

ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

Clerk of Council's Office
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Formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

17:00 on Thursday 26 August 2021 at the Courthouse

MINUTES

Present:	HE Mr Greg Gibson, Acting Governor [remotely] HH Xander Halliwell, Acting Administrator Allen Cansick, Attorney General [remotely] Gareth Morris, Director of Resources	Councillor Alan Nicholls Councillor Kitty George Councillor Andrew Ellick Councillor Nicholas John
In attendance:	Luke Atkinson, FCDO Desk Officer Robert Cheeseman, Crown Counsel [remotely]	Siobhan Stewart, Clerk of Council
Apologies:	HH Mr Sean Burns, Administrator HE Dr Philip Rushbrook, Governor	

1. Welcome

The Acting Administrator welcomed all parties and explained who was present for those attending remotely.

2. Approval of Minutes

Decision: The minutes of the Formal Council meeting held on 15 July 2021 were accepted with two feedback comments received. In accordance with the Council Rules these had already been agreed by Council members and published on 30 July 2021.

Decision: The summary of the Informal Council meeting held on 12 August 2021 was accepted, with no feedback comments received. In accordance with the Council Rules the summary had already been agreed by Council members and published on 17 August 2021.

3. Matters arising

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

- **Animal Welfare [pets]:** The DoR explained that a Public Notice had been distributed asking the public for expressions of interest in having the vet visit Ascension Island, adding that whilst it now currently looks unlikely that the vet will be able to visit due to work commitments on St Helena it was clear that there is strong public demand for the vet to visit Ascension Island. Travel options are now being considered for December 2021. Councillor John requested an update on the Policy and Ordinance on Animal Welfare, recommending mandatory health check-ups for domestic animals to warrant the best use of the visiting veterinarian and ensuring the welfare of animals. The Acting Administrator requested that this enquiry be submitted through a Councillor Enquiry Form to allow thorough consideration and response. Councillor George explained that in previous years the condition and health of sheep in Two Boats was raised and meetings were held with residents of Two Boats where several options around their welfare was discussed. Councillor George suggested that if the vet were to visit Ascension Island, perhaps they can perform health checks on the feral sheep and donkeys also. The Acting Administrator explained that consideration would need to be given to the funding of the health checks on the feral animals. Councillor John noted that the Policy Officer had previously provided an extensive report on animal welfare, the Acting Administrator agreed to recirculate the document to Councillors.

- **Single-use Plastics:** A memo will be provided to Councillors ahead of the next informal meeting scheduled for the 23 September 2021, where the Policy Officer was invited to attend.
- **Connection Issues with telecommunications in the Courthouse:** Internet has now been installed in the Court House and is working. It was agreed that this would remain on the Actions Tracker until the accompanying equipment such as video conferencing and sounds systems were installed.
- **Explore the options/measure that may be enforced regarding the dumping of fish waste at the pier head:** The Director of Conversation and Fisheries has recently returned to the island; internal discussions are on-going the between DoCF, Crown Counsel and the Policy Officer.
- **Schuyler Ferry Service:** A Public Notice will be distributed in the next week reiterating the Schuyler Ferry Service times, as well as updating the consolidated list of boat owners.

4. Coronavirus update [standing item]

The Acting Administrator provided an update about **coronavirus** (COVID-19). There are three cases of COVID-19 in compulsory isolation that were picked up during routine testing following a recent flight from Turkey, resulting in the island remaining at level 2 ORANGE of the COVID-19 Response Protocol. They have since been individually isolated and will continue to be monitored throughout their isolation periods, however they are currently in good health generally and have little to no COVID-19 symptoms. The Acting Administrator explained that all COVID-19 cases from the most recent A400 flight have now made a full recovery, as well as the sick seaman who is now housed on the island and is awaiting a flight to their country of origin.

The vaccination percentage on island remains high, with many now arriving to the island having already received both vaccinations. He emphasised the importance of maintaining a vaccination level of above 80% of the total population, adding that the current stock of vaccines on island will expire at the end of August 2021 with the UK Government committing to continuing to supply Ascension Island. Councillor John requested an update on vaccination availability for 12-18 year olds. The Acting Administrator explained that there are currently no plans to roll out the AstraZeneca vaccine to 12-18 year olds as it has not yet been through the multi-level UK approval process and ultimate recommendation by UK Government.

Councillor Nicholls conveyed concerns over recent reports of the vaccines diminishing efficacy over time and asked if booster vaccination jabs were being considered for Ascension Island. The Acting Administrator explained that the UK government are considering boosters, with a number of discussions already taking place. It is unknown at this time what dosage will be required, with several versions being considered, highlighting that most of the second doses on island were administered around April/May 2021 time. Councillor Nicholls explained that for passengers travelling six months after their second dose, reports claim that the efficacy is reduced by 50%, unless boosters were to be received before then.

The Acting Administrator explained that letters detailing patients date, batch and type of vaccination are being provided by Georgetown Hospital upon departure from the island and have been accepted by GP's, UK Border Force and the NHS. Councillor Nicholls highlighted that whilst the letters are useful, they offer no health benefit to persons who are travelling six months after their second dose.

Councillor Nicholls explained that there is a degree of concern in the community regarding the number of positive COVID-19 cases that have recently arrived on the island, despite pre-departure testing. The Acting Administrator explained that whilst pre-departure testing is mandatory it remains a possibility that people can still catch the virus before they fly, bearing in mind that the AIG cannot enforce pre-departure quarantine in the UK. Arrival testing at Ascension Island forms a triple stage process, with testing on the day of arrival, day two and on day eight or 10, adding that the most recent cases were likely to have spread within the initial bubble due to the group isolation dynamic within their isolation accommodation. Councillor George shared her concerns regarding the planned reduction of compulsory isolation to one day in St Helena, noting that during a recent flight a passenger tested negative 72 hours prior to the flight, negative on the day before the flight, negative on arrival to Ascension Island, then tested positive several days later. Councillor Nicholls acknowledged that this is a St Helena policy; however it will impact Ascension Island due to the travel corridor agreement.

The Acting Administrator explained that to activate the travel corridor passengers must have been on St Helena for a minimum of 14 days before travel to Ascension Island. Councillor George highlighted that risk still remains if someone were to travel from the UK to St Helena, completing their one day quarantine period and then tested positive some days later following contact with members of the community that have since returned to Ascension after a period. The Acting Administrator explained that with comprehensive contact tracing systems in place in both St Helena and Ascension Island, any potential cases would be picked up on very quickly, although this is something that will be considered and discussed in more detail in the future.

Councillor Ellick stressed the need for a plan to be in place for vaccinating the 12-18 year old category in the imminent future. The Acting Administrator explained that following the successful adult vaccination roll out on island, it would likely be run in the same way as previous rounds from Georgetown Hospital. Councillor Ellick explained the need for an economical and cost effective approach, proposing that consideration should be given to sending this age category to St Helena to have the vaccine when it becomes available. The Acting Administrator explained there remained logistical and pack size challenges around the varying vaccines. Councillor George suggested bulk ordering with St Helena to prevent wastage and fly the vaccine amount required for the island to the Island with the remainder staying in St Helena. Councillor George went on to express how impressed she has been thus far with the level of planning and response to COVID-19 on both St Helena and Ascension Island and is confident that planning is already happening. The Acting Administrator offered reassurance that conversations were already taking place between the AIG, PHE, St Helena and the FCDO regarding the vaccination of 12-18 year olds.

Councillor Ellick asked if a policy was being considered to ensure persons coming to Ascension Island have already received both their vaccinations. The Acting Administrator explained that whilst this has been raised and considered previously it is essential that the availability of the vaccine is abundant enough that people can readily access it in Ascension's countries of recruitment. Additionally, legislative and policy work would be required whilst maintaining the administering of vaccinations in Ascension Island. The US Department of Defense had recently announced that they will require employees and contractors to be double vaccinated, making up approximately one third of the island. Councillor Ellick recommended a more proactive approach, streamlining recruitment to countries where vaccines were readily available to protect Ascension. Councillor John recommended that guidelines are provided to passengers who are planning to travel to Ascension, specifically around isolating and restricting contact in large public gatherings following a negative pre-departure test. The Crown Counsel noted however that the guidelines would be unenforceable and so you may find people not adhering.

5. Runway project update [standing item]

The Acting Administrator provided an update on the runway project, reporting of continuing unfavourable swell conditions meaning offloading operations have slowed. The Acting Administrator confirmed that the contractors have offloaded 56% of the aggregate that arrived on the ship currently in harbour, with a departure date of around the 15 September 2021. To allow the contractors to make best use of the more favourable sea conditions, permission was granted to allow exceptional out of hours working on the most recent two Sundays. A separate request has been submitted for out of hours working to be granted for Monday 30 August 2021. The Acting Administrator sought feedback from Councillors on their view of out of hours working. Councillors supported the allowing the contractors to work on Monday 30 August 2021, adding that there has been minimal disruption to the community and as long as consideration is being given to the contractors working hours around Health and Safety, that they would like to see the runway completion as a priority. The Acting Administrator thanked Council for their feedback. Finally the Acting Administrator explained that the next Turkish Charter flights are expected on 09 September and 03 October 2021.

6. Any other business

- **Employment Legislation:** Councillor George requested a progress update on the Employment Legislation, whilst conveying the continuing need and importance of the legislation on Island. The Acting Administrator explained that it has been gazetted and work to draft an initial proposal for an implementation plan in underway, however this is a large piece of work that takes time.

- **Luggage allowance:** Councillor Ellick noted that passengers due to travel on the September Titan shuttles have been asked to only carry hand luggage and ship their standard sized hold luggage on the MV Helena arriving one week later. Councillor Ellick requested clarity regarding who was meeting the costs of shipping the luggage on the MV Helena and whether the same was being considered for the November 2021 and January 2022 flights. The DoR explained that the AIG would be meeting the costs of shipping passengers hold luggage for the September flights only at the moment, highlighting that this would be subsidised by the extra passengers on the flight. The DoR added that amid the weather issues in St Helena and the limited flexibility of the Titan Service consideration was being given to using Air Link as a one off solution if there were to be further cancellations.
- **Recruitment:** The DoR provided an update on recruitment of a new Director of Operations and Facilities and a new Crown Counsel, both of which are progressing well.

There was no further business and the meeting ended at 18:20

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk of Council

I certify that this is a true record of the meeting to which it relates.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sean Burns', is written on a light-colored background.

Sean Burns
On behalf of HE The Acting Governor, Mr Greg Gibson