

Making the most of party conference season

Every autumn, the Westminster village decamps to cities across the UK for the annual political party conference season. For businesses, investors, and industry groups, this is more than a diary fixture. It is a chance to engage with policymakers, take the political temperature, and understand the direction of travel for government and opposition parties alike. This year, there is also a new player on the circuit – Reform – adding another diary entry to an already crowded calendar.

At GK Strategy, we advise clients on how to cut through the noise and make the most of this period in the political year. As well as sharing the expertise from across the GK team – many of whom are veterans of the conference circuit – we've drawn on the experience of our Strategic Advisers, all former government ministers, to look at the potential pitfalls and opportunities that business leaders and government relations teams should bear in mind if they want to make the most of conference.

Why it matters

While this year's conferences may not have the same political significance as last year, following as they did from the general election and a change of government in July 2024, they remain absolutely crucial to both the government and opposition parties in (re)setting their narratives after a difficult and tumultuous 12 months. The government in particular will want to make the most of the opportunity, not least to offer the Chancellor the opportunity to roll the pitch before delivering what is expected to be a very challenging Budget in November.

Reform enters conference season properly for the first time, seeking to consolidate the attention the party has attracted over the summer, and to position the party as the de facto opposition.

For businesses party conferences can be a good way to get exposure to decision makers, and the influencers around them. But they can also be difficult to navigate, and ultimately frustrating if there's no clear plan for what the business wants to get out of them. But the upsides of doing party conference well are clear. The government continues to be in listening mode, looking to business to support its policymaking after a rocky start and some unforced

errors. As it continues to put the flesh on the bones of some of its more ambitious policy agendas, business input and expertise will be indispensable to making this a success. For the parties in opposition, businesses can afford to play a slightly longer game. Reform will want to continue to try to position itself as a professional political operation, moving away from being a single issue party to one that has a broader and more nuanced policy platform. To do that successfully the party will need to look to experts in the business and investor community. Meanwhile, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats face the challenge of cutting through in a noisy political environment and crafting policy platforms that capture the political mood and speak to the issues that voters care about. Both will be looking to business for new campaigns and issues to champion.

Below are a few tips to help you make the most of the next few weeks, as Westminster decamps to Birmingham (Reform, 5-6 September), Bournemouth (Lib Dems, 20-23 September), Liverpool (Labour, 28 September – 1 October) and Manchester (Conservatives, 5-8 October).

1. Plan as much as you can in advance

Make sure you spend some time pre-conference planning your schedule. Look at the fringe guides, understand where and when key events are happening, and where any key ministers are likely to be, if you want to try to meet them.

Phil Hope notes: *"The fringe event diary is really helpful in planning which events to attend and using time well. Although this will change so use the online version for the latest info and confirm which events will have ministers speaking."*

Schedule meetings in advance where you can, and make sure you have somewhere to meet – a noisy conference bar or coffee area isn't ideal. Most of the conference venues have dedicated lounges or meeting spaces, but it's worth bagging a space early if possible. But be aware that conference diaries can shift significantly, so don't be frustrated if meetings are cancelled or rearranged – it may be easier (and more productive) to meet policy makers away from the conference bubble (see no. 3).

Rob Halfon says: *"The new lounges that have sprung up in recent years are suitable for meeting people. 'Drive-bys' near the hotel bar are good, but noise and chatter make conversation tricky. The same goes for receptions."*

2. Be clear on your objectives

Conferences are busy, fast-paced, and often unpredictable. Success depends on entering with a clear plan but also with the agility to adapt to the issues of the day. Not every business will have the same reasons for being at conference. Some will want to influence policy, others will want to build on existing relationships with policymakers. Some will be there to raise the

profile of their business or campaign, and others will be there to gather intelligence or gauge the political mood. It's easy to spend a lot of time doing not a lot at conference, so go with a clear plan that's aligned with your wider business objectives.

As former Labour Minister Phil Hope advises, *"be very clear how what you are suggesting will achieve the government's objectives, and not just your own."*

3. Be cautious (and realistic) about meetings

Set-piece breakfasts and dinners can be worthwhile, but diary pressures mean one-to-one meetings are often rushed, or worse, moved and cancelled. Former Education Minister Rob Halfon said *"one-on-one business meetings are a waste of time, given that they can take place in Westminster. They are usually rushed, and there is a lot of box-ticking on both sides."* Other advisers agreed they are better suited other times of year when MPs are more focused and less distracted. If meetings are important, target backbenchers or committee members who may have more time. MPs are also increasingly using conference season to spend time in their constituencies and so drawing out constituency links will attract their attention.

As one of GK's strategic advisers noted: *"As to meetings for MPs, I always found it fascinating when I did go in the past how everyone and his dog was absolutely desperate to meet during three squeezed days in Bournemouth, Blackpool, Birmingham or Manchester. It seemed curious to me when there were 51 other weeks each year when I had much more time [for meetings]"*.

4. Craft a really sharp elevator pitch

If you are able to get a few minutes with a target MP, minister or adviser, make the most of the time. Their conference diaries will be packed, and they'll be speaking to hundreds of people each day. If there's a single 'ask' you want them to take away from the conversation, make it as memorable as possible. Be clear, be concise, and remember to make it relevant to the party's priorities. Phil Hope notes: *"If you get time with a Minister recognise that they won't have much time before they move onto the next event so be prepared and keep any points short in number and length; be very clear how what you are suggesting should be done will achieve the government's objectives and not just your own; be positive and supportive (unless you deliberately want to annoy them which would be crazy); and leave them or their minder (could be their PPS or SPAD) with a note of the proposal and contact details."*

5. Make the most of fringes

Fringe events are often the best way to gauge the political mood and test the thinking of backbenchers driving the debate on complex policy issues. In the view of our advisers, asking a concise, well-prepared question from the floor – and saying who you are (!) – is far more effective than trying to corner a minister afterwards *"Don't hang about afterwards to collar the Minister as it will irritate them and they'll almost certainly be late for their next appointment."* While others rush to the front, look for the SPADs and bag carriers and secure a more

meaningful conversation later in Westminster. As Steve Brine notes, *"Find their SPAD and pass them your card. Trust me it will be obvious who's the SPAD."*

6. Build relationships with staffers

Advisers and staffers are often more accessible – and sometimes more influential – than frontbenchers. A well-judged conversation at a reception or in the hotel bar can open doors to more substantive engagement later. They are off the clock from minding their minister, they are more receptive and open to speak over a casual drink and help deepen the relationship. David Laws notes: *"Advisers are around and are often easier to see [than ministers]. They may in some cases be highly influential."*

7. Look after yourself

It is easy to underestimate the toll of conference season. Long days, late nights, and travel between cities quickly add up. Building in time for reflection and recovery – and remembering to eat and rehydrate – will keep you sharp and effective throughout. It's worth considering whether you need to go for the whole conference, or whether you can just attend for a day. Where there is a dedicated 'business day' at conference these are usually well-advertised, and if used well can be just as effective as a longer stint.

8. Follow up effectively

Once conference season is over, take the time to regroup, assess and follow-up on the conversations you had at conference. Reference when and where you met, reiterate your key messages, 'asks' and set out your reasoning for a follow-up meeting. If you've promised to share additional details, data or case studies, now is your opportunity to do so.

GK's perspective

The format and function of party conferences may have evolved over the years, but they remain important arenas for taking the political temperature and building relationships. The key is to approach them strategically: know who you want to reach, tailor your pitch to their priorities, and use each interaction, however brief, to open the door to more meaningful engagement afterwards.