

## Accessibility to the Conference

<b>Contact Name and Details</b>	Mr David S Walton, Chair of the Conference Business Committee
<b>Status of Paper</b>	Final
<b>Resolutions</b>	See end of paper.

### Background

Further to decisions of the Conference in 2015 (specifically notice of motion 2015/108), the Council established a working party to bring recommendations to address issues of accessibility to the Conference. The working party was asked to include within its remit questions not just about logistical arrangements, but to consider how people can engage with the Conference, regardless of their experience, ability or confidence.

The Council considered the working party's 16 recommendations at its meeting in April 2017 and concluded that these recommendations needed to be considered in detail by the Conference Business Committee before the Conference could be asked to consider any matters of principle [minute 17.2.19].

The Business Committee had a thorough discussion of each of the recommendations at its meeting in September 2017, and brings the following summary of its discussions.

### Recommendation 1:

**That recommendations from the 2015 report continue to be implemented:**

- **Strengthening of pre-Conference district briefings.**
- **Making reports available as early as possible.**
- **Commending the use of the cover sheet for reports to assist with the large volume of reading.**
- **Priority for first-time speakers.**
- **Variety in the format of debates – referred to the Business Committee for consideration as to how best to use, eg, workshops, hearings etc. Clarity of the purpose of the alternative formats.**
- **Districts to ensure that the decisions and outcomes of the Conference are disseminated to circuits and churches.**

The Business Committee felt that the content of this recommendation is already being implemented. The reintroduction of a Conference Business Digest was felt to be helpful in support of the dissemination of the decisions and outcomes of the Conference, particularly if it can be distributed quickly after the close of the Conference.

### Recommendation 2:

**Greater attention be given to enabling members of the Conference to identify office holders by publicising who they are.**

The Committee felt that this should be done by means of the Conference Handbook.

### Recommendation 3:

**A 'Glossary of Terms used in the Methodist Church' be compiled.**

There is already a long list of terminology in use by some committees, but it is not a simple process to adapt since there are, for example, some acronyms which apply to several different things. The

Conference Office ensures, through the scrutiny process, in the case of the Conference Agenda and associated documents, that acronyms are always spelled out the first time they are used with the abbreviation in brackets. The Committee felt that the issue is as much to do with how speakers use the acronyms rather than what is written in the reports themselves, and that speakers therefore need to be discouraged from speaking in acronyms or jargon. Members of the Committee agreed to look at the list which already exists to assess whether it would be helpful to make it more widely available or whether it could be adapted for this purpose.

**Recommendation 4:**

**Stricter control of *en bloc* and 200-series Notices of Motion is exercised.**

The Business Committee agreed to recommend that there should be the same number of signatories required to remove an item from *en bloc* as is required to submit a notice of motion. Currently, only six signatures are required to remove an item from the *en bloc* list. The Business Committee wished to emphasise that items of business which are dealt with *en bloc* are no less important than any of the other business which is before the Conference.

The Business Committee gave careful consideration to the 200-series notices of motion (ie those which do not directly relate to items of business contained within the Conference Agenda), and what 'stricter control' might mean. The Committee noted that a number of such notices of motion could have come before the Conference as memorials, as often they do not represent new or urgent matters. The Committee considered various means by which these notices of motion could be handled differently, including receiving them all together and the Committee deciding how best to print them (noting that some may well overlap in subject area). The Committee discussed whether more signatures should be required for such notices of motion (currently the requirement is for 10), and the indication that an increased number of signatures would provide as to the spread of concern across the Conference about the particular matter being considered. The Committee discussed whether it would be advantageous for there to be a mechanism for deciding that notices of motion were not permissible and how criteria to determine that might be drawn up and approved.

*The Committee would welcome responses from the Council on this point, noting the link with the concerns raised previously about how notices of motion affect the workplan and the budget.*

- *Would the Council wish to see a mechanism for notices of motion being dismissed as impermissible on the basis that the content of the motion could have been addressed in a Memorial?*
- *Would the Council wish to see an increase in the number of signatures required for a notice of motion (to 20, to 50, to 100?)?*
- *Would the Council wish to amend the procedure in the light of concerns about the impact of notices of motion on the workplan and the budget?*

Resolutions are offered below to test the mind of the Council on these points.

**Recommendation 5:**

**President and Vice-President exercise stricter control of speakers in debates, encouraging restraint, and that the Conference Business Committee explores use of 'planned debates' in major debates on controversial subjects and ways of enabling 'comment from the floor' without the need to speak from the front.**

The Business Committee felt that the President and Vice-President are free to exercise control of debates as is appropriate. Standing Order 136(2)(iv) already allows for the use of 'planned debates' and the Business Committee can explore their use where it might be felt to be appropriate. However, the Committee raised concerns about 'comments from the floor', rather than being made as speeches, for reasons of audibility and visibility and did not wish to pursue this point.

**Recommendation 6:**

**President and Vice-President each offer one set-piece address or sermon at the Conference – one at the Opening of the Conference, and one on the Sunday morning.**

**Recommendation 8:**

**Wednesday service of Holy Communion be discontinued, and that there be an early morning communion on the Wednesday (as on other days).**

**Recommendation 14:**

**The Conference be scheduled as follows:**

**Saturday – 10:30 start**

**Sunday as at present**

**Monday and Tuesday – 09:00-19:00**

**Wednesday – 09:00-17:00**

The Committee discussed these three recommendations together. It was confirmed that finishing on the Wednesday evening would not make a significant impact on the costs of the Conference, because of the numbers of people who would still need accommodation on the Wednesday night. Although these recommendations were made with lay working people in mind, the Committee did not feel that it represented enough of a change balanced against the amount of change that it would mean for the functioning of the Conference. There would clearly be timetabling issues as a result of this, not least the deadlines for notices of motion (which, it could be argued, would make the decision-making process less accessible). The Committee also felt that the Conference needs proper time available to it to confer on the more difficult and sensitive issues. The Committee noted the effect that this, and particularly the later finish times on Monday and Tuesday, would have on those working in the Record Office and all the volunteers who support the Conference in various ways. For its own part the Committee would not wish to see the end of the Wednesday communion service, and was particularly concerned that there should be an opportunity for the Representative Session to engage in an act of remembrance, which is included within the communion service.

The Committee was not minded to pursue these recommendations, and felt that such changes should only be considered within the context of a more over-arching review of the governance and oversight processes of the Church.

**Recommendation 7:**

**Guidance regarding morning and evening prayers is strictly observed by those preparing and leading them (and that they should only be led by those who are already at the Conference).**

The Committee noted that practice in this respect has improved, and that the shorter pattern of evening prayers have been appreciated.

**Recommendation 9:**

**Arrangements for continuous prayer within the Conference day be encouraged and be implemented through the chaplaincy team, with the President and Vice-President being encouraged to pause for moments of prayer or silence as appropriate.**

The Committee felt that the President and Vice-President do this in appropriate ways.

**Recommendation 10:**

**Present pattern of Sunday worship and ordination services be retained until further notice.**

There was no action to be taken in relation to this recommendation.

**Recommendation 11:**

**Making venue and accommodation as accessible as possible.**

These concerns are being taken up by the Conference Planning Executive.

**Recommendation 12:**

**Following up and implementing guidance on providing for special needs.**

These concerns are being taken up by the Conference Planning Executive.

**Recommendation 13:**

**Use of technology and electronic voting be explored and implemented as far as possible.**

The Committee noted that when electronic voting was trialled for a day at the 2011 Conference, it was expensive (around £2500 for a day's rental) and slow to use. However, some feedback indicated that there were those who felt safer to vote in the way they wished when their vote was not seen. The Committee was unsure whether the software would only be used for those votes that require counting, which would have meant, for example, that it would not have been used very much at all at the 2017 Conference. The Committee felt that electronic voting, by its very nature, changes the nature of the Conference's conferring as it moves from votes to ballots. The concern was raised that members of the Conference need to be accountable to one another, and live with those with whom they disagree. The Business Committee felt that it should, through its reporting, address the issue of representatives not feeling able to vote in the way in which they wish to vote. The Committee will explore the cost of hiring electronic voting systems and discuss the matter further.

**Recommendation 15:**

**Participation of fellowships of national origin be encouraged within districts.**

This is being done.

**Recommendation 16:**

**Reduction in size of the Conference – phased reduction to 250 in 2020 and then 220 in 2023.**

The Conference reviews its membership every five years. When this was last done two years ago, the conclusion was reached that, although in terms of the church's membership it should be cut by 100, the present size was appropriate to aid representation and participation. The review also noted that, it is proportionally the same size as it was in 1933. The Committee felt that this recommendation was being suggested for cost-cutting reasons, but was unclear as to whether it would save enough money to be worthwhile. The Committee felt that the broader question about the necessary size of the Conference in order to be fully representative was more important. If the Conference is significantly smaller, it becomes less accessible. The Committee was not therefore looking to pursue this recommendation.

**\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

**11/1. The Council receives the report.**

**11/2. The Council agrees to recommend to the Conference that Standing Order 134A(1)(c) be amended to increase to ten the number of signatures required to remove an item of business from its *en bloc* list.**

- 11/3. The Council recommends to the Conference that the Conference Business Committee be directed to develop a criteria by which it can be agreed whether or not notices of motion might be dismissed as impermissible.**
- 11/4. The Council recommends to the Conference that there should be an increase in the number of signatures required for a notice of motion to 100.**
- or*
- The Council recommends to the Conference that there should be an increase in the number of signatures required for a notice of motion to 50.**
- or*
- The Council recommends to the Conference that there should be an increase in the number of signatures required for a notice of motion to 20.**
- 11/5. The Council recommends to the Conference that the Conference Business Committee and the Conference Financial Committee reviews the procedure for assessing the impact of notices of motion on the Connexional Team workplan and the budget.**
- 11/6. The Council directs that this report becomes its report to the 2018 Conference on the matter of accessibility to the Conference.**