**EXCO meeting of 24 January 2012**

A fairly weighty agenda today kept us busy from 9.30am to about 1.20pm; the longest EXCO meeting I have chaired here since I arrived.  I was pleased to welcome Councillor John Cranfield to EXCO, kindly standing in for Councillor Tony Green who is currently in Brussels representing St Helena at an EU meeting.

We began by listening to a presentation by officials to update us on how the policy on income related benefits is being applied.  It is a complex issue and while the new policy introduced last year was designed to be as fair as possible, Councillors sought greater clarity on how certain aspects of the policy were working in practice.  The key to the matter is to ensure that there is flexibility within the system to recognise those that are genuinely struggling and to direct help specifically to them.  Work continues to review how the system may be fine tuned to address Councillors’ concerns.

Councillors approved a draft agreement with SHELCO, to be signed by the Governor, which grants permission for SHELCO to acquire a freehold landholding licence for the development of a tourism development project. Accompanying the licence will be a memorandum of agreement stipulating conditions for use of the licence. This opens the way forward for SHELCO to proceed with their luxury hotel development.

Councillors considered proposals for some increases in electricity and water tariffs, alongside ways in which the impact of any increases could be softened for those least able to afford them. Officials briefed Councillors on plans to help keep tariffs lower in future years by increasing the number of wind turbines producing electricity and by purchasing new, more efficient diesel generators.  Any revised tariffs that are approved would be introduced from 1 April 2012.

The Financial Secretary received approval for a proposal to streamline the processing of applications by workers employed by Basil Read to import personal belongings such as vehicles and household items. This did not amount to granting any special privileges but would make for easier and quicker management of the process by HM Customs. The process would be closely monitored to ensure that it operates as intended in accordance with normal regulations.

Councillors also granted approval for Basil read to begin extracting rock, which would involve the use of explosives, from an open quarry in the Rupert’s Bay area. The rock would be used for constructing the temporary jetty at Rupert’s Bay.

Another major piece of work has produced draft Land Disposal and Housing Policies.  Officials explained that the paper would be put out to extensive public consultation during January and February. The draft Land Disposal policy is designed to enable a speedier and more transparent process by which SHG may release land and housing assets to the open market. The Housing Policy is concerned to safeguard the interests of the people of St Helena by ensuring that they can access a range of affordable housing.  Both polices complement the objectives of the Land Development and Control Policy which has also been subject to much public consultation

All in all, an interesting and diverse agenda which attracted much constructive debate, ending shortly before 1.30pm on a lovely warm and sunny St Helena afternoon.

**Mark Capes**

**Governor**

**24 January 2012**