

ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

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Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

1630 on Thursday 01 Oct 2020 at the Court House

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: HE Dr Philip Rushbrook, Governor
HH 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
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk of Council

Apologies:

In relation to the recent press interest in the UK surrounding reports that the UK government was considering setting up asylum centres outside the UK on Ascension Island. The Administrator advised Council that they have been invited to attend a meeting with the Shadow Home and Shadow FCDO Ministers, as well as Chair of the Home affairs committee, Yvette Cooper. It was left with elected members as to what level of engagement they wished to undertake, with the Administrator adding that if they had concerns, elected members could write to Ministers directly if they so wish.

The Administrator thanked former Clerk of Council Jane Disley for her work in supporting the Ascension Island Council over the past 2 years and wished her well for the future.

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

- **AIG switchboard:** The switchboard message has now been updated with the latest list of employees, titles and extensions numbers. The intention is to update the entire system, for which Sure are currently working to provide a quotation.
- **Rodents:** The Environmental Health team have increased their rat control activities putting out baited boxes around the settlements, main roads and the dump. The Environmental Health team will continue to monitor this to ensure they are taking sufficient action to keep numbers in check. The current high level of rodents is expected due to a seasonal surge.
- **Scholarship Grants:** The Education Directorate on St Helena has confirmed that local scholarships are available on St Helena, with the criteria being that students should be resident on St Helena two years prior to their application, and must have successfully completed full time Year 13 studies at Prince Andrew School.
- **Illuminations of Flags:** The lighting at the Naval Flagstaff is working, however, it needs some directional adjustments to be made. The type of lighting required for the Ascension Island flag outside of Government House, is not typically stocked by the AIG. Procurement is currently being looked into.

The HoAO provided an update about **coronavirus** (COVID-19) on Ascension. With the influx of runway contractors arriving to the island, the AIG has now implemented a two-stage testing system on island. New arrivals will be tested 72 hours prior to departing their originating country, 72 hours after arriving on Ascension Island and again on day 12 of isolation. We have recently had our first 2 positive cases of Covid-19 on Ascension Island where the alert level was raised to Level 2 Red, however, after investigation by the SMO and PHE, and following further testing, it was concluded that these positives were likely remnants of an old Covid-19 infection. Ultimately the two subjects were not actively shedding any virus and the response level returned to Level 1 Amber. The HoAO encouraged Councillors to provide feedback on the communication of the escalation and de-escalation of the alert level. Following some discussion, it was explained that the current 3 tiered response enabled sufficient flexibility and will remain in place with the guidance being issued again for clarity to all islanders.

The HoAO gave an update on the arrival of **medical supplies** and testing kits to the island, confirming that supplies from the UK Government were expected to continue to arrive until March 2021, with a stock level designed to last until Dec 2021. In an effort to preserve the number of available test cartridges, the AIG is working under guidance

from PHE to pool samples taken from small group bubbles with one test for the group. Individual tests would be completed if a bubble indicates a positive.

The HoAO provided an update on the **runway project**. He confirmed that newly arrived runway contractors were undergoing compulsory isolation at Bedford House, as well as Travellers Hill and the USAF Base. The HoAO went on to explain that the first pieces of plant and equipment for the runway project were offloaded over the weekend along with a 90 foot barge, currently moored up in Clarence Bay. He confirmed that ships bringing in the bulk of the remaining equipment are scheduled for 03 November 2020 and 15 November 2020. The aggregate ships are currently forecast to arrive in January. Fluor have submitted initial haul route plans to the AIG, although an agreed route is yet to be confirmed whilst taking into consideration the community impact. Copies of the planned route were distributed.

Councillor Nicholls attended the first Sherpa meeting for the proposed virtual **Joint Ministerial Council** planned for November 2020 and provided feedback to Council on the four suggested key areas planned for the agenda. A brief discussion was had about the future partnership with the EU, although not impacting Ascension hugely, the Councillors agreed to offer their support to the other Overseas Territories. The Administrator added that virtual bilateral meetings will be available with the various Ministers and it was suggested it may be a good opportunity for more than one Councillor to attend. Councillors plan to meet prior to the JMC to discuss whether there are any further agenda items they wish to add.

Crown Counsel provided an update on implementation of the **Biosecurity Ordinance**, highlighting three pieces of draft secondary legislation. Crown Counsel explained that these were technical pieces of legislation necessary to bring the Ordinance into force. Crown Counsel explained the draft legislation to Council, including flagging a minor change to the way in which commercially –packaged seeds will be dealt with. Some discussion was had with regards to animals being imported from places other than the UK and St. Helena, Crown Counsel agreed to pass feedback onto the Director of Conservation and Fisheries. Crown Counsel informed Council that the intention is to bring the administrative machinery of the Ordinance into force after the next formal meeting so that officers can be appointed and so on, and the for remaining provisions to be brought into force on 2 November. Finally, Councillors were given a draft of the intended fees associated with the import of live animals under the Biosecurity Ordinance – (note that these will remain the same as the current fees)

Crown Counsel provided details regarding **Public Holidays** planned for 2021, pointing out that Ascension Day in 2021 falls on Thursday 13 May and advising that Councillors may wish to propose to the Governor at the next Formal meeting that it be observed on Friday 14 May instead.

The Administrator confirmed the **by-election** was planned for the 12 November 2020 and that several nominations had been received. Councillors were reminded that the deadline for nominations was the 28 October 2020.

The Director of Resources provided an update on **Two Boats School** since the departure of the Head Teacher, Farah Quinn. Interim arrangements had been made to cover the Head Teacher role until a longer term solution was agreed; this will be discussed at the Governors meeting planned for 07 October 2020. With the departure of Ms Nicholson due at the end of October 2020, recruitment for a specialist maths teacher had taken place and will start in time for the January 2021 term on a 7 month contract before the permanent replacement starts in August 2021.

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

- (i) **Single use plastics:** Councillor Nicholls raised the importation and use of single use plastics on the island following the consultation process that was completed last year. After a brief discussion the Administrator agreed to ask the Policy Officer to provide an update at a future meeting.
- (ii) **Budget:** Councillor Ellick highlighted that an update on the financial budget should be a standing agenda item. The Director of Resources agreed to provide a Q2 update at the next meeting.
- (iii) **Special fund request:** The Director of Resources explained that he would be making a request to the Governor for a Special Fund to be created so that income and expenditure associated with the provision of services in support of the runway project could be managed separately from day-to-day Government spending.
- (iv) **Statement of expenditure in excess:** The Director of Resources explained there would also be a request for the Governor to approve a Statement of Expenditure in Excess due to a revision of the initial agreed budget

following the review of salaries across the AIG. The overall budget and forecast positions had not changed, however, the impact on certain Accounting Areas requires different projected budget amounts.

The meeting closed at 18:07

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk of Council