

Downs Management Report – Downs Committee 28th Jun 2022

Ben Skuse, Area Parks Supervisor

Mid-summer update on the Downs

Up to now everything looks lush and bright green and verdant. The downside to this beautiful scene is the constant mowing that is required to keep the grass in check as we move through this period of peak grass growth. The trees and vegetation being in full leaf make finding all 9 goats on our daily checks sometimes a lengthier job than in previous months. But all 9 animals remain well, loving having so much choice in what to eat no doubt.

The team were nervous about the potential for litter “Armageddon” over the extra bank holidays for the Queens Jubilee, but rainy weather saved us from this prospect. However, the guys still worked hard for 4 days straight to keep the Downs looking tidy over this period.

It is crucial during May that we get our football pitch renovations completed to allow maximum time for the grass seed and new soil to bed in prior to the hotter weather and upcoming new season. I am pleased to report that all 25 pitches have had new topsoil added and grass seed put down.

In terms of events, the Downs 22 programme is in full swing. Since the last meeting in March, we have welcomed onto the Downs;

Funderworld

Foodies Festival

Bristol Comedy Garden

Bristol Race for Life

Funderworld and Foodies both took place on the heavily damaged Water Tower site. As such it is always touch and go for us to get the ground fit in time. Both events were able to work with the conditions just. However, my position which I have stated already previously, remains that the longer term plan to construct a purpose built roadway and embedded surfacing into parts of this area is the optimal plan now in terms of having further events on this area. We have to spend ever increasing amounts of money and time on this site every year and the site looks unsightly for longer and longer periods of time in the year. This is not a good outcome for Downs users who want to use this area at other times during the year. On the plus side, we have nothing else scheduled on this piece of ground now until Funderworld 23. So, we have an extended period of time in which to take remedial action to improve things.

At the time of writing, I am just scheduling the site hand over processes with the organisers of Bristol Comedy Garden, Bristol race for life and the upcoming Born Free exhibition. Barring biblical rainfall periods during these events I am not envisaging any issues with significant ground damage.

Not really on the list of annually recurring Downs events, but still worth a mention, on May 18th, as some members who were in attendance know, we held a very successful and well attended Downs Commoners event. With thanks to the Society of Merchant Venturers, Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project, FODAG, Bristol University, grazing rights are preserved on the Downs for another period of time.

Some members may have noticed a wooden bin store has been installed on a small piece of hard standing area (that is technically Downs land) outside the Spire hospital. This allows for Bristol Waste Company street cleaners to have a place to store collected bags and is a solution to them piling them up around our Thomas Memorial plant beds in the unsightly way that used to happen.

I want to finish by speaking about the declared ecological emergency and some of the measures that Bristol Parks Dept have been asked to implement to try to mitigate some of the worst effects of a changing climate on our parks and green spaces within the city.

At the Downs last year, it was decided to trial leaving unmown strips of verge alongside Westbury Rd for the whole summer. Leaving grass unmown in this way does look to some eyes unkempt, but provides more habitat and food source for invertebrates and birds. Having these unmown strips underneath the canopy line of trees also promotes tree health due to better water retention in the ground underneath them.

Looking back at last year and speaking with my team it was agreed that leaving these areas unmown did not cause us any maintenance issues, were not particularly unsightly due to litter entrapment, and of course we will take the benefits of time saved and less fuel use!

As such, this year we have extended the scheme to encompass both sides of Westbury Rd all the way from the Spire Hospital across the White Tree roundabout and down to where the Downs stops at Badminton school. Similarly, we are experimenting with the plant bed in the middle of the White Tree roundabout this summer. The history of this bed has seen the full range of BCC Parks planting schemes over the years. A transition through traditional ornamental bedding, thousands of individual bedding plants with very little benefit to pollinators, laboriously planted then removed every year, through to more herbaceous and less labour intensive plants. Now against the backdrop of how we get more habitat for nature into our green spaces, we are leaving this bed to colonise naturally this year. It comprises the remainder of the herbaceous plants from planting in previous years with the addition of naturalised plants that have self-seeded and provide colour along with grasses.

This is very much an experiment and can be changed back next year if people want something more formal, however this is very much in line with measures taken across the city in parks and along highways, to promote spaces and food sources for invertebrates and then animals higher up the food chain such as birds. We do intend to continue grass mowing on this roundabout for reasons of road safety and will continue to monitor for the rest of this summer to gather information that can be used next year before any decision to formalise this arrangement.

As stated previously, we can reverse this change and go back to a different regime if desired. But I personally believe that these sorts of changes to maintenance regimes are the things that people need to get used to seeing in parks as part of our response to the climate emergency declared by Bristol City Council and others.