

Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands



Annual Report
2020



Message from The Commissioner

The global Covid-19 pandemic has of course massively impacted us all. Whilst it may have led to an early end to the tourist season in March 2020 and hugely complicated logistics, the manner in which the government team have responded has been exemplary. Crucially, together with our partners and stakeholders, we were able to ensure we did not falter in delivering high quality stewardship of this most special Territory. To be frank, no other outcome would have been acceptable.

2020 started with two important scientific expeditions. The first saw a multidisciplinary group study penguin populations and the active volcanoes of the South Sandwich Islands. The second was a highly encouraging whale population survey around South Georgia. Inevitably the pandemic saw several Darwin-funded projects delayed, but science continued nonetheless.

We had two notable additions to our calendar. Firstly, 30 October was our inaugural Environment Day. This day allows us to pause to reflect upon the progress made and commit ourselves anew to deliver continuous improvement. The second was our inaugural Polar Pride Day on 18 November, a date that will signify our shared commitment to support and enhance diversity in Polar Science.

Our steadfast support for the Blue Belt programme has paid dividends with the implementation of a new communications network. We continue to enforce intelligence-led surveillance of the Marine Protection Area (MPA) through tailored strategies developed in collaboration with the MMO. We were determined that not one of our marine protection conservation measures was compromised in the 2020 austral winter fishing season. This required that we adapt our procedures to deal with the ever-evolving Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and saw licence inspections taking place in Stanley, rather than King Edward Point. The partnership with our fishing operators was outstanding, whilst the support of the Falkland Islands Government was essential.

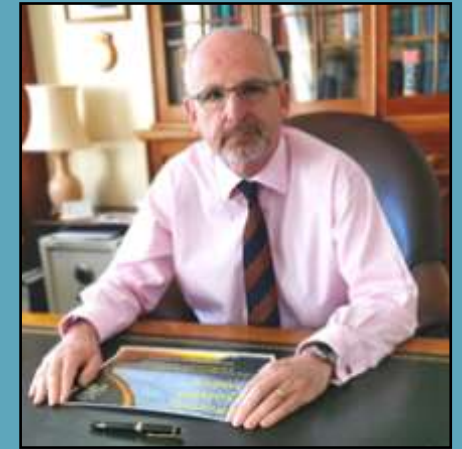
November 2020 marked the culmination of a SGHT international competition to invite artists to design a site-specific installation to illustrate not only Grytviken's past and present, but also emphasise the levels of stewardship that paved the way for the resurgence of whales, seals, seabirds and native plant life. We hope the series of sculptures titled Commensalis: The Spirit Tables of South Georgia, by Michael Visocchi will leave a lasting impression on all visitors and provoke them to ponder mankind's relationship with nature.

We have now published our new values-driven approach to the stewardship of SGSSI and I would encourage you to read the [published version](#). The product of extensive consultation during the reporting period, it sets the stage for a refreshed delivery model. With the values of environmental protection, evidence-based decision-making, sustainability and openness, the team are already working with stakeholders on the detailed thematic strategies and business plans that will implement Protect, Sustain, Inspire.

Indeed, our approach to stewardship is beautifully illustrated in our new [South Georgia visitor film](#) narrated by Sir David Attenborough; it will be mandatory viewing for all arrivals on South Georgia—when they are able to come. The film captures the result of tireless effort over many years and our hearts swelled when Sir David described South Georgia as a rare thing, *an ecosystem in recovery*.

There is always more to do, which is why there is already more in the pipeline. So I end as has become customary – Onward!

Nigel Phillips CBE



HE Commissioner Nigel Phillips CBE

#SGSSI

Governance

“To manage the affairs of SGSSI and the surrounding 200 nautical mile Maritime Zone through efficient and transparent government “

Staff

2020 saw a large recruitment exercise for new Government Officers. The cohort of Government Officers is being increased to 4 to manage the increased activity in Cumberland East Bay particularly in the tourism season. By any measure 2020 was an exceptional year with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic but preparing for a resurgence in visitors and preparing new people to lead the activity on South Georgia in 2021 will see them embedded before visitors return in numbers.

The decision was taken to suspend the recruitment of a new role as Tourism Officer until a later year given the lack of visitors.

Financial

By 31 December 2020, the lack of tourism income was impacting on our overall income position in comparison to 2019. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was also delaying the implementation of projects for which grant funding was received in 2019. At the end of 2020, the Government of SGSSI had successfully secured over £8.6m of income exceeding our estimates by £1m. This sum includes a £125k Blue Belt funding to support aerial reconnaissance and satellite surveillance to protect our Maritime Zone against illegal activity.

Final payments for the King Edward Point wharf development were once again pushed back and will be paid in 2021, drawing £2.25m from the General reserve.

Work to streamline our processes with Falkland Island Treasury department has continued which has seen more delivery of functions online reducing paper use substantially.

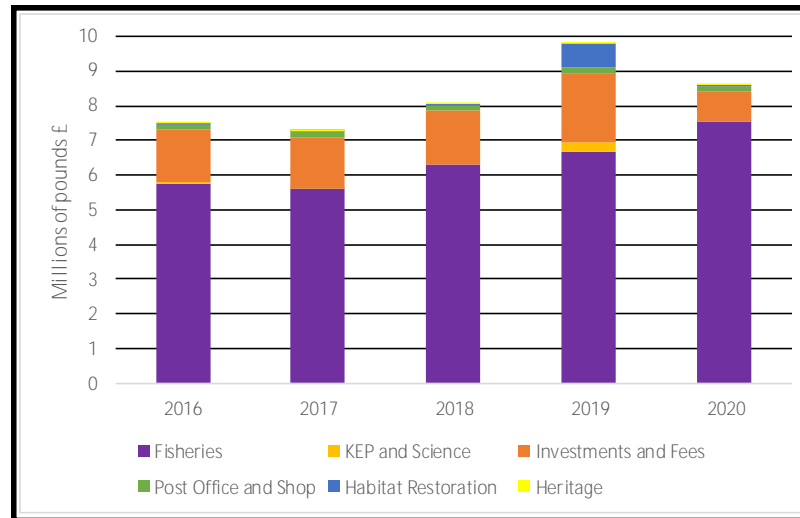


Fig 1. Government of SGSSI Income including Unaudited 2020 figures

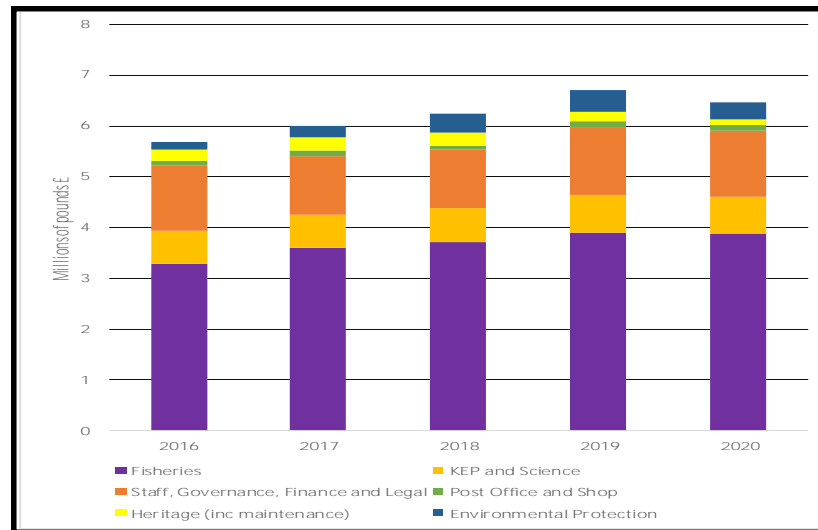


Fig 2. Government of SGSSI Expenditure including Unaudited 2020 figures



SGSSI and British Antarctic Territory announce 18 November as Polar Pride. It was celebrated with cake and a parade on South Georgia.



Job Advertisement for new Government Officers

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Governance

Post Office

South Georgia has 2 post offices; one at King Edward Point (KEP) open all year round for personnel stationed at KEP and one in the Slop Chest at Grytviken open for any visitors and open during the summer season. However, whilst the 19/20 tourism season was largely unaffected by Covid-19 the 20/21 tourism season was heavily impacted by international travel restrictions. This meant the Post Office at Grytviken was closed from March 2020 except for invited guests and UK British forces. We processed over half a tonne (520.69kg) of mail, and sold 9, 560 stamps and 745 First Day Covers (FDCs).

There were 4 new stamp issues along with their FDCs. These included:

- *South Georgia from the air* on 5 August 2020
- *2020 Definitive* on 15 October 2020 (see our cover page)
- *Shackleton's Unsung Heroes* on 11 November 2020 (second in a specific Shackleton series)
- *Royal Navy Ships* on 8 December 2020 (shared with the Company of HMS Forth)

KEP and Science

Thirty one Regulated Activity Permits were issued in 2020. This is considerably fewer than in 2019 (52) due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic restricting the number of visitors to South Georgia. However, the fact that so many projects were able to proceed is testament to the determination of science teams and support staff and highlights the importance of this work to the ongoing management of the Territory. Of particular note were the number of permits to study the effects of the A68 iceberg which made international news when it grounded, and then broke up, within the SGSSI maritime zone.

In addition to the extensive GSGSSI/FCDO funded research in support of sustainable fisheries management within the SGSSI Maritime Zone, the Government has permitted a diverse array of marine and terrestrial science projects over the last 5 years. This included:

- Two major multi-disciplinary marine research surveys to the South Sandwich Islands in 2018/19 conducted on the RRS Discovery. These Blue Belt funded surveys investigated the biodiversity of seafloor and midwater communities. A further yacht-based survey investigated the penguin populations and volcanos of the rarely visited archipelago.
- Whale research increased significantly with scientists collecting data over three summer seasons including two dedicated vessel surveys around South Georgia. Highlights included the discovery of a significant increase in numbers of blue whales and tracking southern right whales in the region.
- South Georgia science projects attracted substantial funding through the Darwin Plus scheme including funding for albatross tracking, seaweed biodiversity studies, monitoring wildlife using new technologies such as UAVs and the development of the research and monitoring plan for the MPA.
- A new five-year science plan was agreed with BAS in 2019 for science undertaken from the King Edward Point laboratory and visiting scientists from both the UK and beyond have spent time at the KEP facility in recent seasons carrying out research in areas as diverse as marine plastics, freshwater invertebrates and plant-microbe soil interactions.



Photo credit: Ross James

Grytviken Post Office

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Governance

New Strategic Development – ‘Protect Sustain Inspire’

Protect Sustain Inspire represents an evolution in the approach from the last five-year strategy. Our aim is to set out our vision and values in order that our stakeholders can understand how the government intends to approach the coming period. It identifies the following values as paramount to underpinning our activities: Environmental Protection, Evidence-Based Decision Making, Sustainability, and Openness.

Whilst the framework document offers a capstone, there will also be a series of rather more detailed thematic strategies, environment resilience, local science; global impact facilitating sustainable visits, and communications & media to set out the government’s approach to meeting its ambitious vision for environmental recovery and resilience through world-leading evidence-based sustainable management. The Government looks forward to working with the over 50 respondents to the consultation on turning words into reality.

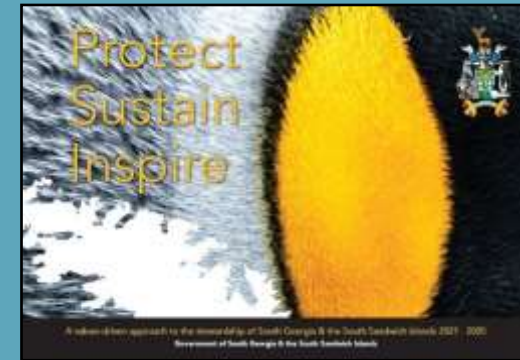
Biosecurity

As part of our efforts to minimise human impacts and improve biosecurity, efforts have been focused on improving pre-border biosecurity measures. The benefits of this approach are manifold, but perhaps most importantly by acting pre-border, biosecurity risks are mitigated before reaching South Georgia. A key element of this drive was the establishment of the biosecurity dog programme.

The biosecurity dog programme went from strength to strength over their first full season of operation. The dog team searched all kinds of vessels (77 in total) transiting to South Georgia via the Falkland Islands, including cruise ships, fishing vessels and research vessels. As the season progressed, search techniques and training were honed, and confidence increased to the extent that now the dog team are able to determine if rodent scent is ‘active’ or merely a ‘residual’ scent.

In parallel, the dog team undertook important conservation work checking islands within the Falklands archipelago to ascertain if they remain rodent free, as well as checking vessels and cargo bound for them to mitigate against the risk of re-introduction. Besides the obvious biosecurity and environmental benefits the dog team bring, they have also helped in education and outreach as the dog programme is a great vehicle for telling the story of how we protect South Georgia.

The Government worked with BAS and WD4C to initiate a satellite dog programme in the UK, capable of searching vessels and cargo to GSGSSI’s standards. The UK dog team successfully undertook detailed searches of all the cargo, materials, machinery and the cargo ship bound to deliver South Georgia’s new wharf development. We also worked closely with BAM to ensure that the biosecurity risks implicit in such a large-scale infrastructure project had been mitigated as far as possible. The result of this pre-border biosecurity effort meant that issues were resolved before arriving in South Georgia and subsequent delays and problems were avoided, helping to keep the project running on schedule.



Picture credit: artmattersstudio.co.uk

Photo credit: Rod Long

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Governance

“To conserve the Territory’s environment, minimise human impacts and, where practicable, restore native biodiversity and habitats”

Invasive Plant Management Programme

The current non-native plant strategy commenced in 2016 following a successful Darwin-funded project to map invasive plants on the island and develop suitable control measures. This work was of particular importance following the eradication of invasive reindeer which removed grazing pressure and provided a narrow window of opportunity to survey invasive plants once more visible and control them before they spread. In the first four years of the project, key performance indicators which included control of all high priority/high risk species, and a target to control at least 1ha of more widespread species were achieved. The final year of the project covering the 2020/2021 season was impacted by Covid-19 restrictions but core work around KEP was carried out. Furthermore, ongoing surveys have led to an additional eight non-native species being recorded which are now subject to control. The project has combined the expertise of specialist staff from New Zealand with training local staff who are based in the Falklands.

Highlights in 2020 include:

- 1149 square metres of Class One species treated in 2020 compared to 846 square metres the previous year. We would anticipate the area of class one species requiring treatment to reduce each year but the increase in 2020 was due to a new site of *Agrostis vinealis* highlighting the importance of on-going surveys
- 12328 square metres of Class Two species treated this season.
- 33 management units visited for both control and surveys. The weed management team visited popular visitor sites such as Salisbury Plain, Gold Harbour and Fortuna Bay as potential hotspots for newly established species and also looked for signs of rats, with no recent activity detected.
- A small population of *Poa trivialis* was found at Ocean Harbour this season. While recorded historically at Grytviken, it has not been found there. This species has been promoted from Historic to Class One and will be prioritised for control.
- The Darwin Initiative project ‘Securing South Georgia’s native habitats following invasive species control’ work has been ongoing. The project will analyse data from herbicide monitoring plots and will also quantify the potential for non-native plant species to disperse into new areas following deglaciation due to climate change.



Photo credit: Ross James

Native species Greater Burnet

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Governance

“To manage SGSSI fisheries to the highest international standards of operation, stewardship and sustainability”

Fisheries and the marine environment

2020 marked the end of the Government’s 5-year 2016-2020 strategy and whilst the impacts of Covid-19 were felt across all areas including fisheries, the Government was still able to achieve its objectives relating to fisheries and the marine environment. In addition, the introduction of the UK government’s Blue Belt programme in 2016 supported a wide range of additional work that was carried out in support of our stated objectives ‘to manage SGSSI fisheries to the highest international standards of operation, stewardship and sustainability’.

We continue to manage fisheries within the entire MPA in a manner that is consistent with the obligations of Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) but across all fisheries have introduced additional management measures that are more precautionary than those agreed annually by CCAMLR. Over the last five years this has included:

- Setting more precautionary long-term targets for toothfish stocks than those agreed at CCAMLR.
- Extending the seasonal closure of the krill fishery by two months to further reduce competition with krill-dependent predators.
- Working closely with our fishing fleet and BAS and CEFAS scientists to collect more data on species abundance, distribution and ecology to support the scientific basis for sustainable management.
- The successful recertification of South Georgia’s toothfish and icefish fisheries by the Marine Stewardship Council has provided independent evidence of fishery sustainability.
- The introduction in 2018 of a four-year licensing regime for the toothfish fishery with the highly competitive process rewarding vessels with the best track record in compliance, safety, efficiency and commitment to undertaking science and research. This has led to significant investment from industry in the fishery and has resulted in very high levels of compliance.
- Fishery management plans for all our fisheries were published providing details of our management and assessment procedures and research priorities.
- Fishing industry representatives have worked closely with NGOS to promote bird bycatch mitigation best practice outside our fishery boundaries including an invitation to Tokyo in 2019 to a tuna fisheries symposium.



Photo credit: John Bennett

Sperm whales in South Georgia waters

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Governance

The outcomes of the initial five-year review of the SGSSI MPA were published in 2018 and led to the introduction of a range of MPA enhancements 2019. These included a substantial increase in the size of the MPA's No-Take Zones (NTZ) where all commercial fishing activity is prohibited. These NTZ extensions, which now cover 23% of the MPA, were based on an assessment by the MPA review panel of over 200 scientific publications.

A further development from the MPA review was the phased introduction of the prohibition on the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil (HFO) by vessels within the maritime zone.

The high profile interception, boarding and inspection of the unlicensed Panamanian registered fishing vessel *Nika* by GSGSSI in 2019 provided further evidence of the ongoing threat of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in SGSSI waters. Coordination between the Government's patrol vessel *Pharos SG*, Government Officers, the UK Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and INTERPOL lead to the apprehension of the vessel in Indonesian waters. Evidence collected at SGSSI was key in unearthing information on the vessel that led to prosecution of the vessel's captain and owners by Indonesian authorities. Whilst the case is ongoing, the vessel has been forfeited to Indonesia, delisted by Panamanian authorities and added to the CCAMLR IUU vessel list.

The Government of SGSSI has continued to work closely with MMO, through the Blue Belt programme, to assess the use of new satellite surveillance capabilities and has ensured that, despite the significant reduction of vessel traffic in the MPA during the Covid-19 pandemic, effective surveillance has not only remained uninterrupted, but has also been strengthened. MMO have also supported the development of new strategies and policies to clarify and enhance SGSSI fishery compliance and enforcement processes due for roll-out in 2021.

Much of the work in support of sustainable marine management has been enhanced by funding from the UK government's Blue Belt programme over the last 5 years. The programme, which started in 2016, has provided for multidisciplinary research cruises to the South Sandwich Islands providing new information to help address data gaps identified by the MPA review for this rarely visited and sparsely studied region. Additional support was provided for a science programme to assess the biodiversity of the seafloor across the MPA at the depths that the longline fishery for toothfish operates using deep-water camera systems deployed from fishing vessels.



Photo credit: Arvid Olai Mjølnes

Orca in South Georgia waters

#SGSSI

Governance

“To facilitate visits that are safe, responsible, environmentally-sensitive and contribute to sustainable management, creating future ambassadors for the Territory”

Tourism

A biosecurity audit system was introduced to measure how effective biosecurity procedures of visiting vessels were at reducing the risk of introducing alien species. Over the course of three seasons, the system succeeded in raising standards and reducing risk significantly.

During the 2019/20 season, biosecurity audits showed a continued improvement in the standards of biosecurity over the previous two seasons. Just over 93% of vessel visits passed their biosecurity audits in the Acceptable or Good categories, up from 85% the previous season. This improvement helps fulfil the strategic objective of facilitating sustainable visits by minimising the risk of introduction of alien species.

The closed Chinstrap Penguin colony at Cooper Bay was tested for Avian Cholera following the historic outbreak of the disease there. Scientists observed a healthy colony of Chinstraps and this was later confirmed by the tests, showing no active disease in the colony. GSGSSI will assess the site to understand if it is suitable to be reopened to the public.

The pandemic curtailed the end of what was nonetheless a successful tourism season with continued growth in visitor numbers. Over 12,000 passengers arrived on 79 ship visits and nine yacht visits. Other visitors included Royal Navy personnel, science project teams, researchers and fishers. There were six visits impacted by the pandemic, with two being cut short as global travel restrictions emerged, and a further four cancelled.

The pandemic meant that the International Association Antarctica Tour Operations (IAATO) AGM was not possible in the usual way. Instead the AGM was conducted online, and IAATO facilitated Government in a ‘Town Hall’ event where we presented our Covid-19 mitigation measures to continue safe and sustainable visits into the 2020/21 season, whilst recognising that global travel restrictions would present immense challenges for any tourism season to take place.

We have implemented a new robust system for ensuring that Permit Holders are properly briefed before arriving to South Georgia. The new online permit holder briefing and assessment unifies our messaging and provides an opportunity to ensure that information is available and understood by those leading visits to South Georgia. It covers aspects of safety, environmental protection, and administration.

Throughout the 2019/20 season we worked with Silverback Productions LTD to create a new visitor briefing film. The new film aims to inspire visitors to play their part in the protection of the South Georgia, with Sir David Attenborough generously offering to narrate the film, lending his voice and helping us to create future ambassadors for the Territory.



Photo credit: Hurtigruten

Biosecurity can be very rewarding when it all goes well.



#SGSSI

Conservation

“To preserve, where practicable, and bring to a wider international audience the heritage of South Georgia”

Heritage Projects

Grytviken Cemetery fence replacement

A condition survey in 2019 highlighted that the Grytviken Cemetery fence was damaged beyond economic repair. Following consultation with Heritage Advisory Panel, oak was chosen as the material to replace the fence and was delivered in October 2019. The fence replacement project commenced in the 2020-2021 season. This was beneficial as it allowed the oak to further dry out. The design remained unaltered, but instead of painting it, it was coated with a clear UV resistant treatment.

The posts and rail elements were delivered rough cut. This meant that all pieces were sent through the planer to cut to the correct dimensions and then sanded with two grades of sand paper before a tar preservative was applied and the final UV resistant treatment.

Fortunately, this project was undertaken and completed in preparation of the centenary of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s death on 5 January 2022.

Main Store external painting

This task has bridged over this season and the two previous seasons. At the outset, the whole surface area was scratched back to remove rust and loose paint. Repairs to the damaged sections of tin sheeting were made and finally, in the 2020-2021 season the final top coat of paint was applied.

Coffee Grinder Shed window replacement

The annual walk around the site at the close of the 2019-2020 season led to the discovery of the gable end window was rotten beyond repair. The window has been crafted and is awaiting installation.

Sorling Valley historical hut removal

The dilapidated former Old Post hut at Sorling Valley has been dismantled and a new field hut is planned. Sections of the Old Post hut complete with historical inscriptions carved into them have been retained to be incorporated into the new field hut when built.



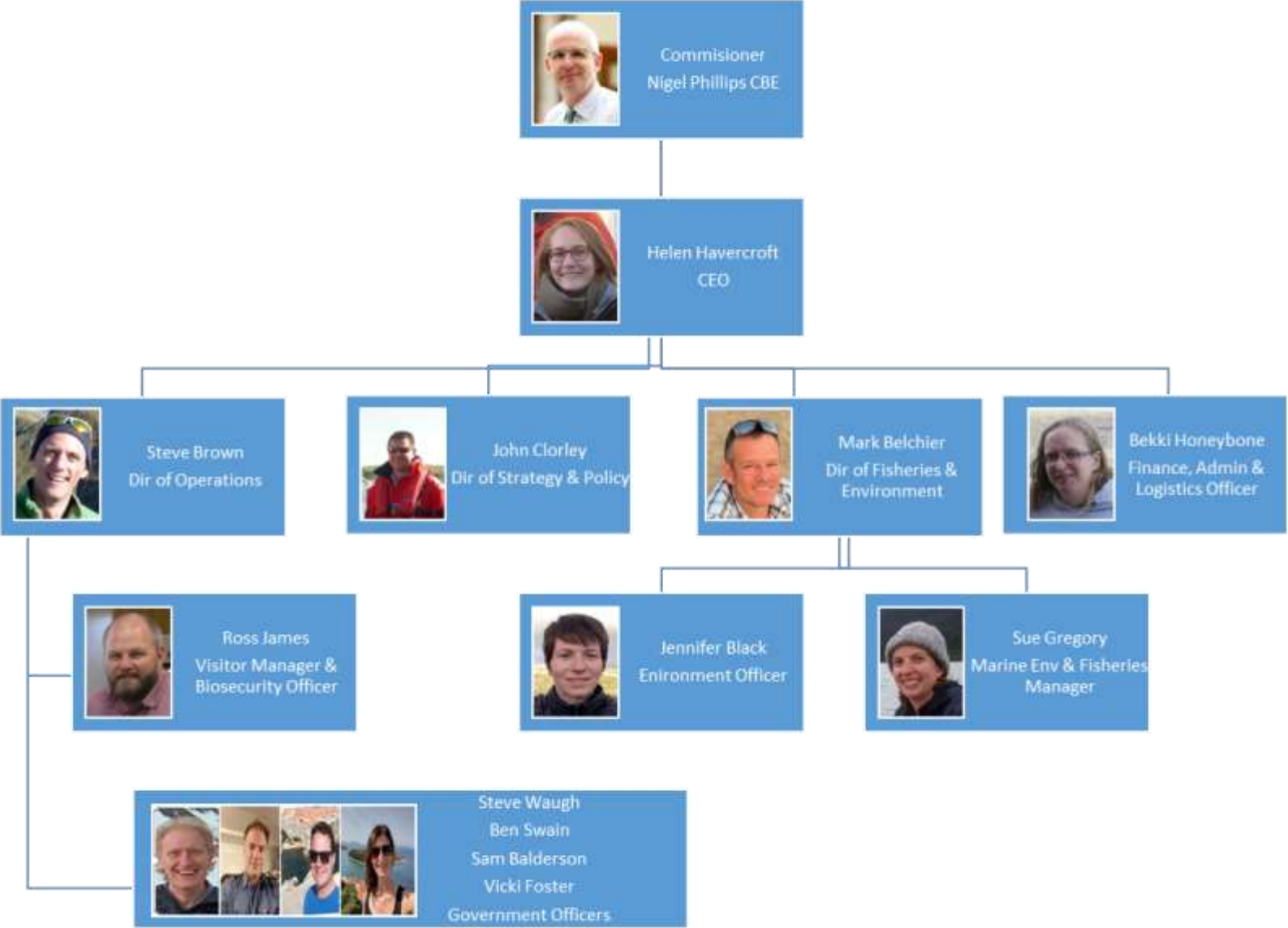
Photo credit: Ross James

Grytviken cemetery with the new fence

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Conservation

The Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands



This organisational chart is correct as of June 2021