

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

DOWNS COMMITTEE

November 18th 2013

Report of: Service Director, Environment and Leisure

Title: Report of the Downs Ranger

Ward: N/A

Officer Presenting Report: Robert Westlake, Downs Ranger

Contact Telephone Number: 0117 9736210

RECOMMENDATION.

That the Report be noted

Summary

The report reflects the objectives of the Downs Management Plan and to inform members of progress since the last meeting.

The significant issues in the report are:

- Enjoyment
- Access
- Working Groups
- Landscape
- Wildlife
- Management and Resources

Policy

Not applicable

Consultation

1. Internal

Richard Bevan, Manager, Parks Estates, Play, Cemeteries & Crematoria.

John Williams, Estates Manager,

Andrew Gordon, Estates Management team leader,
Mike Allan, Finance Business Partner,
Becky Coffin Conservation Officer,
Richard Ennion, Horticultural Services Manager,
Terry Hannan, Head Gardener, Blaise & Downs

2 External

Mandy Leivers, Education Officer,
Jack Penrose, FODAG.

Context

Enjoyment:

Last month Billy Smarts Circus enjoyed a successful run at the Downs. This year the weather cooperated and the site suffered minimal damage. The Downs has been successful with its application for 'Dark Skies Discovery' status and the first stargazing sessions are planned for the New Year.

The OTIS outdoor training system was launched by the Lord Mayor in September and has quickly proved to be a popular addition to the activities available at the Downs. (Appendix 1) The equipment located along Ladies Mile and has been installed for a twelve month trial period and is in regular use. I have received numerous positive emails and comments, with just two dissenters concerned that the City Council by permitting sponsorship of the equipment could be seen as endorsing a private company.

I have received an enquiry from Liverpool City Council who are considering installing the training equipment in their City Parks.

The Downs League and University football fixtures are underway for the new season. To date no cancellations have been recorded.

Clifton's entry into South West in Bloom received a very credible Silver award. The entry included parts of the Downs and judges singled out Mandy Leivers presentation on the Avon Gorge for special comment, and were very complementary on the management of the Downs and commented that "*Both sites are clearly in good hands and demonstrate the commitment of all parties to the natural heritage*"

The Community Payback team continue with internal improvements to the dressing rooms and additional teams provide litter patrols at various locations around the Downs.

It is proposed that some of the Downs display panels currently fixed to the water tower fence could be accommodated within the corridors of the dressing rooms. As well as being informative they would go some way to enhancing the somewhat austere aspect of the building and provide a safe environment for the panels.

b) Access:

The complex scheme to install a new water supply across the Downs is finally complete. The fences used to protect the grass sward as it established have now been removed and we are in the process of returning this part of the Downs to its normal condition. A final area where the works compound was located has been reinstated and the final fencing will be removed shortly.

The scheme overall has gone smoothly, with completion dates met and reinstatement successfully achieved.

The in-house security team continue with patrols across the Downs, but now provide reduced winter hours coverage. Since the last meeting officers and the Ranger team have removed or ticketed 37 illegally parked cars.

The trial barbecue area has proved popular this summer and has been well used. Security staff dealt with unauthorised portable barbecues whenever the weather was fine.

The trial period was extended for a further year and a recommendation to Committee will be brought to the next meeting.

In September the power box that supplies the ice cream van at Sea Walls road along with several wooden bollards and a cast iron litter bin were badly damaged by a car that failed to negotiate the bend. The supply has been restored, the bollards will be replaced and the bin has been removed for repair and refurbishment. I am currently pursuing a claim against the driver with colleagues from insurance services.

FODAG volunteers are once again reaching out across the Downs on their regular winter litter patrols and continue with valuable assistance with weekend goat monitoring.

New for this winter a group of FODAG volunteers will take on the repair of the dead fences along Circular Road. The simple fences constructed from local materials are designed to direct joggers away from sensitive

areas of grassland and rare plants. Downs staff will provide all the materials, tools and basic training.

Other FODAG members continue with the 'Adopt a Hawthorn' scheme.

C) Working Groups:

1 Traffic Management Group.

The working group tasked to consider all aspects of the impact of traffic on the Downs have completed a series of meetings with senior traffic planning officers and neighbourhood partnership coordinator.

The final stage of the process is to get the report, previously endorsed by this Committee before the relevant Neighbourhood Partnership. This is scheduled for the next NP3 meeting on December 2nd

A paper will also be presented to the other NPs that share a boundary with the Downs.

The working group have identified 23 organisations that will be included in the consultation process.

The working group will continue to monitor progress and regular updates will be brought to the Committee.

2 Rock fall Group.

Parsons Brinckerhoff are now in the final stages of evaluating the tender submissions and preparing the contract documents.

3 Widening the Audience.

A small group comprising myself , Mandy Leivers and FODAG representatives have had several meetings to discuss how best to promote the Downs to a more diverse range of visitors.

This is an aspiration of the Downs Management Plan and seeks to encourage people from all backgrounds and abilities from right across the City. Various organisations have been contacted to promote walking activities for older people and people with disabilities. The walks will be coordinated/led by FODAG volunteers. In addition a meeting has taken place with the Downs League secretary to organise a series of coaching sessions in the New Year.

Mandy and Martin Collins (FODAG) hosted a walk for 15 people from St Paul's, Easton, Barton Hill and St George. (All but one had never been to the Downs before)

It is proposed to use the notice boards in the dressing rooms to further promote activities at the Downs and for the display of artwork.

d) Landscapes.

At the end of September the first stage to improve the approach to the Suspension Bridge was completed. This involved the removal of scrub from the large copse opposite the public conveniences. The next phase of the work will see the removal of the smaller self-sown competing trees, leaving a much improved and more open aspect.

At the same time the self-seeded trees were removed from the perimeter of the unofficial car park adjacent to the area where the ice cream van parks.

The second stage will see the creation of the previously agreed coach drop off point.

The flower beds at the top of Blackboy Hill have been replanted with spring flowering bedding plants. This includes the recently redesigned bed on the roundabout which for operational reasons was not planted this summer.

At the end of September early October the Downs team carried out essential highway maintenance to the rock faces above Bridge Valley Road. This involved tree lifting and scrub removal. Much of the work was carried out from a high access platform and coincided with Portway road closures.

The annual rock face inspections were also carried out by Parsons Brinckerhoff and their report will be forwarded shortly.

To take full advantage of the road closure volunteers from Climb Bristol undertook to remove loose rock that has become unstable over the years. As well as tackling a mounting and foreseeable threat to climbers the work will have contributed to providing a safe passage to other parties on the underlying land.

A new information panel has been installed on the triangle of grass at the top Blackboy Hill. The panel describes the finding of the 'Bristol Dinosaur' one of the earliest dinosaurs ever found.

Three new memorial benches have recently been installed at the Downs and several more applications are in the pipeline. The benches which are assembled by the Downs team are charged at £750 each, valuable income that helps under-pin Downs budgets.

Some redundant benches have been removed and where possible will be recycled.

At the last meeting members agreed to fell the dangerous Ash tree located along Ladies Mile. This decision has been challenged and members will have been circulated information intimating that the decision made by this Committee to disregard the tree officers report might be unlawful. In essence the challenger who represents a group called 'Bristol Street Trees' claims that in felling the tree BCC may be in breach of European legislation, in that we have failed to fully establish that bats are no longer roosting in the tree.

Tree officers are of the opinion that the action to fell the Ash is not unlawful but are rechecking with local experts and Natural England.

Colleagues from the tree section are rechecking that all is order before proceeding with the agreed action.

e) Wildlife.

A third year UWE student is carrying out a study of the goats, looking at how they are spending their time and how and if feeding habits change in the winter months. The study will include analysis of the data already obtained from our own and FODAG daily monitoring and is supported by Natural England.

The Education Officer Mandy Leivers and her seasonal assistant have had a busy season with many diverse groups using the Downs as an outdoor classroom. (Appendix 2)

Thirty five Fly Agaric toadstools were spotted on the triangle of grass opposite the Lords Mayors mansion; these are unprecedented numbers for the Downs and were quite a spectacle.

f) Management and Resources.

One of the Downs team has accepted a twelve month secondment to the Estates Ranger service. This is a valuable development opportunity to gain further experience and a wider understanding of the

management of large and high profile public open spaces. The arrangement is flexible and permits time to ensure adequate cover for goat management and facilitating football provision. Negotiations to provide a more permanent arrangement are underway.

In recent months the Downs has benefited from regular volunteer work placements. This has proved to be a rewarding experience for the placement as well as a welcome addition of manpower.

The Estates Management team leader Andrew Gordon is exploring with Natural England the possibility of extending the Higher Level Stewardship agreement to include restoration of species rich grassland on the Downs.

The Downs team continue with the winter programme of works, carrying out day to day response maintenance in line with the Downs Management Plan, the Annual Plan and the Avon Gorge Management Plan and in line with Parks and Open Spaces grounds maintenance specification.

On-going general maintenance including, maintaining spring bedding, managing the goats, leaf clearing, maintaining football pitches and dressing rooms, clearing litter and emptying bins, cleaning signs and shelters and removing graffiti.

Retaining areas of previously cleared scrub.

Planned winter projects include, the next stage of scrub clearance at the Iron Age Fort, scrub clearance and improved management at Zoo banks, removing a large patch of scrub from in front of the Observatory tower, opening up a recently identified 'lost view' opposite Engineers House

Proposal

N/A

Other Options considered

N/A

Risk Assessment

N/A

Equalities Impact Assessment

Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following “protected characteristic”: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy, and maternity, race religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision- maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:

- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010
- ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to-
 - Remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;
 - Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons’ disabilities):
 - Encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to – tackle prejudice; and – promote understanding

Legal and Resource Implications

Legal

The Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act 1861 provides that the Downs should remain as a place for the resort and recreation of the citizens of Bristol, and that a committee should be appointed to manage the. The recommendations of this report are within the powers conferred by this statute

Financial

(a) Revenue

Financial advice provided by Mike Allen, Finance Business Partner

(b) **Capital**

None

Land

The land is under control of the Downs Committee.

Personnel

N/A

Appendices:

Appendix 1

Appendix 2

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
Background Papers:

It is a statutory requirement to list papers used to prepare the report but not ones already published



Avon Gorge and Downs Biodiversity Education Officer's Report August – mid October 2013

Events

- We ran three children's holiday events attended by 41 children. This included a 'Ladybird spotters' event, run in conjunction with Rhian Rowson from Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery.
- The 'Autumn adventure' family walk was enjoyed by 11 people (28 had booked) and joined we forces with the North West Bristol Camera Club to run the 'Picture perfect photography course'. The 9 participants all rated the course as 'excellent'.
- 44 people attended a fantastic talk about spiders by Mark Pajak from Bristol Naturalists' Society.
- Chris Westcott (Natural England) gave a talk about the Avon Gorge goat project, to 22 people, as part of the Bristol Conservation and Science Foundation conservation lecture programme. Mandy took along the Avon Gorge and Downs travelling display and leaflets.
- We've listed our events on the BBC run local activities 'Things To Do' website and put our full programme of events for October to December on our Facebook page.

Widening the audience – Your Downs

- The steering group for this project met for the third time. We've decided to re-name the initiative 'Your Downs'. We're currently investigating setting up guided walks for older people and will be joining the Disabled Ramblers steering group.
- Mandy and Martin Collins (FODAG) hosted the first 'Walking the five ways to well-being' walk. 15 people from St Paul's, Easton, Barton Hill and St George came to the Downs (all but one for the first time and most of them refugees).

Playschemes

- For our first playscheme session in August the Lord Mayor of Bristol joined us to find out more about the project and meet with the children. 25 children from Space Cadets playscheme, from St George, took part in a minibeast hunt and met the Lord Mayor.
- During the school holidays we ran 24 playscheme sessions for 401 children.

Schools

- During September and early October we taught 386 pupils in 16 education sessions. Both Holymead school from Brislington and St Ursulas came to us for the first time; a total of 149 children.
- We also ran three sessions for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties from the St Matthias Park Pupil Referral Unit.
- Two classes from St Werburgh's School, enjoyed 'Autumn art' sessions. Some of the artwork created on the day was taken back to school for display as part of the following weekend's St Werburgh's art trail.
- 30 Year 4 children from Hotwells Primary also took part in an 'Autumn art' session. The clay creatures and leaf rainbow art that they produced during the session will displayed during the West Bristol Arts Trail.

Volunteers and work experience students

- Ten volunteers gave 139 hours of their time
- Five people came to us on work experience placements - a total of 85 hours.

Other

- Mandy did an interview about the project on Bristol Community radio (BCFM).
- Julie Doherty (Avon Wildlife Trust Learning Development Officer) asked for images and text for a nature journal that she was producing for the Northern Slopes nature reserve. As part of it she included a page to show the connectivity between different wildlife sites around Bristol.
- Mandy went to a briefing meeting about LINE (Learning In Natural Environments) / Natural Connections, a Natural England initiative to ensure learning about the natural world is embedded in school teaching. The project aims to link up schools with organisations who deliver outdoor learning.