



HM Government of Gibraltar

Deputy Chief Minister

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Budget Address 2022 - Deputy Chief Minister, The Hon Dr Joseph Garcia CMG MP

INTRODUCTION

Mr Speaker,

It has been a difficult six years.

As you know, Gibraltar has had to endure a dual crisis.

The consequence of a lethal combination of our departure from the European Union and a global public health pandemic.

The former stretches back now to the Referendum of June 2016.

The origins of the latter can be traced to December 2019.

Those two events have dominated our politics and shaped our lives.

They have also taken up valuable hours, days, weeks, months and years of Government time.

And not least, the pandemic in particular, has impacted negatively on the economy and on Government finances.

All this is reflected in the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure before us today.

In all my time in this House, I have never have witnessed an external event which has impacted on our finances in this way.

It would be grossly unfair to belittle or to ignore this fact.

And to pretend it simply has not happened.

Mr Speaker, this is my twenty-third budget debate.

The pandemic caused us to skip one as Honourable Members will recall.

COST OF COVID

The Covid Response Fund has set out, in a clear and transparent manner, exactly what the financial

consequences of the pandemic have been.

Clearly, the human cost will always be more important than this.

The 6.3 million people who have lost their lives so far.

Over one hundred of our own citizens.

But Mr Speaker,

The public health crisis has catapulted the planet into an economic crisis.

Businesses have closed.

Many have contracted.

Jobs have been lost.

Revenue has fallen.

Expenditure has increased.

And debt has mounted.

Government finances everywhere have taken a hit.

And Gibraltar is no exception.

The latest published figures show that the overall impact of the pandemic here is over £360 million.

All this represents a real and direct blow to our finances.

The House will recall the detailed preparations that were made in 2020 and 2021 to meet the challenge posed by the pandemic.

This included the purchase of medical equipment.

The stockpiling of medical supplies.

The creation of a field hospital from scratch.

The extensive testing regime which made Gibraltar a world leader in the field.

The contact tracing bureau.

And in addition to this, the taxpayer supported the salaries of private sector workers during two lockdowns and in certain cases beyond.

Indeed, businesses were also assisted with their costs in other ways.

Mr Speaker, this has run to hundreds of millions of pounds.

That is money the Government has spent and money that the Government has not received.

All this with the agreement of the Opposition.

Mr Speaker, we hope we have seen the back of the pandemic.

But the truth is, as variants of concern continue to emerge, that we can never know for certain.

The vaccination program remains our main defence going forward.

And in this area too Gibraltar has led the world, with the invaluable support and assistance of the United Kingdom.

Therefore the impact of the diversion of resources, of funding, of staff, of time and of energy to fight the pandemic since 2020 should not be underestimated.

Neither should the combined consequences of the £360 million in expenses and in lost revenue.

EU DEPARTURE – GENERAL

But Mr Speaker, COVID-19 is sadly not the only external factor to have hit Gibraltar.

The effects of our departure from the European Union have been with us for even longer.

Indeed, Brexit has dominated many Government work-streams since the 2016 referendum.

That makes it six years of our ten in office.

It also means the entirety of this electoral term so far.

It is inevitable that six years of Brexit and three years of COVID-19 will have consequences for what any Government can do.

The time spent on Brexit matters by Ministers and officials has had a knock-on effect.

That same attention will have been denied to other areas.

The speed with which decisions are taken has been impacted.

The time available to meet people has been sadly squeezed.

And we cannot underestimate the all-consuming and cross-cutting nature of our EU departure.

Practically every department or Ministry has been affected in some way.

It is true that the Chief Minister and I have certainly devoted more time to this than other members of the Government.

But that does not mean to say that others have not been involved.

On the contrary, Mr Speaker, they have.

Firstly, in the wider discussions and the policy decisions that have needed to be taken.

And secondly, because of the direct impact of our EU departure in their own areas of responsibility.

And now thirdly in the assessment and discussions of the proposed future relationship with the EU.

I cannot stress enough therefore the cross-departmental nature of this work.

It is also relevant to emphasize that there are different Brexit work-streams.

The first for work in the context of an agreement.

The second in the context of no agreement with the exploration of possible alternatives or contingencies.

And the third in relation to future long-term economic planning.

The entirety of the Government has been involved in these processes over all these years.

FUTURE RELATIONSHIP TREATY

Mr Speaker, as my Honourable friend the Chief Minister has said, the Government continues to work towards a treaty to govern the future relationship of Gibraltar with the European Union.

The House knows that our main interest lies in a mobility agreement which facilitates the movement of persons.

That principle was reflected in the New Years' Eve Agreement of 31 December 2020.

It is relevant to note that this objective is diametrically opposed to the deal that the UK negotiated for itself under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement or TCA.

But for us, the objective remains.

That is to remove the existing EU Schengen controls from the land border with Spain, and to transfer those controls to Gibraltar port and airport.

The effect of this would be the seamless movement of persons by land between Gibraltar and the European Union through Spain.

Mr Speaker, it is obvious that the movement of goods can impact on the movement of persons.

Under the terms of a common travel area, a person on foot or in a vehicle would not be subject to immigration controls.

However, they could still be stopped and asked to show the contents of their bag, or their suitcase or indeed to open the boot of their vehicle.

The decision of the Government to pursue an agreement on the movement of goods must be seen in this context.

The House will understand why.

The history of the border crossing experience enjoyed by our people since the frontier opened is well known to us all.

And no controls means no queues.

So the work goes on.

The Government remains fully committed to arrive at a positive conclusion.

NO NEGOTIATED OUTCOME - NNO

But we also need to be alive to the alternative, Mr Speaker.

That is to the possibility of a No Negotiated Outcome, known as NNO for short.

This, to put it mildly, is not an attractive proposition.

Nor is it where we wish to land politically.

But we do recognise that until there is a deal, no agreement remains a possibility.

And that the Government has a duty to prepare, as far as possible, for this eventuality.

In some areas, Gibraltar can and will look to alternative mechanisms and procedures.

We will look to non-EU international legal frameworks.

Council of Europe and United Nations Conventions.

International Agreements too, may cushion the full impact of our departure from the European Union.

However, it must be understood that there are some areas where it will simply be impossible to provide any mitigation.

That means that the full impact of our position outside the European Union will come to bear. The House will be aware of the booklet on NNO which was issued by the Government in February. This was entitled “Guidance to Citizens – No UK-EU Treaty on the future relationship of Gibraltar”. It was an important piece of public communication strategy on NNO. The booklet was published on-line and distributed to thousands of households all over Gibraltar. It made the point that since UK or Gibraltar would never sacrifice fundamentals or put Gibraltar’s future in jeopardy, we must also be ready to walk away. The 40 page guidance covered areas like the movement of persons, the movement of goods, healthcare, driving, social security, students and mobile roaming. It also pointed to advice which had been issued previously. This information is on the Government website. I should add, Mr Speaker, that the booklet did not pretend to be exhaustive. So, in order to further assist the public, the email address brexit@gibraltar.gov.gi was provided in order to handle any further queries. That email address was set up in October 2020 and a total of 170 emails have been received. These were all replied to in substance or the sender was referred to the correct department for a substantive reply. The queries mainly related to passports, residency, health cover, customs requirements, road haulage, driving licences, pets, and the registration of medical devices. Those questions, and questions about other areas, were answered in line with the guidelines included in Technical Notices or based on the advice provided by Government departments. Over fifty Technical Notices and two information booklets have been issued to date.

NNO – COOPERATION WITH UK

Mr Speaker,
United Kingdom experts have supported every aspect of the negotiations. The necessary resources and expertise has been made available to Gibraltar at every stage. This has been a cross-Whitehall effort. In that same way, we have also worked together on every step of our planning for a No Negotiated Outcome. There has been, and continues to be, very positive and productive engagement between the two Governments. The formal structure between the Gibraltar and UK Government remains the NNO Board. This is co-chaired by myself and by the UK Minister for Europe. When in that role Wendy Morton MP participated in a Board Meeting here in Gibraltar. Her successor Chris Heaton Harris MP did so virtually.

And I very much look forward to working with James Cleverly MP in the NNO Board going forward.

Mr Speaker, I want to place in record the thanks of the Government, on behalf of the people of Gibraltar, for the unwavering support that we continue to receive from the United Kingdom.

The contribution from UK Ministers and officials from every department and in every area has been second to none.

I must single out for particular praise the support of officials from the FCDO.

This has extended to the co-funding of NNO projects in Gibraltar.

The first of these was for the purchase of waste equipment.

The shredder, wrapper and baler was put to good use at the beginning of the year when there was a delay in the processing of permits for the export of waste to Spain under a new system.

This increased the resilience of Gibraltar by allowing us to shred, wrap, compact and store a greater volume of waste.

The UK also co-funded the ferry operation from Algeciras.

The House will recall that the end of the transition period saw a change to the way in which goods of animal origin made their way from the UK to Gibraltar.

That ferry operation is now entirely funded by those who choose to make use of it.

A third area where the UK has assisted financially is with works to the container terminal at the port.

Those works have involved repairs to the wharf

resurfacing and repaving the area

as well as improvements to its electrical infrastructure.

The outcome is that the number of electrical connection points for refrigerated containers will increase from just a handful to over fifty.

That project will be complete in the next few weeks.

The Government cannot stress enough the importance of this facility in an NNO context.

The UK also assisted Gibraltar with financing a contingency to hold a number of hotel beds for key workers in the event of problems at the border when the transition period came to an end.

Mr Speaker, the Governments of the UK and Gibraltar are now working together on a plan to extend the pedestrian entry facility at the land border with Spain.

A planning application has now been filed with the DPC.

The objective is the expansion of the building in order to accommodate the installation of a number of e-gates on our side of the frontier.

These are already in place on the Spanish side.

In the event of NNO, the automated technology would assist with the flow of persons into Gibraltar.

The UK and Gibraltar Governments had agreed to co-fund this NNO programme as well.

Indeed, as I speak, a team of officials from Gibraltar are in London to meet with UK Borderforce precisely about the e-gate project.

Honourable Members should bear in mind that, even if there is a treaty, the contingency will be available to Gibraltar at any point in the future.

This could arise at the four-year treaty review point.

It could follow the election of a more aggressive Government next door.

And it would also work when there is a need to reinstate controls with and within Schengen.

This happened, for example, following the terror attacks in France and again during the migrant crisis from the east.

Mr Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank the many officials of the Government of Gibraltar too who have also been active participants in this process.

In particular the Civil Contingencies Coordinator Ivor Lopez, the Director of Gibraltar House in Brussels Daniel D'Amato, the CEO of the Ministry of the Environment Dr Liesl Mesilio and my Principal Secretary Ernest Francis.

They have brought the many strands of this work together in an effective, organized and highly efficient manner.

However, despite all this work, I must repeat the following.

In certain areas there are simply no contingencies.

There is no mitigation and no plan can be formulated.

In those areas, the default position of NNO will simply reflect what it means to be outside the European Union.

NNO BRIEFINGS

Mr Speaker, the detail of NNO planning has been set out in private to Members opposite and to others.

The Leader of the Opposition and the Brexit Select Committee were each briefed separately.

A similar presentation was delivered on a confidential basis to the Chamber of Commerce, the Gibraltar Federation of Small Businesses, the Gibraltar Betting and Gaming Association, the Finance Centre Council and to the media.

Gibraltar is therefore as prepared as we can be.

Mr Speaker, it is impossible to have done more.

NNO SPANISH BRIDGING MEASURES

The House will know that the full impact of a hard Brexit has been mitigated so far by a series of contingency measures unilaterally extended by Spain.

Those unilateral measures were first enacted by them on 28 December 2020 a few days before the transition period came to an end.

The last extension, under Spain's Decreto Real, came on 28 December 2021.

Persons with a right of access to public healthcare in Gibraltar were allowed to continue to access public healthcare in Spain on terms equivalent to those which existed before we left the European Union.

That measure was reciprocal and applies only between Gibraltar and Spain.

This comes to an end this month on 30 June unless it is extended.

The equivalent provisions with regard to the rest of the European Union ended with the transition period some eighteen months ago.

There were other bridging measures applied at the time in relation to the exchange of driving licenses and to education.

Gibraltar has ensured reciprocal treatment where relevant.

Mr Speaker, the single the most important area has been the border.

Gibraltar's departure from the European Union at the end January 2020 meant that the legal status of our land border with Spain changed.

It ceased to be an internal EU border.

And it switched from being an external border of the Schengen Area to an external border of the European Union as well.

Our departure also transformed our personal status.

British Citizens, including Gibraltarians, ceased to be EU nationals and became instead what the EU terms Third Country Nationals.

Therefore when crossing a Schengen border the rules that apply to us are no longer the same.

Nonetheless, Spain maintained the position at the border from January 2020 until October 2021.

However, at that point, the United Kingdom introduced new immigration rules for EU nationals.

Spain did the same for UK nationals at the border.

This led to the stamping of their passports on entry to and exit from the Schengen Area.

In April 2022 there was another new departure.

UK nationals, including those who hold blue civilian registration cards, started to be stopped and questioned by Spanish border guards.

Some were turned back.

Although there is provision for questioning in the Schengen Border Code, the Government has made it clear that this state of affairs is not satisfactory.

We have raised the matter both with the United Kingdom and with Spain.

And we will continue to do so.

Having said that, the Government is conscious that the default legal position at the frontier is the Schengen Border Code.

The full application of that Code would mean that everyone, including Gibraltarians, would be subject to the more stringent controls.

No agreement would extend the same chaos to all.

It is important to note that the proposed treaty would unblock these mobility issues for all residents of Gibraltar.

GIBRALTAR HOUSE – BRUSSELS

Mr Speaker, I now turn to report on our office in Brussels.

The expanded office is in its seventh year of operation.

It has been a constant source of support throughout the tumultuous journey of our withdrawal from the EU.

And it continues to provide vital assistance to the government as we conduct negotiations for a Treaty to govern our future relationship.

The office has provided much more than simple technical support.

Its footprint in Brussels, in the heart of the European Union, has also gone a long way to promote our interests and our reputation.

The Government has always maintained that this physical presence in Brussels has provided a value to Gibraltar that goes far beyond its size.

ENGAGEMENT – EU

Mr Speaker, our representation in Brussels has continued to engage on a regular basis with the EU institutions and with other stakeholders there.

This includes officials from the European Parliament, from the European Commission and from different Member States.

This contact takes place both online and in bilateral meetings in person.

Indeed, the Government hopes to be in a position to resume familiarisation visits to Gibraltar by relevant EU stakeholders.

The value of this was evidenced by the European Commission technical visit to the airport and the border in January.

They left with a better understanding of the situation on the ground and with a willingness to explore practical solutions.

The best way to understand Gibraltar, Mr Speaker, is to see it.

ENGAGEMENT - UK IN BRUSSELS

Efforts continue to be made by Gibraltar House to remain centre stage of the British presence in Brussels.

The office continues to have a central coordinating role in the activities of the network of UK interests there.

This organisation has been newly branded and is now called 'UK Stakeholders Brussels' or UKSB. It brings together governments, industry associations and educational representatives from the wider British family of nations which are based there. This has become a forum in which to share perspectives and devise strategies to collectively promote British interests with the EU. Gibraltar maintains close contact with the offices of the devolved administrations, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also work very well with the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and with other UK Overseas Territories like Bermuda – all of which maintain their own representation despite Brexit. And Mr Speaker, Gibraltar remains a vital British interest in Brussels. This is evidenced by the excellent working relationship the office and the Government maintains at all levels with the UK Mission to the EU, known as UKMIS. Indeed, the lead negotiator for the UK in our Treaty negotiations is the UK Ambassador to the EU himself, Lindsay Appleby – a close friend of Gibraltar who understands better than most every nuance and every detail of our position. This in itself underlines the importance that the UK Government attaches to these negotiations.

ENGAGEMENT – CoR UK CONTACT GROUP

Mr Speaker, in the last year the Brussels office has been instrumental in facilitating my participation in the European Committee of the Regions' - UK Contact Group. The Group was formed in 2020. It brings together local and regional political representation from the UK and EU Member States. The majority of meetings I have participated in have been virtual. However, the most recent meeting of the Contact Group took place in the Welsh Senedd in Cardiff. I took the opportunity to attend this meeting in person. It was a useful occasion to engage with officials from the EU institutions as well as with politicians from different regions. The meeting was attended by the Chair of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, Ms Nathalie Loiseau MEP, and the First Secretary of the Delegation of the EU to the UK, Mr Jan Tatum-Krauss among others. I also used the visit to Wales to meet bilaterally with the Welsh First Minister, the Rt. Hon. Mark Drakeford MS. It was very useful to be able to exchange notes with the First Minister on Brexit and on other matters. The next meeting is pencilled in for Brussels in September. Mr Speaker, it is important to be part of the efforts at continued UK-EU cooperation.

This is key to ensure that Gibraltar's unique situation in the post-Brexit landscape is understood by the relevant actors both in the EU and indeed in the UK itself.

BRUSSELS OFFICE - TREATY NEGOTIATIONS

Mr Speaker, with regard to the actual Treaty negotiations, the office in Brussels has been a bedrock of support.

It has been involved at every stage of the preparation and conduct of these negotiations.

Indeed, the Director of Gibraltar House, Brussels, Daniel D'Amato has participated in every negotiating round in person alongside the Attorney General.

We anticipate that the office will also be vital in ensuring that any agreement, if reached, is effectively communicated in Brussels.

It is relevant to recall that, as with any other international treaty, a Gibraltar Treaty will have to be ratified by MEPs in the European Parliament.

It will also require ratification by the EU Member States in the European Council before it can enter into effect.

The UK and Gibraltar Governments and Parliaments will have to do the same.

Our point of view during any ratification process will be put forward by Gibraltar House.

BRUSSELS OFFICE - FUTURE

Mr Speaker, the role of the office will be vital if a Treaty is concluded but it will be equally important if there is no agreement.

In the case of a deal, this will mean another wholesale transformation in our relationship with the EU. The office will need to cater for the increased work streams which such agreements usually generate.

There would, for example, be technical work and reporting requirements through working groups and joint committees established by the agreement itself.

In addition to this, there would also be a need for day-to-day working relationships with the Commission to ensure that the anticipated Treaty is implemented correctly and efficiently.

On the other hand, if an agreement is not reached, the office will continue with our lobbying and promotion work.

Therefore, Gibraltar House in Brussels stands ready to continue to serve Gibraltar's interests whatever the future may bring.

I take this opportunity to thank the Director of Gibraltar House in Brussels Daniel D'Amato and the team there.

GIBRALTAR HOUSE - LONDON

Mr Speaker, I move on now to Gibraltar House in London.

Covid restrictions gradually eased in London over 2021.

Gibraltar House took the first opportunity under UK rules to have a full staff return to the building on 12 April, thereby ending work from home.

It was a priority to get back to normal operations as soon as possible.

This reopening of the office was in the context of a London where many shops and businesses were still closed.

Indeed, there was a very gradual return to in-person work on the part of many institutions and organisations.

Whitehall itself was a prime example of this.

By late May 2021 officials and ministers from Gibraltar were once again travelling and making use of the office in the Strand for meetings and as a base for work.

Commercial entities began using Gibraltar House two months later.

In this period, it also became possible for the team at Gibraltar House to finally meet more parliamentarians and officials in person.

However, both Houses of Parliament took a cautious approach.

It was only some months later that meetings were allowed on the actual parliamentary estate.

Nonetheless, lobbying and engagement in London continued both online and in person where possible.

GIBRALTAR HOUSE LONDON – LOBBYING AND APPG

Mr Speaker, online meetings of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Gibraltar had one important advantage.

This was simply that MPs working from home were more easily available.

It also meant that the Chief Minister and I were able to brief MPs remotely from Gibraltar.

We did so on several occasions.

The House will recall that last September the traditional National Day celebrations were once again on pause due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Instead, the Gibraltar office in London hosted 10 MPs and Peers to a lunch to mark National Day on 10th September 2021.

Before lunch, guests gathered at Gibraltar House for a viewing of the virtual National Day rally, which included an address from Sir Bob Neill MP, the Chairman of the Group.

Mr Speaker, the Government expects to have a presence at all the main UK party conferences this year.

In 2021, both the Conservative and Labour parties returned to in-person conferences.

Gibraltar hosted a stand and a reception at both of these.

The Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the 400 strong Gibraltar reception in Manchester.

Then Shadow Europe Minister Catherine West did the same at the reception in Brighton at which some 300 delegates were present.

The Liberal Democrats chose to meet virtually instead.

This included a fringe meeting with speakers from the devolved regions and from Gibraltar.

In late October, Gibraltar House supported my colleague the Minister for the Environment Professor John Cortes who led a delegation to COP26 in Glasgow.

The office in London also coordinated our participation at the Joint Ministerial Council between the UK Government and its Overseas territories which was hosted at Whitehall in November.

Mr Speaker, in January 2022 Gibraltar House London organised a visit to Gibraltar by Sir Bob Neill MP.

He was briefed by the Chief Minister and I on the state of the negotiations with the EU.

Sir Bob also attended a number of meetings and delivered an address to students at the University of Gibraltar.

Two months later, in March 2022, Stephen Doughty MP, Shadow Europe Minister, and Stephen Morgan MP, Shadow Schools Minister also visited Gibraltar.

They too were updated on a number of issues, including the continued negotiations on the proposed UK-EU treaty.

March also saw the first in-person meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Gibraltar.

Mr Speaker, I would like at this point to pay tribute to Lord David Chidgey.

He was both a close personal friend and a good friend of Gibraltar.

In his early days, David, represented the Liberal Democrats on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons.

He took a strong stand at the time against the attempt to share the sovereignty of Gibraltar between the UK and Spain.

Sadly, he passed away after having contracted Covid-19 in February of this year.

I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our deepest condolences to his wife April and to their family.

Members will recall that in March the Royal Gibraltar Regiment was presented with New Colours by HRH the Earl of Wessex at Windsor Castle.

The Government hosted 8 MPs and Peers, as well as the UK representatives of the other Overseas Territories, to the parade and a reception to mark the occasion.

Finally, Gibraltar House has of course been subject to the same restrictions and controls on spending as other areas of government.

The Gibraltar Representative to the UK has reported back to me that there will be an inevitable impact on the office of the level of inflation there.

This will cut across different areas.

The cost of electricity, for example, projected from existing usage, is expected to rise some 86%.

The telephone bill is expected to increase by 14%.

Generally, a 9% rise for most items and services is anticipated.

However, the expiry of some long-standing contracts at Gibraltar House has nonetheless allowed the opportunity to explore alternative providers for some services.

This may help to mitigate some of those projected costs.

Honourable Members will have seen that both Gibraltar House in London and Gibraltar House in Brussels have come in within the Estimates approved by this Parliament last year.

LOBBYING – COMMONWEALTH

Mr Speaker, in the last financial year, Gibraltar's engagement and links with the Commonwealth continued to be an important part of the activity of Gibraltar House.

There was plenty of direct contact with Commonwealth institutions and High Commissions, as well as general diplomatic contact with other countries.

Gibraltar was invited to and represented at a number of Royal and Commonwealth events.

The Gibraltar Representative, Dominique Searle, attended regular sessions of the advisory group of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council.

He also participated in meetings of the Commonwealth Foundation as well as FCDO briefings on the Commonwealth Games.

Along with the other UK Overseas Territories, Gibraltar was represented at recent key events.

This included Remembrance Day, the Commonwealth Day Service and the Memorial for Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

On Commonwealth Day Mr Speaker Sir Lyndsay Hoyle invited all the Overseas Territory representatives to the raising of the Commonwealth Flag at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.

Gibraltar was represented too, along with Commonwealth High Commissioners, at a number of events in London to mark Her Majesty the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

This included the Trooping of the Colour ceremony, the Service of Thanksgiving at St. Paul's Cathedral and the Platinum Jubilee Pageant.

Now that restrictions have eased, a number of Commonwealth High Commissioners have expressed an interest in visiting Gibraltar.

We hope to be able to make arrangements for this to happen soon.

Mr Speaker, part of my role as the Minister with responsibility for relations with the Commonwealth is to bring together the different strands of Commonwealth activity.

The Estimates before the House reflect the continued support of the Government for different organisations and institutions of the Commonwealth.

These comprise the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

Separately, the House will see reflected the estimated expenditure in relation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association which this year meets in plenary in person Canada.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my honourable and learned friend the Minister for Justice for her sterling work during her term as the Chair of the regional Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.

Mr Speaker, this year Gibraltar was represented at some of the events taking place in the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda.

There was a Business Forum, a Women's Forum, a Citizen's Forum and a Youth Forum.

This was a case of third time lucky for Kigali.

On the previous two occasions, in 2020 and 2021, everything was postponed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Commonwealth Youth Association selected Chris Cardona and Adriana Lopez to represent them, and Gibraltar, in the Youth Forum.

Sadly, Chris was unable to attend for health reasons but was replaced just in time by Aaron Santos.

My friend and colleague the Minister for Tourism and Business delivered an address to the Business Forum.

He was joined there by the Country Director of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council Jared Peralta.

Mr Speaker, this year the Commonwealth Games will take place in Birmingham.

The opening ceremony on 28 July will once again see the Gibraltar flag flying proudly together with those of over seventy countries and territories that make up the wider Commonwealth family.

I know that the House will join me in wishing all the very best to Team Gibraltar.

LOBBYING - NEW YORK

Mr Speaker,

I move on now to our work in Washington and in New York.

This is an area of Government in-person work which has suffered as a result of the pandemic.

Given the restrictions on travel to the United States at different points, coupled with risk of enforced quarantine or isolation, the Government has exercised some caution in this respect.

Although some of that work did move virtually.

In this context, it was very helpful that Gibraltar's Representative in the United States, David Liston, lives and works in New York.

He was only too pleased to deliver our annual address to the Committee of 24 in June 2021 and later to the Fourth Committee in October.

The Government is very grateful for this.

The work in New York has often gone beyond the set speeches to the United Nations.

There is a significant amount of activity behind the scenes.

This year, the Chief Minister and I were able to continue where we had left off.

The House knows that there was also a private meeting with the Chair of the C24.

In addition to this, my friend and colleague Sir Joe Bossano participated in the annual regional seminar in St Lucia.

LOBBYING - WASHINGTON

Mr Speaker, there has been no work in Washington in person over the last financial year.

This was brought to an abrupt halt by the pandemic.

So my last visit to the US Congress was in May 2019.

And the last visit by a group of US Congressmen to Gibraltar was in July of that year.

I have, however, met virtually with Congressman Ron Kind, who is a Democrat.

The Congressman is now the lead sponsor on the annual resolution which is tabled in support of Gibraltar.

This followed the retirement of Congressman George Holding, who was a great friend of Gibraltar.

The House unanimously approved the award to him of the Gibraltar Medallion of Honour in 2017.

Congressman Kind has himself been a supporter of the Gibraltar resolution since 2014.

The House will recall that we started with only five.

There are currently 25 other co-sponsors in addition to Representative Kind.

However, Gibraltar has continued its interaction with the United States of America in different ways.

The Gibraltar branch of the American Chamber of Commerce AMCHAM continues to develop commercial ties.

Under their auspices, a sister cities agreement was concluded with Raleigh in North Carolina, the capital of George Holding's former Congressional state.

I know that there are plans for a trade exchange in the pipeline.

I was also very pleased to receive the Commercial Attache to the US Embassy in London in March.

OPERATION TORCH

Mr Speaker, this year is the 80th anniversary of Operation Torch.

This was the Allied offensive against the Nazis in North Africa.

It was planned and executed from Gibraltar, under General Dwight Eisenhower, who became the 34th US President after the War.

Indeed, General Eisenhower then became the first non-British person to command Gibraltar for over two hundred years.

There are plans to celebrate our links with the United States through a permanent memorial to Operation Torch in the vicinity of the American War Memorial in Line Wall Road.

CIVIL AVIATION

Mr Speaker, I move on now to civil aviation.

The Airport has managed to continue to grow its traffic, albeit now concentrated on British Airways and EasyJet flights.

The 2022 scheduled programme of summer flights is not far short of the pre-Covid levels of 2019.

I have to congratulate my honourable friend the Minister for Tourism for this.

It has been a difficult operating environment for the airline industry all over the World.

The number of non-scheduled flights visiting the Airport set new records in 2021.

The figures for the first quarter of 2022 show a significant increase in numbers even over that same period last year.

While “domestic” routes between Gibraltar and the UK continue to flourish, Brexit limitations mean there are no scheduled flights from Gibraltar to EU Airports.

In the event that a UK/EU Treaty regarding Gibraltar is concluded, and if that covers aviation, it will set the legal basis for flights to and from the EU.

CIVIL AVIATION - LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker,

work on aviation legislation continues.

Over the past 12 months, a law improving the enforcement of the control of drones has come into effect.

This is important as it allows a number of agencies, in addition to the RGP, to impose penalty notices on those persons using a drone without the correct authorisation.

The Government has recently published a Bill to cater for the policing of Winston Churchill Avenue between the Police Posts at the Airport.

This came about as a result of an incident last year, which occurred as the function of Winston Churchill Avenue changed from a road to a runway.

The consequence of the incident was that an aircraft was forced to break off its approach to land.

CIVIL AVIATION - UKRAINE

Gibraltar has followed the western world in imposing restrictions on Russia after the illegal invasion of Ukraine.

In common with the United Kingdom and the European Union, Gibraltar issued instructions to the Airport and the wider aviation community that we would not permit aircraft owned, chartered or operated by persons connected with Russia at Gibraltar Airport.

CIVIL AVIATION – AUDIT PROGRAMME

Mr Speaker, post-COVID the Director of Civil Aviation has reintroduced the ongoing audit

programme.

This is necessary in order to demonstrate continued compliance with stringent international civil aviation requirements.

The Audits, which are undertaken by UK CAA Inspectors, have provided the DCA with confidence that standards have not dropped despite the impact of COVID on operations.

In compliance with international aviation requirements, the DCA has informed the Civil Airport that it will face a cyber-compliance audit before the end of the year.

CIVIL AVIATION - DRONES

Mr Speaker, drone activity has reduced slightly in 2022.

Nonetheless, there remain a significant number of local commercial and recreational operators registered with the DCA.

In addition, there is an increasing number of requests from persons visiting Gibraltar with their drones.

The majority of drone flights continue to be undertaken within the authorisation system run by the DCA.

However, there continues to be evidence on social media of flight activity being undertaken by unregistered operators.

Given the very small size of drones and their limited endurance, it is exceedingly difficult for the law enforcement authorities to counter this unlawful activity.

For this reason, the DCA in conjunction with the MoD, law enforcement agencies and a local software company, will be trialling an electronic surveillance system designed to detect drones in flight.

Once a drone datalink is activated, the system should be able to pinpoint the location of the drone, but more importantly the location of the operator.

If the trials are successful, consideration will be given to seek funding for a permanent solution to protect not only the airport, but also local wildlife and persons in the urban environment.

On another matter, after a short competitive tender process, the DCA has renewed the contract of Redline Assured Security Ltd to provide unannounced covert and overt testing of security at the Airport.

Mr Speaker, I want to take the opportunity to thank the Director of Civil Aviation Chris Purkiss for all this.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

I now want to update the House on the workings of the Freedom of Information Act.

The House will recall that when the Command Paper was published, there were no representations

from anyone within the period allowed.

The Freedom of Information Act was commenced in June 2021.

In that time there have been a total of nine requests made.

Four of those requests came through the online portal.

All of these were in respect of the Human Resources Department.

Two of those requests were Subject Access Requests, which do not carry a fee and are dealt with directly by the Department.

The applicants were informed to contact Human Resources directly.

A further five requests were received by email.

Request number one was for information from the Gibraltar Health Authority, which is not currently in the schedule.

Request number two was for information from the Gibraltar National Archives for which a Freedom of Information request was not necessary. The applicant was advised to contact the archives directly.

Request numbers three, four and five were from persons who were not resident in Gibraltar and therefore did not meet the criteria.

The Government looks forward to the annual report from the Information Commissioner after which it will consider the next steps.

GIBRALTAR NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Mr Speaker, the Gibraltar National Archives continues to do a sterling job in promoting our history.

This is due in large measure to the energy, the enthusiasm and the commitment of the Archivist Anthony Pitaluga with the assistance of his dedicated staff.

Much of this promotion is carried out online through their website which has become a portal for the world.

In the financial year 2021/2022 there were twenty-two thousand four hundred and thirty four hits on the website from one hundred and thirty five different countries.

There were also two thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven registered visitors who consulted analogue and digital material directly at the premises.

In addition to this, there were fifty-nine enquiries received by email and one by post from a total of thirty different countries.

On 1 January 2016, the Archives implemented the issue of History Cards for registered users.

This allows them to log the number of enquiries received per member and to build up a profile of the interests of each one of them.

There are now 1254 registered members of the GNA of whom 143 are new users who joined in the financial year to 31 March 2022.

In April 2021, the Archivist attended via Zoom online digital preservation workshops run by

Preservica UK.

In August 2021, he also took part in the Zoom conference of the Archives and Records Association of the United Kingdom and Ireland (ARA), after the in-person event was cancelled.

Mr Speaker, in November and December 2021, the Gibraltar National Archives organised an exhibition which marked 100 years of the establishment of the City Council in 1921.

Another exhibition was organised on 25 April 2022, outside that financial year, to mark the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict.

These exhibitions were both expertly curated by Anthony Pitaluga to the high standard that he has us accustomed to.

Honourable Members will be aware that an exhibition to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen opened at the Gustavo Bacarisas gallery in Casemates earlier this month.

It will run until 22 July.

I must specifically thank the Archivist, the staff and their helpers for this commendable achievement.

Mr Speaker, the Government remains fully committed to the development of the Gibraltar National Archives.

Honourable Members will recall that Duke of Kent House has now been earmarked as the building that will be home to the public face of the Archives.

There is a nominal entry for this in the Improvement and Development Fund Head 102 – Projects – Sub-Head 4 Other Projects (zzu).

The House will also note that the I&DF also provides for funding to be made available for the installation of a specialist fire suppression system at the Gibraltar National Archives.

This is shown under Head 102 – Projects – Sub-Head 4 Other projects (zzc).

NORTHERN DEFENCES

Mr Speaker,

Work at the Northern Defences continues to progress well.

The Government remains committed to continue the transformation of the site into a new heritage, tourist and community park.

In March this year Outline Planning Permission was received for a Strategic Master Plan.

This will gradually see that vision come to reality.

An application for Full Planning Permission for an access staircase from Casemates Square was also supported by the Development and Planning Commission.

It was gratifying to witness such overwhelming support from every member of the Commission both for the work done so far and for the holistic proposals presented to them.

NORTHERN DEFENCES - INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr Speaker, in addition to the clearing and restoration works, the area has also witnessed major improvements to our infrastructure.

This year I wish to particularly praise the work carried out by Aquagib.

They have coordinated that work tirelessly with representatives of my office.

Providing and upgrading infrastructure is an essential component of a thriving community.

However, those responsible for delivering such a service are rarely acknowledged or praised for the work they carry out.

We too often take for granted the presence of our wifi signal, the provision of electricity or the supply of water.

Last year, the Western Water Mains Relief Project, designed to supply the needs of the East side reclamation site, has progressed smoothly and quietly along the western slopes and tunnels at the Northern Defences.

This infrastructure project was born out of the need to provide redundancy in water supply due to the ageing infrastructure on the west side.

It was also designed to cope with increased demand due to the rapid expansion rate of construction and demographics in the building sector.

The logistical challenge of supplying these relatively remote sites, has been overcome at the Northern Defences through close cooperation between AquaGib and the Project Director Carl Viagas.

The combination of knowledge about the Northern Defences, coupled with a dedicated management team, has enabled the identification of a route away from congested sites.

The outcome has reduced costs and avoided considerable inconvenience to the public.

The extent of the works, once completed, will involve the laying of some 1650m of twin pipes.

This will make this project one of the most significant of its kind in the last decade.

I have to congratulate the team at AquaGib for the sensitive way in which this infrastructure has been dealt with.

For instance, hundreds of metres of pipes have been laid and then buried in tunnels.

And a viewing platform below the Tower of Homage now conceals a previously exposed network of pipes.

The nature and speed of this intervention will hopefully be adopted in sensitive sites elsewhere in Gibraltar in the future.

NORTHERN DEFENCES – LEISURE AND EDUCATION

Mr Speaker, the pandemic wreaked havoc with our lives.

The challenge of isolation and of adapting to this was a strain on many of us.

However, our people have always been resourceful.

The Government responded to this new stressful situation by adapting our programme of works at the Northern Defences.

The work was redirected to infrastructure, as I have just explained.

But we also isolated those works to allow for the rest of the site to remain partially open for leisure activities.

The public was able to make use of this new park within the Nature Reserve.

There is still plenty more to be done – though the benefits were immediately obvious.

Families have been able to enjoy a stroll or a picnic in what is one of Gibraltar's most picturesque landscapes.

I have been extremely pleased to see members of our community practicing yoga there or attending some of the popular tours on offer.

But perhaps the best use of the site has been for educational purposes.

Several schools have visited the area which now features as part of our local history curriculum.

Walking through fortifications which date back to the late 18th century, and witnessing the impact damage of cannon shot upon our historic walls, often has a greater effect on a student than the most relevant book or classroom presentation will ever be able to accomplish.

The most notable use of the site for educational purposes came last year.

I reported to the House then on the use that the Gibraltar College made of the area.

The House may recall that the College chose this site as a destination as part of its Business and Travel module.

In the past they had opted for locations abroad.

Organising events such as rock climbing and abseiling, the Gibraltar College tapped into a resource that until now was only available elsewhere.

Building on such an event the College will be announcing its new educational programme starting this September.

And I am very grateful to my colleague the Minister for Education Professor John Cortes for this.

The concept is to use the Northern Defences as a "wall-less" classroom.

This is a revolutionary vision which the Government is very keen to support.

The use of this site and access by specialists will allow students to play an active role as part of an educational enrichment programme.

This programme will consist of modules such as event organising, health and safety, local history, rock climbing and conservation and will be part of the education provided.

The investment at the Northern Defences will therefore go beyond the physical elements of the site.

It is also an investment in our younger generation.

The Northern Defences will become a key area that will provide the opportunity for us to create a

team of qualified youngsters who may well end up running this or other similar sites in the future. This will be a unique experience for our learners to redefine learning in real life local projects. It will connect students to the real world with a vision of enhancing creativity and purpose in a range of vocational fields.

NORTHERN DEFENCES – FUTURE WORKS AND MANAGEMENT

So works will continue this financial year.

They will see interpretation signs, access stairs as well as lighting and improvements to the designated activity areas at Queen's Lines.

The House is aware that the Government has received a number of Expressions of Interest for the commercial running of activities on the site.

However, no firm decision has been taken as multiple options are being studied.

NORTHERN DEFENCES – ROYAL VISIT

Mr Speaker, the Government warmly welcomed the fact that the Earl of Wessex, Prince Edward, chose to visit the Northern Defences earlier this month.

He did so together with His Excellency the Governor and I under the expert direction of the project director Carl Viagas.

My impression is that His Royal Highness was very interested in everything that he saw and very much valued the restoration and rehabilitation of this historic site.

Mr Speaker, I wish to thank Carl Viagas, whose energy and enthusiasm have been a driving force behind this project.

THE MOUNT

Mr Speaker, I move on now to update the House on progress at The Mount.

Two Planning Applications for The Mount and its associated grounds received Planning Permission in March this year.

The first was a Master Plan, which provided a holistic approach and strategy to the site and its grounds.

The second was a detailed application for the refurbishment of the Porter's Lodge and the Hall which are to be used as a registry office and an events venue respectively.

The two applications received overwhelming support from the Development and Planning Commission and works are expected to commence after the summer.

The policy approach towards this project has been similar to that adopted at the Northern Defences. The Mount is a large, complex and historically significant site.

Honourable Members will recall that the Government embarked on a clearing out exercise two years ago.

The grounds have now been cleared of undergrowth and many paths and steps have been exposed. This work has respected the wildlife and has been carried out in consultation with GONHS, the Heritage Trust and the Environmental Safety Group,

The removal of vegetation has allowed us to identify an original set of steps which connect from the Mount's main service road up to Engineer Road.

This will become a new direct walking or hiking route to the Upper Rock Nature Reserve away from our busy roads.

This first exercise has allowed for the true scale and nature of the project to be appreciated.

Even though the task may seem overwhelming, the team has eagerly accepted the challenge and defined the type and sequence of works which need to be carried out.

This will be based on the phased approach that was presented and approved at the Development and Planning Commission.

Whilst clearing out works will continue, works to the Porter's Lodge will commence as part of a first phase.

The refurbishment of this charming building, the events hall and associated gardens will be an initial step towards the renaissance of The Mount.

This will provide the perfect venue both to register and to host weddings.

Running parallel to the refurbishment of the Porter's Lodge, will be works to the slopes behind the main residence.

These beautiful spaces and magnificent views of the bay will be used for outdoor educational experiences.

This part of the project is being funded by the Parasol Foundation for which the Government is extremely grateful.

Their generous donation of a million pounds towards this vision is what makes us special as a community.

Their contribution will see to the creation of a children's play area, paths, nature areas, tree hopping activities and an adventure park which seeks inspiration from the property's history.

Future phases will see the creation of paddle tennis courts.

The centrepiece will be the sensitive restoration of the main building which is our ultimate goal.

The recommissioning of disused water tanks and the use of sustainable technology could make this project a truly remarkable one to be enjoyed by our people and by visitors.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Mr Speaker, planning permission for the refurbishment of Parliament House and a change of use for

the ground floor was received on 22 March.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to announce today that the installation of the lift at Parliament House is finally scheduled to commence during this financial year.

The preliminary funding for this can be found at Head 102 Projects Sub-Head 4 (zzv).

This is the outcome of the work of several years on a number of different options.

In the end, following the availability of the premises on the ground floor, it will now be possible to provide an internal lift.

The proposed solution will address the concerns of those persons with reduced mobility in manner which respects and is sensitive to our proud heritage.

This new planning application, as with the previous two, received overwhelming support at the Development and Planning Commission.

Honourable Members will recall the wider proposal which I presented to them privately last year and of which they have copies.

The next phase, in the future, will see the creation of meeting rooms, enhanced security and offices for Members and staff.

The roof will also be refurbished and will allow for a series of uses, whether ceremonial or simply as an external space for staff and members.

Mr Speaker, once again the appreciation of the Government must go to the Parasol Foundation.

Their generosity has not been limited to the Mount and to its grounds.

It will also go towards the external refurbishment of this handsome, but currently tired building.

In order to satisfy the requirements for an internal lift and much needed extra office space, the ground floor cafeterias have been lost.

However, we do acknowledge that these provided an element of vibrancy to this part of town.

In order to minimise this loss, the Government has awarded a tender for the use of the kiosk as a coffee serving facility with a limited number of tables and chairs.

Such a proposal has already received planning permission.

We look forward to providing a modern Parliament which also allows the public to enjoy that special morning coffee in its forecourt.

This building is not just bricks and mortar, it is and has been the bedrock of our democracy.

It has witnessed our evolution and our development as a people.

It is therefore only fitting that there be some investment and restoration.

The first phase will focus on the external refurbishment and the internal lift.

This is expected to commence after the summer.

The rest of the restoration will be carried out in phases over slower time as this House approves the

funding.

ROAD TO THE LINES

Mr Speaker, the last Expression of Interest for Road to the Lines closed on 7 March.

The Government has since engaged in detailed discussions with the most attractive proposal from the highest bidder.

The discussions have involved a number of Government departments, agencies and utilities who have put in considerable time and effort to push matters forward.

The result is that the Government is on the verge of concluding an agreement that will completely transform the upper town.

I will give the House a flavour of the submission on the table.

This proposal will see considerable private sector investment which will run into millions of pounds.

Honourable Members will know that the site has been neglected and dilapidated for decades.

Road to the Lines is a quaint area consisting of narrow streets and steps visible from Casemates Square.

Nestled below our Castle, it is the backdrop to many of the events held in our most popular public space.

But yet it has been the victim of neglect and sadly witnessed the loss of its residents.

Many old housing properties lie empty and abandoned beyond economical repair.

Different factors have contributed to this including anti-social behaviour, the lack of accessibility and poor infrastructure.

These issues are not easy to resolve.

The Government has regarded this as a challenge.

A challenge that we have a duty to meet if we wish to drive an urban regeneration programme that is truly meaningful.

In dealing with such projects, we have to understand and accept the causes of urban decline.

Refurbishing individual properties without addressing the core issues, while certainly very useful in certain areas, is only an important first step.

The current situation requires a carefully coordinated, multidisciplinary approach if we are to succeed in bringing life back into this quarter of town.

In order to do so we aim to address those main core issues head on.

ROAD TO THE LINES – ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Mr Speaker, Road to the Lines is adjacent to the Northern Defences, an area colourfully described as “The Jungle”.

Anti-social behaviour plagued Road to the Lines for decades.

No urban renewal attempt would ever have a chance of succeeding if the Northern Defences had remained ignored.

We are now on the road to tackling this matter.

The Northern Defences is slowly becoming a family friendly area even before it has been officially opened.

It will become our most prized jewel as a recreational space once works have been completed.

And it will provide the perfect outdoor walking and picnic area for residents and visitors.

So there are two other remaining costly issues.

The first is failing infrastructure and the second difficulty of access.

ROAD TO THE LINES – FAILING INFRASTRUCTURE

The negotiations that the Government is conducting aim for improvements to infrastructure to be provided at no cost to the tax payer.

That is the objective.

It is painful to see cables and pipes fixed onto historic walls and facades, and collapsed drains in different places.

All this needs to be tackled.

A significant cash premium has been offered for the land.

The details will be announced when the agreement has been signed.

In addition to this, private investment estimated at over £2 million, will be made in the infrastructure of the area.

This will see the provision and re-routing of essential services.

It will also involve the introduction of high speed telecommunications.

New drainage will be provided.

The proposed development will involve the use of sustainable technologies.

The creation of a revitalised public square, landscaping, stone paving, café's, public artwork, up-lighting of historic walls and green walls will also be part of this scheme.

This proposal would be directly in line with our manifesto where we pledged to create a child friendly city by upgrading properties and public spaces.

ROAD TO THE LINES - ACCESS

Mr Speaker, the above improvements would be pointless if we do not address the issue of access.

This will affect not only residents and visitors but also the developer who will need to transfer tonnes of material to and from the site.

It is a logistical challenge that very few have been willing to accept and an impossibility for individual property owners.

Once completed, and as part of the scheme, the intention is to provide lift access to Road to the Lines.

This will not only serve residents but will also become a vital connection to the Northern Defences.

I am very grateful to my friends and colleagues the Minister for Urban Renewal Professor John Cortes and to the Minister for Housing Steven Linares for their invaluable support.

The Housing Department has been instrumental in decanting residents over many years.

A small number of tenants who remain are being offered alternative accommodation so that they are not inconvenienced during these intensive and intrusive works.

ROAD TO THE LINES - REDEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker, I must stress that this proposal is still under negotiation.

The House may nonetheless be interested to know that the redevelopment is aimed at attracting a diverse market.

The properties are intended to be rented and not sold.

This was an important consideration for the Government.

The objective is to create a vibrant new quarter.

There will be, needless to say, a full public consultation with all interested parties when the plans are presented to the Development and Planning Commission hopefully later this year.

The outcome will deliver an improvement, not only in the constructed fabric of the area, but in so doing to its social environment.

This project will deliver an exceptional residential product.

But it will also attract visitors to appreciate the history of the area as well as its unique environment.

The combination the Northern Defences with Road to the Lines will provide a springboard from which to push forward with a new high-quality visitor offering.

I must once more thank Carl Viagas, who has advised the Government on the merits of the different proposals received, as well as Kevin de los Santos the Senior Director at Land Property Services Ltd.

OTHER LAND TENDERS

Mr Speaker, the House is already aware that the different Expressions of Interest for the Victualling Yard and the former GBC premises have yet to progress.

The Government is, however, in discussion preferred bidders in respect of the vaults at Ragged Staff and separately the Cross of Sacrifice site.

We also continue in discussion with preferred bidders for the Rooke site and for the old air terminal site following two separate invitations to Expressions of Interest.

Mr Speaker I want to thank the staff at the Lands Office in Convent Place and the management and staff of Land Property Services Ltd for their assistance and their professional advice.

CONCLUSION

Mr Speaker, the six years since the Brexit Referendum have been difficult years for Gibraltar.

Not least too because of the consequences of the global pandemic which was thrown into the mix for good measure.

The combined effect of these two events has been that the Government has had less time to deal with other matters.

This is not an excuse.

It is a reason.

It is the plain truth and the hard reality of the last few years.

Were there things we could have done that we have not been able to do?

Yes there were.

Were there also things we could have done differently?

Yes there were.

But the financial and the time constraints imposed upon us have meant that we had to do what needed to be done.

Mr Speaker, the people put us in office in 2011, in 2015 and in 2019 for a reason.

Precisely to take those difficult decisions.

To tackle and overcome whatever challenges fate may throw in our path.

And we are fully confident in the knowledge that nobody else in the same circumstances, faced with the same challenges, would have done any better.

So for now, Mr Speaker, we are where we are.

Gibraltar is not an economic island.

We are not insulated and protected from what happens in the wider world outside.

Whether its Brexit, or Covid or the new monkey-pox virus or even the war in Ukraine – everything, however, distant it may seem, will have an impact here.

And when we look at the estimates of revenue and expenditure before the House that is precisely what they reflect.

The localised impact of international crises on our own unique situation.

Mr Speaker, I close by thanking my personal staff at No 6 Convent Place.

I also thank you Mr Speaker and the staff of the Parliament for their assistance and support throughout the year.

Thank you.

ENDS