

Downs for People public forum statement: information, engagement and governance

I Summary

1.1 *Downs for People (DfP)* is drawing attention – yet again – to the Committee’s deplorable lack of transparency and accountability. The Committee has again refused to provide information relating to our court case. Our requests for information on, and involvement in, the review of Downs strategy and governance have been ignored. The review is being conducted behind closed doors. We sought a meeting with the Society of Merchant Venturers, which was also refused.

1.2 This is not how a statutory body should behave, and changes must be made. We have asked the City Council to conduct an internal review of the refusals to provide information on our court case; we are calling on the Society of Merchant Venturers to give Clifton Down to the city; and we want this Committee to be replaced by one that is fit for purpose.

II Background

Information on court case.

2.1 *DfP* made formal requests under the Environment Information Regulations 2004 on 27 September and 8 November last year. The Lord Mayor wrote on 14 December refusing information for the second time. We have asked the City Council to conduct an internal review, a necessary step before referral to the Information Commissioner. We do not accept the reasons given for refusal. ***We would remind the Committee that the regulations anyway specify the minimum that must be disclosed, not the maximum the Committee can reveal if they wish.*** Council tax payers have a right to know how much of their money was squandered on a hopeless court case, and why.

Review of Downs strategy and governance

2.2 *DfP* pointed out in June last year that a review of the Downs Committee was needed. We asked to be involved. We were encouraged when a wide-ranging review of Downs strategy and governance was announced at the beginning of July. The Lord Mayor held a meeting with stakeholders in October, focusing on criteria for decision-making and funding. *DfP* submitted a paper which also addressed governance issues: we suggested there should be a separate session or working group on these. We also asked for information on how the review would progress and on membership of the review group. These requests were ignored.

2.3 The Committee has not provided any information on the progress of the review. We know there was a meeting of the review group on 13 December but no minutes have been published. The Downs Committee is becoming ever more secretive: in the past it published minutes of all its sub-groups.

Meeting with the Society of Merchant Venturers

2.4 We sought a meeting earlier this month with the Society of Merchant Venturers, which has a critical role to play in the reform of governance. The issues we sought to discuss included the ownership of the Downs; the Society's financial contributions; Downs Act amendments; and Merchant Venturer representation on the Downs Committee. Our request for a meeting was refused.

The way ahead

2.5 These repeated refusals to engage will not do. The Downs Committee is unfit for purpose and major changes are needed urgently. We can see no reason for the Merchant Venturers' continuing involvement. They have been exercising power without responsibility for too long. We are calling on them to give Clifton Down to the city, with a significant financial dowry, especially if the City Council assumes the Merchant Venturers' responsibility for the rockfaces. This dowry should also reflect the lack of past financial contributions, and the future cost of maintaining Clifton Down.

2.6 As for the Committee, in our paper in October we pointed out that:

"A Downs Committee created today would be very different. Its detailed composition would not be set out in statute, to allow future flexibility. There might instead be a provision whereby a Downs Committee would be established with its composition decided by Bristol City Council, after public consultation.

A committee set up today would have user and expert representation. Its chair would be chosen by open competition for their interest and competence. The chair would stay in post for at least three years and a maximum of six."

We urge the Committee to resolve to make these changes.

Downs for People, 20 January 2022