

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Downs Committee

21 March 2022 at 2.00 pm



Members Present:-

Councillors: Steve Smith (Chair), Jos Clark, Geoff Gollop, Philippa Hulme, Paula O'Rourke, David Freed (Vice-Chair), Jonathon Baker, Mike Bothamley, Mark Burchfield, Gillian Camm, Patrick Despard and Peter Rilett

Officers in Attendance:-

Stefan Edwards (Events Officer), Kevin Jay, Ben Skuse and Becky Belfin

1 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair led introductions and issued the safety information.

2 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Paul Goggin and Councillor Katy Grant.

Councillor Jos Clark gave notice that she would be late for the meeting.

3 Declarations of interest

Councillor Geoff Gollop declared an interest as a member of FODAG, Respect the Downs and that Jonathon Baker is one of his clients.

4 Minutes of last meeting

RESOLVED the minutes of the previous meeting 24 January 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

5 Action Tracker

The action tracker was NOTED.



6 Matters Arising From the Events and Finance Group

The minutes of the 12 January Events and Finance Group meeting reads:

“We expect income of £317k and expenditure of £579k. The underlying deficit is £262k, which is reduced to £164k after reserves are drawn on.”

This should read:

“Income for 2021/22 is forecast at £270,000 with expenditure at £590,000. The net deficit is £220,000 following the use of £98,000 of reserves.”

7 Public Forum

Councillor Jos Clark arrived at the meeting.

The following public statements were received and noted by the committee:

1. Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (in person)
2. Peter Weeks – Downs for People (in person)
3. Chris Millman – Downs for People (in person)
4. Andrew Lynch (in person)
5. Councillor Christine Townsend (in person)

The Lord Mayor outlined how requests for information were processed prior to publication. He commented that whilst legal disputes were by their nature confrontational, the case had been settled and all parties should concentrate on building the best future for the Downs.

Councillor Gollop expressed concern about some of the comments made in the public forum statements and asked that they be noted. He affirmed the value of the contributions of the Merchant Members.

Councillor O'Rourke expressed concern that the current format of public forum statements may have the effect of limiting discussion. She expressed pride in the amount of governance work that had been undertaken and the benefit of having Councillor Smith as Lord Mayor, who had the ability and drive to effect real change. She confirmed that future events with more collaborative discussion would be welcome.

8 Strategy and Governance Engagement Update

The Lord Mayor gave a verbal update on the Strategy and Governance work stream.

The Lord Mayor was hoping to announce that the survey was open today, but unfortunately that is not the case. A huge amount of work has been done by members and officers to create the survey, but there



have been some issues about how and where it is published. Officers are working on this right now, and we will publish the survey as soon as possible.

UPDATE: the survey is now available at <http://smartsurvey.co.uk/s/DownsEngagement> and runs until Tuesday 19 April 2022.

9 Downs Management Report

The Area Parks Supervisor introduced the report and summarised it for the committee.

- There was an update on the meeting with the observatory to address the problems with vehicle access damaging the ground and plants. It was agreed that the damage caused was largely due to waste collection at the observatory. The owner has gone back to his providers to request smaller vehicles that will fit better on the path. If this is not possible, he will approach another service provider. There has now been a bollard installed to manage the volume of vehicles, which will now need access by permission.
- The recent sunny weather has attracted more BBQs, which damage the surface of the Downs. There has been consultation with the events team to manage this.

1 Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project Annual Report 2022

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The Parks Development Officer and the Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager introduced the Annual Report and highlighted the following points:

- This is the annual report for the project covering January to December 2021. Launched October 1999, the aim of the project is 'to secure the future of the outstanding wildlife interest of the Avon Gorge, Clifton Down, Durdham Down and Leigh Woods, as well as raising awareness and understanding of this unique location and its importance for people and wildlife'.
- Habitat Management Works: tackling invasive scrub that crowds out rare species on rocky outcrops in the gorge. In March, 4 Baggot goats joined 2 existing Kashmir goats, and another 4 Kashmirs were added in July, bringing the herd to full strength. The goat activity was promoted on ITV news.
- The Scrub management plan to restore the wildflower meadow continues, with support from FODAG to construct dead hedges to steer runners onto established paths. The large increase in footfall during covid has damaged meadows, with new paths being created that run through sensitive wildflower areas. So some areas have been roped and signed to encourage walkers to stick to the old paths. University students are studying orchids in the meadows.
- The Education and Community engagement work was made very difficult last year due to Coronavirus disruption. The Education Manager was on furlough until April and the Avon Gorge and Downs Learning and Engagement Officer started 2 months later than normal. Most of the focus in April and May was about restarting the programme including setting up events, contacting schools and booking in educational visits, as well as rebuilding the volunteer team.



- Education events and activities have a long lead time, so we had to offer a reduced programme. It was also not clear when restrictions would be lifted. While attendee figures were lower than normal, we still managed to get people out about and involved, which was much appreciated.
- During the year 529 school pupils were taught in 27 education sessions. This is a lot less than we would normally teach but we spaced out groups to allow us to follow covid precaution protocols. This included giving extra time for cleaning and disinfecting equipment between school visits. We were thrilled to receive positive and enthusiastic feedback from many teachers who bought their classes to the Downs for sessions.
- At the other end of the education spectrum, we also ran a bird ringing session for South Gloucestershire and Stroud College students on the BSc Zoological Management and Conservation course, on the Downs
- Play scheme engagement was limited by Covid issues, with many groups shutting down or struggling with staffing issues.
- We began the Bridge 2 Nature project – a nature connection and wellbeing project for young people run in partnership with Off the Record and the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge. There were many setbacks caused by Covid so we had to suspend the programme for 2021 and have re-launched it in spring 2022.
- Wastes and Strays project: the Downs is one of 4 Urban Commons being studied nationally. A researcher has collected oral histories. The Downs 'poet in residence' ran workshops for school group and a guided walk. There were also creative mapping activities.
- The Education Team attended the Downs Festival and University of Bristol welcome fair to engage the public and recruit volunteers.
- There has been further development of the project's website with new web resources for children.
- In May there were efforts to build up the volunteer team, reviewing existing volunteers and recruiting newcomers.
- When Bristol Zoological Society closes Bristol Zoo and relocates to Wild Place, it is proposed that the main entrance building will become the Clifton Conservation Hub. It is intended that the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project education team will be based there. There is a public consultation on Thursday where the plans can be viewed.
- We hope to be back up to speed this year, but some larger events still cannot go ahead.

Discussion notes:

- Members thanked the officers for the quality of the report, especially the photos and quotes from participants.
- The recently planted wildflower beds on Christchurch are doing well, with expected growth in the spring and full bloom in the summer.

The Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager then introduced the regular update report:

- The new starter with the team was an engagement officer last year, which means she already has a lot of the relevant experience. She will be working between May and October, especially to support major events.



- A recent “meet the goats” event has been well received.
- A project around birdsong, including how birdsongs change during the year will be put on the website. This weekend there will also be a ‘learning birdsong’ talk and a ‘feathered friends’ easter event.
- There have been 32 school sessions booked so far. Scout groups are also coming for evening sessions.
- The Bridge to Nature project starts tomorrow, involving 3 trips to the Downs and 2 to Leigh Woods. Participants will be painting a mural for the Upfest street art event.
- The team has been working with Bristol University to film wildlife on the Downs and Avon Gorge.

RESOLVED the reports were NOTED.

1 Events Report

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The Events Officer introduced the report and summarised it for the committee.

- The report is short as there were no events since the last meeting. A schedule of upcoming events is now available on the council website.
- Cycle Sunday cannot run this year so has been taken off the schedule. The Downs Concert is advertising now, and organisers are carrying out ongoing consultation with residents. They have agreed a one-year contract.

Discussion notes:

- As part of the wastes and strays project, the committee could consider curating events so that they could better address inequality in the events programme and make them more open for the whole city.
- A flock of sheep will be driven across the Downs this May to exercise this right under the Downs Act.
- Members noted that there was public concern about Love Saves The Day last year. It was confirmed that Team Love’s new concert Forwards (formerly known as Downs Concerts), which is planned for this year, is more family oriented with appropriate music acts. Love Saves the Day last year catered to a young adult audience and there were issues with egress around the site.
- Organisers are engaged with residents. The plan was initially for a 5-year period, but a 1-year licence has been agreed to test the event before a longer-term commitment. The event will be held at the Sea Walls site this year, with the possibility of rotation in future years.

1 Finance Update

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The Principal Accountant introduced the report and summarised it for the committee.



- There is a substantial deficit, caused largely from defending the legal case and additional covid-related costs. Prior underspends have contributed to a reserve, but this will be wiped out in this year.
- Members expressed sympathy for complaints raised by the public about a lack of information and detail in the published financial report. Members requested that the finance officer, Chair and clerk discuss this issue and produce a report with more detail, with exemption being reserved for commercially sensitive matters [ACTION].

1 Any Other Business

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Councillor O'Rourke announced that enough money had been raised to enable the repair of the Clifton suspension bridge playground. Funding was from a variety of sources, which began with crowd funding, then a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and then matched grant funding from Veolia. This could provide a model for funding these types of projects in future.

1 Date of Next Meeting

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The next meeting is on 27 June 2022 at 11.00am at the Merchant's Hall.

Meeting ended at 3.00 pm

CHAIR _____

