

# Written Evidence submitted by the St Helena Government (OTE0012)

## Background

St Helena is part of the territorial grouping of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, each island has their own elected Government. The resident population on St Helena at the end of February 2024 was 4,120.

St Helena is an Official Development Assistance (ODA) eligible UK Overseas Territory. St Helena's total budget for the financial year 2023/24 was £47,072,000 of which £33,060,000 was provided by HMG in budgetary aid; this represented 67.8% of the total budget.

£3,585,000 was allocated to the Education, Skills & Employment Portfolio (ES&E). This was allocated as follows:

- Schools 67%
- Lifelong Learning 12%
- Inclusion Services 7%
- Management and Admin 6%
- Tertiary Education 5%
- Teacher Training 2%
- Public Library 1%

A further £742,685 was allocated to Education from the Technical Cooperation (TC) allocation held within the Central Support Services budget. This allocation funds internationally recruited teachers in subject areas which cannot be recruited locally, for which we are becoming heavily reliant, due to the radical decline in our working age population and the inability to attract trainee teachers, qualified teachers or individuals willing to become qualified in the profession.

In allocating the budget, the St Helena Government must make difficult decisions. As a small isolated island, all services are still required as they would be for a larger country without economies of scale or complex logistical issues. Furthermore, the island is challenged by an

ageing demographic – the Old Aged Dependency Ratio of the resident on-island population (the number of those 65 and over compared to those of average working age) was estimated to be 47.3 at the end of February 2024. As a result, spend on the Health and Social Care sector is high utilising 19.5% of the budget, to provide such services to include when necessary, medical evacuations and referrals due to lack of specialist medical care being available on island. A further challenge we are facing is the increasing level of comorbidity within our community. It has been recognised by my Government that this is an area that needs addressing urgently, as it is not a problem occurring within our aged population only, in fact, it is more concerning that it is being identified throughout our community. To tackle this issue however, will require devoted resources, both human and financial to first raise awareness of the problem, followed by much needed policies and processes being implemented, to encourage, and where necessary assert the need for members of our community to take more responsibility for their health. This would then enable St Helena to move to preventative/proactive care whereby we address our people's overall health and wellbeing instead of operating a healthcare system that is based on a reactive approach to illness. Due to budget pressures and being financially aid dependent, these scenarios I hope, will help to demonstrate the predicament we find ourselves when having to allocate limited budgets to core services that are demand led.

With the above in mind, I now turn my attention back to Education. As part of core education provision, four schools provide fulltime compulsory schooling for children from 5 to 16 years of age under the Education Ordinance (2008). In addition, the three primary schools also offer non-compulsory Nursery education for children from age 3 and the secondary school offers sixth form education up to age 18.

An inclusive system of education is operated to ensure all children, no matter their ability, circumstances, special educational needs, or disability, have the opportunity to access mainstream education.

There is initial teacher training, and upskilling programmes and development opportunities for teaching staff on the island.

The St Helena Community College (SHCC) which opened in September 2016 offers a broad array of learning opportunities through a variety of programmes to support learners aged over 16. SHCC work alongside local and overseas training providers, businesses and students to deliver a wide range of exciting training opportunities for the community of St Helena. SHCC is able to offer training for those who are unemployed or engaged in either full or part time employment.

### **Current challenges**

Recruitment and retention of teachers and teaching assistants is a concern: this is due to a shrinking labour market and competitive salaries from other professions both on island and offshore. The financial package on offer to recruit TC teachers especially in core areas where there are shortages, for example Maths, English and Science, makes international recruitment difficult. Continuous teacher shortages put additional strain on existing teachers who are expected to provide cover, which impacts their own development. Teachers studying for professional qualifications are currently doing so in their own time, which is fuelling discontentment as they are physically and mentally tired.

There is an increasing number of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Currently, numbers of students on the SEND Register are as follows: 45 students out of a Secondary school population of 219 = 20.5%; 55 students out of a Primary school population of 297 = 18.5%. These figures exclude those who are being catered for through School Action. The span of specific conditions and disabilities has also grown. There are an increasing number of children in the system who are on the Autistic Spectrum, have ADHD, are strongly at risk of dyslexia and have limited cognition in learning. In addition, there are individual cases of children with Downs Syndrome, Klinefelter Syndrome, Turners, Achondroplasia and Cerebral Palsy. Specialist support for these children is not available as there are no professional support systems on island such as an Educational Psychologist or Speech and Language Therapist.

The academic achievement indicates that whilst there have been some improvements, the 2023 Cognitive Ability Test (CAT) indicators show that 28% of Year 6, 24% of Year 5 and 23% of Year 4 are below age related expectations (ARE) in terms of their ability.

To address these challenges, Ministers have requested a **Review of Education** provision which will identify strategies to:

- Improve standards of teaching
- Provide additional support to the increasing number of learners with SEND and SEMH
- Utilise more on-line teaching to provide more sustainability and to mitigate against single points of failure in curriculum delivery.

**Specific questions raised by the enquiry.**

**In what ways is the UK Government supporting the education of students from the Overseas Territories.**

There is limited direct support from the UK.

**Is the Government reaching its aspiration to prioritise aid assistance for education to ODA eligible territories.**

St Helena received £33,060,000 from HMG in budgetary aid for 2023/24, from which the St Helena Government must prioritise spending. As alluded to earlier, difficult decisions must be made. It would be helpful to have a ring-fenced allocation of funds for the development of Education on the island if we are to successfully address our current trajectory. This could include a provision to implement the recommendations from the Review of Education, formal links with a Local Authority or organisation in the UK to develop links to upskill and support the development of the teaching staff which, in turn, will raise the educational attainment of the students and hopefully address the current low morale issues being encountered, whereby teachers feel devalued, unappreciated and not valued.

**What challenges do Overseas Territories students looking to study in the UK face, and what can the UK Government do to help?**

Up until the academic year 2022/23 the St Helena Government (SHG) provided full scholarships for students wishing to go on to study at university in the UK. Whilst this was always a competitive process, with the small number of students applying, all students wishing to attend university were successful in getting a scholarship. With increasing

pressure on the budget to fund core education services, the financial support to students was significantly reduced in 2022/23 and no financial support was provided from 2023/24.

Students from St Helena wishing to go on to tertiary education can now access the UK tuition fee loan (from the academic year 2022/23), but they are still unable to access the maintenance fee loan. Whilst access to the tuition fee loan is appreciated, students experience difficulties with the application process. They are unable to apply online and all documentation must be sent by post – with the unreliability of the postal service route from St Helena this makes it more laborious and riskier for prospective St Helenian students. The students have had to rely on person/s travelling from the island who are prepared to hand carry their application forms and documents to the UK to then pass these documents onto the St Helena Government UK Representative who then posts the documentation to the Student Loan Company (SLC) and liaises with them on behalf of the students. The process is further hindered, by the fact that students applying from the Overseas Territories are expected to complete forms designed for EU students.

Students on St Helena are also limited in their options in respect of subjects they can study at both GCSE and A Level as the subjects offered are dependent on the availability of teachers to teach them and the costs associated with running them, when numbers interested are low. This predicament, in some cases, is limiting students in their course choice at university.

**To what extent are the various responsible Government departments working together in achieving their goals regarding education and the Overseas Territories?**

FCDO facilitated a conversation with the DFE around the issues of the application process for tuition fees.

**To what extent have they been responsive to requests and concerns raised by the Overseas Territories and their students?**

Following complaints to DFE regarding issues around the application forms, due in part to a lack of understanding of the Overseas Territories by some of the personnel processing the applications, the UK Representative was given the contact of a Policy Officer in the SLC who

followed the application process and provided regular updates for the 2023/24 cohort of students.

Both the UK Representative and I have raised the issue of access to maintenance loans with FCDO at both Ministerial and official level, and it was also raised and recorded in the communique following the Joint Ministerial Council meeting in May 2023 – to date no satisfactory response has been received.

In closing, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to submit evidence. Should you require additional information or clarity, please do not hesitate to contact me, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to offer adequate standards of Education on our island, within very restrictive parameters in terms of financial and human resources coupled with limited access for our students to access UK Student Finance. Being in this position, is frustrating to say the least, as it is our desire to strengthen and improve our educational offering by continuing to recognize the importance of inclusivity, whilst acknowledging the prominence of education in our lives. Encouraging Life Long Learning by investing in and valuing our people in order to develop through upskilling, training and rewarding as we create a sustainable workforce remains our aim, but is undermined because of our circumstances. The need for this to be achieved is urgent, as we can ill afford to lose more of our young citizens and young families, departing the island seeking better opportunities and prospects, simply because they cannot be attained here in their homeland. It is these such challenges, which will holistically make it more difficult for Overseas Territories, such as ours, that our aid dependent, to ever achieve economic and social sustainability, if we are subjected to losing our richest resource – our people.

**Submitted by: The Hon. Julie Thomas**

**Chief Minister and Minister with responsibility for Education, Skills, and Employment**

**St Helena**

***April 2024***