



**Formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council**  
**16:30 on Wednesday 13 December 2023 at the Courthouse**

**MINUTES**

Present: HE Nigel Phillips, Governor [remotely] Councillor Kerry Benjamin  
HH Simon Minshull, Administrator Councillor Kyla Benjamin  
David Ballantyne, Attorney General [remotely] Councillor Douglas Miller  
Catherine Leo, Acting Director of Resources Councillor Alan Nicholls  
Councillor Laura Shearer

In attendance: Matthew James, Crown Counsel  
Ailsa Hearne, FCDO Desk Officer  
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk of Council

Apologies: Carl Mackerras, Head of the Administrator's Office [Overseas]

**1. Welcome**

HH the Administrator welcomed all parties present and those attending remotely.

**2. Approval of Minutes**

**Decision:** The summary of the Informal Council meeting held on 27 October 2023 and published on 15 November 2023 was accepted and in accordance with the Council Rules these were agreed by Council members.

**Decision:** The minutes of the Formal Council meeting held on 09 November 2023 and published on 16 November 2023 was accepted and in accordance with the Council Rules these were agreed by Council members.

**3. Matters arising**

There were currently no actions on the actions tracker.

**4. FCDO Desk Officer Introduction**

The Administrator introduced Ms Ailsa Hearne, the recently appointed FCDO Desk Officer for Ascension Island. Ms Hearne provided an overview of her role within the FCDO, thanking Councillors for the opportunity to formally meet and address Council. Ms Hearne expressed the value of her visit as an excellent opportunity to better understand the community and context of challenges faced by people, allowing her to provide briefings and information on Ascension in the course of her daily work.

**5. Joint Ministerial Council**

Councillor Shearer and Councillor Kyla Benjamin provided an update on their recent attendance at the Joint Ministerial Council (JMC) that took place on 14 and 15 November 2023 in London. Councillor Shearer reported on a positive Bilateral meeting with the Minister Rutley where issues directly affecting Ascension was discussed.

Councillor Shearer explained that the primary focus of the JMC was the agreeing of a Joint Declaration between the UK Government and UK Overseas Territories, which has recently formally been approved by the Ascension Island Council. Councillor Kyla Benjamin thanked Council for the opportunity to represent Ascension Island at the JMC and noted the accomplishment and importance of the Joint Declaration.

The Administrator thanked Councillors for attending the JMC, and encouraged all Councillors to consider who they would like to represent Council and attend the next JMC in 2024, ensuring all Councillors have an opportunity to attend a JMC during their tenure.

HE the Governor thanked Councillors for their contributions towards the Joint Declarations and explained that the final signing of the document is expected soon, followed by development of the cross-government strategy.

## 6. Firearms Ordinance

Crown Counsel explained that the Firearms Ordinance 2020 was enacted in Extraordinary Gazette 22/2020 on 18 February 2020, following unanimous approval by the Ascension Island Council at the formal meeting on 06 February 2020. A further Order was required for the Ordinance to come into force under section 1(1) of the Ordinance, however, for unknown reasons this has not been done in the years since the Ordinance was enacted. Crown Counsel clarified that ordinarily a commencement order for a matter that Council have already voted on would not come before Council, however due to the length of time since the initial legislation was passed, it was deemed appropriate that Council should be consulted before it is referred to HE the Governor to be signed.

Crown Counsel proposed that the order is dated from 01 January 2024 where all weapons and firearms are prohibited, with the exception of the MoD, USAF and shotguns used by the St Helena Police in the neutralisation of animals. Crown Counsel confirmed that requirements for spearguns and paintballs are set out in the ordinance and have their own licencing provisions.

The Council discussed a matter directed as being confidential under S.12(7) of the Island Government Ordinance.

	Proposal	Kerry B	DM	AN	LS	Kyla B
1	To formally recommend that the Order be enacted to bring into force the Firearms Ordinance, 2020.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The Administrator invited Councillors to note the contents of the Order, and recommend to HE the Governor that the Order be applied to Ascension. The Administrator explained that all five Councillors present have voted in favour of the above, HE the Governor thanked Councillors for their advice and accepted their recommendation. HE the Governor thanked the Attorney General and Crown Counsel for their hard work in ensuring an appropriate policy is applied for the carrying of firearms in Ascension.

## 7. Any other business

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

- i. **AIG Guest House:** Councillor Nicholls noted that on 09 November 2023 he raised the issues of the future plans for the AIG Guest House, where he was directed to raise the question under the remit of the Public Works Committee. At the most recent meeting of the Public Works Committee held on 05 December 2023 structural alterations and refurbishment of the AIG Guest House was discussed, however it was conveyed that the strategic future use of the building was not within the scope of the Operations and Facilities Directorate. Therefore, Councillor Nicholls returned the topic to formal Council, seeking clarity on AIG's plans for the future use of the AIG Guest House. The Administrator explained that whilst the tender documents went out, insufficient responses were received to proceed. The Administrator proposed that this item be raised as an agenda item at the first informal meeting in 2024 where a memo can be distributed prior. HE the Governor requested a copy this memo.
- ii. **Shipping:** The ADoR provided a further update regarding shipping following discussions at the recent informal meeting of Council held on 07 December 2023. The ADoR explained that the Saint Helena

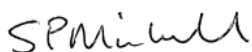
Government [SHG] have requested that the AIG hold off approaching both MACS and Meihuizen whilst they finalise their agreements. Whereas £132K was allocated to subsidise three visits of the Maria Da Paz, only £112K was spent, leaving an underspend to potentially support a fourth visit from the Maria Da Paz. The ADoR confirmed that with a £20k underspend and with saving made in other areas of AIG it is forecast that AIG will be writing to Councillors within the next week seeking recommendation of a fourth voyage of the Maria Da Paz within this financial year. Moving forward, the ADoR confirmed that AIG are in the very early stages of negotiation with MACS to provide a shipping service between St Helena and Ascension Island. The Administrator explained that discussions regarding the frequency of voyages, when they will start and the costs associated are ongoing. Councillor Nicholls requested clarity on what the alternative is to having a fourth voyage with Meihuizen. The Administrator explained that the alternative is having no fourth voyage in this financial year with an unknown future date for the first MACS visit to Ascension Island. It was confirmed that a monthly service will take place from South Africa to St Helena, under SHG's MACS agreement, with the first voyage most likely to start in April 2024. Once finalised, AIG will need to consider which months it would like to request sailings to Ascension Island. Councillor Nicholls asked whether there were confirmed costs for each voyage with MACS. The Administrator confirmed that whilst only preliminary figures have been provided to AIG, Councillors should be prepared for a subsidised shipping service moving forward as the old model of cost recovery is unsustainable for businesses. The ADoR noted that March may be the better option given that the MoD FIRS is forecast to arrive in February 2024 and then May 2024. Councillor Shearer conveyed the need for firm financial figures to allow Councillors to fully consider the offering being made by Meihuizen. The Attorney General confirmed that shipping contract negotiations are near completion between SHG and MACS, with the assistance of a UK law firm who specialises in shipping related matters. The Attorney General reported of MACS reliable reputation who have their own marine vessels, as opposed to Meihuizen who experienced reliability issues due to the need to charter vessels that were often used elsewhere in between voyages to St Helena. It was also reported that SHG are considering the potential of linking shipping services between Europe and South Africa, however this was still in the early stages of exploration.

- iii. **Merry Christmas:** HE the Governor and the Attorney General wished council members a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

There was no further business and the meeting ended at 17:05

Siobhan Stewart  
Clerk of Council

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



*Simon Minshull*

*On behalf of HE the Governor, Mr Nigel Phillips CBE*