

Statements

DOWNNS FOR PEOPLE

For ever unenclosed, for all to enjoy.

Public forum statement: Clifton Down Wildflower Meadow

Summary

Downns for People is concerned that this proposal is going ahead without any consultation or proper assessment. It is contrary to the Committee's statutory recreation remit and interferes with people's right of access on foot to common land. It may be challenged in the courts. The Committee needs to draw up a recreation strategy against which conservation and other proposals can be assessed. Any signage should reflect the history of the site and its surroundings accurately. Restoring the zoo's North car park to amenity use would make a greater contribution to tackling the climate and ecological emergencies.

Background

1. This proposal was presented in a very late paper to the Committee's October meeting. *Downns for People* expressed its dismay immediately in an email to the Lord Mayor and then in a statement to the Committee's meeting in November (relevant extract annexed).
2. The plan is going ahead without any consideration of the impact on those – including organised school groups – who have been using the site for recreation. The zoo has made almost no use of it for over three years and parking had anyway reduced to a few hours on only 22 days a year before that. This proposal will prevent ball games and constrain walkers for much longer periods.
3. There has been no consultation with FODAG or anyone else. The papers for the meeting were not published in time for even the usual five working days consideration. Five days is anyway too short a time for residents' organisations and other members' organisations to form a view.
4. *Downns for People* has suggested repeatedly that the Committee should produce a recreation strategy. It needs that and its promised conservation plan before limiting the recreational use of this key site. The adjacent areas of the Downs are already left unmown. There are extensive wildlife meadows on the opposite side of Ladies Mile. It is hard to reconcile this with the Committee's declared vision of: "An open downland that is protected forever for the wellbeing and enjoyment of the people of Bristol".
5. *Downns for People*, FODAG and others have repeatedly suggested restoring the North car park to amenity use.

Signage

6. It would not be right for Bristol City Council and the Downs Committee to claim credit for restoring this site when they caused the damage. They licensed zoo parking for over fifty years despite annual ecological reports from 2006 about the damage being done. It would also be curious to draw attention to the work of the West Bristol Climate Action Group without mentioning the very much larger wildlife meadows created years ago on the other side of Ladies Mile as part of the

Downs and Avon Gorge Wildlife Project. This is already described on an attractive interpretation board.

Annex: extract from DfP's public forum statement, November 2022

Summary

To avoid another legal challenge, the Downs Committee needs to give more thought to the future use of the zoo's car parks. The Committee must act in accordance with its statutory remit: to keep the Downs open and unenclosed for the public resort and recreation of the people of Bristol. The proposals for both the Ladies Mile site and the North car park are contrary to this remit. The Ladies Mile proposals would reduce the recreational value of the site, while those for the North car park are mainly intended to raise money. Both sites should be maintained as recreational assets, safeguarded in a recreation plan for the Downs as a whole.

Detail

I: the Ladies Mile site

Value for recreation

1. The area off Ladies Mile used for zoo parking is one of the best parts of the Downs for informal recreation. Flat, away from the busiest roads, and with fine views, it has a distinct identity and feels self-contained. It is a perfect place for ball games and picnicking, safely accessed via the path from the pedestrian crossing in front of the zoo. It is criss-crossed by popular walking routes from which dogs and small children can stray at will.
2. The zoo's occupation of the site limited its use at peak times for fifty years. There has been very little parking for the past three years and it has been a joy to see how people have reclaimed the site. It is regularly used by school groups for games during the week and is well used by others too.

Impact of the wildflower meadow proposals

3. Downs for People (DfP) supports repairing the damage that zoo parking has done, as described in the annual ecological monitoring reports. But this must not reduce the recreational value of the land. **The suggestion that grass should be left long to deter motor traffic is unacceptable: this would also prevent ball games, picnicking, walking and other recreational uses.** Wildflower meadows can themselves be an attractive recreational asset, but this is not the place for them if accompanied by long grass. **The Downs must be left open: using vegetation as a barrier is as unlawful as using cars.** Extensive areas of the Downs have already been appropriated for meadows to which access is limited, including land on the opposite side of Ladies Mile. It is arguable that this has already gone too far. (See para 8 below).

Deterring motor traffic

4. There are plenty of techniques for preventing motor vehicles entering land without denying pedestrian access. Strategically placed logs and stones are effective. On the zoo parking site, the Committee could start by removing the gravelled entrances that make access easier.

Susan Carter



Statement of the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

February 2023

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 users of the Downs and to support the City Council and the Downs Committee in the good governance of the Downs.

Since the November meeting representatives of FODAG have met with their opposite numbers on the Downs Committee Task & Finish Group. The purpose was to agree a partnering arrangement designed to improve the future governance of the Downs. FODAG are pleased to report that discussions have been fruitful and are close to concluding. A draft Memo of Understanding has been agreed. FODAG are in the process of inviting individuals, organisations and others with an interest in the future management of the Downs to a symposium to explain the partnering arrangement and to listen to views and answer any questions. Following further consultation additional amendments to the MoU may be required.

Members may recall from the last meeting an item of Health & Safety relating to the terraced Viewpoint in the corner of the goat gully. This is an area heavily used by visitors and more formally for invited educational groups. The problem relates mainly to unsafe surfaces which are eroded and are serious trip hazards. Steps to access the observation area are also in a dangerous condition. In the interests of public safety and in consultation with the North Area Supervisor Ben Skuse FODAG have asked for an independent opinion from a contractor experienced in this type of restoration. We have asked for a specification on how best to improve this area and bring it back to good order. We have also asked the contractor to consider an estimate for such works as might be required. Within reason FODAG will look to secure funding for the project.

FODAG are pleased to report that a scheme to divide the Downs into seven areas and appoint Downs Ambassadors for each of those areas is about to go live. All areas will be covered by our volunteers who will as part of their regular Downs activities report on a regular basis anything of interest or of concern. There will also be a dedicated reporting mechanism to deal with more immediate problems that may present a danger to Downs visitors.

Throughout the winter months our volunteers have delved deep into the far-flung corners of the Downs and Gorge to retrieve deep seated litter. This remains a popular activity which has been helped by a recent grant that allowed us to reequip our teams.

Another of our winter activities gaining in popularity is the annual refurbishment of the dead hedges along Circular Road. Designed to deflect runners away from plant species the hedges require regular maintenance and is completely sustainable.

In December 2023 we were able to hold an AGM. The business of the organisation was quickly concluded and a committee appointed. FODAG members were delighted to welcome the Lord Mayor as our guest speaker.

Earlier this month our members gathered to make a presentation to Mandy Leivers. This was to thank Mandy for her dedicated service to the Downs and for the close working relationship that developed over many years. FODAG commissioned and presented an original piece of art representing some of Mandy's favourite elements of the Downs.

The Committee will be aware of the escalating problem of van and caravan dwellers around the Downs. FODAG in the past has taken a benevolent stance but many members and visitors have raised concerns. To date over sixty units are parked around the Downs and are now settled along Circular Road. We have reports of damage to grass verges, human excrement, exposed propane gas bottles, members feeling intimidated in areas described as 'no-go areas,' wood burning stoves, contravention of smokeless zone regulations as well as illegal parking. The Downs is advertised on websites as a good place for 'stealth parking' Caravans are 'parked up' unoccupied. FODAG have asked for a meeting with the Neighbourhood Enforcement Team to consider options. We acknowledge that essentially this is a Highways issue which is now impacting directly on Downs users. We attest that the situation is no longer sustainable and would urge the Downs Committee to take a more robust stance and seek a long-term solution.

Earlier in the month FODAG responded to numerous complaints from Downs neighbours about illegal night time driving on the Downs. These are drivers who race and skid around the Downs causing huge amounts of damage to the grass. This activity is regular and is well organised through social media and often extends into the small hours.

We understand that in the past drivers have been identified and prosecuted and we would encourage the Downs Committee through its good offices to request a response from the local constabulary. FODAG are planning to leaflet Downs near neighbours suggesting that they call the Police when this activity is witnessed and to record dates and times.

During February FODAG gave a talk to a local scout group, organised well attended Walks for Health and further walks and talks are planned for the coming months.

At the end of February members tidied the flower beds at the Thomas Memorial and we are pleased to report that bulbs planted last year are now in flower.

This year we plan to repaint the famous White Tree.

Robert Westlake
Chair
Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge