

THE DOWNS COMMITTEE

Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act 1861

Minutes of the Downs Committee - 25 April 2023

Present: Cllr Paula O'Rourke, David Freed, Cllr Kye Dudd, Patrick Despard, Jonathon Baker, Mark Burchfield, Cllr Philippa Hulme, Cllr Christine Townsend, Robert Bourns, Cllr Steve Smith

Officers: Jon James (Head of Parks), Stefan Edwards (Events Officer), Anna Stevens, (Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project), Amy Rodwell (Democratic Services Officer)

1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mike Bothamley, Bevis Watts, Cllr Katy Grant, and Cllr Jos Clark.

3. Declarations of Interest

There was none.

4. Chair's Business

The Lord Mayor noted it was her last meeting as Chair of the committee and wanted to make some comments.

'The 'weakest link' for the Downs Committee is the Lord Mayor and I have thought this even more strongly having undertaken the role. It's a difficult role and varied role and there is not a lot of resources to support it. In previous years when I was a member of committee, it feels business as usual and hard to be proactive because someone has to drive it.

I had been on committee before following in footsteps of strong people in role, both Councillors and Merchants, I was able to have clear targets for the past year. There has been some great work by previous Masters and Lord Mayors and I was lucky to have come in when I did. I have reflected on own performance and consider how perception is everything. I wanted to get to the vision, I needed to do 4 things: get an agreement on new governance arrangements, establish a strong ally with FODAG, set up Advisory Panel, and go out and recruit for a Downs Manager. We have achieved all of those 4 things which takes a lot of work going on in the background.

We changed a couple of meeting dates which some people weren't happy about, but it was better to do this to move for progress. Would have been good if we didn't have to change them but there were delays and there would be a better outcome by waiting. In the background we have had 2 task and finish groups on Parking and Infrastructure. We have an interim report today from Parking. Also, there is some really good work going on for the infrastructure T&F. We have done a lot and I am grateful for the support from the Committee thanks to Merchants and Councillors. I will still be on the Committee, so we will have continuity going forwards.'

5. Minutes of the Last Meeting

Resolved; That the minutes of the previous meeting on 28th February 2023 be approved as a correct record.

6. Action Tracker

The action tracker was noted.

7. Matters Arising from the Events & Finance Group

Patrick Despard gave a brief update on the last sub-group meeting highlighting that there were discussions around the pressure on the Committee's finances, specifically staff wages and the rise in utilities costs. It was noted that this was a struggle, but the Committee were heading in the right direction and had good prospects for the future.

8. Public Forum

The following Public Forum questions were received:

1. Mark Ashdown (in person)
2. Andrew Lynch (in person)
3. Bristol Disability Equalities Forum, David Redgwell (in person)
4. South West Transport Network, David Redgwell (in person)
5. Gloucestershire/Somerset Catch the Bus Service Campaign, David Redgwell (in person)

The Chair provided verbal answers to the questions and supplementary questions.

The following Public Forum statements were received and noted by the Committee:

1. Susan Carter, Downs for People
2. David Redgwell, South West Transport Network and Rail future Severnside
3. Robert Westlake, Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge

9. Downs Advisory Panel Update

As part of the Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge Public Forum submission, Robert Westlake covered this item providing an update on the newly established Downs Advisory Panel.

The proposal was for FODAG to lead on the Advisory Panel and would Chair the panel's meetings. Attendees would include Councillors, the Wildlife Project, colleagues from the Council's Parks Team and volunteers. Bristol Zoo would be providing a space and the panel anticipate the first meeting would take place at the end of May/early June, occurring 4-6 times a year going forwards.

Robert Westlake noted that FODAG had been trying to organise restoration works to a viewpoint on the Downs and had arranged for a quotation through the Council's Parks Team which came to a total of £2800. FODAG were looking to raise that funding and thanked the Society of Merchant Ventures for their offer to contribute half of the total cost.

10. Interim Report from the Parking Task & Finish Group

The Lord Mayor briefly introduced the report and noted that this was an interim update; the Task & Finish Group would report back at the Committee again in June.

The Committee would like to introduce parking charges to generate income for maintenance and would like to ensure that citizens parking at the North Car Park are doing so to visit the Downs.

It was noted that there was already a TRO in place for the North Car Park site as it had been used as a car park previously for the Zoo, but colleagues were seeking legal advice on the Committee's proposals for its future.

There was a discussion around van dwellers who were breaching parking regulations on the Downs. The current regulation allows vehicles to park for up to 5 hours and not return within 2 hours, but enforcement of this was difficult. It was noted that this needed a citywide approach, looking at meanwhile sites for van dwellers who would be displaced.

It was noted that this piece of work was ongoing; the Director of Management of Place had been involved in conversations and would provide updates when available.

11. Downs Management Report

The Area Parks Supervisor has sent his apologies for this meeting, so the Downs Management Report was noted.

12. Downs Education Report

Anna Stevens, the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Manager introduced the item.

- It was noted that they have engaged with 670 people in total through various activities though wildlife talks, wildlife walks and workshops with public.
- The team were trying to develop their outreach and would be looking at engagement going forwards trying to reach all areas of the city, not just local schools.

- The short term engagement strategy for the project was shared with the meeting papers.
- The team were working with the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust doing bird surveys in the area and looking at a citizen science project.
- The project were considering charging schools for some activities to cover the costs of equipment, specifically as secondary schools as it can be more expensive.

The Committee raised concerns around charging schools as those in areas of deprivation may be excluded from the project. Parents may not be able to afford to pay for their child to take part so Members would be interested in how the project will mitigate this. It was noted that this was being discussed at Steering Group meetings and that updates could be provided at future Committee meetings.

ACTION: AS to provide an update on the Wildlife project's proposals around charging schools to take part in activities.

13. Events Report

The Events Officer introduced the report and highlighted key points.

- Funderworld has been dealing with challenging weather conditions so had opened the fairground later than expected. The bad weather may have an impact on the ground but the extent of it would not be known until after the event and this would be no fault of the event organisers.
- Forwards Festival would now take place on Friday 1st & Saturday 2nd September.
- There was a new circus provider for 2023.
- There had been no official complaints, but one informal complaint had been received via local councillors. Site Permissions had responded, and no official complaint was made.
- No further events had come forward for 2023 but it was noted that there were events lined up for 2024 and the schedule would be shared at the next meeting.

The Events Officer noted that there had been a request from Bristol Pride asking for the Committee to cover a one off initial cost of £5k to BT for Wi-Fi installation works on the Downs. This would involve dig ducting to run a new cable and colleagues have studied the path that it would need to follow running along a fence. The job would only need to be completed once and would give attractive business case for attracting other events to the site going forwards.

Members raised concerns around the budget which was already in a deficit but agreed that this would be a worthwhile investment for the Committee and therefore, it was:

Resolved; That the spend of £5k for Wi-Fi installation works be approved. (unanimous)

14. Downs Manager Recruitment

The Lord Mayor introduced the item and gave a brief update on the Downs Manager recruitment.

It was noted that huge budget pressures had delayed the progress of this recruitment, but it had been agreed by the Society of Merchant Ventures that they would part fund the role 50/50 with the Council. The role would be part time (2 days a week), fixed term for 1 year.

ACTION: Lord Mayor to share the job description for the Downs Manager with the Committee.

The Lord Mayor shared her thanks to the Society of Merchant Ventures and Stephen Peacock, the Council's Chief Executive, for their support.

15. Finance Report

The Finance Officer has sent his apologies for this meeting, so the Finance Report was noted.

16. Any Other Business

There was none.

17. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled to be held on 12th June 2023, 11am at Merchants' Hall.