



Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

1630 on Thursday 20 Aug 2020 at the Court House

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: Sean Burns, Administrator
Gareth Morris, Director of Resources
Rob Cheeseman, Crown Counsel
Councillor Andrew Ellick
Councillor Kitty George
Councillor Alan Nicholls

In attendance: Xander Halliwell, Head of Administrator's Office [by phone]
Farah Quinn, Head Teacher
Jane Disley, Clerk of Council
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk of Council [Designate]

Apologies:

The Administrator advised that no nominations had been received for the by-election due to take place on 3 Sep so the election was declared void. A new election would need to be arranged and after some discussion it was agreed that this should be as soon as possible while adhering to the requirements of the ordinance. There was also some discussion about how to motivate people to participate, both as candidates and as voters. He also took the opportunity to thank Cllr Hobson for his work on the Council.

The Administrator confirmed that all had seen the recent press release about the next humanitarian flight from/to the UK. Questions were raised and answered about segregation of passengers while on the aircraft. The Administrator also highlighted the potential demand for the 'Christmas flight' and confirmed that the aspiration was to maintain a 6-weekly charter until the regular international flight schedule had resumed.

The Head Teacher briefed the Council on the current situation with regard to **options for post-16 education** and her plans for the future. She explained that there were currently two academic routes for students: self-guided study with tutor support which required students to be highly self-motivated; and Tute Education who provide online classes with tutor support and are currently being used by St Helena. Each option had pros and cons. The non-academic option was the existing YTS placement supported by accreditation where possible. NVQs had been investigated but were prohibitively expensive and better done via employers. Careers planning had been undertaken with current year 11 pupils and had been initiated for next year's cohort. There was some discussion about relative costs of academic and non-academic options and about Ascension's eligibility for pre and post-graduate allowances/scholarships.

The matters arising were addressed via the actions tracker and current topics discussed were as follows:

- **AIG switchboard** The switchboard machine had been investigated with a view to updating the message, but it was not possible to do so and the machine could not easily be fixed. Sure would quote for a replacement.
- **MPA Management Plan** The Dir Cons & Fisheries had had a meeting with elected members to update them on progress with the MPA Mgt Plan. A paper had also been circulated about recommendations from the Inshore Fisheries Advisory Committee about an inshore fisheries policy. This topic would need to be discussed at a later date.

Minutes from the recent **Public Works Committee** had been circulated ahead of the meeting. There was some discussion about options for capital works projects for next year and it was confirmed that the feasibility study on future options for the sewerage treatment plants would take place this year. A new chair for the public works committee would need to be found but all agreed to wait until new councillors had been elected.

There was an update from HoAO about **coronavirus** (COVID-19) on Ascension. The UK Govt was still supplying Ascension with testing kits and other medical supplies, Ascension being one of only 4 OTs still to receive such support. The new emphasis was on testing now that equipment and consumables had arrived. Currently testing was only carried on people who were symptomatic, but AIG was exploring possibilities for testing at the beginning and end of quarantine following bespoke advice from Public Health England. The O2 compressor had arrived and would now need to be set up by the Operations team.

HoAO provided an **update on the runway project**. He confirmed that ships to bring in equipment and aggregate had now been scheduled for 27 October and 16 November respectively. The new supplier of aggregate had been confirmed but they had not yet advised on their preferred method of off-load. Work to start to break up the runway would not begin until March/April 2021 so the interim focus would be on staging and preparation eg marshalling manpower, utilities and equipment.

The Director of Resources provided information on the **FY2020/2021 Q1 forecast**. On the whole the news was positive with operational spending lower and revenue higher than the approved budget. COVID-related spending was within the approved Special Warrant limit. The current forecast would still result in a deficit position, and the longer term forecast still showed a steady decline of reserves, albeit now at a slower than anticipated rate. However, work was ongoing to slow the trend via improving revenue streams and identifying efficiencies. A brief discussion followed about membership of the Finance Committee but all agreed to wait until new Council members had been elected. A brief discussion followed about the need for a 5-year budget forecast. The Administrator confirmed that the FCO had re-engaged on the Future of Ascension work and the Minister was still keen to visit; while COVID limitations remained this might inevitably be a virtual visit in the short term comprising online meetings with key people. A new FCO desk officer for Future of Ascension work had been appointed recently [Luke Atkinson].

There were several items of **other business**:

- (i) **MPA Endowment Fund:** The Administrator confirmed that the MPA Endowment Fund lump sum of £2m had been received by Blue Marine. Elected Council members had met with the Director of Conservation and Fisheries to discuss how the interest could be best distributed. The aspiration was for community projects to benefit, perhaps via a community-led group, possibly involving representatives from each employing organization. Rather than having to wait for interest to accrue over the year an advance payment would be made. Further research and discussion was needed to determine the best way to propose, select and manage projects.
- (ii) **Rodents:** Cllr Nicholls reported complaints about rodents again, especially in Two Boats. This would be looked into.
- (iii) **Sea Rescue Boat:** Cllr Ellick raised the topic again of use of the Sea Rescue boat, although he accepted that the Police had addressed the previous concerns raised through the Councillor Enquiry Form. After some discussion about the need for that explanation to be shared with community members raising questions and concerns, the Administrator advised that the Ascension Island Council was not the appropriate forum for dealing with them. In the first instance queries should be raised with the Police whose remit included management of the Sea Rescue team and its equipment. If that did not satisfy the enquirer they could bring it direct to AIG via the Administrator's Office.

The meeting closed at 1818.

J Disley

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Clerk of Council