

**ASCENSION ISLAND
GOVERNMENT**

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

10:00 on Wednesday 14 August 2024 at the Administration Building

MEETING SUMMARY

Present: HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE [agenda item 5 only] Councillor Kerry Benjamin
HH Simon Minshull, Administrator Councillor Alan Nicholls
Attorney General, David Ballantyne [agenda item 5 only] Councillor Laura Shearer
Director of Resources, Peter Thomas Councillor Gordon Worthington

In attendance: Carl Mackerras, Head of Administrator's Office
Matthew James, Crown Counsel
Siobhan Stewart, Clerk to Council

Apologies: Councillor Kyla Benjamin

1. Welcome

The Administrator welcomed all parties and thanked everyone for attending.

2. Matters arising

Matters arising were addressed via the actions tracker as follows:

Pets on the FIRS: The Administrator explained that no decision has been made as to whether pets only belonging to MOD Military Personnel and MOD Civil Servants will be carried on the FIRS. Discussions are ongoing with both British Forces South Atlantic Islands [BFSAI] and Defence Supply Chain Operations and Movements [DSCOM]. The Administrator acknowledged the public concern around the topic and agreed for the item to remain on the actions tracker until a final decision is made.

Future Vet Visit Plans: The Administrator reported that opportunities to bid to the Ascension Island Marine Protected Area Community Trust (AIMPACT) fund has now been publicised, with a closing date of Friday 30 August 2024. A bid to support costs associated with bringing a veterinarian to Ascension is expected. Councillor Nicholls asked where the veterinarian is likely to visit from. The Administrator confirmed that the AIG are in discussion with the Falklands Islands veterinarian team. Councillor Shearer suggested that it may be an opportune time to also seek the veterinarian's specialised assistance in relation to avian flu detection processes.

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

4. Disposal of confidential waste

The DoR provided an update to council regarding the **disposal of confidential waste** following concerns being raised at a previous council meeting on 17 July 2024. The DoR explained that whilst it is the responsibility of the person disposing of the waste to shred or render unreadable any private information they wish to prevent from being read and potentially shared, the AIG will now offer a confidential waste burning process. A Public Notice was issued on 02 August 2024 which provides tips on disposing of confidential waste and advertised AIG's offering of a confidential waste burning process for sealed bags of paper waste. Councillor Nicholls thanked the DoR for the update and the informative and helpful Public Notice.

5. Memorandum of Understanding between AIG and Sure

In recognition of the sensitivity of this issue, Councillors confirmed their agreement to be bound by their confidentiality requirement.

HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE provided councillors with an overview of the current status of negotiations between the AIG and Sure South Atlantic Ltd (SSA). HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE explained that as Councillors were aware, the arrival of Starlink on Ascension Island had significantly impacted the SSA business model. This in turn had an impact on licencing arrangements. It was acknowledged that beyond the provision of broadband services, as the sole communication provider on Ascension, SSA also provide other essential services such as Landlines, the Mobile Phone Network and Emergency Radio coverage. HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE reported that the AIG had sought advice on how best to proceed from expert external consultants, and following extensive discussions, the AIG were in a position to present a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to Council for consideration and discussion.

The Attorney General explained that the MOU represented a transitional arrangement between the AIG and SSA to enable essential services to be maintained pending future telecoms provision on Ascension. The Attorney General highlighted that the MOU stipulated that given the use of public funds and the need for public accountability, both SSA and the AIG agree to issue a Public Statement confirming that the MOU has been signed, that includes a summary of the purpose of the MOU.

The Attorney General explained that the subsidy amount is based on data that had been assessed by the AIG's external consultants which, over a period of two years, should allow SSA the opportunity to continue to provide essential services to Ascension, while an assessment is made of the future telecommunications provision. Any extension of the subsidy beyond the two-year period would need to be agreed by both parties. Discussion was had regarding the risks associated if the MOU was not to be agreed. The Attorney General noted the importance that Councillors understood the detail of the MOU and had the opportunity to challenge and ask questions, fulfilling their responsibilities as elected members. HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE invited Councillors to ask any questions they may have, noting that there would also be a formal meeting of council on 15 August.

Councillor Nicholls noted that the MOU would be for a period of two years and requested clarity on what is expected to happen after this period. HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE explained that a decision on the situation beyond two years had yet to be taken. There was no pre-judged commitment. However, importantly, the MOU provided certainty over the continuation of essential telecommunication services on Ascension, whilst noting that SSA must provide a 6-month period of notice should they wish to withdraw. That period was in line with the AIG's and its external consultants' assessment of the minimum period required to activate contingency plans, albeit the cost of delivery would not be known until commissioned.

Councillor Worthington requested further detail on the contingencies mentioned and asked whether the AIG were exploring alternative providers for essential services. Discussion was had regarding the telecommunications infrastructure as well as analysis of alternative solutions.

Councillor Shearer asked whether consideration was being given to the AIG taking on the responsibility in house to provide some of the on island essential services, noting that some of the services currently being provided were outdated, and that many constituents had switched to alternative communication platforms following the introduction of Starlink. HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE noted that AIG did not currently have the capacity to deliver the essential services currently provided by SSA. However contingency planning has been undertaken to assess options and it was also the case that technology is progressing at a considerable pace, potentially offering options currently not available.

Councillor Shearer noted the additional fee being charged to the AIG to retain SSA as their IT service provider and requested further information. The Administrator explained that the IT service contract safeguarded the maintenance of AIG's existing IT infrastructure and services, noting that Key Performance Indictors [KPI's] were being written in the new contract to ensure an agreed level of service was maintained.

Councillor Shearer asked whether the AIG had budget provision for the unexpected financial commitment. The Director of Resources confirmed that the AIG has reserves which may be used to underwrite expenditure in emergency situations, such as this. The DoR reminded Council that when incurring any expenditure it should be

considered as to whether it is maintaining the financial stability and sustainability of AIG and that it is appropriate to supporting the needs of the island. Councillor Nicholls suggested that it may be worth requesting the UK Government to support financially. The Administrator highlighted the existing financial reserves AIG has and confirmed that the FCDO are currently providing medium term financial planning support to the AIG through an FCDO Economists. HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE explained that following an assessment of likely risk, the use of reserves for this purpose was assessed as appropriate

The Attorney General assured Councillors that the AIG would continue to work with both technical and strategic consultants to finalise the AIG Telecommunications Policy and ultimately draft legislation to govern the future provision of telecommunications in Ascension.

Councillor Shearer relayed concerns from constituents in relation to financial pressures the prices increase of Starlink would cause and requested an update on when Ascension would be able to access a regional package and pricing plan. Crown Counsel acknowledged the community impact of the impending price increase and assured Councillors that the AIG are seeking a swift resolution with SpaceX to the issue. A Public Notice will issue when there is further news to share.

Councillors thanked HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE, and Attorney General, David Ballantyne, for their attendance and time to answer Councillors enquiries.

6. Any other business

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

- i. **AIMPACT Fund:** The HoAO reminded Councillors that bids to the AIMPACT fund are now being accepted, with a closing date of Friday 30 August 2024. The HoAO requested that Councillors encourage constituents to submit bid applications in line with the Terms of Reference that has been circulated that has been included in the Public Notice issued on 01 August 2024. Councillor Nicholls requested clarity on the criteria to bid to the fund. The HoAO explained that the fund will provide at least £80,000 per year for a variety of projects on Ascension under the following four categories: Community, Education, Environment and Heritage.
- ii. **Governor Visit:** The Administrator reported that HE the Governor, Nigel Phillips CBE will visit Ascension Island from 12 -15 September 2024. This visit will partly coincide with a visit from the Overseas Territories Police Advisor, Mr Andrew Munday.
- iii. **King's Birthday Party:** The Administrator explained that approval had been received from the Royal Unit to hold this year's King's Birthday Party on Saturday 26 October 2024 at The Residency. It was noted that this was a one off approval for the date and that in future years the event is only likely to be held in either June or November. Discussion was had regarding the associated Public Holiday, which will be formally decided upon at the next formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council.
- iv. **Legislative Changes:** Crown Counsel invited Councillors to a meeting where a process can be set out to enable Councillors to propose changes in legislation. A convenient time and date will be confirmed in due course.

The next formal meeting of the Ascension Island Council will be held on Thursday 15 August 2024.

The meeting closed at 11:30.

Siobhan Stewart
Clerk to Council