



TSSA Conference 2021

Online Conference - Frequently asked questions

April 2021
Version 1.0

soc@tssa.org.uk

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Introduction

This document addresses some of the most common concerns about how the TSSA online Conference will work in 2021.

The EC, the Working Party established by the EC and the Standing Orders Committee (SOC) are all committed to ensuring that, as far as possible in the circumstances, we will have a meaningful Conference in 2021. This will give the union a good basis to proceed as we hopefully come out of the Covid pandemic. At an early stage, we decided that it was best to plan for an online event rather than make preparations for a physical gathering that might have to be cancelled at short notice, and we have proceeded on that basis.

We are confident that, with a bit of goodwill, common sense and pragmatism, we will be able to have a Conference that provides an effective opportunity for the debates and decisions we need to have, while being largely enjoyable for participants. Of course, it will not be possible to replicate the social aspects that lift our Conference from a working environment into fun, but it will give us an opportunity to see our colleagues around the country.

Some of this is still a work in progress: although we are confident that appropriate facilities will be there, the details are still to be finalised in some areas.

1) How do branches, SOGs etc make contact about Conference queries?

Head Office remains closed for the time being, and letters are not picked up regularly so we continue to rely on emails.

There are email accounts for SOC and Scrutineers (soc@tssa.org.uk and scrutineers@tssa.org.uk respectively) for any correspondence. If you are writing as a branch or SOG officer, please say what position you hold, and explain the position of any other officers you copy in.

If you have questions or concerns about the arrangements for Conference, particularly if you are a delegate, please get your branch or SOG to write to SOC at the email address given.

A number of branches and SOGs sent their motions and nominations to TSSA Support Services without including the SOC or Scrutineers' mail accounts, as requested in the Circular. Some also did not state their own roles or those of other people copied into emails. This made verification of the validity of motions and nominations more difficult than it should have been.

For information about the support that the EC can provide to help branches, SOGs and delegates, please contact Will Boisseau of TSSA Support Services at supportservices@tssa.org.uk.

2) How will online Conference work?

Conference will be managed through a system developed by ChangeLab, who have provided similar services for a number of trade unions. We hope that this will be an integrated package including the voice and video services, but it is more likely that we will use Zoom for voice and video with the ChangeLab system controlling the timing, voting arrangements and so on. The integrated system is being developed and tested but it may not be ready in time for us and licensing issues may not be resolved. Whichever option is chosen, we will do all we can to ensure that arrangements are reliable and easy to use.

We are planning to have further tests between now and Conference, and we will invite delegates and others to take part in these.

Before Conference

The Final Agenda will be distributed in early May, and SOC will ask branches and SOGs for their views on items they are involved in (motions, composites and amendments), and which other items they wish to speak on (whether supporting or opposing). The responses will be discussed with branches and SOGs using email or Zoom meetings if needed. These discussions will take the place of the normal Standing Orders Committee session with delegates on the Saturday morning before Conference.

The intention is to publish (on the website and by post and email) a comprehensive set of order papers in the week before Conference starts. These papers will set out substantive motions (showing composites and accepted amendments) and amendments for debate with movers and seconders listed as far as possible. We expect the EC position on these items to be published at the same time. The Conference president will have a version that includes those who have indicated a wish to speak against items so that, for most of the Agenda, he or she will know who to call to speak.

It will clearly be harder to identify speakers 'from the floor' than when we are all in one room, although there will be opportunities to decide to speak on the spur of the moment if nobody has indicated in advance.

We will ask delegates to examine the order papers when they are received and let SOC know of any corrections as soon as possible. Although the order papers will be put to Conference as normal, the president will be unlikely to accept calls for 'reference back' on items that have not been raised beforehand. We intend to reduce the need for circulation of papers during Conference to an absolute minimum.

For similar reasons, we ask for any emergency motions to be sent to SOC by 12 midday on Thursday 27 May, so that they can be circulated for amendment and the amendments considered in SOC in time for publication before Conference. Because of the difficulty of asking delegates to read new papers while Conference is in progress, and the need to post paper copies, emergency motions that are submitted after the start of June will be considered by SOC as normal but will only be presented for debate in exceptional circumstances.

Motions that are not debated at Conference will be remitted to the EC as normal.

If a branch has two delegates, they should review the Agenda beforehand and agree the branch position on as many items as possible, as well as arranging how to exchange views during the Conference to agree the branch position on other items.

At Conference

Delegates will have to sign into the system each day. In the provisional timings (Page 3 of the Preliminary Agenda) we show that signing in will be possible half an hour before Conference starts each day, and on the first day Conference will be preceded by an introductory session to give delegates and others experience of how the processes will work in practice. As explained in the introduction, we hope delegates will have had a chance to take part in the test sessions to see how the system works.

Signing in will (probably) mean launching both the Zoom app and the Changelab system. These can run side by side, or on two separate devices if that is easier for you. See the section 'What will I need to be a delegate?' for more about this.

Delegates will need to have the Agenda and order papers to follow the progress of Conference.

The President has made clear in discussion with SOC that the normal facility for unexpected absence will be extended, so items can be moved formally or from the floor if technical or other problems prevent a delegate taking part.

The ChangeLab screen shows the item being debated with information about the current speaker and the timing of the speech. Those not speaking will be muted. There will be a way for delegates to ask questions or raise procedural points. As stated, we hope that most of the time the president will know who is to speak next, but if no speaker is decided in advance there will be opportunity for a speaker from the floor.

Time your speeches carefully. Time for speeches is likely to be more precise than in a normal Conference and you might be muted as soon as the allotted time expires.

As normal, Conference will be 'attended' by TSSA staff including the President's liaison officer, and by SOC, who will be available to provide advice and assistance if needed. Staff from ChangeLab will also be on hand to help with any technical issues that arise.

3) Voting and Tellers

When a vote is called, delegates will be given a certain amount of time to vote. Votes will be recorded and counted automatically by the ChangeLab system. The results of the vote will be shown to all delegates through ChangeLab, as well as being announced by the Chair.

The system counts all votes accurately and handles simple or two-thirds majorities (needed for Rule Alterations). Tellers will therefore not be needed.

SOC members will observe the progress of votes being cast, although nobody will be able to identify how individuals have voted.

Card votes will not be possible this year because of the practical limitations of the online Conference.

4) What will I need to be a delegate?

You will need to be elected as a delegate by your branch or SOG, and the branch or SOG officers will need to notify Head Office before the deadline of 14 May. Later registration as a delegate might be allowed in special circumstances, but earlier notification will make it easier to secure release from work, ensure you have appropriate equipment and connectivity, and allow you to take part in test events.

The minimum system requirements are still to be finally determined, but are likely to be:

- Windows laptop or computer running Windows version 7 or later¹
- Apple laptop or computer with macOS 10.9 or later
- Chromebook laptop
- iPad tablet with iPadOS 13 or later, or
- Android tablet computer using Android version 5.0x or later.

You will need to have both Zoom and ChangeLab apps running simultaneously. This can be done with two separate devices, by connecting a laptop or computer to two screens, or by splitting the screen. Splitting the screen to show two apps at once is fairly easy on Windows PCs, Macs or Chromebooks, but more complicated on iPads and Android tablets: we recommend only using a tablet running both apps if you are confident of how to manage this.

A microphone and speakers, or a set of headphones with a microphone, will be needed: speakers and microphone are often built into laptops and tablets but may be missing on a desktop computer or older laptop. A camera will allow you to be seen when you are speaking, but is not needed.

A Bluetooth or wired keyboard might be a useful addition to a tablet device.

A reliable internet connection will be needed. This can use a 4G or 5G mobile connection, WiFi or a wired connection.

We expect most delegates to be at home for the Conference. You will need a workstation with a comfortable chair, space for your computer and/or tablet and enough room to refer to the Conference Agenda and order papers.

For delegates unused to working at home for long periods, attending the online conference may produce problems associated with proper posture and equipment positioning when sitting at a computer for extended periods of time. Delegates may find the following link on posture and computer equipment useful: <https://www.wikihow.com/Sit-at-a-Computer>.

¹ Note that Windows 10 'S' mode is not supported by Zoom.

We will ask you to take steps to minimise disturbances although we recognise that interruptions are always likely. If you are in a shared space, listening with headphones will make it easier to concentrate and be less distracting for other people.

5) What facilities will the union provide?

The EC has offered support to branches, SOGs and delegates that need it. This is set out on the TSSA website, by following this link: www.tssa.org.uk/.../annual-conference/2021.cfm.

If you feel you do not have what you need as a delegate, your first approach should be to your branch or SOG. The branch or SOG could purchase a suitable laptop or Chromebook: this would be recorded in branch accounts as organising expenditure and a branch asset, and it could be used for financial returns, preparing minutes and other organising work once Conference is over.

If you are concerned about the reliability or capacity of your internet connection, your branch or SOG should consider a short-term arrangement with a mobile provider. Most firms offer 'mobile broadband' or 'mobile Wi-fi' services using a router that uses the 4G mobile network to give a local, portable wireless connection. These can be bought with an upfront payment and a monthly contract: avoid entering into a 12 or 24-month contract!

Branches or SOGs who anticipate any difficulty or special needs should contact Will Boisseau at supportservices@tssa.org.uk.

6) How will the union ensure my comfort and safety?

The Conference sessions will include frequent breaks to allow delegates to relax and stretch, to make participation as comfortable as possible. The following wikiHow link gives useful guidance: <https://www.wikihow.com/Sit-at-a-Computer>.

The RNIB suggests following a 20-20-20 rule: after 20 minutes of looking at a screen, take a break of at least 20 seconds and look at something at least 20 feet away, to reduce eye strain.

7) What about accessibility?

We will do what we can to make sure that Conference is as accessible as possible. The Zoom 'live transcript' system will be available for those with hearing difficulties.

If delegates have difficulties with paper documents, they might find it easiest to have an additional device available to read documents on screen.

The problems that have arisen in recent years with physical accessibility of the venues will be avoided with an online Conference, but there will no doubt be other issues that need to be addressed. If your Branch or SOG anticipates any problems, please contact Will Boisseau of TSSA Support Services at supportservices@tssa.org.uk.

8) What about visitors to Conference?

Visitors will be able to attend online to see and hear debates but will not be able to vote. We will ask all visitors to register and identify themselves, with their TSSA membership number if applicable. This will allow us to restrict attendance to TSSA members for the closed sessions (Rule Alterations and discussions of the union's finances).

Please contact Will Boisseau of TSSA Support Services (supportservices@tssa.org.uk) to register as a visitor.

9) How will Conference Regulations and Procedures be changed?

The normal Regulations and Procedures are published on pages 4-6 of the Preliminary Agenda. SOC is reviewing what changes will be necessary or appropriate for the online Conference, and the revised versions will be in the Final Agenda due to be published by 5 May. Please review these and let SOC know if you anticipate any issues with the revised procedures.

The President, EC, Working Party and SOC are all agreed that enabling an effective Conference with quality debates and decisions is the priority, and flexibility will be extended as far as possible to ensure that this is the case. Many of the potential constraints are in Conference Procedures rather than the union's Rule Book, so we do not envisage an issue where we cannot allow the necessary flexibility.

10) How will we make procedural points, questions and announcements?

The Zoom 'chat' function (and any equivalent in the ChangeLab app) will be continuously monitored by TSSA staff including the President's Liaison Officer. This will allow delegates to raise points of order, questions, procedural points etc that will be brought immediately to the attention of the Conference president.

This will also be the mechanism for delegates who decide to second items, or speak against them, during the course of debates. If you see that no seconder is listed, please indicate on the chat that you would like to second while the item is being moved. Similarly, if the EC is supporting an item or takes no view, you can indicate you want to speak against. Make this clear before the mover's reply to the debate, and the president will call you if nobody else has indicated.

Conclusion

We are all determined to make this an effective Conference but also an enjoyable event for all, and we hope you will take part in the same spirit.