

MINUTES OF THE ASCENSION ISLAND COUNCIL (AIC)

MEETING HELD IN THE COURT HOUSE,

Thursday, 5th February at 13:30 hrs

Present: (by telephone) HE The Governor, Mark Capes
Marc Holland, Administrator
(by telephone) Nicola Moore, Attorney General
Catherine Leo, Director of Resources
Councillor Samantha Arms-Lawrence
Councillor Jacqui Ellick
Councillor Keturah George
Councillor Nicholas John
Councillor Cyril Leo
Councillor Caroline Yon

Apologies: Councillor Larry Poultney

In attendance: Walter Scott, Solicitor General
Nicola Dillon, Clerk of Council

1. Introductions

Following introductions, the Administrator welcomed Cllr Jacqui Ellick to the meeting, who was attending her first formal meeting. Cllr Ellick is one of Ascension Island's long-serving residents and is actively engaged in the community as a Justice of the Peace and through her involvement as Chairman of the Islander newspaper. Cllr Ellick has also done many years of volunteering with the Conservation Office, which has culminated in her leading this year's Turtle Intern Programme. In his introductory remarks the Governor welcomed Cllr Ellick, whom he said came with a huge amount of experience and knowledge of Ascension.

2. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the AIC meeting held on 20 November 2014 were confirmed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 Child Safeguarding Training

Cllr Yon gave feedback on the recent Child Safeguarding Training which was held in January. Social Worker Samantha Dunn and DC Dave Honan from the St Helena Government visited the island from 7 – 12 January to provide the training to a cross-section of professionals and individuals from the voluntary sector. Cllr Yon said that it was unfortunate that the timetable was not advertised until the day that the team arrived. Cllr Yon said that it did not give participants sufficient time to plan to attend, especially as the course involved being away from work for at least two days. It meant that primarily only AIG employees were able to attend the training, but for others it was too late to take the time off work at short notice.

The Administrator took on board Cllr Yon's comments and agreed that there had not been sufficient advance publicity given to the training. He told members that it was hoped that DC Honan might come back to Ascension later this year to train those who could not make it this time.

4. JMC Feedback (Cllr Yon)

Cllr Yon gave a report on her recent attendance to the JMC in December 2014. The JMC itself was preceded by several 'pre-events' including a meeting of UKOTA (United Kingdom Overseas Territories Association) at which Ascension's membership of UKOTA was formally ratified by a unanimous vote.

Cllr Yon, accompanied by the Administrator, also met with Minister Duddridge (Minister for Overseas Territories) and was able to raise issues including difficulties with seat allocation on the airbridge; relations with the US particularly in relation to the Bahamas Agreement, jurisdictional issues, border control, immigration, lack of US financial contribution etc. Cllr Yon told members that the Minister said that he was pressing for a solution to the Wideawake Agreement at that time and Councillors would be informed of any progress as soon as possible. Discussions with the Minister looked at a broad range of issues including the forthcoming Wass Inquiry, Environmental Fishery Protection and access arrangements post-2016. In respect of the latter, Cllr Yon said that the Minister undertook to flag up the issue of finding a new way to get passengers and freight between Ascension and St Helena with the DfID Minister. Other meetings were with Nigel Kirby, DfID Project Manager for the St Helena Airport and the RSPB who were lobbying to create a marine protected area around Ascension.

The JMC ran over two days and began with a parliamentary meeting with the Environmental Audit Committee at which other OTs also commented about NGO lobbying in their territories. During a meeting with the Foreign Affairs Committee Cllr Henry from St Helena gave an update about the airport project, which gave Cllr Yon the opportunity to raise the issue of access between the two islands post-2016. The issue was met with a wide range of support from other OTs, including the representatives from St Helena and the Falkland Islands on the issues that Ascension was facing.

During the JMC there were break-out sessions on policing and the need for better systems of information sharing between the overseas territories, particularly with regard to convicted sex and/or violent offenders. Cllr Yon said that there were discussions on economic development and prosperity which focussed mainly on the Caribbean territories. Cllr Yon was also able to give a short speech during the environment discussions about the strides that Ascension Island had made since the introduction of democracy, in protecting our environment. Other sessions looked at passports and health. On the latter Cllr Yon said she enquired about accessing NHS procurement for some economies of scale but this appears to be difficult to do; although there has been some success in St Helena with vaccination procurement.

The final communiqué was debated between the Overseas Territories and the Minister and Cllr Yon has now circulated this to elected members. In concluding her report Cllr Yon said that the overall impression by the OT's representatives was that the JMC was not as productive as it could have been, which it was felt was primarily due to the lack of ministers attending the meetings. It was also felt that it was not as well organised as it had been in previous years.

The Governor echoed Cllr Yon's sentiments, but overall he said it was a useful meeting, particularly the bi-lateral meetings, and it helped to network and focus on the next JMC.

5. 2016 Access (Toni Bendall)

The Administrator prepared a memorandum for Council which set out developments over the previous months. He told members that the focus in December and January has been to get stakeholders to consider the consequences for their business once the RMS was decommissioned. In order to raise the profile of the issue Councillors had written to Minister Duddridge setting out their position and asking for FCO support to put alternatives in place as this was not a problem that AIG could solve single-handedly. In addition the Administrator told Council that he had recently participated in a teleconference with Whitehall officials to discuss the issue. The island's access issues were now on the FCO's agenda. Alongside of this the MOD and DfID were also recognising that there was a problem and officials from all three departments (FCO, MOD and DfID) had agreed to update their Ministers. FCO

officials concluded that the issue may have to go to the Cabinet for a final decision given the competing cross Whitehall interests. Finally, the island's employers were now focussed on the issue as it would have a direct impact on their business operations.

The Administrator said that now that the issue was on the Agenda he proposed a slight change of direction in effort and return effort to identifying what the solutions might be. Toni Bendall had drawn up a table of options for both air and sea solutions. The costs of these proposals were still unknown. The Administrator added that the cost of the island bearing all the costs of providing a service exclusively for our use were far greater than sharing an existing or otherwise available resource. Further, the cost of running a service was too large for AIG's existing budget to manage and the financial risk had to be shared with other users of the service. In the absence of a permanent solution being in place by the time the RMS goes offline around June 2016, a temporary solution would need to be put in place.

The Administrator concluded by looking at public communications which until recently had been fairly light touch. Once SHG/DFID had reached a decision on St Helena's future service, Ascension would need to step up its public communications strategy to reassure the public when they realise that a solution will not be part of the St Helena Airport decision.

The Governor responded to the Administrator's preamble by saying that the difficulty was that Ascension had benefitted from a subsidised service for many years and was now moving to a situation where the subsidy was being taken away. He told Council that St Helena's negotiations for an air service provider and ocean freight provider were focussing on St Helena's needs, but, he said, a service for Ascension could grow from this. The Governor assured Council that the situation was being looked at very seriously and everyone was looking at a way forward.

Cllr Yon said that it was difficult to make a decision on the next steps until St Helena had finished their tender process. Cllr Leo said that he was pleased that there was more determination to look at solutions for Ascension and he hoped that the focus at Cabinet level would benefit the island.

It was unclear whether the St Helena decision would be announced by the next Island Council meeting in mid-March, however, Council agreed to wait until the outcome was known before making a decision on the way ahead. In the meantime, the Administrator said that they would continue fleshing out the options presented to Council.

6. Two Boats School Inspection (David Blunt)

In November 2014 Two Boats School underwent an inspection, which resulted from concerns raised in Council earlier in the year. In response to the concerns the Headteacher produced a paper which was submitted to Council in March 2014, entitled, 'A More Ambitious Approach to School Inspection'. The paper was given the go ahead by Council and a pre-inspection report was produced in June 2014, followed by a formal inspection by the School Inspection Service (a DfE/COBIS approved inspectorate) during the week 24 – 28 November.

The final report has been received by the school and the results showed that the school was 'very good overall with some excellent features' including being well resourced, well led and managed well. Furthermore the teaching at the school was good and a third of that observed was outstanding. A copy of the report was available on the AIG website. The Administrator said that the Headteacher and staff of Two Boats School deserved recognition and thanks for achieving such a good result for the school. In addition to this, Two Boats School has recently been given full accreditation to COBIS (Council of British International Schools).

Some discussion ensued about how the curriculum could be improved to include specialist subjects such as IT. The Headteacher, David Blunt, told Council that this was very difficult to resource as specialist staff need extra funding. Many of the specialist subjects which are taught, i.e., IT, music, drama, are often a second specialism for teaching staff.

Cllr Leo who raised the initial enquiry offered his congratulations on the outcome of the school inspection and said that he hoped that the report would reassure the public and in particular the parents that the school was doing a good job.

7. Fisheries Update: Inshore and offshore fisheries (Dr Judith Brown)

Inshore Fisheries

Dr Judith Brown reported that the final Cefas inshore report had been received. The report had been largely drawn from data gathered locally through meetings with local fishermen, two public meetings and the limited data that was already available. The report contained four main suggestions on how to go forward, which included:

- To develop a management plan, this would set out the goals for the fishery.
- To form an Inshore Advisory Committee (IAC) made up of local stakeholders who were representative of all of the fishing sectors who would provide advice to the fishery.
- To introduce a Licencing Scheme.
- To establish data collection to assist with management decisions.

Dr Brown said that the turnout at the public meetings was very good and it was quite important that there was buy-in from the local population for an inshore fishery. The next step was to present the Cefas report to the public, which would help to dispel the rumours and perceptions and give the public a better understanding of why a licencing scheme was necessary. The aim of the licencing scheme was not to ban or heavily restrict inshore fishing, but to ensure that it is carried out in a way that is environmentally sensitive and also sustainable. It will also give baseline data which is important for future years so that comparisons can be made to monitor stocks and determine if they are being depleted.

In respect of the Inshore Fisheries Review councillors were asked to consider the following:

- i. Endorse the inshore Cefas review
- ii. Approve the establishment of a licencing system (the structure of this will be discussed by the IAC and brought to a future Council meeting).
- iii. Agree the creation of an Inshore Advisory Committee

A vote was taken on the three decisions and all six Councillors present gave their approval.

Offshore Fisheries

The Cefas report on Offshore Fisheries was presented to Council in November and was essentially in a holding position as at the November meeting councillors agreed to wait until they heard back from the NGO's about a proposal for an MPA (Marine Protected Area). The Administrator said that London had concerns about the cost of running a fishery and whether the island would break even. Cllr Yon asked that if the FCO was concerned about the cost of running a fishery, are we not also concerned about how the island would afford an MPA and the costs associated with enforcing it? The Administrator responded by saying that the FCO would want to ensure that the island had fully researched both options before making a decision; either option would result in a controversial decision.

Dr Brown said that while the NGOs were on island it was in our interest to listen to their arguments for an MPA. She told councillors that if the island opted for an MPA, then it could not easily go back and introduce a fishery and could be left with the long-term financial obligations of enforcing an MPA. In the meantime, and until the NGO consultation was complete, it was planned to update the Fishery Limits Ordinance to add in some sections.

In respect of the Offshore Fisheries Review, councillors were asked to consider:

- i. Endorse to update the Fishery Limits Ordinance
- ii. Agree a timing for the announcement of the offshore marine management option

On the second point, it was agreed to delay the decision until after April.

A vote was taken and all six councillors gave approval to both decisions.

Action: to follow up on the points approved by Council for the Inshore and Offshore Fisheries Reviews

8. Cinema Proposal

The Ascension Cinema Experience was a joint project driven by the MOD and subscribed to by AIG and other Island businesses to provide a modern cinema experience which would be available to all members of the public. Councillors had previously voiced concerns about the degree of public access, the pricing structure for tickets and whether there would be family movies. To address these concerns, an MOU was drafted by the SG, which locked in the agreement reached between the MOD and AIG for the future. Council was content with the MOU and the proposed document would be sent to the Base Commander for final adoption

A vote was taken and all six Councillors present agreed to the content of the MOU.

Action: To sign off the final MOU with Wing Commander Taylor

9. Pobjoy Contract

Pobjoy Ltd, a UK based firm, had an exclusive contract with AIG for the minting and marketing of legal tender commemorative coins. The contract which was drawn up in 2010 was about to expire and Council was asked to consider offering Pobjoy a one-year 'rolling' contract. During the past five years income from royalties of coins had declined steadily. The Administrator had raised this with Pobjoy, which had pledged to improve their marketing strategy. A one year contract would give both parties flexibility to bring the contract to an end at one year's notice.

A vote was taken and all six councillors present agreed to offer Pobjoy an extension of Commemorative Coin Agreement on a one-year rolling contract.

10. Quarry

AIG had received a request from the MOD (DIO – Defence Infrastructure Organisation) to use aggregate from the AIG Quarry to carry out repair works on the runway. The Dir Ops was going to do a proper evaluation of the aggregate so that AIG could make a charge which would reflect the work that DIO would have to put in to open the quarry and also the fact that it could later be used as an island resource. Council was asked to approve the opening and use of the quarry for the runway resurfacing project and for AIG to open negotiations with DIO to establish a fair price for the aggregate. Furthermore, AIG would look at establishing a process for handling future requests by third parties for aggregate extraction.

All six councillors gave their approval to proceed with this project

11. Bicentenary

The Administrator introduced this item by saying that there were two parts to the Bicentenary project; the infrastructure aspect, led by Jane Murray Stringer, and the public celebrations to mark the anniversary, which were being led by Haley Jackson. (NB This position has subsequently been re-advertised.)

The Administrator explained that the infrastructure project comprised of 3 projects, including a park in Georgetown and two major projects, restoration of the former Exiles building and the turtle ponds. There were substantial financial costs associated with these projects particularly for the funding of the restoration of the Exiles building. Some of the costs could be met through the AIG capital budget, but funding for the Exiles building would need to be sought from other means. This would be a task for the Project Manager to research and report back to Council.

On the celebration side, work was underway to draw up a programme of events leading up to the 22 October and the ensuing weekend. It was planned to set up a bicentenary committee to take these arrangements forward.

In the meantime councillors were asked to support the projects and the celebrations and to nominate representatives from among their group to champion various components of the bicentenary plans.

All six councillors offered their support for the infrastructure projects and the celebrations. Cllr Nicholas John agreed to be Councillor Champion for the Georgetown Park. Cllr Kitty George and subsequently Councillor Larry Poultney expressed an interest in being a Councillor Champion for the Exiles Building

12. Rats

At the Island Council meeting on 27 October 2014 Cllr Yon raised concerns about the increase in the rat population on the island. Following this, the Environmental Health team increased the number of traps that were set around the island, however, this added to their current workload and with the available manpower limited what could be achieved by the team. Council was asked to consider three options for dealing with the issue:

- i. Re-prioritise work within the Environmental Health to continue the increased level of rat baiting.
- ii. AIG to employ someone on a 3-month contract to increase the baiting effort to bring the problem under control.
- iii. Identify persons within AIG that could be tasked with assisting with baiting in/near their work area.

Councillors recognised that option i) would have a knock-on effect on other work areas within Environmental Health, but felt that a combination of ii) and iii) would help to combat the problem.

Action: Dir Ops to take forward in conjunction with Conservation

13. Bonus Policy

The Administrator advised Council that the second round of bonus awards for AIG Employees would take place at the end of March.

14. Memorandum: Residency and Property Rights for the people of Ascension (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo introduced a memorandum entitled "Residency and Property Rights for the people of Ascension". The paper asked that the people of Ascension be granted residency and property rights by the UK Government. Cllr Leo said that while he was on St Helena recently he was told that DfID did not see the importance of a direct air-link between St Helena and Ascension. The DfID view as he understood it was if St Helenians choose to leave and work on Ascension, why should they provide a way to get there.

Cllr Leo felt that this irresponsible approach had the potential to have serious detrimental negative consequences on the economy of St Helena and for the people of Ascension. This approach, said Cllr Leo, was a clear confirmation that DfID did not properly consult and inform St Helenians employed on Ascension in the period leading up to the vote on future access to St Helena.

The elected members of the Island Council had an obligation to help safeguard the jobs, livelihoods and best interests of the people of Ascension and as such he asked the Government to take the necessary steps to make residency and property rights an option for the people of Ascension.

The Governor noted that (this) was an issue that had been raised not too long ago and assured Cllr Leo that he and his SHG colleagues recognised the importance of maintaining the link between the islands. In his memorandum Cllr Leo referred to the United Nations (UN) Charter, Chap XI, Article 73 which he said declared that the UK Government had an obligation to ensure the political, economic and social advance for the people of the territory. In her response the AG said that the UN Charter did not specifically say that the people of Ascension should have right of abode. Cllr Leo replied that the UN Charter promotes the importance of people's self-determination, and political, economic and social development.

There was some discussion about the timing of the request and the need to convey priorities to London; with access post-2016 being the pressing issue at the moment. Cllr Leo decided that he would wait until after the UK General Election in May to take his request to the UK Government, in the meantime he asked whether the Governor had any objections to him consulting the electorate. The Governor said that it was Cllr Leo's prerogative, however he warned Cllr Leo against increasing expectations or raising alarm.

Decision: Cllr Leo would wait until after the UK General Election in May before taking his request to the UK Government.

15. Any Other Business

15.1. Police Liaison Committee (Administrator)

The Administrator updated Council about proposals to form a Police Liaison Committee (PLC). The PLC would be tasked with working the local police force to look at ways of improving performance through feedback from the community. The Administrator said that he was keen to make better use of the Ascension Island Government website, which for this purpose could be utilised for online consultation. The Solicitor General was asked to look at what kind of structure could be used and to report back. Members agreed with this approach.

Action: Solicitor General to research and report back to Council with a proposed structure for the Committee (SG)

15.2. New vehicles for the Police Force (DoR)

DoR said that due to a budget underspend there was money available to purchase some new vehicles for the Police Force. Council were consulted via email and had already agreed to these funds being appropriated for this purpose.

15.3. Ventilator (DoR)

A quote had been received to purchase a new ventilator for the Georgetown Hospital.

15.4. BFBS TV

The extended BFBS TV Service was on track to be implemented in July 2015.

15.5. Two Boats Village Fence (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo enquired about the perimeter fence around Two Boats Village. In recent years the fence around the village had deteriorated to such an extent that sheep were now able to get in the village

and had become a pest. The Administrator told Council that the fence was repaired in November 2014. The issue now was how to remove the sheep from the village. One of the options under consideration was a sheep drive, a task that could be incorporated into the AIG Away Day.

Action: Dir Ops would be asked to look at this issue and to come up with a solution

15.6. AIG Employee Disputes (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo enquired how much public money has AIG paid out to date, either through out of court or through the court settlements, as a result of employee disputes. The AG said there is a case currently going through the courts but no public money has been spent to date. The DoR told Cllr Leo that there has been one out of court settlement in recent times (£10,000).

15.7. US Base Employment Policy (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo asked the Administrator to confirm if there has been a change to the employment policy on the American Base which is putting St Helenians at a disadvantage in favour of other nationalities. While it was timely, this was a question that needed to be researched and until such evidence was presented it was difficult to comment. The Governor undertook to follow this up with the Administrator.

Action: Administrator to follow up with the Governor

15.8. Export Control Regulations (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo referred to the Export Control Regulations and asked, what is the procedure for fish that was caught on Ascension and exported to the US?

Following a tip-off, Customs recently carried out checks of fish exports during the last RMS. The question was asked whether checks of fish exports were being carried out at the US Base. Council was advised that checks are happening at the US Base and persons wishing to export fish to the US were also required to purchase fish permits from AIG.

Action: The Director of Fisheries would be asked to speak to the US Authorities

The Council meeting closed at 16.05pm.

Nicola Dillon
Clerk of Council