

**Public Affairs Standing Committee Meeting held on Tuesday 8 April 2025**  
**Online via Teams**

**Present:** Ms Alice Brown (Convener of PASC)  
Mr Arron Ashton  
Ms Candice Donnelly  
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 Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact  
Ms Ann Cormack (ISC)  
Professor John Gillies (ASC)

**1. Welcome and apologies**

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting and handed over to Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact, Department of Social Responsibility and Sustainability to speak to the committee about the latest draft of the University's Community Plan.

Apologies received from Tamara Raidt.

**2. Presentation from Gemma Gourlay, Head of Social Impact**

- A draft of the new 2025-30 Community Plan (Paper E) had been forwarded to the committee in advance of the meeting;
- Detailed slides used during the presentation will be circulated to the committee along with the minutes.
- GG began by mentioning her previous appearances before the committee to discuss earlier versions of the plan, signalling a history of consistent involvement with its development. The purpose of this meeting was to share updates since the last meeting in May 2024;
- She reported that the updated version of the plan would be taken to the University Executive in June;
- GG presented the latest draft of the Community Plan (CP), detailing its development, strategic aims, consultation processes, and next steps;
- She outlined that part of the current discussion would involve examining and providing feedback on how the latest version of the CP had been shaped in light of extensive activities and consultations that had occurred over the past year, and touched upon the current financial context of the University and how this has influenced the new plan's formation;
- She credited the work to a team effort, led by Dave Gorman, Director of Social Responsibility and Sustainability with significant contributions from herself and Sarah Anderson, Senior Community Engagement Manager, supplemented by other committees like the Communications and Marketing Stakeholder Relations Team;
- The updated plan was presented as a continuation and evolution from existing frameworks, not a project starting from scratch, aiming to build on the reported

successes like the positive progress in 27 out of the 32 commitments of the previous plan;

- GG reviewed several key successes particularly highlighting community engagement through investments in social enterprises and various forms of experiential learning and community service performed by students;
- Other highlights included the social and scientific impact activities such as medical research and health innovation taking place at the Bio Quarter, and programmes centred around inclusivity and collaboration at the Edinburgh Futures Institute and the Usher building where these spaces are designed to be accessible to the public;
- The following link provides greater detail of the progress made in the fourth year of the CP: [www.local.ed.ac.uk/what-we-did-year-four](http://www.local.ed.ac.uk/what-we-did-year-four);
- Pointed out efforts in building a new plan with fewer and less specific commitments within the text and more emphasis on the sum total of what is realistically achievable; and more flexible that recognises financial and resource constraints and adapts priorities according to potential shifts in University strategy;
- The draft plan is written in plain language making it clear and understandable about what the University is hoping to deliver and allows the audience to identify with the plan;
- Also includes greater visibility of engaged research and support of other strategies relating to regional activity e.g., Data Driven Innovation;
- Identified three key priorities for action:
  1. **Partnering for positive social impact** – supporting communities through volunteering, community-led research, student projects and placements and addressing poverty
  2. **Promoting equalities now and in the future** – improving community benefits; health and social care, housing and employability
  3. **Thriving communities** – promoting wellbeing, volunteering, student projects and placements and health and social care
- The strategic aims and missions were noted, with a focus on embedding the priorities for action into research, learning and teaching, and operations:
- She emphasised the engagement with various University departments and external stakeholders to shape the plan collaboratively;
- Finally, she mentioned the importance of adjusting the plan based on stakeholder feedback and the aim to launch the new CP in October;
- She concluded by inviting questions and feedback from the committee to further refine and perfect the deployment of the CP.

## Discussion

- DS raised concerns about how the “town and gown” relationship between the University and the City of Edinburgh Council is managed. He questioned the effectiveness of that relationship as part of the ongoing community plan process;
- GG responded by mentioning that there has been active participation from various councillors in the development of the plan which is encouraging. She highlighted that Lynn McMath, Deputy Director for Stakeholder Relations, Community and Marketing is part of the Edinburgh Partnership Board and engages regularly in meetings and strategic conversations with the council. This includes discussions of wider issues e.g., a previous housing summit;

- DS also expressed significant concern regarding the apparent lack of clear communication plans for the launch of the Community Plan scheduled for October. He worried that insufficient communication strategies might undermine the effectiveness and impact of the plan's introduction;
- GG acknowledged this concern and pointed out that while there is substantial development happening with the comms plan, they are very conscious of internal and external timing, especially considering the transitions and challenges currently faced by the third sector in Edinburgh. She emphasized the intention to align the communications launch carefully to ensure readiness and receptivity among both University colleagues and community members;
- BN queried about the resources and the realistic expectations from the plan, particularly regarding the internal buy-in from the University's Senior Leadership Team (SLT), given the required financial consideration of £140m in savings;
- GG noted that while engaging in conversations with SLT, the focus has not been on requesting additional funding or resources but rather emphasizing flexibility and sustainability in developing the shape of the plan, mentioning the plan's design to adapt to changing capacity and resources, pausing proposed projects if necessary and identifying priority areas already being delivered which align with the University's civic purpose, research and day to day business;
- AB and WD discussed the need for broader engagement with the public and potential pro bono support from the significant number of General Council members based in the local area, suggesting liaising with Development and Alumni to help facilitate this. They stressed the importance of using the Community Plan launch as an opportunity to improve the University's public image and deepen community engagement;
- The committee agreed that this is a "good news" story for the University and needs to be properly celebrated;
- There was a suggestion from DS to consider a launch event at the City Chambers involving high-profile individuals such as the Lord Provost and Principal to garner more attention and impact for the plan's launch;
- GG thanked the committee for their helpful reflections and suggested that the General Council might share awareness of the launch through *Billet* and sign up to Edinburgh Local: [www.local.ed.ac.uk](http://www.local.ed.ac.uk);
- Mentioned that the Community Grants Programme was recently launched: [www.local.ed.ac.uk/community-grants/how-to-apply](http://www.local.ed.ac.uk/community-grants/how-to-apply) and if the committee are aware of any organisation who could benefit from a grant of £5k to please let them know before the deadline for applications on Monday 5 May;
- GG concluded by saying that her team are looking to replicate the Economic Impact Assessment launch event, which was held last year in the Dovecot Studios and which delivered measures of performance, showcasing examples to community stakeholders of how community groups already engage with the University and benefit from e.g., use of the University's facilities free of charge after hours.

AB thanked GG for an excellent and comprehensive presentation and invited her to address the committee re progress with the Community Plan launch at a future meeting.

### **3. Minutes from the meeting held on 22 October 2024**

The minutes were approved.

### **4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 22 October 2024**

#### Item 5

University Rector, Simon Fanshawe has agreed to be involved in a General Council “In Conversation” event including Joanna Cherry and Lord Wallace planned for next academic session 2025-26 (early October).

### **5. General Council communications**

#### Billet

- WD reported that Summer Billet is in the near final stages for production, scheduled to go out at the end of April and will retain the format of previous editions;
- Postal copies have been reduced from 700+ to 75 GC members who have specifically requested one;
- Significant savings from postage costs and not having to engage an external design company will be channelled into producing promotional videos for the General Council;
- The proposal for Winter Billet 2025/26 is to steer readership to the General Council website as there has been a low open rate (2%) for the pdf attachment of Billet which is sent out through Dot Digital. Highlighted that the General Council will be charged going forward for each email sent out through Dot Digital and there is a need to now co-ordinate messaging with Development and Alumni (D & A), but pointed out that emails from D & A are sent out to all alumni not just General Council members.

#### Proposal to produce short videos

- AB spoke about efforts to raise awareness of and interest in General Council activities and encourage increased attendance at HYMs with an opportunity to produce three up-to-date, short and engaging videos on the following themes:
  1. An overview of the General Council and its role in University governance
  2. Business Committee and the work of the Standing Committees
  3. Prince Philip Scholarship Fund and how it has been established to help support disadvantaged students
- WD, AB and AM had a productive meeting with David Lee, [David Lee Media and Events - Event hosting and media content services](#), a former editor of the Scotsman and recommended by DS who has worked with him previously;
- David has since provided a written briefing including creative suggestions for producing media that include being clear on messaging and the target audience, and can provide expertise with scripting, support for speakers and aspects relating to technical editing, noting PASC would have the final cut;
- An additional meeting with Sanctus who currently livestream General Council events and whose business has expanded into video production, is scheduled for 16 April to move forward with previous discussions and can compare quotes afterwards;
- The committee were happy to support this proposal, describing it as an “excellent idea” and an “exciting project”;

- BN suggested that the promotion of the Prince Philip Scholarship Fund could be linked to wider communications sent out from D & A.

## **6. Future Events**

### **7. Update on PASC's Work Plan**

As it was not possible to cover the above agenda items in the time allocated, an additional meeting of PASC has been arranged for 8 May.

## **8. Any other business**

### Usher Institute event on 22 May

- WD reported that preparations are going well and the programme is shaping up to include an opening from Professor David Argyle, VP and Head of College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, and a presentation from the Director of the Usher Institute;
- Arrangements are being made through the dedicated events team based at the Usher Institute with registrations via Eventbrite for 125 places before a waitlist is enabled;
- A reminder to book has been sent to members of the Business Committee and a further reminder will be sent on 5 May via Dot Digital to all General Council members based in Scotland;
- As the event is free and includes a buffet supper, there were concerns raised about no-shows and resulting food waste;
- 114 delegates have already registered and catering will be ordered for a maximum of 125 even if the full capacity of 150 places is reached;
- In addition, this event will not be livestreamed to avoid a situation where delegates decide not to turn up at the last minute and to watch the event online instead.

## **9. Date of next meeting**

Thursday 8 May 2025, 4.30pm, online via Teams.