

ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

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Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

17:00 on Thursday 23 September 2021 at the Courthouse

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: HH Sean Burns, Administrator
Gareth Morris, Director of Resources
Councillor Andrew Ellick
Councillor Alan Nicholls
Councillor Douglas Miller

In attendance: Rob Cheeseman, Crown Counsel [Remotely]
Alasdair Bain, Policy, Projects and Communications Officer
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk to Council
Apologies: Councillor Kitty George
Councillor Nicholas John

The Administrator welcomed all parties and thanked everyone for attending. The Administrator reported that HMS Protector was visiting Ascension Island. The vessel and her crew were undertaking important surveys and patrols on behalf of the Ascension Island and UK governments for the long-term benefit of the island. The crew of HMS Protector will be running tours of the ship, assisting with local conservation and heritage projects and engaging with the community at a number of social events. It was a real boost to see the Royal Navy in Ascension's waters and AIG would be doing what it could to help make the visit a success.

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

- **Animal Welfare [pets]:** It was confirmed that a seat has been reserved on the January 2022 Titan shuttle in the hope that circumstances will allow the vet to visit Ascension Island.
- **Single-use Plastics:** The PPC Officer was in attendance to provide an update to Councillors.
- **Connection Issues with telecommunications in the Courthouse:** The Director of Resources reported that the AIG network is now working although audio and visual equipment is still being considered for procurement.
- **Explore the options/measure that may be enforced regarding the dumping of fish waste at the pier head:** The PPCO provided a brief background on the topic, explaining that following internal prevention measures being put in place the AIG has not received any further reports of fish waste being dumped into the sea from the bin provided at the pier head. It was agreed that this item would now be removed from the actions tracker.
- **Schuyler ferry service to and from the Pierhead:** A Public Notice will be distributed before the next formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council reiterating the Schuyler Ferry Service times, as well as updating the consolidated list of boat owners.
- **Single-use Plastics Memo to be provided to Council ahead of the next informal meeting:** Memo sent to Councillors on 20 September 2021.
- **Circulate previous Animal Welfare documents created by PPCO to Councillors:** Documents sent to Councillors on 20 September 2021.
- **Progress of Employment Legislation and estimated timeline requested:** The Implementation Schedule is currently being finalised. A meeting of the ERWG [Employment Reform Working Group] was offered to discuss timelines, however Councillors requested that this be communicated via email, to which the PPCO agreed.
- **Clerk of Council to send CEF [Councillor Enquiry Form] to Councillor George regarding vet check-ups and funding for feral animal:** CEF sent to Councillor George 01 September 2021. Discussion ensued regarding donkeys on island and the management options that have previously been considered by Council and the AIG. Councillor Ellick suggested fencing around Georgetown to keep the donkeys out of town and creating a

feeding area away from town. Further discussion was had regarding where the responsibility lay for the welfare of the donkeys overall and the resources available.

- **Clerk of Council to send CEF to Councillor John regarding the possibility of mandatory health checks on domestic animals:** CEF sent to Councillor John 31 August 2021.

The PPCO provided an update on the current **COVID-19** status of the island. They highlighted that following further discussions with expert colleagues in Public Health England proposal had been developed for recognising convalescent COVID-19 individuals (i.e. those who have recovered from a recent COVID-19 infection) in the territory's COVID-19 protocols and procedures. A draft policy paper on this issue was shared with Councillors on 17 September, detailing proposals to consider recent recovery from a confirmed COVID-19 illness when determining what protocols to apply in regard to the isolation of arrivals. The advice received from PHE (Public Health England) is that for someone who has had COVID-19 in the last 28 days there is a negligible chance of them catching COVID-19 again. The PPCO explained that for an individual to be considered as convalescent COVID-19 they would need to provide evidence that they had recovered from COVID-19 within the last 28 days. In order to establish that they had recovered from COVID-19, a positive PCR test result from within the last 28 days would be needed, and as with other person travelling to Ascension, they would need to produce a negative pre-arrival and negative arrival test. The PPCO explained that if the individual is able to provide the documented evidence as described to the satisfaction of the SMO then, absent other factors, that individual is unlikely to be considered to pose a risk of passing on the virus to others. In that case, the requirement for that individual to isolate, or to continue to isolate, could be removed without undermining the effectiveness of the overall system of managing arrivals to the territory. Applying the same logic, the PPCO also confirmed that for individuals who provide a positive test in Ascension and then produce two negative tests within a 72 hour period, they will no longer be considered to pose a risk to public health and will therefore have their isolation period ended. Councillor Nicholls conveyed some concern over the community perception and concern over the change in policy, especially with different countries having different rules. Councillor Nicholls conveyed the importance of ensuring the message is communicated to the community in a clear and straightforward manner. The PPCO explained that they have met with employing organisations to explain the decision making process and science behind it, and as with all COVID-19 measures a public communications campaign would accompany the changes. It was agreed that employers would be approached and offered the opportunity for the SMO (Senior Medical Officer) to attend their workplaces to provide a question and answer session, as they have done previously, if wanted. Councillor Ellick expressed concern over the policing of arrivals being released at different times and the challenges this may bring in capturing any potential breaches of quarantine. The Administrator explained that any suspected breaches of quarantine should be reported to the Police in the first instance. Councillor Ellick requested clarity over the COVID-19 rules for England being imposed here on Ascension. The PPCO explained that whilst the organisation is called PHE (Public Health England) the advice received is specific to questions posed by AIG officials. Councillor Ellick requested details on how the variants will affect the decision making. The PPCO explained that all COVID-19 protocols and procedures are kept under constant review and will therefore be adapted to reflect any developments in the understanding of new variants of concern and impacts on the efficacy of vaccines. They noted that as it stands all COVID-19 specific entry control measures are underpinned by the condition detailed in the *Policy on the Isolation on Arrival of Persons Travelling from Affected Areas* continuing to be met (e.g. 80% of the eligible population being fully vaccinated).

Councillor Nicholls requested an update on the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccination and the potential of booster vaccinations being offered in Ascension. The PPCO noted that the UK government is now implementing a programme of booster vaccinations for those aged 50 years and over, based on a recent PHE study which indicated some waning of vaccine efficacy in those aged 50 years who have serious co-morbidities (i.e. older high-risk individuals with other serious health conditions). Discussions remain ongoing with Public Health England but an initial commitment has been made to provide Ascension with a further supply of vaccines, albeit this time this is likely to be the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. A booster vaccination programme will begin shortly after delivery has taken place, which is expected to be around November or December. The PPCO explained that the level of supply is still to be determined but it is hoped that authorities will be able to offer it to every adult who has already been vaccinated as a booster, to anyone who has not been vaccinated and to those who have only received partial vaccination. Current advice from JCVI (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation) and PHE is that a one dose vaccination programme for 12-17 year olds can take place, whilst monitoring of data elsewhere continues ahead of a formal recommendation on administering the second dose of Pfizer to this cohort. Councillor Ellick asked whether there were any concerns over the mixing of different brands of vaccines. The PPCO explained that

if you were to have AstraZeneca for your first two vaccinations and Pfizer as a booster, the efficacy is just as good (if not better) than having all doses from the same brand of vaccine.

Finally the PPCO explained that this year's flu vaccination programme will go ahead as in previous years. Councillors offered their support in encouraging the community to attend for their flu vaccine.

The Administrator offered his thanks to the PPCO for all his hard work and dedication over the last 20 months in protecting Ascension Island from COVID-19, Councillors also passed on their gratitude.

The PPCO provided a brief update to Council on the previous work to date on the **restriction on sale and distribution of certain single-use plastic products**. Following the formation of a small working group in 2018 to look over the issue of single-use plastics in Ascension, the group developed a proposal to restrict the import, sale and distribution of up to 10 single-use plastics items which were most commonly found washed up on beaches in Europe (as this was the main market of supply of these items to Ascension). Both informal and formal consultations took place in 2018 and 2019. Island businesses were supportive of the draft proposals, although it was noted that sufficient lead-in time would be required to allow their operations to sufficiently adapt to the new rules and regulations. With the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020, AIGs scarce policy and legal resources were necessarily diverted to focus on this critical work stream, ultimately halting the process on single-use plastics policy making. The PPCO requested a steer from Council as to whether or not elected members still wish to pursue this policy. In recognition of the environmental damage posed by the ongoing importation and usage of single use plastics and the newly designated Marine Protected Area Councillors offered their support for the policy initiative to continue, especially ahead of COP26 later this year. Councillor Nicholls highlighted the international importance of taking action on the use of single-use plastics, noting that people are very mindful on Ascension of this issue and are in some instances moving away voluntarily from single-use plastics. Councillor Miller offered his support to the initiative, especially around the use of non-recyclable water bottles. Councillor Ellick explained that with Ascension's main importing countries moving away from single-use plastics it may ultimately be a decision that is made by the restrictions enforced on manufacturers in the UK and USA. Councillor Ellick explained that whilst he supports the initiative he would not like to see other important work the PPCO was involved in be put on hold, such as the progress of Employment Law Legislation and COVID-19, as a result of diverting attention to this. The PPCO therefore agreed to take this away and consider potential options to take this forward.

The Director of Resources explained to Council that the Constitution requires estimates of revenue and expenditure to be produced for each financial year, and that an **Appropriation Ordinance** is passed in order to authorise spend against agreed budgets. The DoR explained that following discussion within the Finance Committee three additional capital projects and purchases have been identified and put forward for immediate funding, therefore requiring a supplementary appropriation of funds totalling £106,000. The DoR provided an overview of where the funds would be spent, with £47k on a new school mini bus, £34k to fund a replacement water tank for potable and salt water, £15k on necessary improvements required for the Dental Clinic to align with current UK clinical standards regarding cross infection control and radiation protection, and finally £10k for dental equipment to support the improvements sought for the clinic. The DoR explained that a separate business case for the Two Boats School playground likely to be funded using grant from the European Development Fund. Councillor Nicholls and Councillor Ellick offered their support for all requests.

The Administrator gave an update on the **runway project** reporting that the project is progressing well with the completion date still estimated to be by the end of 2022. The third ship of aggregate has arrived with a fourth ship expected before the end of 2021.

There was six items of **other business**:

- i. **Electoral Register:** The Provisional Electoral Register was published on 06 September 2021, as a result, a small number of amendments have been made. The updated register, which will be valid from 01 November 2021 to 31 October 2022 will be published shortly.
- ii. **Joint Ministerial Council:** Councillor Nicholls and the PPCO will be in attendance at the JMC in London on 15 – 17 November 2021.
- iii. **Green Mountain Infrastructure:** Work is scheduled for next week on the mountain road. The DoR explained that road barrier safety and playground equipment is being quoted prior to planned procurement. Councillor Nicholls requested an update on the future plans for the Red Lion building, highlighted that following a substantial refurbishment the building appears to have been underutilised and

at risk of deterioration. The Garden Cottage refurbishment business case has been completed.

- iv. **Conservation Fund:** Councillor Ellick requested an update on the Blue Marine Endowment Fund. The Administrator explained that the responsibility and liability were still under consideration and discussion with Blue Marine.
- v. **Clerk of Council:** The Administrator welcomed back Clerk to Council Siobhan Stewart and thanked Caitlin Thomas for her hard work in providing holiday cover and supporting Council.
- vi. **Crown Counsel:** The Administrator thanked Crown Counsel Robert Cheeseman for his excellent work, highlighting specifically his work on Ascension Island Employment Law, COVID-19 legislation, Biosecurity, the Solomons case and the Marine Protected Area. Whilst recruitment continues for a substantive replacement, the Solicitor General will be coming to Ascension Island to support the role of Crown Counsel from the end of October to the end of November 2021.

The meeting closed at 18:45

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk of Council