

**ASCENSION ISLAND
GOVERNMENT**

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

10:00 on Thursday 27 October 2023 at the Courthouse

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: Catherine Leo, Acting Director of Resources
Councillor Kerry Benjamin
Councillor Kyla Benjamin
Councillor Douglas Miller
Councillor Alan Nicholls
Councillor Laura Shearer

In attendance: Carl Mackerras, Head of the Administrator's Office
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk to Council

Apologies: HH Simon Minshull, Administrator
Matthew James, Crown Counsel [overseas]

The HoAO welcomed all parties and thanked everyone for attending.

There were currently no actions on the actions tracker.

The Head of the Administrator's Office [HoAO] confirmed that the **FCDO and MOD Senior Officials visit** was due to take place from 06 to 07 November 2023 where constituent views on the future of Ascension will be sought, through Councillors, with the view of making recommendations to ministers in the UK. The HoAO reported that Officials would be keen to discuss entry control policies and will be able to provide an update to Councillors on recent discussions in London. Councillor Nicholls requested clarity on what options were being considered for the future of Ascension. The HoAO explained that primarily the options being discussed are with a key focus on entry control, given that Ascension Island is a secure working island. Councillor Nicholls asked for more information on what has prompted these discussions specifically around entry control. The HoAO requested that this question be directed to the visiting officials who will be able to offer clarity. Councillor Shearer and Councillor Kerry Benjamin highlighted the importance gathering information from the community of Ascension Island prior to any decisions being made. Councillor Shearer asked whether consideration was being given to allow visitors to transit to St Helena from the UK, as opposed to just the Falklands Islands. The HoAO explained this is unlikely to happen as SHG already have an agreement with Airlink for the Johannesburg to St Helena route, and as the Voyager is a MOD flight, there is no appetite to create this as an alternative commercial route.

The HoAO thanked Councillor Shearer and Councillor Kyla Benjamin for agreeing to represent Ascension Island at the annual **Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council (JMC)** that is due to take place on 14-15 November 2023. Whilst a final agenda was yet to be circulated, the primary focus of this year's JMC appears to be the agreeing and signing of a political declaration so that a strategy may be formed to enact the declaration. Councillor Shearer noted that it was suggested at the previous JMC that smaller break out groups may be beneficial for territories to discuss specific topics directly affecting them. The HoAO requested that Councillors feed in any key topics they wish to discuss ahead of the bilateral so that briefing notes can be prepared in advance.

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

- i. **Shipping:** Councillor Nicholls requested an update on the ongoing tendering process for a continued shipping service between St Helena and Ascension for 2024 and moving forward. The ADoR confirmed that the shipping tender board has submitted their recommendation to SHG with the expectation that Ascension will be a separate add-on to the main South Africa to St Helena route and will require the AIG to negotiate separately.

- ii. **Girlguiding: Girlguiding:** Councillor Nicholls provided an update to Council following notice of cessation of Girlguiding support to Overseas Territories earlier in April 2023. The Girlguiding UK board of Trustees decided in June 2023 to extend Girlguiding activities in British Overseas Territories until the 31 December 2023, however this has now been extended further into 2024 to allow for a smooth transitional period.
- iii. **Procedure Committee Enquiry:** Councillor Nicholls provided an update on the UK House of Commons Procedure Committee inquiry into *The procedure of the House of Commons and the territorial constitution: Overseas Territories*. Councillor Nicholls reported that the Committee would like to engage further with overseas territories, this can be done virtually and either as a formal oral evidence session, or as a more informal roundtable. Councillor Nicholls suggested that a response is provided explaining that discussions regarding the future of Ascension Island are ongoing, however this is something Ascension would be interested in contributing to in the future. The HoAO recommended the email from Margarete McKinnon be distributed to fellow Councillors, along with a deadline set by Councillor Nicholls, to allow time for consideration, and then a response can be provided.
- iv. **ACRO & DBS Checks:** Councillor Miller requested clarity as to why the National Police Chiefs' Council Criminal Records Office [ACRO] Certificates are requested when applying for VISA's as opposed to a Disclosure and Baring Service [DBS] Certificate. The HoAO explained that ACRO Certificates are used for their international applicability, whilst DBS checks are used for various roles within the UK only and as per the AIG Entry Control Policy, an ACRO Certificate is required.
- v. **Avian Flu:** Councillor Shearer thanked the AIG for their forward thinking and quick response to the recent avian flu outbreak, noting that whilst Ascension's isolation offers some protection, recent reports of avian flu affecting South Georgia's Skuas and Seals are of great concern. Discussion was had regarding the testing of sea birds in Ascension for avian flu, it was confirmed that conversations were already underway with the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA] to explore this.
- vi. **Transit access to the Airbridge:** The ADoR reported that following receipt of queries regarding the transit of passengers originating from Stanley in the Falklands Islands as opposed to Mount Pleasant Complex [MPC], the AIG will be holding a meeting with the Falkland Islands Government [FIG] to discuss how non-MOD personnel book flights, as well as flight availability over the festive period. Councillor Nicholls asked whether an additional flight could be sourced if there was sufficient demand. The ADoR explained that demand is unknown at this time and flights schedules are planned over one year in advance.
- vii. **Electronic Travel Authorisation Scheme:** The HoAO notified Council that from 25 October 2023 the UK are beginning the implementation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation [ETA] scheme. The scheme will apply to those passengers visiting or transiting the UK, who do not currently need a visa for short stays or do not have a valid UK immigration status prior to travelling. The first phase sees nationals of Qatar needing to apply for an ETA with immediate effect, following by nationals of Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia from 01 February 2024. Further updates will be provided to Council following notification from the Home Office. The HoAO noted that British Overseas Territories Citizens (BOTC) will be exempt from the ETA requirement, in the same way that British Citizen passport holders will be exempt.

The meeting closed at 10:30

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk to Council