

**ASCENSION ISLAND  
GOVERNMENT**

Clerk of Council's Office  
Ascension Island  
South Atlantic Ocean  
ASCN 1ZZ



[siobhan.stewart@ascension.gov.ac](mailto:siobhan.stewart@ascension.gov.ac)

+ (247) 67000 ext. 1100

[www.ascension.gov.ac](http://www.ascension.gov.ac)

**Informal meeting of the Ascension Island Council**

**10:00 on Thursday 07 December 2023 at the Courthouse**

**MEETING SUMMARY**

Present: HH Simon Minshull, Administrator  
Catherine Leo, Acting Director of Resources  
Councillor Kyla Benjamin  
Councillor Douglas Miller  
Councillor Alan Nicholls  
Councillor Laura Shearer

In attendance: Carl Mackerras, Head of the Administrator's Office  
Matthew James, Crown Counsel  
Tiffany Simpson, Director of Conservation and Fisheries  
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk to Council

Apologies: Councillor Kerry Benjamin [overseas]

The Administrator welcomed all parties and thanked everyone for attending.

There were currently no actions on the actions tracker.

The Director of Conservation and Fisheries [DoCF] provided an update to Council on **Avian Flu**, reporting that this highly contagious viral diseases can affect both domestic and wild birds, with varying levels of severity. The DoCF explained that low pathogenicity avian influenza [LPAI] typically causes little or no clinical signs, with high pathogenicity avian influenza [HPAI] causing more severe clinical signs with the possibility of high mortality rates in birds. HPAI has now been officially declared in over 70 countries, with recent high outbreaks though a number of provinces in South Africa, as well as South Georgia where King Penguins have been infected and the Falkland Islands where Black browed albatross have also been infected.

The DoCF explained that LPAI and HPAI infections are typically spread through poultry and migratory birds such as waterfowl, gulls and shorebirds, where various strains can be carried in their respiratory and intestinal tracts. When birds have little or no symptoms, they are able to spread the viruses over long distances along their migratory pathways and the viruses are able to survive in the environment for weeks, especially in low temperatures. The DoCF confirmed that whilst transmission of HPAI can be spread from birds to humans, this is incredibly rare and typically only affect those who are in close and repeated contact with infected birds or heavily contaminated environments. It was noted that HPAI can also be spread to small mammals, including rats and mice, as they can carry the virus in their feet and fur.

The DoCF reported that whilst there have been no confirmed cases in Ascension, the AIG have introduced measures to both prevent, where possible, HPAI coming to Ascension and mitigate its impact should it arrive here. Increased biosecurity measures have been put in place such as the temporary restriction on the importation of certain poultry and poultry products imported from South Africa. Air travel from South Africa and the Falkland Islands can also pose a risk given that the virus can persist on surfaces, particularly through organic matter such as soil on shoes., Therefore following the recommendations of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA], disinfectant liquid and mats have been procured to be placed at the exit of each arriving aircraft to prevent potential spread by human means. Disembarking passengers will be asked to step through the mats to kill virus that may be remaining on their shoes.

The DoCF explained that the seabird team have the greatest risk of contracting HPAI during their routine productivity checks and as they monitor for signs of disease within the seabird colonies. DEFRA has provided protocols to follow when sample collecting from potentially infected birds and disposing of dead birds and AIGCFD has requested

appropriate PPE to enable staff to safely follow these protocols. The DoCF confirmed that a process is being developed for testing, so early identification of the virus can be made. Pest control measures will continue with rodenticide being used around seabird colonies, including Letterbox Peninsula and Mars Bay. The importance of community reporting was noted, with plans to make the community aware of the symptoms of HPAI in birds and encourage reports of concerns as well as sightings of migratory birds. Continued collaborative working with St Helena Government, Falkland Island Government, South Georgia and the UK Government through FCDO Desk Officer's is ongoing to ensure that in the event that HPAI or LPAI is identified in Ascension, there is an efficient and coordinated response.

The Administrator requested clarity on the number of migratory birds that visit Ascension Island. It was confirmed that there are significant numbers of migratory sea birds that visit Ascension Island, such as Shearwaters, and there were recent reports of a Kelp Gull on island that is likely to have originated from South Africa. Sooty Terns that normally reside in Ascension are currently on migration and are potentially interacting with infected birds, which presents significant risks as this species is one of the most infected worldwide. Further discussion was had regarding potential spread through the resident Myna bird population who are known to feed on Sooty Tern eggs.

Councillor Nicholls request further detail on the response should LPAI or HPAI be detected in Ascension. The DoCF confirmed that an update would be provided to Councillors in due course once the response plan has been finalised. Discussion was had in relation to other Overseas Territories response plans, where the immediate response is to remove the dead bird to prevent other birds feeding on the potentially infected carcass. In some areas of high infection rates, access has been closed to the public.

Councillor Nicholls conveyed concerns received from a number of constituents in relation to the increase in the **rodent population on the island**, in particular rats. It was acknowledged that the Environmental Health team are doing their best to control the situation, however, the number of rodents appear to be too great for the small team to now get under control.

Councillor Nicholls reported that one resident indicated that they had caught 12 rats on their premises, and another reported of rats living in their roof space, a clear indication of the scale of the problem in even the settlement areas. Reports of considerable numbers of rats seen on Green Mountain, including in the vicinity of the Residency was also of concern. Of even greater concern was reports that rats are also in Two Boats School, which poses a health and safety risk to children at the school. Councillor Nicholls explained that constituents have reported of having a phobia to rats, and have conveyed how impactful the increased numbers have on their lives. Councillor Nicholls also raised concerns regarding potential diseases that rats are known to carry and requested that AIG take whatever action is deemed necessary, as a matter of urgency, to either eradicate or substantially reduce the rodent population on this island.

The DoCF thanked Councillor Nicholls for raising these concerns and acknowledged that there appears to be a population boom of late, despite the Environmental Health Teams best efforts to address. The DoCF explained that the unprecedented amount of rain fall throughout 2023 has led to optimum habitat conditions for the rodent population to thrive and multiply in Ascension. In response to this, the AIG have almost tripled its spending on additional rodenticide and traps using increased AIG budget as well as supplemental funding from the Blue Marine Foundation. High priority areas are being targeted with rodenticide on a weekly basis, such as Two Boats School, the settlements, and homes on request where additional measures are needed. Areas such as Encompass at English Bay are also being prioritised also due to the critical infrastructure on site. The Road network is baited with rodenticide once a month, with campsites and mountain walks being baited with rodenticide once every three months and will be prioritised in the lead up to the festive period where there is likely to be more frequent use by members of the public.

The DoCF explained that in January 2024 Darwin funded consultants from Wildlife Management International will be visiting Ascension to provide specialist advice and a feasibility study into the eradication of pest species in Ascension. This will include rats, mice, sheep, Myna birds and rabbits. It was noted that whilst full eradication of rodents is incredibly unlikely, it is hoped that a strategic approach can be established which will ultimately allow a more targeted approach in managing the rodent population.

Councillor Shearer also conveyed concerns received from constituents in relation to the rodent population, specifically around beaches and the seabird colonies. Councillor Shearer explained that due to a shortage of rodenticide on island, beaches and sea bird colonies had not been baited for some time. Councillor Shearer explained that wildlife habitats are not prioritised during times of shortage of rodenticide, with all efforts being

focused on the settlements instead. During this period rodent populations were able to boom. The DoCF explained that to overcome shortages of rodenticide, contingency plans were quickly put in place whereby supplies were sourced from St Helena via ship and the UK via airfreight. The DoCF confirmed that sea bird colonies were once again being regularly targeted with rodenticide, given the increased risk of avian influenza spread. Further discussion was had regarding the funding of additional resources, some of which is currently being funded by the Blue Marine Foundation. Councillor Shearer thanked AIG for their efforts in sourcing rodenticide from alternative sources during times of shortages.

The Administrator thanked the DoCF for attending and provided such comprehensive updates. Councillors were asked to encourage members of the community with concerns to contact the Environmental Health team.

Crown Counsel explained that the **Firearms Ordinance, 2020**, was enacted in February 2020 following a unanimous vote by elected members of the Ascension Island Council. However, for the Ordinance to come into force a further order was required, which was overlooked in 2020. As this law has been voted on by Council, and enacted, Crown Counsel deemed that it would be appropriate that the Ordinance is now brought into force by Order, so it may be enforced correctly. Crown Counsel invited Councillors to make any objections or questions known in advance of the formal council meeting due to be held on 13 December 2023 where Councillors will be asked to vote on the Order.

Crown Counsel also took the opportunity to raise the housekeeping of legislation, such as correcting minor grammatical errors etc. Crown Counsel explained that whilst these changes did not need to come before Councillors for voting, Councillors may prefer an email update of minor, unimportant changes made for their records.

Councillor Shearer provided an update on behalf of herself and Councillor Kyla Benjamin following their visit to London to represent Ascension Island at the annual **Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council (JMC)** that ran from 14 November 2023 to 15 November 2023. Councillor Shearer provided an overview of both days, listing the various topics discussed and noted the focus round agreeing a Joint Declaration between the UK Government and UK Overseas Territories. Councillor Shearer highlighted two important meetings, firstly the bilateral meeting held with Minister Rutley, the UK Minister for Overseas Territories, where issues affecting Ascension were discussed, and secondly, the opportunity to attend an evening reception with HM King Charles III at Buckingham Palace.

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

- i. **Annual Leave:** The Head of the Administrator's Office, Carl Mackerras informed Councillors that he will be on overseas leave over the festive period and that during that time FCDO Desk Officer Ailsa Hearne will be visiting Ascension to offer support and continue to expand her knowledge of Ascension Island
- ii. **Christmas Lights:** Councillor Nicholls recalled approval of spend for new Christmas lights for Georgetown and asked whether they had arrived in time for Christmas. The Acting Director of Resources [ADoR] explained that the new lights had arrived, however the steel supporting wires did not. Efforts are being made to use existing steel wires to support the new lights.
- iii. **Shipping:** The ADoR explained that earlier in the year Councillors agreed to subsidise three visits of the Maria Da Paz up to the value of £132K. Meihuizen have since proposed that they can make one final call to Ascension in March 2024 should AIG wish, whilst further analysis of the financial implications is required, early indications show that there is around a £40K underspend on the overall shipping budget originally allocated. The ADoR proposed that following finalisation of financial figures, a report will be produced requesting Councillors to consider supporting a fourth visit of the Maria Da Paz in March 2024. Councillor Shearer requested an update on the tendering process beyond March 2024. The ADoR confirmed that negotiations are very much in the early stages with MACS, data has been provided to MACS and AIG are awaiting proposed figures from them. The HoAO also noted that the MoD FIRS is forecast to visit Ascension either side of Meihuizen's proposed date, in February 2024 and May 2024. Councillor Shearer explained that it is imperative that Councillors know the forecast date of the first MACS visit before committing to any agreement with Meihuizen.
- iv. **Minister Visit:** The Administrator reported that the UK Minister for Overseas Territories, David Rutley, recently passed through Ascension Island on route to and from the Falkland Islands. This provided an opportunity for the Minister to see UK Government funded projects and for AIG officials to meet with him and discuss key issues affecting Ascension Island, such as shipping and food security.
- v. **Christmas Carols in the Georgetown Square:** The Administrator reported of a good uptake of people attending the annual Christmas Carols event which will be held in the Georgetown Square rather than the Residency.

The meeting closed at 10:55

Siobhan Stewart  
Clerk to Council