

AGENDA ITEM NO. 9

Downs Committee – 21st November 2011

Dear Lord Mayor and Senior Warden

At a recent meeting of the Avon Gorge and Downs management sub-committee the Downs Ranger advised us about the proposed break-up of the individual City-wide parks teams, including the Downs Ranger's team, into a centralised group. This is understandably being driven by budget issues but Francis Greenacre and I, and the two councillors Chris Davies and Glenise Morgan were very concerned that this would not only have a detrimental impact on the Downs but would not achieve the savings envisaged.

We asked Robert Westlake to prepare a paper of his thoughts which is enclosed but I would add the following comments with which I know Francis concurs:

- 1) The very special legal status of the Downs Committee with its own budget and financial reserves is not well understood within BCC. The Downs Committee in our view should not be part of this financial exercise.
- 2) Francis and I have each had over 10 years experience of the Downs Committee and have seen the work put out to private tender to effect savings only later to be returned to its current in-house operation, because quality was lost and savings were not made.
- 3) The performance of the current team is so far ahead of any previous experience in quality, skills and commitment that we should make every effort to keep it together. The public comments in recent years have been overwhelmingly positive.
- 4) The Downs is an extraordinarily sensitive area to the needs of which the current team is highly attuned. The allocation of work on the Downs to staff who are part of a pool team trained only to the maintenance of municipal parks will lead inevitably to a diminution in quality, insensitivity to the environment and antagonism of the public.

This is clearly a very important issue and I fear that time is in short supply. Our sub-committee agreed that I should write to urge that this matter is considered at the Agenda meeting with the intent that it should be fully discussed as a matter of urgency at the next Downs Committee meeting.

Kind regards

Anthony

Case for excluding the Downs from the current review.

The current draft structure fails to fully acknowledge the complex nature the Downs, or to recognise the value and benefits of a flexible workforce dedicated solely to a destination, and risks a failure to deliver the aspirations of of the Downs Committee as identified in the Downs Management Plan and the Avon Gorge Management Plan. The Plans evolved to look at the long term management of the site and to ensure continuity by establishing a stable business plan. In my view the proposed structure will be unable to deliver or sustain this over the medium to long term.

I do not believe that sufficient research has been carried out into the numerous activities that are undertaken at the Downs that are over and above the day to day grounds maintenance operation. Examples are, managing the newly established goat herd and all the implications that go with managing livestock in a high profile environment, annual scrub clearance of sensitive and ecologically vulnerable sites, hay cutting, [we do our own] bye-law enforcement, visitor management, managing 31 football pitches and the Downs League, tree works, summer bedding, events management, and a host of associated tasks required to achieve the objectives of the Management Plans.

The proposed structure is in my view too fragmented to maintain the acknowledged high standards of maintenance and too diverse to allow a proper structured approach to managing the Downs and risks the loss of of any sense of cohesion required to maintain a prestigious visitor attraction. In addition I am concerned that there may be a possible conflict of interest if the Downs Ranger no longer has direct control of the operational team.

It is my opinion that not enough weight has been given to the status of the Downs, for example. The Downs is protected by Nature Conservation Policy NE5. It is further protected by NE9 due to its designation as a Historic Landscape. The Downs is also a Site of Conservation Interest [SNCI] a Site of Special Scientific Interest [SSSI] a European Special Area of Conservation [SAC] a Strategic Nature Area [SNA] and a Scheduled Ancient Monument [SAM] All these designations are of national and international importance and acknowledges the Downs as being among the top five locations in the country for the richest concentrations of biodiversity value and imposes legal obligations upon the landowner to ensure their upkeep is safeguarded.

The Downs also enjoys Favourable Conservation Status. To achieve this status "*All its habitats and species must be in a favourable condition with a reasonable expectation that they will be maintained in that condition and not deteriorate in the long term*" The Downs currently enjoys the highest category and is considered to be category 1.

In addition the Downs has retained Green Flag status every year since 2007 and was the first in Bristol to do so.

Whilst acknowledging the need for savings across the Estates I remain to be convinced that any significant impact can be made by the dissolution of the Downs operational structure. If it is the case that the Downs budget is entirely ring fenced and pays the salaries and for resources to run the site, how can that budget be of any benefit or gain to the Estates in general. The Downs Committee would in my opinion expect the budget to be spent on what it is intended for and in line with best practice for the Downs to continue to be run as a business unit.

Risks of adopting the proposed structure.

Loss of confidence from the Downs Committee.

Loss of confidence from the general public.

Alienation of the Friends of the Downs [FODAG]

Previous good works and critical training at risk of being wasted.

Loss of support from Natural England and other key stake holders/partners.

Risk of losing Favourable Status.

Risk of losing Green Flag accreditation.

Loss of multi -skilled flexible workforce.

Failure to meet legal obligations under the Welfare of Animals Act 2006.

De-motivated workforce.

Dilution of effort resulting in lowering of standards.

Failure to deliver the Downs and Avon Gorge Management Plans with subsequent loss of credibility.

Loss of external funding ie Natural England, Heritage Lottery Fund.