

ASCENSION ISLAND GOVERNMENT

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Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council

10:00 on Thursday 19 May 2022 at the Courthouse

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: HH Sean Burns, Administrator
Catherine Leo, Acting Director of Resources
Matthew James, Crown Counsel

Councillor Alan Nicholls
Councillor Nicholas John
Councillor Andrew Ellick
Councillor Kitty George
Councillor Douglas Miller

In attendance: Francesca Bennett, Clerk to Council
Alasdair Bain, Policy, Projects and Communications Officer
Carl Mackerras, Head of the Administrator's Office [Remotely]
Dr Bill Hardy, Senior Medical Officer

Apologies:

The Administrator welcomed all parties. The Administrator welcomed the Crown Counsel, Matthew James who has recently arrived on Island.

COVID-19 Emergence Strategy: The Administrator explained that there has been ongoing work on a Covid-19 Emergence Strategy that will enable Ascension to adapt to move from the position it is currently in, whereby quarantine protocols are in place to keep Covid-19 from entering the community, to a position whereby the territory adjusts to living with Covid-19 as a community illness. The Administrator informed that there have been extensive consultations on this with employers and off Island partners (such as SHG and the UK Health Security Agency). A number of criteria have been identified that need to be met before quarantine requirements are removed. However, it was confirmed that assuming these are met, it is anticipated that the Island will no longer require quarantine on arrival from 01 August 2022. The Administrator confirmed that it is not known whether St Helena will also remove quarantine requirements along the same timelines, which could result in people from Ascension having to quarantine on arrival in St Helena. The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer explained that there have been ongoing discussions to find the best possible options for removing quarantine and introducing Covid-19 in a managed way, and dealing appropriately with the consequences of doing so. The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer confirmed that Ascension Island is already in a very good position from the perspective of the individual, with the majority of the public having been vaccinated. It is also in a good position at a community level whereby Island organisations are making preparations for the change to ensure that critical business functions can continue during the transition. The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer reported that officials have been in contact with the Falkland Islands who had confirmed that they have had 1500 confirmed cases thus far out of a population of 3600 and no hospitalisations due to severe Covid-19 illness. This follows the removal of quarantine restrictions on 04 May, although it was noted that their outbreak began on 15 April following the virus escaping quarantine protocols. It was noted that there have been temporary interruptions to the operations of some smaller businesses that did not have the kind of resilience that larger organisations would have due to the high numbers of infections in such a short period of time. Given that with vaccination the risk to an individual from Covid-19 is now far lower than it once was, the primary aim for Ascension is to slow the spread of infections following the removal of quarantine so that there will not be a large number of people with Covid-19 at the same time.

The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer explained that the Covid-19 testing will change once quarantine is removed. Testing will only be done on those that are symptomatic and have arranged a test with Health Care workers. If a positive test is returned that person would be expected to isolate. They will be provided with a

number of lateral flow tests (LFTs) and if otherwise well (i.e. they no longer have symptoms) will be directed to begin retesting after five days. If they return two successive negative results (one conducted by a healthcare worker) they will be advised they no longer need to isolate, but if they provide ongoing positive results they will be expected to isolate for up to 10 days. The clinics at both military bases have generously offered to help with Covid-19 testing to increase the testing team's resilience. The public will not be required to isolate under law but it is expected this will be relatively self-policing among the community. There could be critical workers who test positive but could still go to work if they are otherwise healthy (i.e. they are positive but feel fine and don't have any symptoms), but this would need to be done in a risk assessed way to try and avoid them passing on the infection to others. Outside of work they would still be expected to isolate in line with guidance. The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer stated that there will be no mandate for public health measures, such as social distancing and wearing a mask, and that it would be left to individuals and companies to consider whether or not they wanted to observe these.

The Senior Medical Officer explained that the majority of the public have been vaccinated and have received their booster therefore it would not be practical to wait any longer than 01 August 2022 to stop quarantine, as to do so later in the year would be when immunity in individuals may be lower. They confirmed that there will be a second booster offered to persons over the age of 60, and AIG had requested through the FCDO that the UK government provide additional vaccines to enable everyone to have a second booster to optimise the Island community's vaccination status ahead of the changes coming into effect. The Senior Medical Officer clarified that it would not be effective if the quarantine time is reduced as opposed to no longer requiring to quarantine, as reducing quarantine times would mean that Covid-19 would quickly become established in the community anyway and then authorities would be requiring people to quarantine on arrival despite Covid-19 already circulating. The Senior Medical Officer confirmed that there have been full vaccinations for children aged five to 11, with excellent uptake across this cohort. In terms of what vaccinated people should expect from Covid-19, he explained that initially most people are likely to feel otherwise well or experience a mild illness. From observing the experiences of other territories that have removed quarantine, it is expected that a high number of infections will be observed within a three to six week period. As this could see a high level of absenteeism from work, the primary function of the proposed measures are to maintain critical services and functions while the island transitions from having no Covid-19 to living with Covid-19 as a community illness. The Senior Medical Officer explained that the idea around self-isolation is those that test positive are likely to be contagious, although it doesn't mean that others aren't. Therefore it makes sense to expect those people to isolate to prevent them infecting too many others, which could otherwise lead to many people being absent from work at once. The Senior Medical Officer informed that the hospital will continue its function and staff will use high level masks and virus control measures. If the hospital saw a large number of staff becoming unwell then as a contingency the implementation of staffing measures used over festive periods may be considered, whereby services are temporarily limited to mainly emergencies.

Councillor Nicholls asked what would happen if a considerable amount of people became seriously ill, how would the hospital cope. The Senior Medical Officer confirmed that although unlikely, if we do have people that are seriously ill the hospital has additional facilities and supplies to cope. The majority of people would have cold like symptoms for about a week which can be safely and effectively managed at home without the need for intervention from healthcare workers; although the hospital could offer homebased care if needed and medication packs will also be available. The Senior Medical Officer confirmed that the hospital will not be divided between Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 care as are the current protocols. Councillor George queried if the specific Covid-19 therapeutic medicines had a long shelf life and if the stock will increase. The Senior Medical officer confirmed that the medicine does have a long shelf life and there are enough in stock for 20 courses of treatment. The therapeutic medicines are not a first line treatment; these medicines will only be used in cases where individuals are at high risk for developing severe illness. Despite the significant number of infections in the Falkland's, colleagues there have advised that as yet none of their therapeutic treatments have been deployed, despite a number of highly vulnerable persons having tested positive for Covid-19 (such as transplant patients).

Discussions continued around additional facilities, supplies, vaccinations and possible ways of communicating information to the public. Councillor George raised concern about the December inter-island flights, stating that if St Helena does not change their quarantine protocols before that time, then people travelling to St Helena on the 18 December 2022 will then be in quarantine for Christmas Day. Councillor George asked if it was possible to change the flight dates to avoid quarantine over the festive period. The Policy, Project and Communications Officer confirmed that AIG would have a discussion with SHG. Councillor Ellick questioned the anticipated cost of the Covid-19 emergence strategy. The Acting Director of Resources confirmed that the Senior Medical Officer has submitted a bid for facilitating this, such as enabling the testing protocols proposed, which will be taken to the

Finance Committee. A discussion was had around the supply of PPE for organisations, where it was noted that all organisations had already made provision previously for PPE and had been advised to reconsider this ahead of the removal of quarantine requirements. Councillor John raised concern about who would be covering the cost of quarantine in St Helena if they do not change their quarantine policy. Councillor John queried whether one oxygen machine would be adequate. The Senior Medical Officer confirmed that the oxygen machine is industrial and produces unlimited amount of oxygen which can be stored in oxygen tanks, and that the hospital had procured a number of smaller portable oxygen generating machines for use on patients if needed.

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

Employment Ordinance Implementation: The Administrator confirmed that further advice had been received from the Attorney-General's Chambers on 05 May 2022. The advice received had raised some further questions regarding the format of the legislation. The Administrator explained that the Policy Projects and Communications Officer had been in discussions with the Attorney-General's Chambers over the past few months regarding a number of issues that they had highlighted, which had now been addressed. The Administrator then explained that following his arrival the Crown Counsel had raised some further minor concerns around the presentation of the legislation in its current form. Following this, the Attorney-General's Chambers had then flagged additional concerns on how the overall Ordinance is currently structured and suggested this be reviewed in light of the other work underway on the legislation. The Crown Counsel confirmed that the reason for these amendments was to provide scope for future edits to be made to the legislation in the most appropriate way possible, and therefore provide suitable flexibility for the legislation to remain relevant and effective for the long term. The Crown Counsel confirmed that there are no changes at all to with the content of the agreed policy but explained the implications with the layout, confirming that none of the provisions currently included would be undermined or adapted, and that the amendments would still ensure that the legislation reflected the Policy on the Regulation of Employment in Ascension. The Administrator confirmed that a new timeline had been agreed with the Attorney-General's Chambers for these amendments, and agreed that an update would be provided for councillors by end May 2022. It was proposed that the upcoming formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council be postponed to 10 June 2022 and that consideration could be given to the amendments by councillors ahead of the meeting. If all were agreeable, a recommendation could then be sought at the 10 June meeting and if recommended the legislation could be signed into law by the Governor thereafter. Councillors expressed their disappointment that the Employment Ordinance implementation remains outstanding. The Crown Counsel and the Administrator reassured Councillors that the Employment Ordinance is a priority and once the draft is circulated, encouraged councillors to study the legislation carefully and take up the offer of a meeting before 10 June if they needed any further advice. A further discussion was had around the contents of the policy and the changes that would be made to the layout.

The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer stated that the **air travel corridor** protocols has been amended. The SHG recently introduced changes to the Covid-19 entry, quarantine and testing protocols for all arrivals to St Helena whereby the requirement for pre-departure testing was removed and PCR testing was only applied on the sixth day of a seven day quarantine protocol. Going forward there will be Covid-19 testing applied to all arrivals from St Helena. The Policy, Projects and Communications Officer explained that doing so will ensure that authorities can remain confident in the quarantine free air travel corridor that is currently in place. This will remain in place until Ascension no longer requires quarantine on arrival from 01 August 2022.

ITT Process for the buildings previously known as the Obsidian Hotel: The Administrator reported that following the appointment of the new Crown Counsel a meeting had taken place with SMT colleagues to discuss this matter. However this will be brought back to Councillors to seek a recommendation for further action and to find a clear indication of what will be required of the consultant. Councillor Ellick expressed his disappointment that the visit from UK Government officials has still not gone ahead and the future of Ascension is still unknown. A further discussion was had about progress on the future of Ascension.

Councillor Ellick asked if there had been an accident at the pier and questioned if it had been investigated. The Administrator confirmed there was an accident, not related to any AIG activities, and that it had been investigated.

The Administrator gave an update on the **runway project** reporting that there are just two further delivery ships due, one with aggregate and the other with sand. The asphalt mix for the runway surface had now been approved. It is still currently anticipated that the completion of the runway itself will be mid May 2023 with regular flights

resuming shortly after. Councillor Nicholls questioned if once the runway project has been completed, will the roads be resurfaced. The Administrator confirmed that a quote has been requested from the runway contractors and once received this will need to be considered.

The Acting Director of Resources provided an update on the **Queen's Platinum Jubilee** Celebrations. On Friday 27 May 2022, the weekend prior to the Queens Platinum Jubilee a live Music Gala featuring music throughout the decades for which the Queen has been in reign will be held at Two Boats Club. Saturday 28 May 2022 will be tree planting at Green Mountain National Park, organised by the Conservation and Fisheries Directorate. A Dew Pond (Dewbilee) Run will take place on 29 May 2022. On the evening of Thursday 02 June 2022 there will be the lighting of a beacon at Jubilee View at 21:15. There will be performances by students, the Administrator will give a speech and a reception will follow. Mario Anthony will be the official photographer for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee events. Friday 03 June 2022 will see a service of thanksgiving at St Marys Church as well as the opening of the Arts and Crafts exhibition at the Saints Club, and in the evening there will be a light-up float parade. On Saturday 04 June 2022 the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Garden Party will be held at The Residency. Sunday 05 June 2022 will be the Street Party at Georgetown Square. The final sport for the Platinum Cup is the Tug of war; there will also be various novelty games taking place and stalls. The prizes for the Arts and Crafts and Photography competition will be awarded. At 20:00 there will be a live band followed by a disco. A further discussion was had regarding the criteria for medals for serving frontline members of the Police, Fire, Emergency Services and Armed Forces with five years' service that would be awarded at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Garden Party at The Residency.

The Administrator proposed a change of date to the 10 June 2022 for the upcoming formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council.

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

- i. **Fixed Penalty Notices:** Councillor George questioned whether it was possible to have Fixed Penalty Notices for minor offences. The Crown Counsel confirmed that this is something that could be looked into, although this would not be a straightforward matter to address and would need careful consideration and policy work to underpin it.
- ii. **Road repairs:** Councillor Ellick raised concern that the roads are in need of repair after the heavy Easter rains. Councillor Ellick informed that he had contacted the Director of Operations and Facilities regarding the cones that were at the Hogan's Bypass / Gannet Road junction and expressed his disappointment that this road did not take priority over the Marty-Wade track. The Administrator asked that this concern be submitted through a Councillor Enquiry Form or through the Public Works Committee.
- iii. **Hospital Clinic Appointments:** Councillor John inquired whether the hospital appointments could return to the past system where the public do not have to book an appointment in advance. Councillor John was encouraged to submit a Councillor Enquiry Form.
- iv. **Visa for those turning 18:** Councillor John queried visa options available for those turning 18. A discussion was had about the various options. The Acting Director of Resources confirmed that it is possible to apply for jobs at the age of 17. The Administrator also confirmed that those that are in post 16 education can apply for a visa extension until the completion of their exams subject to the rules that were agreed and circulated to all in 2020.
- v. **Fire Service update:** Councillor Nicholls questioned if there has been an update regarding the Fire Service. The Administrator confirmed that he has been in discussion with the RAF Commander of Ascension Island Base (CAIB) regarding the contract.
- vi. **Hospital refurbishment:** Councillor Ellick asked if there was an update on the refurbishment of the hospital. The Administrator confirmed that the refurbishment will probably depend on the future of Ascension but noted that the current global difficult financial situation, including in the UK, would make securing funding for large projects very challenging.

The meeting closed at 11:55

Francesca Bennett
Clerk of Council