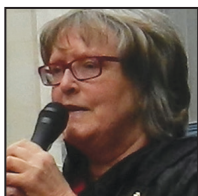
Women's Conference 2023

Swimming in Treacle

Jean Crocker describes the obstacles being battled by members of Women's Conference CAC and NWC

Hoping to return to the vibrant 2019 stand-alone event

In the mid-2010s Women's Conference was much reduced from that in the 1980s, and included 'showcased' speeches. CLP representatives on the new Women's Conference Arrangements Committee (Women's CAC) worked hard for a democratic conference, for example for motions to be voted on in 2018. It often seemed like wading in treacle, but the 2019 two-day stand-alone event in Telford was vibrant, diverse and well-attended; women spoke passionately from their own experience, and there was a constant buzz of networking. We were online during the pandemic, so for 2023 we hoped for a return to the Telford experience, but this time it has felt like actually swimming in treacle.



Battling a series of difficulties

Women's CAC and National Women's Committee (NWC) argued for a stand-alone event, but it is back to one day

before Labour Conference. With considerable staff turnover and no dedicated National Women's Officer, there were no meetings at first. The CLP representatives discussed priorities, which Women's CAC later agreed (see Box 1). But little has fed into Conference planning, although we do have the Friday welcome reception, and we hope other early positive signs will still bear fruit.

NWC "oversee the overall direction of Annual Labour Party Women's Conference", so we asked for a meeting before theirs in June, but were told it wasn't needed because NWC 'does not have a formal role in conference planning' for Women's CAC to feed into CLP representatives on the two committees are meeting informally. Of the six Grassroots women elected to NWC in 2021, only two remain. It is most important that delegates to Women's Conference this year vote for the six Centre Left Grassroots candidates to the NWC (see Box 2). NWC need more meetings (currently 4 x 2 hours per year) and resources.

Women's CAC were not consulted on the timetable of events leading up to Conference, as should happen by rule. As a consequence, compositing is online soon after the priorities ballot, like last year, when many delegates could not attend at short notice because of work or childcare. We tried to get it changed, but could only get the assurance that compositing would

be in the evening. Also, Women's CAC have little time to read the motions, which come in Thursday, with our meeting on Friday. Some of us are preparing for no sleep on Thursday night! We have asked to receive motions that come in early. The office proposes rulings, which can be very useful, but it is the duty of elected members to read the motions themselves and make considered, fair decisions.

On a positive note, we said it was hard to find the Conference on the website, and it is now immediately visible!

Videos to help navigate Conference

In line with our election statements, the CLP representatives decided to produce videos, for example on writing motions which don't fall foul of the rules, and on what a delegate does, to help women avoid pitfalls and enjoy participating. Union colleagues have joined us, we have held additional informal meetings, and have had good staff support. To ensure that we ourselves are fully informed, we had a useful meeting with the Chair of Labour Conference CAC, learning for example that there are no unstated conventions when it comes to motions being in order (for tips on the latter, see Box 3). We also agreed wording for the delegate pack to emphasise that it is delegates who decide the final wording of composites.

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Women must feel welcome

When women members feel we and our views are welcome, it strengthens enthusiasm for election campaigning. A return to a well-resourced two-day stand-alone grassroots Women's Conference is key to this.

Jean Crocker is Vice-Chair, Women's CAC, writing in a personal capacity.

Box 1. Women's Conference 2023

What we have argued for

A two-day stand-alone Conference, and when refused:

- Six debates on the Saturday (Women's CAC decides the number of debates by rule);
- Round table discussion sessions on Friday pm;
- Friday reception;
- Networking breakfast on Saturday;
- Maximum of two platform speakers (plus one at reception and one at breakfast);
- Stalls (not just setting up for Sunday).

Also:

- Working with Kathy Bole of Disability Labour to ensure good access;
- More notice of compositing meetings at times women can attend;
- An invitation to CLPs to put on fringe meetings for free;
- Videos to help navigate conference processes.

Box 2. Women's Conference
Elections 2023

**Vote for the 6 CLGA
candidates for the
National Women's
Committee**

- Zoe Allan
- Claudia Bowes
- Chloe Hopkins
- Juliet Miller
- Helen Smith
- Cecile Wright

Box 3. Guidance for future Women's Conference

**Keeping motions to Women's Conference 'in
order'**

- No more than 250 words. All words are counted, including notes, references etc (but not the motion title).
- Of relevance to women: For the best chance, include wording in the body of the motion, even if brief, to indicate why it's relevant to women.
- One issue only: Keep the actions that you call for within one policy area, e.g. women's rights at work, women's health.
- A policy motion, not an organisational matter: On what the policy of the Labour Party should be, i.e. something that would fit in a Labour manifesto, *not* on how the Party is internally organised, relations between parts of the Labour Party, etc.