

SCOTTISH CONFERENCE



Phil Fairlie, Assistant General Secretary, reports on the POA Scottish Conference held on 25th and 26th October 2023 at the Peebles Hydro Hotel.



Delegates and guests gathered at the Peebles Hydro Hotel in the last week of October for the Scottish annual conference. It is one of the calendar events to which everyone always looks forward, and it had a busy agenda too, with 93 motions up for discussion and debate.

As ever, it was very well attended including our guests from the POA in ROI, Northern Ireland, Police Federation, the SPS, Thompson's solicitors, Phil Thomas as TUS Secretary, and, of course, our HLM's, who again were there in good numbers. Unfortunately, Bill Stephen and John Renton MBE were unable to attend this year, but we look forward to seeing them again at next year's conference. We were pleased to have the National Chair, Mark Fairhurst, and the General Secretary, Steve Gillan, in attendance, and both addressed the conference over the course of the two days. We also had a good number of the NEC and FTOs in attendance.

CONFERENCE AGENDA

We had a pay offer on the table prior to conference week, and the pay ballot was ongoing while we were at conference. Not unexpectedly, it featured heavily in the debates on the agenda, as well as in the coffee breaks and in the bar among the SNC and delegates. The outcome of the ballot is not known at the time of writing.

Like most years, the agenda included all the usual issues around pay, terms and conditions, staff compliments, health and safety, violence, drugs, pensions, and staff welfare issues. Also included was a motion seeking expansion of the roll-out of 'soft cuffs' across the estate, following their use in an ongoing pilot in several of our prisons. The feedback has been entirely positive on the impact the use of these is having on the levels of injuries to staff, and the drop in numbers of time off sick from injuries sustained from removals. Conference voted to accept the SNC approaching the employer asking for their wider use.

There were several motions that focused on better training for members, and the introduction of body scanners across the estate, caused by the significant problems we continue to face with the supply and use of drugs in prisons, in particular, psychoactive drugs. These motions all received support across the floor at conference, with all branches able to readily identify with the stories people spoke of in debates. The full agenda will be available to view on the POA website for those members wishing to see it in more detail.

We had a couple of motions relating to the private prison at

HMP Kilmarnock coming into the public sector in March 2024. Conference agreed to reinvigorate the branch structure there, to assist our members in Kilmarnock during the transition.

We had several guest speakers at conference. Jim Dawson gave fraternal greetings on behalf of our HLMs; Mark Fairhurst and Steve Gillan both gave updates on matters across the trade union that impact us all; and we also heard from Neil Findlay of Unity Consulting; and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice of Scotland, Angela Constance.

UNITY CONSULTING

We took the decision to engage Unity Consulting to assist us with several matters that are important to us as a trade union in Scotland, and we passed two motions that gave the SNC a mandate to pursue mandatory sentencing for those responsible for violence against our members, our property (car fires in prison car parks) or our families.

Behind this are the significant risks our members face from dealing with those involved in organised crime in our prisons. We want to ensure that the justice system does not continue to view these attacks and threats as no more than an occupational hazard. We want adequate protection for our members, and proper sentencing for those found guilty of such behaviours towards prison staff, and we will be working with Unity Consulting to structure a campaign.

We will also be working with the firm to see if we can find a breakthrough in the issue of our pay structure, which continues to be a real source of frustration for us as a trade union that, as yet, we have not been able to satisfactorily resolve.

Given Unity's involvement with other trade unions such as the FBU, we are looking to work with it to see if we can find an alternative viable solution to this issue.

REACH ADVOCACY/SPS PRESENTATION

On the first day of conference, we had a presentation by Jed Brady, Derek McCabe, Dilan Kaya and Tara Singleton of Reach Advocacy, and from the Scottish Prison Service that looked at the combined areas of human rights legislation and trauma-informed practice in the service.

Both presentations were of significant interest to the audience and explained in detail what the purpose and impact impending changes in legislation will have on our members in carrying out their roles in future. Sue Brookes, Dr Anna McKenzie, and Lee Currie all attended from the SPS, and after giving us a very informative presentation, they also took part in a Q&A session with delegates. We would like to thank them all for their time and contribution to our conference.

CABINET SECRETARY FOR JUSTICE; ANGELA CONSTANCE

The Justice Secretary addressed the POA conference for the first time, having been appointed to the role earlier this year. She has visited the majority of prisons so far and fed back on what she found on these visits. She thanked the staff for their efforts and professionalism and committed to get round those prisons she had still to visit.

The Chair, in response, asked her about the overcrowding situation and pointed out that acknowledging the numbers were high wasn't enough; we needed some assurance that there were steps in place to bring those numbers down in a reasonable timeframe, and to a level that is manageable for the system.

He also asked her about the situation around GeoAmey and the escorts fiasco.

In her response to the former, the Cabinet Secretary reiterated steps that she had outlined to the Scottish parliament several weeks ago and sought to reassure conference that it was a matter she was determined to tackle and seek to make a difference to the size of our prison population.

She was also extremely frustrated over the GeoAmey escorts issue and spoke about the "public paying twice" for a service caused by the failings of the private sector not delivering (quite literally!) and the public sector having



CHARITY FUNDRAISER

Each year, we choose a charity to support through our fundraising raffle and collection. This year, we decided to support The Trussell Trust given its work supporting those hardest hit by the current cost-of-living crisis.

As ever, branches were asked to bring along raffle prizes and to buy tickets at conference, as well as selling envelopes in the branches to members.

We had a fantastic response yet again and the money raised from the fundraising, boosted by a donation from the welfare fund, raised £4,300, which is a terrific amount when you consider the moderate size of the conference.

We also asked delegates and guests to supply any items of food and toiletries to donate to the local Trussell Trust foodbank in Peebles.

Dear Kathryn
We want to thank you all for your incredible donations for Peeblesshire Foodbank. We weighed in over half a tonne of food thanks to the amazing generosity of The Prison Officers Association in Scotland! We really can't thank you enough. What a fantastic bunch of people.

This will really make a difference to the help we can provide to those in our community who are struggling, a situation which is sadly becoming more and more prevalent nowadays.

It was so lovely to meet you both yourself and Phil on Friday and thanks so much for your lovely words and hope to meet you both again soon.
Kindest regards

Fiona & Carol
Peeblesshire Foodbank

Yet again the response to that appeal was fantastic, with some individuals going way above and beyond in their generosity. The photographs do not do justice to just how much we collected, and the two volunteers at the foodbank were genuinely overwhelmed when we took the collection to them on the last day of conference.

It was a very positive conference, and it was good to finish off such a positive week with a very real demonstration of the kindness and generosity of our members, officials and, of course, our guests.

The SNC now has the task of taking forward the decisions made at the conference to form our policy positions, and engage with the employer, government, and other outside bodies in pursuit of them on behalf of the membership.

The SNC would like to pass on its thanks to the branches for providing the agenda, to the delegates for their contributions to the debates and decision-making, and to our guests and speakers for their friendship and generosity throughout their time with us.

As ever, our biggest thanks go to the (now two) people responsible for the conference happening at all. This year, we had Peggy Purves attending her first conference, having joined our team in August this year.

Nobody quite knows just how many weeks and months of time, effort and organisation goes into making conference happen, and such a success. Kathryn has been responsible for that for so long she makes it look far easier than it could possibly be. Having Peggy to share the workload and thinking time around that has been a huge help this year, and we want to thank both for all their efforts. ●

