

**Public Affairs Standing Committee Meeting held on Tuesday 22 October 2024**  
**Online via Teams**

**Present:** Ms Alice Brown (Convener of PASC)  
Mr Arron Ashton  
Ms Candice Donnelly  
Ms Tamara Raidt  
Mr Devin Scobie  
Dr William Duncan (Secretary of the General Council)  
Mr Gordon Cairns (Convener of the Business Committee)  
Mr Bruce Nelson (Vice Convener of the Business Committee)  
Ms Alison McNulty (Assistant Secretary of the General Council)

**In attendance:** Ms Ann Cormack (ISC)

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

The Convener welcomed all present to the first meeting of PASC to agree the work schedule for academic session 2024-25.

**2. Apologies for absence**

None.

**3. Minutes from the meeting held on 13 May 2024**

The minutes were approved.

**4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 13 May 2024**

None that would not be covered under the following agenda items.

**5. PASC's work plan 2024-25**

- Paper 2, prepared by AB, had been previously circulated and outlined the proposed work plan for PASC, with a focus on the following areas:
  - Communications Strategy – notably production of future Billets and plans for GC Half-Yearly Meetings and events;
  - Engagement with GC members – includes a proposal to conduct a survey of alumni residents in Edinburgh to ascertain their views on how alumni participation can be enhanced;
  - Engagement with the wider community

**Discussion**

- DS emphasised the importance of engaging with local Councillors and senior politicians, discussing the University's profile and influence within the City;
- Noted that PASC should aim to establish stronger working links for a mutually beneficial relationship which cover areas that concern both the City and the University and which affect students and staff e.g., housing and other infrastructure issues;

- WD raised concerns about mismatched perceptions between the University and the City Council regarding their relationship's quality and suggested further engagement with, for example, the chief executive of the City of Edinburgh Council, Paul Lawrence, and The Lord Provost, Robert Aldridge, through upcoming events to better align perceptions and expectations;
- The complementary relationship between the GC and D & A could intensify certain outreach and engagement strategies e.g., assistance with the process of conducting and analysing the results of the suggested survey of alumni resident in Edinburgh (around 44k!) and provide support for any additional GC digital communications to involve community members and alumni more effectively in the University's activities;
- The Committee agreed that Paper 2 was an excellent summary of PASC's priority areas and were content with the proposed workplan but will need to consider how to implement some of the suggestions and the cost implications.

#### **Actions:**

- ***Invite Chris Cox, VP Philanthropy and Executive Director of Development and Alumni to a future PASC meeting to develop and agree a strategy to encourage alumni participation with the University and its General Council;***
- ***Invite Simon Fanshawe, Rector, to speak to the committee in order to identify areas of common interest and activity;***
- ***Follow up the presentation given to the Business Committee on 2 May 2024 by the City of Edinburgh Council leader, Cammy Day, with a view to agreeing ways in which the "Town and Gown" relationship can be enhanced.***

#### **6. Billet**

- Members noted Paper 3, previously circulated, and the following points were highlighted:
- Billet is the General Council's traditional publication which goes out to members twice yearly, providing information and papers for the statutory meetings; the winter edition gives additional information about elections to the Business Committee;
- It is sent electronically to around 140k members and sent by post to approx. 800;
- The production of Billet is expensive. The cost of Winter and Summer Billet in 2023/24 was £32,495 which was 50% of the General Council budget;
- Noted three main issues to consider:
  1. The rationale for phasing out printed copies, noting increasing postage and distribution costs, particularly for overseas members, as well as sustainability reasons;
  2. How to improve readership when only around 2% of those receiving the email open the pdf attachment;
  3. CAM no longer support the production of Billet which has been outsourced to an external media agency, and this creates additional workload for the GC office which is now required to undertake a complicated procurement process and ensure a DPA is in place in order that data can be released to the printer for each new edition of Billet;

- The committee were asked to consider if Billet is the only (and most effective) way of communicating to members, particularly as much of the information included in Billet is also available on the GC website;
- Although it was felt that there were certain benefits to receiving paper copies and the committee liked the new design by Lane, there was a need to reflect if this was the best use of resource going forward;
- WD pointed out that there is yet no contract arranged with a design agency for Summer Billet 2025, and another procurement procedure would need to begin in January if no credible alternative has been proposed;
- A meeting has been scheduled with Tom Mortimer, new Head of Communications, D & A, to discuss possible alternatives to engaging with the GC membership.

[Post meeting: The main points arising from the discussion with Tom Mortimer on 24 October were as follows:]

### **1 - How to improve readership of Billet, and other General Council communications, when they are sent digitally.**

Currently the emails perform at around the same level as other D&A mailings, but the desire is to increase engagement, with the ultimate goal of increasing the number of people attending the General Council meetings and events.

The concerns are that some recipients do not realise that they are automatically a part of the General Council or that they have the right to come to these meetings and events. Improved messaging in the mailings may help to alleviate this, ensuring alumni understand the Council.

Alice from the Lane Agency has a number of ideas about how the email could be improved and Brian (D & A comms) has agreed to meet with her to discuss her ideas for Winter 2024/25 Billet and what she could provide for the current design and/or wording.

The D&A Comms team will also explore increased promotion of General Council activities through the main UoE social channels.

### **2 – Future format for Billet**

There was little desire to enter another round of procurement for a print publication, and instead wished to look at digital alternatives. Currently Billet costs around £30k, which could be redistributed to other activities if Billet is no longer a print publication. Discussed the possibilities of instead hosting the information on the General Council website. This would avoid a lengthy procurement process, the creation of the PDF and the cost of printing and fulfilment. It would also allow for information to be more regularly updated.

Suggestion that the University design teams could help to initially redesign the site to feature this information most effectively.

Agreed to move forward with exploring the move to the General Council website, instead of a printed Billet.

**Action:-**

***AB will draft a paper which will go to the Business Committee at its next meeting on 5 December, for members to agree whether paper Billet should be phased out in favour of digital communication.***

**7. Future Events**

The committee agreed to invite representatives from the City of Edinburgh Council to the General Council Christmas Reception on 10 December at the Talbot Rice Gallery to help foster relationships.

**8. Any other business**

**Action:-**

***AB will meet with DS to discuss some of the ideas touched on during the meeting and draft a proposal to circulate to the committee for feedback;  
Take forward any action points raised before the next meeting of PASC.***

**10. Date of next meeting**

Tuesday 8 April 2025, 4.30pm, online via Teams