

MINUTES OF THE ASCENSION ISLAND COUNCIL (AIC)
MEETING HELD IN THE COURT HOUSE,
Monday, 23rd March at 13:30 hrs

Present: (by telephone) HE The Governor, Mark Capes
Marc Holland, Administrator
Walter Scott, Solicitor 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: Nicola Moore, Attorney General
Councillor Larry Poultney

In attendance: Nicola Dillon, Clerk of Council

1. Introductory Remarks

The Governor attended the meeting by phone from St Helena. Unfortunately the Attorney General, Nicola Moore, was unable to attend but the Solicitor General, Walter Scott, was representing her at the meeting. The meeting would primarily focus on the budget for the next financial year. In his opening comments the Governor referred to the WASS Inquiry which was currently in its second week on St Helena; the team would be leaving St Helena on Wednesday, 1 April arriving back at Ascension on 3 April to fly back to the UK. The Governor also mentioned the UK General Election which would take place on 7 May – the next few weeks would see much publicity and campaigning on behalf of the major parties.

With regards the Airport Project, the Governor told Councillors that they were working hard towards airport certification and looking forward to a first trial flight in July 2015 to test the airport electronics. SHG was also working hard on establishing a sea freight service for both islands; the Governor told Councillors that services for Ascension were very much at the fore of discussions in St Helena. The Governor ended by saying that the news that Comair, operating as British Airways, would operate a service between Johannesburg and St Helena was a major step forward in the airport project and the culmination of three years of hard work.

2. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the AIC meeting held on 5 February 2014 were confirmed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Post 2016 Update

Due to telephone problems Toni Bendall was unable to join the meeting by phone, but had prepared a paper for Councillors' information. In his introduction of the paper, the Administrator referred to the announcement from the St Helena Government about Comair having been chosen as the preferred bidder for the provision of an air service to St Helena.

With regards Ascension's post 2016 plans, the 2016 Access Project had been tasked by the FCO to provide more detailed financial analysis on the options which were presented at February's meeting. As a result AIG contracted the Danish firm, COWI, to review the projects progress to date and to identify additional options which were not yet considered. Two consultants from COWI visited the island from 12 to 14 March for this purpose and met with key stakeholders. The Consultants' report was still to be received. The Administrator told Council that there were still a number of issues to resolve such as finance and getting Employing Organisations to commit, especially the US Contractors to sharing the financial risk, but overall the trend was positive.

Councillor Leo responded to the update by saying that the support from FCO was appreciated, especially the funding that they provided for the COWI consultancy project.

5. Legislation

i. Ascension Island Appropriation Ordinance, 2015

The Acting DoR presented the 2015/16 budget. In her presentation, the DoR said that Council had been well briefed, both through finance committee and also in informal sessions, so she did not propose to discuss the financial strategy supporting the figures which were set out in the Ordinance, but to give an overview only.

DoR said that one of the focuses for the coming year was to maximise the collection of existing fees, charges, duties and taxes. As agreed at last year's BCF, AIG would continue to increase vehicle licence fees with the next increase due on 1 April 2015. Also agreed at last year's BCF, AIG would be consulting on and introducing a fee for waste management. Last July's BCF had also agreed that immediate urgent Pier repairs would be paid for from reserves and recovered through increased fees, thus from 1 April 2015, the handling charges for ship operations would increase by 10%. DoR told Council that the USAF had also indicated their willingness to contribute to pier head repairs, a decision which was based on a previous precedent; this was still to be confirmed.

Looking ahead, DoR said that pressure points included rising staff costs, a rise in medical referrals to the UK and an ageing housing stock in need of an overhaul. With the decommissioning of the RMS St Helena in 2016, AIG projected a rise in operating costs, although it was not clear yet what liability would fall to AIG (and other users) and how the island's cost base would increase.

DoR gave an overview of the main factors that would contribute to revenue streams for 2015/16; they included an increase in income tax due to MOD sub-contract work (to start in May 2015); an increase in Corporation tax in 2016/17, which was based on the contribution by Sure for 2014/15 and also in local revenue the sale of quarried rock to the MOD (a one off project) for one year only. While some streams of revenue were slightly decreased due to factors such as reduced demand and reduced rates, other duties were set to increase.

On the expenditure side, the main contributing factors included the setup of a Fisheries Directorate; funding for a full-time Social Worker; increases in utilities and consultancy and staffing costs, with some new full-time and part-time posts being recruited (Disaster

Management Consultant, Policy Officer, ICT Teacher, Painters).

The Appropriation Ordinance also included expenditure of £1,014,554 under the Development Fund and projects which were included for this year's budget were:

- Repairs to Two Boats Pool and Changing Rooms
- Upgrade of the Georgetown children's playground and other public amenities
- Replacement of the JCB Excavator
- Replacement of the Motor Transport Garage Doors (recommended as the current doors are a health and safety issue)
- Replacement of the second (of two) marine pontoon engine
- Additional Pier Head works as agreed by BCF

Other projects in the Development fund included an IT upgrade both at the School and within AIG and replacement vehicles and equipment.

In concluding her budget report, DoR said that the budget envelope for the Consolidated Fund was £7,709,012 and the budget envelope for the Development Fund was £1,014,554.

In his response to the budget, Cllr John commented on the variance of £550K over a 2 year period of staff costs, which was a concern. Overall though Cllr John felt that having gone through the details, the budget which was before Council was a better budget than in the recent past.

Cllr Leo asked that in the interests of accountability and transparency of public funds, whether Council could be provided with a breakdown of the income and expenditure of AIG departments in future Finance statements. DoR said that she would arrange for members to receive a copy of the audited accounts from the last financial year.

The Governor thanked DoR and Councillors for their work in preparing the budget and asked whether he could know the reason for the 3.75% increase in utilities from April 2015 especially in view of the recent sharp drop in the price of fuel oil. The Administrator said that he was certain that the increase reflected a rising cost base and a decrease in the number of people on the island although he undertook to seek an answer from Babcock.

The Administrator addressed Councillors' concerns about the rising staff costs within AIG which he said was a combination of some pay rises which were awarded in July 2014, some new posts which had been appointed over the last year (and some still to come), such as a Director of Fisheries post, a Disaster Management Consultant, Painters, ICT Teacher; all roles which were necessary for AIG to meet its obligations. AIG had been carrying some gaps and when these were filled it reflected in the overall staff costs. In recent informal meetings Council agreed that costs cannot continue to rise at this level although AIG does face increasing demands to meet modern standards, both on island and back in London, however, income is not going up in proportion. This has created a wider policy challenge for the Government as a whole.

The Conservation Officer, Dr Nicola Weber, was invited to give a presentation on her department's expenditure as Council had raised some concerns in a previous informal meeting about the increase in expenditure over the last three years¹. Dr Weber provided Councillors with a breakdown of the last four years' budgets and the current year's budget (Annex A), which she went through in some detail with Council. In addition to the AIG budget, the Conservation Department receives an income from Tourism which has increased year on year to £16,422 in

¹ See Annex A for a copy of the Conservation Officer's Report.

the last financial year, and also grant funding from overseas partners for the Darwin initiatives (£140K to £180K per annum) and support from the RSPB (£12K per annum).

Dr Weber gave a brief explanation about the rising staffing costs and gave Councillors an assurance that the department was now at a sustainable capacity in terms of core Government-funded staff and did not anticipate this increasing in the foreseeable future. The department would still look to external funding sources to employ short-term expert staff for specialised tasks e.g. invertebrate studies, but in terms of the core tasks, the department had the staff that it requires. The department started in 2001 with one on-island Conservation Officer and there were now 9 full-time staff working in Conservation (including AIG youth trainees). Over this time the department had been successful in securing external funding to initiate projects, which have been funded for 1-2 years and have allowed the department to build local capacity as well as the purchasing of vital equipment. As each project ended it was decided to retain a critical number of skilled staff to enable the department to meet its global and local obligations. As a result the plant, seabird, sea turtle and land crab programmes, as well as the outreach programmes such as Ascension Explorers, are now well resourced. The future of the fisheries science team remained uncertain especially with the end of the project in the next year when decisions will need to be made about whether it integrates with the Fisheries Department (which could morph into a Marine Management Department) and how the work is funded, externally or through fishing licences. Dr Weber also mentioned the daily challenge of controlling invasive species and told Council that the department was working with other departments such as Environmental Health and the Gardening team to share tasks and to develop a sustainable work plan to keep these under control.

Cllr Leo joined the Administrator in thanking Dr Weber for her helpful response to the queries and criticisms which had been directed towards the Conservation Department. The public, he said, were now better informed and more aware of the work and the various mechanisms of Conservation on Ascension. Conservation was essential and he thanked the Conservation Department for their good work, and especially all the people who carry out voluntary conservation work on the island.

Cllr Leo asked about the funding of the Conservation staff, which are funded entirely by the Darwin Initiative and asked for clarification that no public funding is used towards the costs of employing these staff. Dr Weber and DoR explained that some costs, such as accommodation (but not utility bills) etc. are picked up by AIG, but other costs such as the salaries, travel, fuel and purchasing of ~~the some~~ vehicles etc are entirely funded by the Darwin Initiative.

Cllr Leo also enquired about the level of funding that has been secured from UK donors for 2015/16 and referred to the statement by the Conservation Officer that over £900,000 had been secured from overseas bodies in the last three years. This year's funding amounted to £182,378 which consisted of the £39,835 for Darwin Mapping and £12,000 from the RSPB and the balance of the Darwin AIMS project (£261,087), which was a two-year project which began last year. In a further question, Cllr Leo commented that the two income streams were linked operationally and asked whether the Finance Department have any say in the allocation of the donor funds. Dr Weber explained that when the funding is applied for via external agencies, there is a very clearly defined guideline as to what the funding is being granted for and reports, with a breakdown of spending need to be submitted (and undergo peer-review) every six months and are made publically available.²

² www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/location/country/ascension-island/ and <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-4401>.

Cllr Yon referred to the AIMS Project which she said was only a two-year project and it was unlikely that all of the work would be completed within this time. She asked Dr Weber about the likelihood of getting more funding once the current two-year project ended so that the work can continue and that the costs do not fall to AIG? Dr Weber replied that the work that they will have completed will fulfil all of the requirements of what was proposed in the grant application, forming an important baseline for future monitoring and study, and funding could be sought on the basis of what is found out in the next year relating to the health of our marine biodiversity and fish stocks and simply that there is so much more that is still unknown. As well as putting together another bid (which the department and overseas partners have begun to think about), the department would also need to consider that if the bid was not successful what the next step would be, but support would be sought from overseas collaborators such as RSPB that have pledged their support. Cllr Yon agreed and said that this was part of the issue for the Council in that there is pressure to fulfil the obligations to the UK and also internationally, and while in the beginning NGOs are happy to fund various projects as time has gone on AIG has had to pick up the shortfall. Council was concerned that the more projects that were funded externally, the greater the chance that AIG would eventually have to find funding to sustain them in the long run. Dr Weber responded by saying that in the recent past the department did not have the on-island capability to put together bids for funding, so relied heavily on external sources to submit bids on the island's behalf; over the years, with the increase in capacity and skills, the department was currently in a position to submit bids for funding so there is now a greater chance of getting overseas funding. This is not to say that the department takes all of this for granted and the team does look at its priorities and if funding were to be reduced then in consultation with stakeholders, both on-island and overseas, work programmes would be adjusted accordingly.

There were no further questions from the Council and the Administrator thanked Dr Weber for her contribution to the meeting, which was a good example of democracy in action and enabled Councillors to ask questions and to be provided with a more in-depth look at the department's work.

In drawing the discussion on the Appropriation Ordinance to a close, the Administrator thanked the DoR and the Finance Committee for their work over the past weeks and put the Ordinance to a vote.

All six Councillors present voted in favour of the Ascension Island Appropriation Ordinance, 2015. There were nil votes against and nil abstentions.

Action:

1. DoR to send members a copy of the Audited Accounts for the last financial year
2. Administrator to provide the Governor with an explanation for the increase in utilities

ii. Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Ascension) Ordinance, 2015

The purpose of this Ordinance was to repeal the provision of applying the Coroners Ordinance, 1987 to Ascension. The repealed Ordinance would be replaced by the Coroners and Presumption of Death Ordinance, 2015, which would come into force in St Helena on 1 April 2015. The new ordinance modernised local Coronal laws in keeping with recent developments in the law in England and St Helena. Under the St Helena Law Application Ordinance Cap A1 the Coroners and Presumption of Death Ordinance, 2015 would also apply to Ascension (in the absence of an Ascension ordinance).

Cllr Leo asked whether AIG had a procedure in place for informing next of kin in St Helena if

there is a sudden death on Ascension. The SG said he would take this forward with the Coroners' Office and to look at introducing/revising the policy.

A vote was taken and all six Councillors present voted in favour of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Ascension) Ordinance, 2015. There were nil votes against and nil abstentions.

Action: SG to look at procedures for informing next of kin in event of sudden deaths

6. Policy Paper:

i. Policy for Mandatory Criminal Records Check and requirement for Child Protection Policy for those undertaking work or volunteer roles with children on Ascension

The Ascension Island Safeguarding Children Board (AISCB) submitted the policy to Council to recommend to the Governor for adoption. The policy had two main goals: i) to ensure that all people working unsupervised with children had a criminal record check, and ii) that all organisations as listed in Schedule 1 of the policy have Child Protection policies in place (a sample was attached to the policy in Schedule 3). The underlying principle of the policy was the safety of children and to provide them with a safe environment. The policy was driven by past recommendations that said that every person working with children should have a criminal records check.

Council was told that the process was supported by the recruitment of a Criminal Records Check Officer and by setting up a procedure for all voluntary organisations and individuals working with children to follow. The checks were free as the cost would be borne by the Ascension Island Government. All checks would be confidential.

The Policy was put to the vote and all six Councillors present voted in favour of the Policy being adopted. There were nil votes against and nil abstentions.

7. Fisheries Update

The Administrator provided an update on the latest fisheries developments. The present status was that AIG was still waiting to hear back from the RSPB with regards funding an MPA (Marine Protected Area). The RSPB was lobbying the UK Government to have a no take zone around Ascension and there had been some misleading reports in the press about a Pitcairn Island MPA, as the UK Government had not committed any funding in support of this.

The Fisheries Director had recently reported to the Administrator that the recent public meetings were well supported and an advisory committee for inshore fishery had been set up. The committee would provide advice on developing catch reporting systems, developing best practice guidelines and forming regulations within a licensing system to protect vulnerable species.

8. Any Other Business

8.1. Request for a Coin Operated Shower Facility at the Pier Head (Cllr Leo)

Cllr Leo said that he had been approached by a constituent to see whether a coin operated shower facility could be installed at the Pier Head. The DoR told Council that the proposed Yacht facility which would include a shower was still in the pipeline and was due to start imminently (Cllr George confirmed this was the case).

8.2. Policing (Cllr Yon)

Cllr Yon referred to recent discussions that Council had regarding policing on Ascension, which was one of the Governor's special responsibilities. She told the Governor that there was no formal agreement in place, but she referred to policing issues which AIG are left picking up the cost for. The Governor agreed that this was an issue that needed to be looked into and needed to be formalised; he hoped to see a proposal soon.

Action: To submit a proposal for a formal arrangement between AIG and SHG regarding policing responsibilities

8.3. Communicating with Ascension (Administrator)

The Administrator recently carried out an exercise to ascertain the scale of the difficulties that people have been experiencing in trying to call Ascension. There were a number of service providers that were not connecting calls to Ascension. All organisations on the island have been affected by communication problems. He told Councillors that he had met with Sure and given them 7 days in which to investigate the issue and to provide an answer.

8.4. Pensions & Gratuities (Cllr John)

Cllr John enquired whether employee gratuities were taxed, and the SG confirmed that they were exempt from taxation. PricewaterhouseCoopers was on island and they were currently looking at the pension scheme in St Helena.

Cllr John asked about the scheme, 'My Saint Pension' and it was suggested that this was followed up with the Financial Secretary in St Helena.

Action: To speak to the Financial Secretary (SHG) about 'My Saint Pension'

Business was concluded and in his closing remarks the Governor told Councillors that he was currently talking to the Administrator about possible dates for a visit and looked forward to visiting the island soon.

The Council meeting closed at 15:00hrs.

Nicola Dillon
Clerk of Council

Annex A

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015 *Income/Spend up until Feb '15	2015-2016
AIG Budget Total	£93,264	£125,274	£234,855	£281,443	£243,396
Staffing	62,485	94,053	126,269	207,360	171,531
# staff	5	5	6	9	9
Supplies	2,834	2,834	7,440	9,500	9,100
Other	27,945	28,387	101,146*	74,083	62,765
Total Spend	-	£131,230	£176,013	£222,465	NA
Income:					
Tours & Sales	-	5,831	11,374	16,422	NA
Grant funding	£181,471 OTEP Plants (145,400, over 18 months) OTEP Turtles (73,507) RSPB Partner Support (12k)	£171,402 Darwin BAP (£299,480, over 2 years) FFI (£9,662) RSPB Partner Support (12k)	£161,740 Darwin BAP (£299,480, over 2 years) RSPB Partner Support (12k)	£142,543 Darwin AIMS (£261,087, over 2 years) RSPB Partner Support (12k)	£182,378 Darwin AIMS (£261,087, over 2 years) Darwin Mapping (£39,835) RSPB Partner Support (12k)
# externally funded staff	4	4	5	8	8
Total staff	9	9	11	17	17**

Staffing includes: salaries, travel expenses, training & development

Supplies includes: consumables, PPE, cleaning

Other includes: property costs, water & electricity, insurance, depreciation, transport.

*Includes £62,211 budgeted by the Director of Resources, Mr Hamish Stewart as 'other' that was not done at the request of the Conservation Office and so was not spent and returned to AIG.

** This comprises: **AIG funded** = Nicola Weber (Head of Conservation), Jolene Sim (Assistant Conservation Officer), Stedson Stroud (Park Warden), Natasha Williams (Conservation Assistant), Kenickie Andrews (Fieldworker), Eliza Leat (Seabird Scientist), Megan Benjamin (Trainee) (Scott Duncan Trainee on a separate budget line), Andy McKay (Part-time Tourism Officer), Rachel Holland (Part-time Media Officer). **Externally funded** = Sam Weber (Science Officer), Andy Richardson (Marine Fisheries Scientist), Emma Nolan (Marine Fisheries Scientist), Kate Downes (Marine Fisheries Scientist), 4 x Part-time turtle/ conservation interns.

MAIN POINTS

- The AIG Conservation Department was established in 2001 when the FCO funded a Seabird Restoration project, initially managed by the RSPB, which recruited 1 on-island Conservation Officer. In this year, AIG and the UK Government also signed up to an Environment Charter for Ascension with the aim of conserving its natural heritage.
- Over the past 10+ years, AIG Conservation Department and its overseas partners have been successful in securing considerable external funding to initiate projects that are critical to our ability to safeguard Ascension's natural heritage. Since 2011-2012 this has amounted to approximately £140,000 - £180,000 per year in addition to the core funds allocated by AIG. Where as in the past

- grants were typically secured by external partners (e.g. University of Exeter, Kew Gardens, RSPB), AIG is increasingly taking the lead in the preparation of these proposals.
- Each project has typically funded staff for 1-2 years to build local capacity and allowed the purchasing of vital equipment e.g. vehicles and scientific kit. When each project finishes, AIG are left with the decision of which aspects of the project should be continued so that we meet our targets in the Environment Charter/ Biodiversity Action Plan and make our contributions to international agreements e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity obligation to reduce worldwide biodiversity loss by 2020. Over the years, we have made the decision to retain a critical number of skilled staff to allow us to meet all of our obligations, train the next generation, give back to the island and its residents, and secure more external funding to carry out everything that we need to do.
 - This has seen our core AIG funded staff increase from 1 in 2001, 3 in 2005, 5 in 2011 to 9 in 2015 (which includes 2 tourism/ media staff on a job share and a youth trainee). While this is an obvious growth (and one that is reflected in the budget that has increased each year), it is not unreasonable given the workload of the Department and will not continue to increase on a year-on-year basis as we are reaching capacity with a team that is able to carry out everything that is required of us.
 - It is worth noting that in all years the Department has been able to maintain a total staff that is approximately double that funded by AIG. These additional, externally-funded staff members are taxed locally and spend their incomes on island so the net cost of conservation to the tax payer is not entirely reflected in the headline figure.
 - Our plant, seabird, sea turtle and land crab programmes, as well as our outreach programme e.g. Ascension Explorers, are now well resourced and will not require further core staff in the foreseeable future. Question marks remain over how the marine/ fisheries science will continue when project funding ends next year and how it should integrate with the Fisheries Department – decisions will be made once we know whether it can be funded by commercial fishing licences or charitable organisations depending on the outcome of the current marine management decisions. A tourism officer is important for dealing with the current low-level of higher end eco-tourism that we currently receive – this may change with the opening of the airport on St Helena and so a Tourism Strategy to inform this will soon be drawn up. Finally, the control of invasive species is a daily challenge, but we are currently working with other Departments e.g. Environmental Health, the Gardening team to divide tasks between ourselves and develop a more sustainable work plan to keep them under control.

We fully appreciate that island residents have differing views of priorities for how tax-payers' money is spent and it is right to question exactly where it goes to. We believe that the work that we carry out is essential in terms of preserving our Island's biodiversity for everybody, including future generations, to enjoy, and in meeting the international obligations that we are signed up to both as part of the UK and also separately as a Territory – detailed in our Biodiversity Action Plan (available here: www.ascension-island.gov.ac/government/conservation/projects/bap/). This is not a priority for everybody on-island and so we want to give back to the community as much as we can, both in terms of increasing awareness of why biodiversity is important and also helping people to experience and enjoy it – e.g. through Islander articles, Ascension Explorers, guided tours, maintain footpaths. We appreciate feedback on the work that we do.