

**Meeting of the Public Affairs Standing Committee
at 4.30pm on Thursday 14 May 2026
Online via Teams**

Present: Mr Devin Scobie
Ms Candice Donnelly
Mr Thomas Wrench
Dr William Duncan (Secretary of the General Council)
Mr Gordon Cairns (Convener of the Business Committee)
Ms Ann Cormack (ISC)
Mr Lorn Macneal (FSSC)
Dr Dorothy Welch (ASC)

1. Welcome and apologies

- In the absence of the Convener, Alice Brown, who was overseas and unable to connect to a Wi-Fi link at the time of the meeting, Devin Scobie (DS) welcomed all attendees and led the introductions;
- He invited Stuart Tooley, Head of Public Affairs, to update the committee on the University's political mapping post-election.

Apologies received from Professor Alice Brown, Dr Bruce Nelson and Dr Kate Richards.

2. Presentation from Stuart Tooley, Head of Public Affairs, Communications and Marketing

Stuart Tooley (ST) gave a detailed analysis of the elections to the Scottish Parliament as shown in the slides that accompanied his presentation. Note that Cabinet and opposition spokesperson shadows have since been appointed (bringing considerable change).

The key points emerging from the presentation and subsequent discussion were as follows:

1. The opinion polls consistently showed SNP was expected to continue as the Scottish Government, but the final election outcome was less predictable because:
 - Large turnover of MSPs (over 40 retired but with incumbent losses on the day, 64 of the 129 MSPs are new)
 - The popularity of all party leaders declined during the election campaign
 - Support for Labour and Conservative declined significantly over previous 2 years
 - Support for Reform UK had increased significantly over same period
 - Tactical voting and voters varying party support between constituency and list ballots
 - Boundary changes affecting the majority of Scottish constituencies
2. SNP are still by far the largest group, with 57 MSPs but this is 6 less than the previous Parliament which again means it will again need the support of another party (or parties) to pass legislation and budgets.
3. The biggest change was the Conservatives losing 19 MSPs and Reform gaining 17 MSPs. The Greens increased their representation to 15 and the Lib Dems doubled their number of MSPs, from 5 to 10.

4. Although half of the MSPs are new, the distribution of new MSPs amongst the various parties is markedly different; no new Conservatives, less than half new in Labour and SNP, 60% new Lib Dem MSPs and all new Reform MSPs bar their one Tory defector (Graham Simpson) who was re-elected.
5. For the Edinburgh and Lothians, 6 of the 9 constituency MSPs were re-elected, but only 1 of the 7 Regional list MSPs returned (Miles Briggs). This means that for Edinburgh and Lothians, just over half the MSPs are new.
6. Edinburgh University engaged constructively with 4 of the 6 party leaders during the election – John Swinney, Anas Sarwar, Malcolm Offord, Alex Cole-Hamilton.
7. A new Cabinet will be needed as several long-standing members did not seek re-election. Two prominent MPs (Stephen Flynn and Stephen Gethins) were elected as MSPs, which will result in by-elections for their Westminster seats.
8. It is now just months until the City Council elections, but those Councillors elected as MSPs can continue as Councillors until the May 2027 elections, due to a dispensation in Disqualification Regulations designed to avoid multiple expensive short term by-elections, but their Councillor 'wages' for the remaining term goes to charity.

Action:-

Slides used will be circulated to the committee.

3. Minutes from the meeting held on 12 March 2026

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters arising from the meeting held on 12 March 2026

WD updated the committee on planning for the following events:

Half-Yearly Meeting – 13 June at Teviot Row House

- Arrangements for the forthcoming half-yearly meeting are well underway and will include a discussion session with Professor Ailsa Henderson and Alison Payne 'in conversation' with the Rector about the implications of the recent election;
- Invitations will be sent to politicians who are also members of the General Council, noting that our events do not have fundraising purpose, but instead can bring important opportunities for engagement and networking, prior to any later fundraising by D&A.

Showcase visit to College of Science and Engineering (CSE)

- WD referred to Paper 2;
- This event on 24 June at the Nucleus Building is being arranged with the College of Science and Engineering and will include a visit to the new Engineering Hub;
- A notice about the event will be sent all General Council members on 18 May and WD will discuss with the Head of CSE, Prof Iain Gordon, invitations to external VIPs.

Showcase event at the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (CAHSS)

- WD met with Head of College, Professor Sarah Prescott, on 23 April and had follow up discussions with senior College staff who are enthusiastic. The feasibility of holding this event on 9 July at the Informatics Building is being actively pursued;
- This event will be coordinated with Chloe Kippen, D & A, and will focus on AI and large language models, illustrating that the UoE is keen to preserve its language schools amid broader closures at other universities.

The last item discussed concerned a video about the Prince Philip scholarships, for which PASC hopes to gain an endorsement or introduction from the Princess Royal.

DS thanked WD for his meticulous planning and execution of events, noting the challenges of managing multiple significant projects simultaneously.

5. 2026/27 Work Programme

a. 'Town and Gown' Events

- DS introduced a discussion on future event planning and engaging effectively with Edinburgh City Council, recognising its current complex political alignments and the prospect of the May 2027 elections resulting political shifts;
- WD highlighted the challenges in engaging with the City Council and the importance of having specific subjects for engagement to ensure effectiveness rather than general lobbying;
- Suggestions included hosting bespoke events focused on party perspectives on specific city priorities, which may help create more successful interactions with Council members;
- DS discussed the potential of making events more personal and tailored to ensure better attendance and engagement, contrasting this with past University events where general invites yielded low turnout;
- He emphasised the importance of clear communication to indicate that our events are not for fundraising but opportunities for genuine engagement and collaboration;
- Discussed the potential for using City Chambers for drop-in type events to foster closer interactions between University representatives, Councillors and City officials. The central municipal venue could make their participation easier;
- PASC will consider immediate next steps, including direct engagements and brainstorming sessions to refine the focus of future events, ensuring alignment with both university goals and political realities.

Action:-

WD will arrange a meeting with DS and Stuart Tooley to refine the focus of future events of this type and ensure alignment with the University's goals.

June 2027 HYM (Paper 3)

- Discussion revolved around a proposal to hold the next summer half-yearly meeting in London, with the aim of integrating the GC statutory meeting within a larger event organised by D & A, primarily geared towards alumni engagement;

- This is viewed as a strategic move to better connect with London-based alumni and potentially increase the impact and visibility of the event, as historically, meetings held in London had been productive and well-received;
- Furthermore, a weekday, early evening London event might attract the presence of HRH The Princess Royal, who is the chair of the General Council and has a longstanding connection with the University, to elevate the stature of the event;
- Committee members expressed general support for the idea, recognising the importance of discussing further logistical and administrative details with Chris Cox, D&A, and confirming the support of the Principal before any invitation issued to HRH;
- WD recommended the involvement of experienced organizer Chloe Kippen (D & A) for the practical execution of the event, highlighting her past successes with similar University events in London;
- Subject to approval of the Motion to allow Half Yearly Meetings to be held weekdays, and support from senior D&A staff being confirmed, it was agreed to recommend to the Business Committee that the June 2027 HYM be held in London

Action:-

WD will follow up with Chloe Kippen and Chris Cox to determine their interest and support.

b.

"In Conversation" Event – 22 October 2026 at Teviot Row House

- The Committee reflected on the successful "In Conversation" event in October 2025 featuring Lord Jim Wallace and Joanna Cherry, noting its high attendance and positive feedback;
- Plans for a similar event on 22 October are underway with Sir Ian Rankin and Allan Little as speakers;
- Recorded thanks to AB for her efforts in securing the speakers;
- Discussed a nominal entry fee of £5 to add perceived value and manage attendance more effectively;
- Agreed to have a drinks reception after the discussion to enhance networking opportunities and make the event more appealing, which was not possible at last year's event at St Cecilia's Hall;

20 February 2027 HYM

- WD spoke to planning for next February's HYM and confirmed that Sally Magnusson has agreed to an "in Conversation" type exchange with the Rector, Simon Fanshawe in a half-hour slot during the lunch;
- The preferred venue for the lunch is Teviot Row Union Debating Hall and WD commented on why this would be a more suitable venue than Playfair Library due to its accessibility for individuals with mobility issues, and its closer proximity to EFI where the statutory meeting will be held;
- Teviot Row Union also had the potential also for a reduction in catering charges and using Blue Sky's menu would respond to concerns about the previous high costs of the lunches.

Billet Summer 2026

- The discussion moved to the latest copy of Billet with some members citing their disappointment at its appearance and suggesting improvements like better quality covers;
- It was noted that only 76 members receive paper copies leading to a broader discussion about possibly phasing out printed materials altogether;
- Noted that costs saved in not engaging the services of a professional media agency to produce Billet meant that more funds could be allocated to events for General Council members;
- CD suggested that invitations to VIPs should be made more attractive in an effort to make events more appealing and noteworthy.

6. PASC Budget for 2026/27

- The discussion revolved around budget considerations related to PASC activities, as outlined in paper 4;
- Devin Scobie encouraged the committee members to examine the budget more closely, and suggested possibly adding a local government event, which isn't currently included, to enhance the committee's agenda, even though it might incur additional costs;
- WD underlined the budget flexibility for certain planned items, mentioning that the items relating to College showcasing events with an allocated £10,000, could potentially be reduced;
- He stressed the importance of early planning for events;
- A significant point discussed was the saving of £30,000 pounds achieved by changing the format of *Billet*, which has released funds for other potential uses.

7. Indicative schedule of PASC meetings in 2026/27

- DS emphasised the importance of involving AB in discussions about future events and the process for scheduling meetings before she retires from the BC;
- WD noted the necessity of setting meeting dates to match the overall schedule of standing committee meetings and determining the number of guest presentations per meeting due to their tendency to extend beyond the planned duration;
- CD reflected on her experience as a member of PASC, and suggested limiting the number of presentations to allow more time for thorough discussion on topics, rather than constantly moving to new subjects without sufficient consolidation;
- DS acknowledged the effectiveness of having smaller subcommittees, like the one which helped organise the "In Conversation" event last October;
- He concurred with CD about the challenges of managing time during meetings when presentations run longer than their allotted slot;

Action:-

- ***WD and DS will consult with AB for her input on proposed events and the organisation of PASC meetings;***
- ***WD will liaise with DS re dates for meetings in 2026/27***

8. Membership of PASC in 2026/27 and inducting new members

- Newly elected members of PASC are Dr Ian Conn, former Director of CAM, and Emily Honeysett who is based in the US;
- WD suggested that it would be helpful if he and DS held an online induction session for the new members before the first PASC meeting in the next academic session;
- WD mentioned the significant ongoing review within CAM, which is expected to lead to reductions in staff and this is causing considerable anxiety among staff, which The committee agreed that understanding the reorganisation of the University's communications and marketing division will be crucial item for the Past future work programme.

9. Any other business

- Members expressed their gratitude to AB and acknowledged her significant contributions as Convener of PASC and as a long-serving and active member of the Business Committee. She will continue in this role until the end of July 2026;
- DS highlighted Alice's extensive network and her generosity in helping organise events;
- DS will replace AB as Convener from 1st August 2026 and expressed hope that PASC will maintain its productivity moving forward with 'Town and Gown' at the heart of its deliberations.
- Candice Donnelly was also thanked for her past role as Convener of PASC before her tenure as BC member also comes to an end in July 2026.