

## **Questions**

**Mark CD Ashdown**

At Agenda item 6 - ACTION TRACKER – FOR DOWNS COMMITTEE 19 September 2022, it states at the update on the planning application for the Sea Walls Café that the deadline for completion for the holding action relating to the application to the Secretary of State under section 5 (1) of the Localism Act will be completed by 19 September 2022.

**Question 1:** Has a response been received from the Secretary of State?

**Question 2:** If so, what was the response?

## Statements

### **Chris Harries**

I write as a Stoke Bishop resident to convey the views of my wife and myself on the recent 'Forwards Bristol' ('Forwards' where?) Festival recently sponsored by the Downs Committee at the Sea Walls end of Bristol Downs. This year the concert lasted for two days (one day is quite enough for those of us with no choice but to have it foisted upon us), and we feel strongly that the time has come for some other format for the occasion, in another location, to be found.

We live in Stoke Bishop village, but the hours of noise were most unpleasantly and objectionably intrusive. What justification can there be for two days of noise at such a level? And why should the lives of those of us in proximity to the event continue to be affected like this? We ourselves are perhaps fortunate not to be immediately adjacent to the site and for our lives not therefore to be reduced to worse wretchedness.

By what right does the Committee inflict such an ordeal on everyone living on the Downs perimeter? It is a rotten thing to do. The least that could be done is to turn the sound down: if we can hear it where we live then surely the people who have paid to listen to it, and who are right next to it can have no problem doing so.

It is perfectly obvious - but clearly not understood by the Committee - that the centre of a city surrounded by urban development is no place for a pop concert; and the Committee must realise that the disturbance which it is inflicting on the Bristol residents most affected has gone on for too long. As our Council representatives have made clear, it is widely hated: what is the Committee proposing to do to remove it? Why should other sites not share the 'Forwards' experience with us, for example?

Again, by what right does the Downs Committee do this to us? It behaves as though it is quite untroubled by the noise pollution it is creating. Is it right that that should be so? These questions deserve an answer.

## **Rob Acton-Campbell**

Statement to Downs Committee Wed 19th October 2022

As a member of the Parks Forum Committee, and more recently Chair of Trustees for the Charity Your Park Bristol and Bath, I have been involved as a volunteer in park issues for many years and am keen to see all parks across the City, including the Downs well managed. I hope my comments below will be helpful, these are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisations I volunteer with.

### Governance Proposals

It seems to me that Option C is really 'no change' in the governance of the Downs. The proposed TrustCo would not have any say in what happens on the Downs, it would be advisory only. This is not a proposal to change the governance, it is a proposal to set up an additional body with a fundraising and consultation role but no decision making powers over the Downs.

There is a suggestion of an MOU between TrustCo and the Downs Committee, given that the "The Downs Committee is not a legal personality and does not possess a bank account" can it sign an MOU? Even if it could, the relationship between the Committee would need managing and would add the complexity of managing the Downs. If it were a charity, this new body would have a team of trustees, who would these be? How would they work with the Committee. How would disagreements be managed?

Considering the fundraising role, this new body could not make grants to the 'Downs Committee' as indicated by figure 1 - the Committee do not have a bank account. As correctly stated in Appendix 4, the funds would have to be passed to BCC. Alternatively, TrustCo could pay for works or projects directly.

There are already a number of organisations that could raise money for projects on the Downs such as Your Park Bristol & Bath, Avon Wildlife Trust, Sustrans and of course Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FODAG). Fundraising on any scale needs a lot of work, beyond the scope of volunteers if it is to be ongoing rather than for specific one-off projects. To employ fundraisers the organisation would need to first raise funds to cover its own costs. Any fundraising would be in competition with those other organisations mentioned above as well as all the other causes that are currently crying out for funds and volunteers to help people with the cost of living crisis etc. Creation of a new fundraising body is unnecessary; the Downs Committee should work with existing organisations if it identifies projects that need additional funding.

I hope that this process will lead to an opportunity for further discussions between the Committee and FODAG as well as the other organisations mentioned above. Fundraising opportunities should be explored that can benefit parks across the City as well as specifically the Downs.

Turning to the proposed consultation role, which I note is not mentioned in figure one. In the body of the proposal it states 'TrustCo could also become an additional conduit for engagement with the wider community and stakeholder groups' However, in Appendix 4 the proposed items of the TrustCo MOU make this proposed role clearer. Half of the bullet points refer to this consultation role, with the first one being the key "Will agree to become the principal liaison group for all those local parties with an interest in the Downs, for the benefit of the Downs (this will be in addition to the formal consultation run by the Downs Committee)".

Thus it appears that the proposal is for any concerns over the management of the Downs to be raised with TrustCo in the first instance, rather than directly with the Downs Committee. This simply will not work. People and organisations will want the opportunity to raise issues with those with the power to make decisions, not some intermediate body. It would also lead to a situation where the Downs Committee was not hearing the voices of local people directly. Surely a main function of the Committee is to hear these views, otherwise why not abolish the Committee and manage the Downs in the same way as other green spaces in Bristol.

#### Downs Coordination Role Proposal

As I understand it, this proposal is for an additional admin role within the City Council. It is said that it would have to be self-funding, but there is nothing to say how this would be achieved. Even if the funding came from the Downs Committee budget, ultimately this means it comes from the Council budget as they have to meet any shortfalls. At a time when the Council is facing unprecedented budget cuts it is totally unrealistic to expect it to fund an additional role to support the Downs Committee.

Supporting the Downs Committee already takes a proportion of the Council budget in officer time to prepare and submit reports as well as attendance at the meetings. This is a level of governance that is not in place for other parks & green spaces across the City; as a result the management of the Downs already costs more than other spaces, this proposal will increase that cost still further - it should not be pursued. The Committee should be looking to reduce costs not to increase them.



## **Report of the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.**

**October 19<sup>th</sup> 2022**

FOD+AG welcomes the opportunity to update the Downs committee on our most recent events and some of the activities planned for the coming weeks.

We remain committed to our core values to represent fairly all legitimate users of the Downs and to support the City Council and the Downs Committee in the good governance of the Downs.

The Friends group welcomes the 'Downs Vision' document and the proposals committee are asked to approve. We look forward to further details but provisionally we are keen to offer our support. Some of the concerns raised by FODAG and others in the past have been acknowledged in the paper.

FOD+AG are in the process of reviewing its own processes. In particular we are revising our current Action Plan. The plan which has been in place for several years details our activities and future plans and measures progress but it is not entirely suitable for a volunteer organisation. The new plan will help us to better meet our aspirations and obligations for the future. The revised plan will include a brand new initiative that will attempt to engage routine users of the downs to provide reports on 'observations' during regular recreational use of the Downs, be it jogging, walking or just exercising the dog. The intent is to divide the Downs into several zones and recruit monitors from amongst our members. Monitors could look out for any unusual activity, vandalism, dumped rubbish or damaged trees within their nominated zone. No specialist skills are required and urgent observations/photographs can be emailed directly to a FOD+AG contact point.

On one of the hottest evenings in August over sixty FOD+AG members gathered near the Downs café to enjoy a social get together. Members were able to take a guided walk and learn more about local trees before returning for welcomed refreshments and a chance to meet and mingle. The evening was notable for the many hundreds of our citizens simply enjoying the Downs as they should be enjoyed.

In August FOD+AG were pleased to join members of the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Steering Group. Signatories to the Group include Bristol City Council, Bristol Zoo Gardens, Natural England, The Botanic Gardens, The Society of the Merchant Venturers, Downs Committee, University of Bristol, Bristol Zoological Society, National Trust and Forestry England. Notably the Downs committee as one of the principal signatories to the project did not send a representative. Traditionally Downs committee members from both the Council and the MV would attend.

The Project was launched in 1999 to secure the outstanding wildlife interest of the Avon Gorge and the Downs, and to raise awareness and understanding of this unique location. Primarily the group has three roles, Wildlife surveying and monitoring. Habitat Management, and Education.

Recently due to Covid restrictions and key personnel changes within the various organisations the important work of the group has struggled to meet all its commitments.

The purpose of the meeting was to re-establish the roles of the key players and seek to rejuvenate the Project.

Actions from the meeting included {a} To advertise without delay the post of Education Officer and {b} Invite the respective heads of the key organisations to a recommitment meeting.

FODAG are pleased to see that Downs Committee representatives have now been appointed to the Steering Group.

At the end of September FOD+AG volunteers kicked off a new season clearing litter and debris from the less accessible areas of the Downs and Gorge. This important work helps make Clifton and Durdham Downs a safe and attractive place for people and wildlife to share and enjoy.

FODAG are also working on a fresh initiative targeting local schools and young people's institutions including a local Cub group to get involved in the better management of litter on the Downs. Part of the initiative will be a competition to design a poster that can be produced for strategic location around the Downs.

Staying on the litter theme FODAG has been awarded a financial sum in a national community clean up competition which is part of the Growing a Better Future initiative and is sponsored by Foresters Finance. A condition of the award is that we should provide an opportunity for members of the company to spend time engaged in one of our regular activities. This will be accomplished by inviting them to one of our deep litter projects and is scheduled for the end of October.

Following a further financial award secured by FOD+AG we have decided to invest the money in revamping the flower beds at the Reverend Urijah Rees Thomas Memorial at the top of Whiteladies Road. In 2019 in a joint venture with Redland & Cotham Amenities Society FOD+AG undertook a renovation and replanting of the redundant flower beds. Work started today {19<sup>th</sup> October} Volunteers will underplant mainly with bulbs utilising Crocus and Muscari (grape hyacinth).

Robert Westlake

Chair

Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge

## BRISTOL DOWNS FOOTBALL LEAGUE (the League)

- Statement as of October 2022

Downs Committee Meeting, Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2022

### Point 8 of the Agenda

The League finished last season (2021/22) with 40 teams and despite some Covid restrictions and disruption throughout the season all matches were completed in good time.

We had hoped to start this season (2022/23) with the same number of teams as last season but a last-minute withdrawal of one team meant that we started with 39. We are well into this season with most teams having already played 5 matches each (both League and Cup).

Although most teams have plenty of Registered players, availability is still an issue and some teams do struggle to consistently have 14 players per week - one of our 4 team clubs who require 56 players per week have already used over 90 players this season.

As previously mentioned, participation in Saturday afternoon sport, including football is certainly on the decline which includes players, administrators, and referees. The League does seem to be fairing better than other Leagues in this connection, which is in part because of the unique nature of the League as we play at the same venue each week.

Our good working relationship with the Ranger and his team has enabled us to be very flexible on the pitches we use especially if the weather has been poor.

We have established a working group titled 'Future Proofing Football on the Downs' to look at ways to sustain the League going forward.

Owen Dow, Secretary

18<sup>th</sup> October 2022

# DOWNS FOR PEOPLE

*For ever unenclosed, for all to enjoy*

Downs Committee meeting 19 October 2022

## Public forum statement on governance proposals

### Summary

The Committee's refusal to collaborate and consult means that the main proposals in this review need a 'reality check'. It is not clear that the creation of TrustCo is feasible, nor, if it were, how that would improve the Committee's accountability. It would make a complicated, 'top heavy' structure even more complex. ***There needs to be consultation with a range of stakeholders about this.*** Nor is it clear how a Downs Executive Co-ordinator post could be self-financing or self-standing.

The procedural changes that are suggested are welcome but would do little to address the Committee's main problems. It is unlikely the changes would last long: the Committee has already abandoned principles it adopted in June. The Committee's short memory is also reflected in its inaccurate account of the conduct of this review.

As well as consulting stakeholders, the Committee should review the membership of its Governance Task Group, to include more stakeholders and to increase its skill set.

### Detail

#### *The recommendations*

1. Our comments on individual recommendations are as follows:

**Recommendation 1: create TrustCo with wide-ranging executive responsibilities.** Unclear how this complicated arrangement would work, despite the diagram and detailed drafts. An example of something similar succeeding in practice would help. It would make the Downs Committee even more remote.

**Recommendation 2: discussions with FODAG followed by proposals to Committee.** FODAG is an excellent organisation, but a Friends group would not usually take on major executive responsibilities. It is for FODAG to decide whether it wishes to do so. If so, other stakeholders may not want FODAG to represent them. ***There should be consultation before further proposals are put to the Committee.***

**Recommendation 3: sub-groups to adopt a project reporting approach.**  
Good idea.

**Recommendation 4: continuity of membership and SMV member selection.** Welcome attempts to improve continuity. The SMV proposed selection procedure seems unlikely to



improve geographical representation or competence: it is what we understood happened anyway.

**Recommendation 5: a six year term of office, to be extended only in exceptional circumstances, with the agreement of the whole committee.** Long overdue reform.

**Recommendation 6: a more informal approach to public forum, on a trial basis.** Welcome. Not clear why engagement should be limited to the Chair.

**Recommendation 7: concept of Downs Executive Co-ordinator role.** Sensible to provide the Committee with more support and to identify a lead officer in BCC. A single self-financing and self-standing post seems unlikely: more realistic to give responsibility to an existing team.

### *Abandoned principles*

2. In June, as Appendix 2 to the paper records, the Committee adopted principles including a commitment to openness and involvement (principle 6). It promised “to ensure that stakeholders (ie those who live, work and operate on and around the Downs) and the wider public) have the best opportunities to understand, contribute to and challenge the decision-making process. Decisions will be taken in public unless there are legal or commercial reasons for information to be withheld”.

3. Ways in which the conduct of this review has ignored this principle include;

- refusal to engage with interested groups on governance issues: governance not covered at October 2021 meeting; request for separate meeting ignored; request from ten groups for external membership on working group from June 2022 ignored ;
- refusal to reveal participants in the working group until now:
- March discussion of progress on strategy and governance review held in private;
- allowing only the five day minimum period for consultation on the principles and work plan before the June meeting (and not achieving even that at other times);
- failure to consult widely on the current proposals;
- refusal to release governance paper prepared for 19 September until 11 October, the latest date for publication of papers for this meeting under the statutory rules. There is nothing in the rules to prevent earlier publication, indeed this is implicitly encouraged.

### *Misrepresentation of conduct of review*

4. The summary of work to date on the first page of the paper (page 15 of the bundle of Committee papers) is inaccurate: it exaggerates both the amount of work done on governance and the amount of stakeholder involvement. The Committee embarked on a ‘**Strategy and Governance Review**’ in 2021, with the focus on strategy, not governance. Presumably it set up a task and finish group to cover both subjects, not just governance, as the paper suggests. The engagement meeting focused on three strategic issues, not governance. Similarly the survey to which there were 1800 responses covered only strategic issues: as the paper notes, there was a short supplementary survey on governance issues which many people failed to spot. There were fewer than a thousand responses to this.

## Way ahead

5. To ensure its future proposals are more practical, the Committee needs to consult a wide range of stakeholders on these ideas and appoint ‘outsiders’ to its task and finish group.

*Downs for People*

*18 October 2022*