

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Downs Committee

10 June 2024 at 11.00 am



Members Present:

Councillors: Andrew Varney, Rob Bryher, Kye Dudd, Caroline Gooch, Paula O'Rourke, David Wilcox, Mike Bothamley, Robert Bourns, Fiona Francombe, and David Freed

Officers in Attendance:

Steve Hunt, Kevin Jay, Erin Waters and Ben Skuse

1 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

The Committee noted the new Councillor members following the Bristol City Council elections on 2 May 2024. These were Councillors Rob Bryher, Caroline Gooch, David Wilcox.

2 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Paul Goggin, David Powell (SMV), Bevis Watts (SMV), Mark Burchfield (SMV), Jonathan James (Head of Natural and Marine Environment, Parks), Sharon Radnedge (Parks Commercial Manager), Harriet Shannon (City Events & Festivals Manager), Anna Stevens (Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Biodiversity Engagement Manager).

3 Declarations of interest

Councillor David Wilcox declared that geologist Richard Arthur (mentioned in DAP report) had taught him geology.

4 Lord Mayor's business



The Lord Mayor informed members of the sad passing of former Councillor Peter Abraham. Members noted that Peter had served as a Councillor on the Downs Committee and held office with Bristol City Council for 55 years. Members expressed their sadness and paid tribute to Peter.

5 Minutes of last meeting

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting on 11 March 2024 be approved as a correct record.

6 Action Tracker

The Chair ran through actions from the previous meeting. Further updates were included arising from issues raised during discussion at the meeting, namely –

- a) Item 1 – Private driveway issue, Ben Skuse Area Parks supervisor and Councillor Gooch to pursue update from legal enforcement team.
- b) Item 2 - Accessing of CIL money, Luke Mackenzie Business Development Manager to liaise with Jonathan James (Head of Natural and Marine Environment, Parks), to progress.
- c) Item 3 – regarding issues raised in previous DAP report about illegal encampments by travellers, Luke Mackenzie Business Development Manager to liaise with police and other appropriate officers as necessary to progress.

7 Matters Arising From the Events and Finance Group

Noted that there were no matters arising from the Events & Finance Sub Group.

8 Public Forum

The following public forum statements were received and noted by the Committee.

1. Julie Nnamdi
2. Robert Westlake FODAG
3. Downs for People Susan Carter

Regarding statement 1 and the concern about safety issues relating to the height of the railings at the top of the cliff at Avon Gorge, it was suggested that appropriate signage might be the most practical way forward given the financial and legal limitations associated with the site. Ben Skuse Area Parks supervisor stated that this would be pursued, and feedback would be given to the statement author as soon as possible.



9 Downs Advisory Panel report

The Committee received a report from the Downs Advisory Panel noting that since the last meeting of the Downs Committee the Panel had received over sixty contacts. The presence and impact of vehicle dwelling on the Downs continued to generate the greatest number of emails and phone calls. Close behind was a significant increase in complaints about bye law contraventions.

Areas of business considered included the following –

Members of the committee commented on the DAP report in particular the van dwellers on the Downs emphasising that this was a complex and city-wide issue with a range of impacts on local communities especially when considered in comparison to other sites in Bristol.

It was also noted that the impact of van dwellers on wildlife and biodiversity was more significant than other areas of the city as the Avon Gorge had been internationally recognised as a Special Area of Conservation Interest and nationally designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Other points emphasised and agreed upon were -

- a) The Black to Nature project was fully supported by members of the committee and it was noted that going forward FODAG would be working closely with the Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Engagement and Learning Manager to progress this.
- b) An e-mail that the Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Engagement and Learning Manager had circulated previously about concerns of damage to the biodiversity of the Downs including its SSSI status, by some users of the Downs, be circulated to all members of the committee.
- c) Bye law breaches on the Downs, including parking on the verges and grass, were an ongoing concern and recommendations to mitigate these were stated in the report. Members considered these noting that the police were not resourced for this type of enforcement, so members were inclined to look at the option for a temporary arrangement for using uniformed security patrols, for one month, to try and prevent further bye law breaches.

The Business Development Manager was asked to draw up a plan with costs for the committee to consider. It was thought this would take time to work up and likely not be in place until the next summer season. In the meantime, members were asked to consider volunteering to put stickers on vehicle windows to deter parking breaches on the Downs for the current season.

- d) Members agreed a request to grant permission to Richard Arthur (Geologist) to organise a Downs Geology Trail as there were no known cost implications.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.



1 Downs Business Development report

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The Committee received a report from the Business Development Manager reviewing the current facilities and possible opportunities on key locations across the Downs. These included –

- a) Sea Walls site.
- b) Stoke Road changing rooms.
- c) Stoke Road pitches.
- d) Private Training Operators.
- e) Zoo north car park.
- f) New concession sites.

Other ideas for future facilities on the Downs were discussed and included a children's play area by the water tower café, funding for which could be considered by the local Area Committee. Regarding funding for the other areas outlined, options included crowd funding and national lottery funding. It was strongly felt that the criteria for heritage lottery funding was closely aligned to the Downs ethos. The Business Development Manager agreed to look into this and other potential funding sources and report back to the committee with options.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

1 Downs Management Report

1

The Committee received an update report from the Area Parks Supervisor summarising the work on the Downs for the early summer season. A particular and growing problem was ever increasing litter pollution, which was now occupying more resources than previously, this was most noticeable on sunny weekends and bank holidays.

Members expressed their concerns about the litter issue and thanked FODAG volunteer groups who regularly attended to a range of tasks that were beneficial to the Downs including a growing number of people taking it upon themselves to come equipped with a litter picker and bag to help maintain the upkeep of the Downs.

1 Downs Events Report

2



The committee received an update report from the Events Officer on events that had taken place since the last meeting. Members attention was drawn to the returning and new events for 2024, as set out in paragraph 1 of the report. No complaints had been received since the last meeting.

1 Downs Finance Report

3

The committee received the Outturn report for 2023-24 and the Forecast report for 2024-25. Noted that the gross income for 2023-24 was in deficit by £18k, with expenditure overspent by £176k resulting a net deficit of £194k.

Following a suggestion from a member the Finance Manager agreed to look into the possibility of raising a precept on council tax for local residents who lived near the Downs to help increase funding for the Downs and report back.

RESOLVED – That the Outturn report for 2023-24 and Forecast report for 2024-25 be noted.

1 Downs Community Engagement report

4

The committee received an update report on the activities of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife learning and community engagement programme for April, May and June 2024.

As a further update members were also informed that the Festival of Nature held on 1st and 2nd of June was well attended.

RESOLVED – That the Downs Community Engagement report be noted.

1 Any Other Business

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None.

1 Date of Next Meeting

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Monday 16 September 2024, 11 am at City Hall.



Meeting ended at 1.00 pm

CHAIR _____

