

**ASCENSION ISLAND
GOVERNMENT**

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

10:00 on Thursday 18 January 2024 at the Courthouse

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: HH Simon Minshull, Administrator
Director of Resources, Peter Thomas
Councillor Kyla Benjamin
Councillor Douglas Miller
Councillor Kerry Benjamin
Councillor Laura Shearer

In attendance: Carl Mackerras, Head of the Administrator's Office
Matthew James, Crown Counsel
Catherine Leo, Deputy Director of Resources
Tiffany Simpson, Director of Conservation and Fisheries
Chrisna Visser, Mexican Thorn Control Project Officer
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk to Council

Apologies: Councillor Alan Nicholls [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 the introduction of the Evippe moth, reporting that due to increased rain fall the invasive species Mexican thorn continues to grow and spread rapidly across the island. The DoCF explained that following a period of Public Consultation in May 2023 it was requested that lettuce be added to the range of plant species being tested to ensure there is no threat to the hydroponics lettuce crops. The DoCF confirmed that the rigorous testing on various varieties of lettuce grown on Ascension Island demonstrated that there will be no impact to lettuce with the introduction of the Evippe moth. Following completion of this testing a risk assessment and licence application was completed and reviewed by an independent expert who confirmed that the documents were comprehensive and clearly shows that the benefits of releasing the Evippe moth to manage Mexican thorn in Ascension Island will far outweigh the risks or any anticipated negative indirect effects. These documents will be made available to members of the public via the AIG website. A further communication plan will be implemented thereafter which will include various channels, such as the Islander and social media.

The application package is now being finalised in preparation for the Chief Biosecurity Officer to make a formal request to the HE the Governor to grant permission to introduce and release the Evippe moth in Ascension.

Councillor Miller requested clarity on the number of moths that will be introduced to Ascension. The DoCF confirmed that 1000 moths will initially be imported to Ascension, with some being released on to wild Mexican thorn bushes, with the remainder being cultured in the culture facility located at One Boat behind the AIG Fuel Station. Councillor Miller expressed his concerns that the Myna birds will eat the moths placed on the Mexican thorn bushes. The DoCF explained that a team from Wildlife Management International will be visiting the island next week and will be able to advise on mitigations methods in relation to Myna birds eating the moth. The DoCF noted that rats and ants also pose a risk to the moths but that the release sites will be controlled by target species rodenticide and insecticide bait stations.

Councillor Kerry Benjamin asked when the moths are expected to arrive in Ascension. The Mexican Thorn Control Project Officer [MTCPO] confirmed that following HE the Governor's approval it is hoped that the moths will arrive

in Ascension by the end of February 2024. The DoCF explained the current culture of Evippe moth does harbour a spider mite, however it is thought that this is the same mite that already exists in Ascension. This will be confirmed as the moth undergoes AIG's stringent biosecurity checks to ensure there are no new introductions to Ascension.

The MTCPO provided an overview of the release sites which will primarily be around the area of Donkey Plain, where the moth is expected to spread naturally through the wind. The DoCF explained that an application has been made to the Darwin Local Initiative for funding to allow for monitoring the spread and effectiveness of the of the Evippe moth for an additional 12 months.

Crown Counsel explained that following the creation of the Marine Protected Area in 2019 amendments were made to the Fisheries (Conservation and Management) Ordinance, 2015 to make all commercial fishing in Ascension's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), i.e. 200 nautical miles, unlawful. The correlating Regulations and Orders from 2015 now need to be amended. To reflect this, three pieces of legislation relating to Ascension's Offshore Zone are being put before the Island Council to consider. The Licencing Regulations to impose a stricter limit on who may apply for a licence in the Offshore Zone, the Fees Order to reflect the change in the cost of licences for research licences, and the Transhipment Order to make it unlawful for fish to be transferred from one vessel to another in the Offshore Zone, or for fish caught in the Offshore Zone to be transferred anywhere, without a licence.

Crown Counsel and the DoCF requested that Councillors consider these proposed changes and provide comment on the legislation, with a view of being consulted for their approval at a future Formal Council meeting.

The DDoR provided a brief history of the building now known as the **AIG Guest House**, explaining that there were no respondents following a tender process in early 2023 where consultancy was sought to engage an expert advisor to provide support and advice on the condition and future utilisation of the AIG Guest House properties. It was acknowledged that with the property not being utilised to its full capacity, its condition will deteriorate further and the funding required to bring it up to a reasonable standard will continue to grow; currently estimated at around £200K. The DDoR explained that AIG recognise the future need for accommodation and the interest shown in Clarence House in particular and recommended to Council that Clarence House goes out to tender as a business opportunity, with the main AIG Guest House building remaining with AIG.

The DDoR explained that Clarence House has ten large en-suite rooms, two kitchen areas, a storage room, and a large outdoor space for socialising. It was proposed that the building is let on a "as-is" basis, with no living accommodation attached to the business, it would therefore be suitable for someone already operating in Ascension. The DDoR highlighted the benefits it is likely to bring to other small businesses on island.

Councillor Kerry Benjamin requested further information on the renovation works required to Clarence House. The DDoR confirmed that the works required would be only cosmetic, as well furnishing and replacement perimeter fence. Councillor Kerry Benjamin requested clarity on where the tender will be advertised. The DDoR confirmed that the tender will appear in the various newspapers in St Helena, the Islander and the AIG website.

The DDoR explained that following the withdrawal of Andrew Weir at the beginning of 2023 an interim **shipping** arrangement was put in place where the sum of £132K was agreed to subsidize three voyages between St Helena and Ascension. Whereas £132K was allocated to subsidise three visits of the Maria Da Paz, only £112K was spent, leaving an underspend to potentially support a further visit within this financial year. In December 2023, AIG was approached by Meihuizen who proposed that they can make one final call to Ascension in March 2024, however since then the St Helena Government has entered into a contract with MACS for the future shipping needs of St Helena starting from march 2024, therefore the Meihuizen service is no longer an option. The DDoR confirmed that with a £20k underspend and with savings made in other areas of AIG it is forecast to be possible to have a fourth shipping call within this financial year, which will be MACS first voyage to Ascension.

The DDoR explained that whilst early indications were that MACS would be cheaper than Meihuizen, this has since transpired to not be the case, with costs expected to be around \$5K more. The DDoR noted that MACS will be unable to ship pets between St Helena and Ascension Island.

Councillors were invited to consider a fourth call within the 2023/24 financial year by MACS in March 2024, with the revised charter rate and using freight rates already in place, this will necessitate an overspend of approximately £25-30K on the originally agreed budget. Rather than seeking an appropriation for extra funds at this point, it was

proposed that AIG will use savings made in other areas of the budget to cover the shortfall. The DDoR confirmed that the future of shipping between St Helena and Ascension will form part of the budget proposals for 2024/25.

Councillors were in support of the DDoR's proposal of the March 2024 voyage. A Public Notice will be issued in due course informing the public of the March voyage.

Councillor Laura Shearer relayed concerns received by constituents in relation to a recent policy change by the MoD where non-MoD owned pets can no longer be transported on the Falkland Island Resupply Ship (FIRS). The Administrator acknowledged that the AIG were aware that discussions were taking place, however were unaware of any decision being made or formal policy change. The Administrator agreed to look into and provide an update at a later date.

Councillor Kerry Benjamin requested an update of the **Club's roof repairs**. The Head of the Administrator's Office explained that the subject of the Club's roofs was originally raised in March 2023 following particularly heavy rains that caused flood damage through the leaking roofs. These works were discussed at the Public Works Committee meeting held in October 2024 where it was proposed that these works be included in the 2024/2025 capital projects bid. The roof areas marked for replacement are the Post Office (includes Saints), Two Boats Club, Dive Club (includes AIG Archive store) and is expected to cost around £135K. Discussion was had regarding additional labour costs.

Councillor Kerry Benjamin requested an update on any future vet visit plans. The HoAO explained that the AIG are currently reaching out to both St Helena and the Falklands Islands to explore the potential of a vet visit to Ascension soon. Discussion was had regarding the logistics and potential costs.

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

- i. **Employment Ordinance:** Councillor Kerry Benjamin reported of a recent visit from the Public Solicitors Office where it was identified that there is no provision within the Employment Ordinance for sick pay. Councillors agreed to meet with Crown Counsel separately to prepare a proposal for Council consideration.
- ii. **Inshore Fisheries Primary Legislation:** Crown Counsel explained that he will be sending a first draft of the inshore fisheries legislation early next week along with an explanatory information note to accompany to Councillors. Crown Counsel invited Councillors to contact him should they have any questions.
- iii. **HRH The Duke of Edinburgh:** The Administrator reported on the upcoming visit of HRH to St Helena, where there will also be a short window of transit through Ascension. The Administrator explained that there will be a small reception held at the air terminal where Island Councillors, leaders of key employing organisations, and some of our community volunteers will be invited to attend.

The meeting closed at 11:00

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk to Council