

## ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

Clerk of Council's Office  
Ascension Island  
South Atlantic Ocean  
ASCN 1ZZ



jane.disley@ascension.gov.ac

+ (247) 67000 ext 116

www.ascension.gov.ac

## Formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

1000 on Thursday 6 Feb 2020 at the Court House

### MINUTES

Present: HE Dr Philip Rushbrook, Governor  
HH Steven Chandler, Administrator  
Gareth Morris, Director of Resources  
Allen Cansick, Attorney General

Councillor Katharyn Chadwick  
Councillor Andrew Ellick  
Councillor Kitty George  
Councillor Andrew Hobson  
Councillor Alan Nicholls

In attendance: Xander Halliwell, Head of Administrator's Office  
Alasdair Bain, Policy Officer

Rob Cheeseman, Crown Counsel  
Jane Disley, Clerk of Council

#### 1. Welcome

The Administrator welcomed all parties and explained who was present for those attending by phone.

#### 2. Future of Hydroponics Operation

The Policy Officer provided a brief on the recent visit to AIG's hydroponics facility by Edward Whitton, a specialist agricultural colleague from St Helena Government's ANRD. Mr Whitton's review and analysis had fed into AIG's report on the farm which had been circulated prior to the meeting. The report contained background information on the operation, including practical challenges faced by the farm; financial information which showed it was yet to break even over its near four years of operation; and an indication that the facility had lacked strategic direction. The report also noted that the level of output had steadied following adaptations to growing processes, with more and better quality produce available as a result. However, the limited market for farm produce combined with the high cost of production due to the cost of utilities and labour meant there was no obvious way of adapting the operation to bring it to a position of breaking even. As such the cost of subsidising a loss-making operation set against the benefits it brought to Island residents needed to be considered. Councillors were asked their views on continuing this budget line for the 2020/21 financial year.

With some discussion between elected councillors, the consensus was that however unwelcome the costs the positive social impact for morale, health and wellbeing were vital. Cllr Hobson stood apart from the consensus in his view that the operation should ultimately close because there was no prospect of it breaking even. However, he conceded that this should not happen immediately but that the situation should be reassessed once the new practices that had been successful recently had bedded in. There was also some discussion about seeking support from other employing organisations, but for different reasons none were able to commit to doing so. The Administrator noted that although discussions had taken place with the utilities provider regarding the possibility of reducing the cost of utilities for the farm, it would not be possible to take this forward. Cllr Ellick suggested that whilst it may not be possible to gain agreement from the utility provider to supply utilities at a lesser cost than that which was already charged, non-monetary exchanges or offsets between the organisations could be explored.

It was agreed that despite there being little or no prospect of profitability, the operation should continue to operate through the financial year 2020/2021 in order to underpin island food supply and security. It was agreed AIG should aim to reduce costs where possible whilst improving productivity, being mindful however that any adaptations do not imperil the supply of produce. As a result, there was further discussion about how

to consolidate the recent improvements into effective future practices, such as exploring potential changes to the staffing and management structure with access to appropriate expertise and effective business and strategic planning. Other suggestions for consideration were to seek external funding support and consider partnership agreements or even privatisation, which would bring other risks. It was also suggested that produce from St Helena could be an option, but this was not viewed as a viable solution to addressing the issue of food supply and security since it would provide fresh food only for one week per month, also noting that the inter-island air service was primarily for civilian access and not freight. The Governor expressed caution about continuing such a loss-making operation given the wider context of AIG's finances. He suggested that the model was broken and that small changes would not be sufficient to make the level of difference necessary to break even. The Administrator acknowledged the Governor's reflection and noted that any decision by the Council would at least be made with eyes open to the full facts. Based on the view of the elected members of the Council he then confirmed that the budget line would continue into 2020/21 but that AIG would continue to review the farm operation and explore options to lessen the operating loss.

### **3. Approval of minutes**

The minutes of the previous formal meeting on 18 Dec were accepted and could now be published.

### **4. Matters arising**

The following matters arising from the actions tracker were addressed:

10 Oct Waste collection: Feedback on changes to the waste collection schedule would be addressed at the next informal meeting.

24 Oct Optician survey: The survey had been distributed by email with a response deadline of 29 Feb. Hard copies were available at the hospital for people with limited internet/computer access.

21 Nov Islander update: Councillors would meet to discuss their intentions and preferences for a regular item in the Islander covering topics of public interest or concern.

21 Nov Extra flights for school holiday time: Preferred Customer Agreement members had been asked to consider additional flights for the long school holiday next year. Responses from two members were still awaited.

18 Dec Food security plan: The Director of Resources confirmed that work had begun on a contingency plan should the Chandlery close at any time in the future. Initial liaison had taken place but other topics had taken priority recently so there was limited progress to report at present.

18 Dec Fishing during ship to shore operations: A meeting had taken place between relevant parties and procedures had been agreed to ensure safety would be paramount. As soon as these had been written into a formal policy it would be published and a three-ship trial could begin.

23 Jan Residency for A Level students: As a result of the urgency of budget preparations, work had not yet begun to determine changes in legislation that would be required to allow A Level students to remain on Ascension to the end of their course. However, it was noted that this matter was pressing for some families who had key decisions to make and so could not be delayed indefinitely.

### **5. Firearms Ordinance, 2020**

Crown Counsel had circulated in advance a memorandum and a draft Firearms Ordinance, draft regulations dealing with forms and fees and a draft Firearms Policy. All councillors agreed to recommend adoption of this Ordinance to the Governor, who was happy to accept the recommendation.

## **6. Island Council (Procedure) Rules 2020**

Crown Counsel had circulated in advance a memorandum and updated draft rules following feedback on the previous draft, together with a short draft ordinance to amend the Island Government (Ascension) Ordinance. He explained that a minor amendment to the Island Government (Ascension) Ordinance was necessary to correct an inconsistency concerning the number of elected members required to requisition a meeting. All councillors agreed to recommend the adoption of the Ordinance amendment and the Rules to the Governor, who was happy to accept the recommendation.

## **7. EU Withdrawal Agreement (Limited Application) Ordinance 2020**

It was confirmed that legislation for the UK's exit from the EU had been made in accordance with the recommendation sought from elected members via email on Monday 20 January. Crown Counsel also informed Council that the necessary subordinate legislation had been made to commence the Ordinance.

## **8. Runway Update**

The Administrator confirmed that the runway contract had been awarded to Fluor Amec II and would run from Jan 2020 to May 2022, although there was an aspiration to finish works by Feb 22. 130 contractors were expected to arrive from May onwards, along with 450 000 tonnes of plant and materials. Contractor numbers could rise to 200 at certain points. There would be a two-week scoping visit by the contractors in the second half of February during which they would engage with all relevant parties. A weekly teleconference was in place with the contractor, facilitated by the USAF, and a regular meeting between the USAF, RAF and AIG to understand potential project impacts and consider engagement with the public and other parties as necessary.

A question was raised about disruption to nesting turtles. Reassurance was given that the landing area for materials (Georgetown beach rather than Long Beach) had been selected to avoid the main turtle sites and the timing had been arranged such that unloading would begin after the end of the turtle season. AIG would monitor the operations and remind contractors of their obligations where necessary.

## **9. Any other business**

Several AOB points were raised:

a) UK/OTs Joint Ministerial Council. Preparations for the 23-25 March JMC were continuing. Councillors were encouraged to consider their issues and concerns for Cllr Nicholls to raise at the bilateral meeting with Lord Ahmad. The Governor advised that such opportunities to engage directly with British ministers were rare and it would be wise to focus on 2 or 3 points only, and deliver them in a positive context. Similarly, there would be an opportunity for each elected representative to speak during the various plenary sessions. AIG was working with Cllr Nicholls to help frame these.

b) Coronavirus advice. The Administrator advised that a public notice had been issued to provide the public with advice on how to protect themselves against the possible spread of infection. He confirmed that the relevant agencies were working together to minimise the risk. Although this was low, it was important not to become complacent. He explained that planning, should there be a case on island, would focus on isolation processes and would be managed by the SMO who had significant experience with contingency planning for contagious diseases. The Administrator also read a message from the UK's Chief Medical Officer who advised that Overseas Territories would not have epidemiological or health risk reasons to impose travel restrictions which go beyond those for the UK.

c) Emergency planning. Cllr Nicholls raised a series of questions surrounding emergency planning for Ascension. The Administrator responded, noting Cllr Chadwick had recently raised similar questions with him. He explained that there was an emergency planning group, but it had not met recently. This would be remedied and he would advise the Council of a meeting date which would be followed by a table top exercise. He explained that there were two strands to emergency planning and response on

Ascension. The first strand was for major incidents (including an aircraft crash) on the US and UK military bases. This was covered by the Joint Response Plan (JRP) jointly owned by the RAF and USAF which was tested every 4-5 months via a table top exercise in which AIG participated. The second strand was for major incidents off the military bases, such as a mass casualty event involving road vehicles, a severe weather event or a fire at the power station etc. This was covered by a Major Incident Plan (MIP) which was owned by the Police Inspector and was the focus of the emergency planning group. AIG of course had limited resources and if such an event were to occur and overwhelmed those resources it would seek the assistance of the RAF/USAF and other employing organisations to put in place a whole of island response. The key to risk assessments was to balance the likelihood/notice of an event with the potential impact and then match plans and resources accordingly. There had been work undertaken recently to improve resilience and planning including: recruitment to bring the police detachment up to full strength; the replacement of analogue radios with island wide capable digital radios; and establishing more fit-for-purpose Fire and Sea Rescue services (this work continued). Engagement with heads of the other organisations via the emergency planning group would lead to complementary disaster management planning.

**Action: Administrator to advise the Council of the date of the next emergency planning group meeting.**

d) Welfare Committee update. Cllr Chadwick advised that the Welfare Committee had met. She was working to simplify the draft terms of reference.

e) Clinic cancelled. Cllr George reported a complaint raised with her about a clinic that was cancelled while in progress because the SMO had to attend an urgent meeting at very short notice. Patients had asked if the second doctor could hold the clinic instead but were told this was not possible. The Administrator asked if the individual who had raised this with Cllr George had submitted a formal complaint to the hospital under the Medical Complaints Policy. Cllr George thought they had not done so. The Administrator suggested that more details would be needed in order to respond and Cllr George agreed to go back to the complainant.

**Clerk's note:** *The Administrator has since corresponded directly with Cllr George and recommended the individual submit a complaint using the established complaints process.*

f) Notice of formal meetings. Cllr Hobson asked if formal meetings were publicised. It was confirmed that notice was given for each formal meeting, both in the Islander and on the AIG noticeboard.

g) Employment Reform Working Group (ERWG). A date needed to be confirmed for the next meeting of the ERWG. Cllr George was due to be off island from 13 Feb to 19 Feb. No other dates were confirmed as unsuitable and agreement was reached that the meeting should be held as soon as possible after Cllr George's return.

**Clerk's note:** *Two dates were subsequently proposed. Friday 21 Feb has been confirmed.*

## 7. Date of next meetings

The proposed dates for the next three meetings are as follows:

- Informal – Thursday 5 Mar at 1630
- Formal – Tuesday 17 Mar at 1630
- Informal – Thursday 16 Apr at 1630
- Formal – Thursday 30 April at 1630

There was no further business and the meeting ended at 1120.

**J Disley**

Jane Disley

Clerk of Council