

Downs Committee Statement March 21st 2022 Cllr Christine Townsend - Opinion

As stated in January this committee must be served by the Nolan Principles, current composition prevents this. The Society of Merchant Venturers is an unincorporated, undemocratic, invite only, private members' club whose position derives from ongoing environmental extraction and the historic horror of the TST that saw human exploitation, kidnap and murder for private gain. The legacy of the TST is structuralised throughout present day society and personified in Merchant Venturer presence on this committee. Despite Freed claiming that the Merchant Venturers will follow the Nolan Principles, the statement he then read out in January ran contrary to each and every one of them: -

Selflessness – Fighting members of the public in a prolonged, unwinnable judicial review, funded by the public purse to 'save face' is not in the public interest.

Integrity – Merchant Venturers are on this committee by way of this undemocratic, unaccountable private members club and, by definition, are here to represent and promote that organisation's interests

Objectivity – Freed attempts to blame Downs for People for the cost of the judicial review. But it was the Merchant Venturer dominated sub of the Downs Committee, not Downs for People, that prolonged the case even though they will have known it was hopeless. They did not concede until they were almost on the steps of the courtroom. Downs for People were pursuing the case in the public interest to safeguard the Downs, mainly at their own expense.

Accountability – This committee has repeatedly failed to engage with scrutiny from members of the public, ignored email requests for information and has to date failed to make public the amount of public money wasted attempting to fight an unwinnable judicial review. As I stand here as a democratically elected representative there remains zero public information about the total sum wasted on this failed venture.

Openness – it is not acceptable that members of the public are needing to resort to making Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulation requests to get basic information. It was necessary for Downs for People to get a disclosure order via the court to have sight of the 20 year licence they were challenging, the judge was unimpressed with the Committee's behaviour. Needing to approach the Information Commissioner to access requested information is shameful and the antithesis of the Nolan Principles.

Honesty – Freed's statement references 'the court case' the process was a judicial review – accurate language use matters. Freed referred to the history of the Downs and claims that 'at a time when the others were making a fortune out of developing houses all around it....they bought the land specifically to stop that from happening' This statement is factually incorrect, the Merchant Venturers purchased the land in the 17th century and sold leases for development pocketing the money and quarried large parts for private capital gain. The idea that Merchant Venturers act in a manner that benefits anyone other than themselves is ludicrous and is demonstrated in other aspects of their 'work'. The public words of their ex-head teacher John Whitehead stated that the instinct of the Merchant Venturers is '**self-preservation**' days after the felling of their statue mascot the enslaver Edward Colston.

Leadership – Whilst Freed promoted historical inaccuracies, myths about the history of the involvement of the organisation with the Downs and private profit made from it, described a judicial review as a 'court case' the rest of the Merchant Venturers sat back silent, this is not leadership this is complicity.

Democracy and the Nolan Principles are not and cannot be served whilst the Merchant Venturers sit on this, or any other council committee. Any elected representative claiming otherwise are themselves failing to adhere to those principles.