

ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

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Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

1630 on Thursday 5 March 2020 at the Court House

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: Steven Chandler, Administrator
Gareth Morris, Director of Resources
Rob Cheeseman, Crown Counsel
Councillor Katharyn Chadwick
Councillor Andrew Ellick
Councillor Kitty George
Councillor Andrew Hobson
Councillor Alan Nicholls

In attendance: Xander Halliwell, Head of Administrator's Office
Dee Baum, Director of Conservation & Fisheries
Wg Cdr John Kane, Commander AIB
Jane Disley, Clerk of Council

Apologies:

The matters arising were addressed via the actions tracker and current topics discussed were as follows: **Waste collection trial** (The Policy Officer would circulate a review later this month); **Food security contingency plan** (Liaison with local business owners/managers had been undertaken and relationships reaffirmed, via which future action could be taken if required. In the absence of any business plans to leave Ascension, little more could be progressed at this time. Cllr Ellick raised the idea of a board to consider new applications and their potential impact on existing businesses to ensure an even supply of products across the island and to stop unfair competition of product availability); **Fishing during ship to shore ops** (A policy and public notice would be prepared in time for the next ship on 20 Mar); **Additional flights** (There was insufficient interest from PCA members, but AIG would monitor and ask again at the next opportunity); **Optician survey** (The deadline had passed and results were being collated by the Hospital); **Residency of A-level students** (AIG had discussed changes in legislation that would be needed but now needed to explore wider inputs, eg FCO, EOs. Time was critical for this year's potential students so this would be done as expeditiously as possible); **Emergency planning** (The Administrator had collated extensive background information and provided it to the incoming Administrator who would take the action forward. The RAF and USAF undertake regular exercises of their Joint Response Plan which also involve AIG and other parties).

After matters arising, there was a comprehensive discussion about precautions against the potential arrival of coronavirus (COVID-19) on Ascension. The Administrator explained that AIG was acting in accordance with procedures advised from the UK Govt's Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Public Health England (PHE) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) and was regularly publicising information and advice to the community. The SMO also had continual liaison with professional colleagues to ensure the most up to date advice was available for the on-island coronavirus working group. Cllr Ellick expressed the view that the option to close our borders ought to be left on the table for consideration should the international situation worsen. The Administrator confirmed that AIG's response would change as the situation developed, but emphasised that *current* UK Govt/PHE/WHO advice was not to close borders. Although there was no option at present for testing for the virus on Ascension, it was understood testing facilities would soon be available on St Helena. The Administrator agreed to investigate whether or not testing for the virus on Ascension would be available in the future.

Wing Commander Kane (Commander Ascension Island Base) provided a short written **brief on the runway project** which he expanded on with additional detail. His primary message was that the project was a good thing although not without its challenges, which had been anticipated and planned for as much as possible. The runway project contractors had spent the previous two weeks on island meeting with essential personnel and had been very positive. He committed to maintaining dialogue with the contractors and the Council and to answering any further questions from Council members with any initial questions channelled through the Head of Administrator's Office.

The Director of Conservation & Fisheries (Dir Cons) provided some background information about the **Biosecurity Ordinance and policy** designed to prevent damage to public health, the economy and wildlife. Extensive consultation had taken place since the drafts had been presented to the Council in October and the updated versions reflected this. Discussion followed about the role of 'Director' identified in the draft Ordinance and clarification was provided that this would be an appointment fulfilled by an existing member of AIG (most likely Dir Cons), not a new position. However, it was felt that this might open the door to a new director-level position being required in future so it was agreed that the title be changed to emphasise that it was an appointment not a new post. Dir Cons explained that the biosecurity system would result in the reallocation of some staff time within the Conservation and Environmental Health Teams: prevention/limitation of invasive species would allow more efficient use of their time rather than dealing primarily with the consequences, as they do now, i.e. prevention is better than cure. She also explained that liaison with the main importers on island had indicated that they anticipated no additional costs since most already had adequate practices in place. The USAF was the exception and they had also asked for any inspections to be jointly carried out with AIG, which would be beneficial to both parties. The next stage after the Ordinance was to agree an MOU with the USAF, although some Council members felt this ought to have been scoped and drafted in advance. There was further discussion about whether or not now was the right time to proceed. Dir Res explained that early action would save AIG money in the longer term. Also, it would provide the legislative backing to ensure that importers, including the runway contractors, were complying and, if not, that action could be taken. It was agreed that councillors needed more time to review the lengthy documents and would pass their comments to Dir Cons and Crown Counsel by Friday 13 March. If possible Biosecurity would be included on the agenda for the next scheduled formal meeting. .

The Director of Resources (Dir Res) provided a summary of the recent Council **Finance Committee meeting** and explained three items had been approved to bring before the full Island Council. The proposals being brought to the formal Council meeting would be: an increase in the Business Levy, a Property Tax holiday for retailers and an Appropriation Ordinance to approve the 2020/21 Consolidated Fund and Development Fund budgets. Three councillors had discussed this as part of the Finance Committee, and the Dir Res now needed to ensure that the other two councillors had sufficient information to make a decision at the forthcoming formal Council meeting (comment: subsequently set for 11 March).

There were several items of **other business**: (i) there was discussion about the date for the formal meeting since too few councillors would be available on 17 Mar, so a new date would be agreed; (ii) a question was raised about the single-use plastics consultation and the Administrator confirmed that the Policy Officer would produce a draft policy based on the consultation; (iii) Cllr Hobson wanted it noted that Cllr Ellick had raised concerns at the 18 December meeting that an occasion of one AIG staff member allegedly using the AIG Guest house fridge to store eggs was symptomatic of wider AIG staff misappropriation of resources, but this had been omitted from the 18 December minutes and as such needed to be recorded. Cllr Ellick then went on to raise a concern that he felt AIG email accounts were being used for private business gain though it was explained that the example he provided was in fact for a community event and there had been no personal gain. The Administrator said he would look at any evidenced examples if presented to him; (iv) After concerns were raised to her about returning residents having travelled from Italy, Cllr George asked what measures were in place at Patrick AFB to screen for coronavirus. The HoAO explained that PAFB was undertaking screening checks, but that since Italy was a category 2 country travellers need only take action if they developed symptoms within 2 weeks; (v) Cllr George raised a request from a member of the public to put a solar light in the children's playground in Two Boats; this would be passed to the Operations & Facilities Directorate for consideration.

The meeting closed at 1905.

J Disley

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