

# **Convention bureau funding – “business events are essential”**

**Business representatives in Edinburgh are demanding a rethink on last week’s decision by the Finance & Resources Committee about funding for the city’s business bureau.**

**Councillors will discuss the finance package for a Convention Bureau in Edinburgh for the second time in a week when they meet on Thursday morning, and would usually be expected to rubber stamp the committee’s decision.**

**Last week councillors voted against supporting the Edinburgh International Conference Centre**

**(EICC) with the backing they asked for to run Convention Edinburgh for three years, instead approving only a one year payment of £150,000.**

EICC under its Chief Executive, Marshall Dallas, has had a caretaker role of the body which is responsible for attracting business tourism to the city until December 2023, but there were no proposals for any future support brought forward until the Finance committee met last week. Then, two Executive Directors on the council produced a report outlining the proposal by EICC to develop a Convention Bureau building on the caretaking arrangement for the last few years which was only ever supposed to be an interim agreement.



Marshall Dallas, CEO of Edinburgh International Conference Centre

Picture by Stewart Attwood

The EICC board members appearing before councillors last Thursday, said that it had cost the organisation £150,000 in each of two years to support the running of Convention Edinburgh. The board explained that they planned a subscription model for businesses going forward – and were prepared to invest £925,000 of their reserves in building up the bureau. The representatives from EICC asked that this was set against borrowing from the council – but this proposal was [rejected](#). The report asked for funding of £300,000 in each year until 2026.

The Finance Convener, Cllr Mandy Watt, said that it was disappointing that any request had not formed a part of the council's budget discussions in February and said that the proposal to write this "funding" off against loan stock is "not the way we do things". She also criticised the plan to try and borrow forward against any monies the council might earn from the Transient Visitor Levy or Tourist Tax, as this was funding that the council does not yet have. It was a narrow vote by councillors 6-5 and one which was opposed by the Conservative group.

Conservative councillor and finance spokesperson, Cllr Phil Doggart, criticised the council's Executive Director of Place, Paul Lawrence, reminding him that Mr Lawrence had said a year ago that a solution for Convention Edinburgh would be in place by the end of 2023. The councillor pointed out that no funding request made in time for the council's budget discussion earlier this year, and he highlighted that EICC Chief Executive, Marshall Dallas, claimed that he was told it would be "too late" for it to be included in that round of finance talks.

Cllr Doggart bluntly asked Paul Lawrence: "Can you tell me what went wrong?"

The reply offered was that it had taken council officers a significant amount of time to scrutinise and discuss the

options submitted and reach a “mutually acceptable proposal”.

The SNP said that London employs only 11 people in their equivalent bureau and so the proposal to have 10 employees in Edinburgh seemed excessive.

As well as a one year funding deal of £150,000 the council will continue to support the Edinburgh Convention Bureau with a member of council staff as at present.

**Some of the business partners who use and collaborate with Convention Edinburgh are supportive of the need for more funding for its permanent foundation.**

**Ahead of the full council meeting on Thursday, these partners who are involved in conferences and events in the capital, hope that they can change the minds of councillors and get more funding than the one year deal already approved.**

### ***Edinburgh Hotels Association***

Neil Ellis, Chair, Edinburgh Hotels Association (EHA) said: “As Chair of the Edinburgh Hotels Association, I am deeply disappointed by the committee’s decision to reject the proposal submitted which would have supported the ongoing operation of Edinburgh Convention Bureau, while still

acknowledging that funds would also be required and happily given by the private sector.

“Non domestic rate and bid levy contributions aside, this can already be evidenced with EHA over the last two years, making contributions in excess of £50,000 to support Edinburgh’s visitor economy. Whether that be directly to the Convention Bureau to help support sales missions or via Edinburgh Tourism Action Group (ETAG) to support the great work around the visitor economy action plan.

“For our member hotels, and indeed the wider hospitality sector, business events are essential. They drive significant room bookings and elevate demand for our services, especially outside the peak tourist seasons, contributing to a more sustainable, year-round economy. Furthermore, these events significantly bolster our knowledge economy, spotlighting the work of our academic institutions and innovation hubs. Most importantly however, they help secure permanent employment for thousands of dedicated hospitality professionals and allow new and continued investment into our offering for residents and visitors to enjoy.

“The decision to decline the proposal and instead offer significantly reduced funds for only a short period of time means that yet again the situation is not resolved, and I am sure we will once again be listening to these discussions later this year as the budgetary process for 2025/2026 begins. The short-term nature undermines the growth of local businesses and wastes decades of investment in the Convention Bureau service. I hope that this is considered when the full council meets on the 9<sup>th</sup> May and that they review the compelling business case which has been presented numerous times in recent years”.

# ***Edinburgh Airport***

Rob Lang, Head of Marketing, Edinburgh Airport said: “I am perplexed by the recent decision of the committee to reject the proposed funding model that would allow the Edinburgh Convention Bureau to continue its impactful work in a meaningful way for the city. This decision is particularly disconcerting as business events are a crucial component of the Edinburgh 2030 Tourism Strategy. These events attract year-round visitors who spend more than double that of international leisure tourists, a source of income on which many local businesses heavily depend.

“The rejected proposal would have delivered significant economic benefits for a relatively modest investment, offering direct advantages to numerous organisations throughout the city—not just to hotels where visitors sleep or venues where they meet. Visitors utilise our excellent tram system, spend money in local bars and restaurants, and stimulate the wider supply chain from local food suppliers to the city’s freelance community, who receive significant orders and work from servicing these events.

“By not supporting an adequately resourced bureau, Edinburgh risks once again becoming one of the few capitals in the world without such a facility, despite widespread recognition of its importance to a thriving economy. This stance hardly sends a positive signal to the associations and organisations eager to host their events and invest in our remarkable capital city, nor to the businesses and residents who work in this sector. There is a direct correlation between the extensive range of leisure, cultural, and travel options that residents enjoy and the guests who visit our city. A robust year-round economy, bolstered by visitors, is what makes these opportunities financially viable and available for us all to enjoy.”

# ***GainingEdge Consultants***

Lesley Williams, GainingEdge Consultants, and Past Managing Director of BestCities Global Alliance said: “Attracting international conferences is pivotal for Edinburgh’s growth and global recognition. As someone who has worked for international conference destinations, I’ve noticed two critical factors which Edinburgh seems to lack: the acknowledgment that business events offer more than just economic impact, and the absence of a well-established Convention Bureau.

“Business events are vital for Edinburgh’s aspiration to become a Fair Work City. They provide a unique platform for students and young professionals who might not otherwise have the opportunity to engage with international experts, showcase their work, and forge connections crucial for their future careers.

“As a pioneering city aiming to be globally connected, hosting international conferences showcases Edinburgh’s expertise gaining recognition as a world leader in key sectors, potentially attracting talent and investment.

“Attracting conferences demands diligent research, relationship-building by a team familiar with the conference landscape and targeting events that align with Edinburgh’s expertise and ambitions. Effective marketing and promotion is essential.

“Without these efforts, we deprive our students and young professionals of valuable training and development opportunities. We deny our residents the societal benefits that conferences generate, be it access to the latest research on a medical condition, changing government policy or influencing inward investment. We deny our brightest minds an opportunity to hear about the latest innovations in their field and connect with like-minded people.

“Investing in a Convention Bureau is crucial for Edinburgh to capitalise on the full potential of business events and their broader impact on education, innovation, and global connectivity.”

## ***Edinburgh Napier University***

Professor Gary Hutchison FRSB, Dean of Applied Sciences, at Edinburgh Napier University said: “Academic institutions and business events are vital cornerstones of Edinburgh’s economic and cultural landscape. They not only attract crucial investment and job opportunities but also foster innovation and societal advancement. However, the urgency lies in the fact that without effective collaboration, innovation, and knowledge exchange, Edinburgh risks losing its competitive edge in attracting international conferences.

“At the helm of fostering this essential synergy stands Convention Edinburgh. Serving as the nexus connecting suppliers, academia, and policy influencers, they fortify Edinburgh’s status as a beacon for international business events. Amplifying these endeavours is paramount to safeguard Edinburgh’s pre-eminence on the global stage.”

## ***En-Pointe Solutions***

Colin Horsburgh, Director, En-Pointe Solutions said: “In our capital, the accommodation and food services sector alone employs over 34,000 people, rivalling the education sector and closely following financial services. The business events sector creates many skilled roles that offer rewarding careers in complex areas, such as international event bidding. This work requires significant research, deep collaboration, and an understanding of diverse topics, ranging from Renewable Energy to Paediatric Oncology. Convention Edinburgh is effective in bringing together local experts to bid for and manage such events through its dedicated and knowledgeable team.



“The recent decision not to support the officer’s recommendations on the way forward for Edinburgh’s convention bureau was both surprising and disappointing. Since the guardianship’s announcement, the industry has worked collaboratively to regain footing and innovate. I had hoped the dedication and determination of the many individuals who gift their time would be acknowledged and supported.

“As this is due to be discussed again by the full council, I remain hopeful for reflection on the partnership work to date. It is imperative to find a way forward that recognises the roles of both the private sector and the city in sustaining this service, ultimately benefiting Edinburgh, our knowledge economy, and businesses of all sizes including ones such as mine, an Edinburgh based SME that works both nationally and internationally in this field. And of course, for the benefit of the dedicated professionals across the city who work in this sector.”

## Marketing Edinburgh

Convention Edinburgh was previously run by the council-owned Marketing Edinburgh which was dissolved in 2018 at a cost to the council of around £2 million.

It was in 2016 that Marketing Edinburgh reported the most successful year ever of activities by [Convention Edinburgh](#) – bringing £94.3 million to the city and 10,000 conference delegates.

Convention Edinburgh announced in late 2023 that VisitBritain would hold [their first Association Conference in Edinburgh](#) in February with a gala dinner at the National Museum of Scotland.



Calton Hill. Photo: Martin P. McAdam [www.martinmcadam.com](http://www.martinmcadam.com)