

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Downs Committee

5 July 2021 at 12.00 pm



Members Present:-

Councillors: Steve Smith (Chair), Jos Clark, Carla Denyer, Geoff Gollop, Paul Goggin, Paula O'Rourke, Gillian Camm (Vice-Chair), Jonathon Baker, Mike Bothamley, Simon Cooper, David Freed, David Powell and Peter Rilett

Officers in Attendance:-

Ben Skuse and Kevin Jay, Oliver Harrison, Mandy Leivers, Jonathan James

1 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair led introductions and issued the safety information.

2 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Phillipa Hulme.

3 Declarations of interest

Cllr Geoff Gollop declared an interest as a financial consultant for Jonathon Baker and is also member of FODAG and Respect the Downs.

Cllr Carla Denyer declared an interest as a member of the Playground on the Downs campaign group.

4 Minutes of last meeting

There is bug in the software that is listing everything as item 1.

RESOLVED the minutes of the meeting of 22 March are agreed as a correct record.

Within the Events and Finance Minutes, it says that the Comedy Garden opened 2 July, this should read 2 June.



5 Action Tracker

The A4018 action is now a watching brief and so can be removed from the tracker.

6 Matters Arising From the Events and Finance Group

The Master Merchant introduced the summary and highlighted the following points:

- The sub-committee has identified the need for a better decision-making framework.
- The loss of zoo parking income is a major concern.
- Item 3 and 4 in minutes refer to a 'track' on the water tower site. For clarity, this is plastic webbing installed underneath the grass to support it. It is not a roadway.

7 Public Forum

The following Public Forum statements were NOTED.

1. Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge – July 2021 Update
2. Suzanne Audrey – Judicial Review
3. Downs for People – Downs Committee Review

8 Downs Management Report

Ben Skuse introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- The traditional July bus tour of the Downs had to be rescheduled to ongoing Covid restrictions. There are no more limits on the use of outdoor public spaces, so the Downs is experiencing very heavy use.
- There is a major issue with litter removal on the Downs. This is taking an unreasonable amount of time and cost for the maintenance team to deal with. Members of the public are complaining about the extent of littering.
- The current model needs to change as the current situation is unsustainable. BCC Parks and the Bristol Waste Company need to look at how they manage the increased waste levels in parks. BS would like to be part of those conversations.
- The Comedy Garden event has gone well, as has the Circus with very little impact on the grass. Breaking Bread on the water tower site will require considerable repair work ahead of further events in September.
- The Downs will be features on the BBC Green Planet programme, due for broadcast in January 2022.
- We need to check the agreement for new signage for the Draper Monument [OH ACTION]
- There have been some issues with vehicles parking partially on the Downs in the surrounding roads. We have received an approach from a group that has offered to pay for ground protection.



It is not clear how we should proceed on this and there is concern about setting a precedent for private donations for specific projects.

Discussion Notes:

- The discussion should be about the principle of accepting private funding or crowd funding in general rather than piecemeal for particular schemes. We have accepted funding for things like commemorative benches in the past. We would need to check legally whether we can accept and to write a coherent policy about private donations.
- We could raise private funding for a project that the committee has agreed rather than ones being pushed by private funders, or it could be placed in a general bond. This should be considered as part of the at strategy review. [ACTION]
- There have been reports of vehicles driving across the grass almost hitting members of the public. This is related to a traveller encampment, which the council is currently taking enforcement action against.
- Parking on the Downs is a continuing issue that needs additional enforcement. How can we request more enforcement? It is not uncommon to see parking on the grass and barbeques damaging the ground.
- Visitors do not know what the byelaws are, we may need an awareness campaign to engage positively alongside better enforcement. The Lord Mayor has asked legal colleagues to talk to us about enforcement options. [ACTION]
- All members were highly concerned about waste levels on the Downs. The Lord Mayor is in contact with the Bristol Waste CEO about this.
- Waste on the Downs is not being recycled, so it is going to landfill. There are no recycling bins on downs. Bristol Waste is unable to hand pick recycling from landfill waste, it is too labour intensive and does not create good quality recyclate. We need recycling bins on the Downs to facilitate that.
- The Downs is an iconic space that needs protecting, it is very disappointing that people are not taking waste home with them. All visitors have a responsibility to do this.
- At every bench you will find bottles, containers, etc. people feel like they can leave rubbish behind. There are already 20 signs about taking litter home that were installed last week at entry points to the downs. Putting signs at bins is too late and encourages dumping.
- We have installed additional bins, but it is still not enough. There are 8 oil drum bins at several points, but they are still overwhelmed. We should consider removing all bins to see what psychological effect this has. The alternative is building bays for recycling, but that will be large, ugly and requires a roadway.
- It is unlikely we can “out bin” this behaviour given the parks team’s efforts so far. The Downs has been bin-free in the past and there was not this level of waste. There are several parks in the city with no bins. Any full bin is an invitation to litter. This should be part of the strategic review and waste funding could be picked out of the finances. [ACTION]
- For context there has been an average 40% increase in park usage across the city during lockdown. There are similar issues in Castle Park. We may need to have a pause after lockdown is lifted, then do a review about taking waste home.



9 Wildlife Project Education Programme

The committee welcomed Mandy Leivers (Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager) back from furlough. She gave an update on the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project as there new members now on the committee.

- The Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project started in 1999 and is a partnership of Downs Committee, Bristol City Council, Merchant Venturers, Bristol Zoo, Natural England, University of Bristol, The Forestry Commission and The National Trust. The project has three roles: wildlife surveying and monitoring; habitat management; education and community engagement. The Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager and the seasonal Avon Gorge and Downs Learning and Engagement Officer roles are funded by Downs Committee and Bristol Zoo. Mandy is grateful to Downs Committee for their continued support.
- Since the education programme began in 2001, over 127,000 people have participated. The project has a public programme of events (walks, talks, courses, family and children's events); school groups are taught between Easter and October; playschemes visit for education sessions in the summer holidays; and we have run many longer-term community projects that engage with under-represented groups. Many of the latter are part of the 'Your Downs' initiative (run in conjunction with the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge and the Downs Supervisor) which is about enabling a wider audience to visit, learn about and enjoy the special wildlife of the Downs and Avon Gorge.
- We recruited a new engagement officer who started end of May, training has been intensive. We're also working hard to rebuild our volunteer team.
- 500 children are coming back to the Downs for school education sessions this summer, we have had to start slowly due to covid restrictions. This includes social distancing, enhanced cleaning, etc. The autumn term booking is going well, and schools are very keen to get involved.
- Events for 2020 were cancelled but we are now planning ones for this autumn.
- We are also starting a 'Your Downs' project, Nature in the Streets, for young people with mental ill-health. We are working with mental health charity Off the Record and FOD+AG to run the project which focuses on nature connection and wellbeing.
- The Downs is part of the 'Wastes and Strays' project to promote urban green spaces. This includes a researcher collecting oral history about the Downs, also a 'poet in residence' who is leading poetry events to celebrate the Downs.
- The integration of 4 new Bagot Goats was successful and was picked up by ITV news, with lots of sharing across social media.
- Some of the information panels on the Downs are in poor condition and some are vandalised, that will need looking at with the appropriate funding.

Discussion notes:

- The committee would welcome an update on the Wastes and Strays project. It is a comparative study on 4 urban green spaces so is likely to provide good learning opportunities. POR was involved in Phase 1 a couple of years back and could draft a report. [ACTION].



- The committee welcomed the return of the education project. The partnership with FOD+AG shows how important voluntary groups are for the welfare of the Downs.
- Visiting the Downs is very beneficial for all. A key part of the education strategy is to include groups that do not usually visit the Downs. Inclusion of under-represented groups could be part of the governance review.
- Members thanked Ben Skuse and his team for their help restoring areas for educational use.

1 Events Report

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Stefan Edwards introduced the report and summarised it for everyone. Ben Skuse requested contact details for Adventure Cinema to discuss logistics [ACTION].

1 Finance Update

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Kevin Jay introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- There are significant financial deficits in the report, the biggest impacts being the effect of covid on event management and the Judicial Review costs. The additional toilet maintenance is also a cost pressure.
- This is the first time that BCC will have to underwrite losses for the Downs. The financial relationship between BCC and the Downs Committee will be a significant part of the governance review.

Discussion notes:

- If BCC has received funding from central government for covid expenditure, Downs Committee should get their proportion. It was confirmed that there was funding for parks related to toilets and litter. Finance officers should be sure that the credit has gone into DC. [ACTION]
- Downs Committee pays for half of Mandy Leivers' employment cost so will also need to make sure it has received the appropriate furlough funding. [ACTION]

1 Any Other Business

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Closure of Parry's Lane

- The Lord Mayor confirmed that he has been approached by Mayor's Office concerning the ongoing issue of Vehicle Dwellers on the Downs, which has also garnered much public interest.
- The Mayor's Office has suggested some options that have been discussed before at this committee. The two main suggestions are around changing parking regulations and the closure and rewilding of Parry's Lane. Local interest groups have shown support for both options.



- The Mayor's Office has now asked whether Downs Committee would accept responsibility for closing and rewilding Parry's Lane. The Lord Mayor has responded that closing a road is a matter for BCC highways and that Downs Committee will need to see a detailed plan and costings. The LM is asking for an in-principle agreement from DC.

Discussion Notes:

- This may cause a “squeezing balloon” effect, where closing Parry's Lane results in the vehicle dwellers moving to other roads bordering the downs. Taking on another piece of land is ok in principle but DC needs to look at the implications of closure.
- The arguments for closing the road are sound, but consider counter arguments. Vehicle dwelling is a city-wide issue. Vehicle dwellers have come to this committee before with sympathetic views. We have said in the DC position statement that we need a strategy for where these people go. OK with the principle of closure but do not want to push the problem across the city.
- The LM understands that this is a smaller element of a much bigger issue, but that the road closure itself is the ask today.
- It was confirmed that the DC position statement recommended that the administration investigate alternative locations for vehicle dwellers.
- While highways own the road itself, they do not own the land underneath it, which should revert to BCC and the Downs Committee once the road is removed. The LM and MO will continue communicate with highways on this.

RESOLVED Subject to finance and a detailed plan, the committee approve the in-principle closure and rewilding of Parry's Lane.

Cllr Paula O'Rourke confirmed that she does not support the closure of Parry's Lane unless there is alternative site provision.

1 Date of Next Meeting

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The next meeting is scheduled for 20 September 2020 at City Hall.

1 Terms of Reference

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The Lord Mayor introduced this report, which is a Terms of Reference to review the governance and operations of the Downs Committee.

- Officers have been very supportive of this initiative, providing legal input from BCC and agreeing resources to carry this review out.
- It asks for a review of our overall strategy, what we want to achieve on the Downs, also nuts and bolts of how the committee works, including finance and delegation.



- The committee is asked to approve the scope of this review and members are asked to volunteer for a working group.

Discussion notes:

- In the public engagement part of the review, how much of this is a consultation or participation exercise? There are a few options which will need to be discussed with the consultation team at BCC. We could publish documents for comments and/or have meetings with Downs interest groups for a guided discussion. We also want to involve people outside of the committee in the management of the Downs where possible.
- It is right that we talk to interest groups that currently exist, but how do we connect with users that are not in these organisations? This could be a big opportunity for locals to think about how the Downs is used in future.
- Members that want to be on the working group should email the clerk.
- We also need a review of the recent judicial review; it justifies a full management report. The Lord Mayor has spoken to BCC legal and requested this, we are waiting on a possible meeting date. It is likely to be a closed session as it will contain privileged advice.
- There is a considerable amount of public interest in this report so it would be helpful if we are able to hold a closed session with a public report after. This would need to be discussed carefully with legal colleagues.

RESOLVED Terms of Reference for the governance review are APPROVED.

1 Downs Football League Fees

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RESOLVED the Downs and University Football fees will remain at 2020 levels.

Meeting ended at 1.30 pm

CHAIR _____

