

Downs Advisory Panel {DAP}

Report to Downs Committee 18 September 2023

The Panel met on the 1st September at the Zoos Centre for Education.

The Panel has received over thirty communications via the dedicated email and direct telephone line. Predictably most were about ant-social behaviour, the Roma Gypsy situation and van and caravan dwellers. There were also reports of dangerous driving on the Downs, fly tipping, parking on the greensward, inconsiderate joggers, harassment by dogs and one report of youths dressed as Ninja warriors on quad bikes. All were logged and responded to within 48 hours and appropriate advice given.

The Panel discussed four issues for the Downs committee to consider.

1 Unauthorised Commercial Activity on the Downs.

There are currently at least six companies' plus personal trainers advertising on-line outdoor fitness training on Downs land. Currently they operate without any fee for the use of the land and appear to be completely unlicensed, unregulated and unregistered. One company charges £500 per person for a year's membership. Classes of to 60 participants a session have been witnessed.

The argument against fees is that parks are public open spaces and free to use and this is the case for those using the parks for casual play or recreation. However, there is strong case for those wishing to participate in an organised commercial or profitable business {Such as Boot Camps and Personal trainers} to pay an agreed fee, seek permissions and the appropriate licence from the relevant Authority. Other local authorities already have such schemes in place.

It is understood that the City Council Parks Department have considered licencing and fees but is no longer doing so.

Should such a scheme be implemented it would safeguard reputable, qualified and insured training providers and remove cowboy operators providing sub-standard sessions and would balance commercial activity on the Downs. Simply allowing anyone to run a business from the Downs does nothing to safeguard the users of the service or offer anything by way of upkeep of the Downs. A reasonable licence fee would help towards maintenance costs, reinstatement of heavily used areas and avoid the risk to committee should an injury occur.

Research indicates that other Local Authorities are already charging a licence fee with variations between £300 to £1000 per annum Fees are

graduated to reflect the number of participants i.e., a personal trainer operating on a one -to- one basis would pay a reduced fee.

Licence conditions can be imposed on operators to ensure:

- Restricted to specific areas.
- Restrictions on class sizes.
- Ensure that there is no impact on other approved activities or the general public.
- Keeping noise levels to a minimum {especially evenings}
- Ensuring area left clean and tidy.
- Participants to avoid using park benches, Pic-Nic tables, street furniture, and trees etc. as training aids.
- Training providers to provide equipment in good order and repair. Heavy

equipment that could damage the grass surface to be avoided.

- All training providers should have and maintain suitable and appropriate qualifications and accreditation specific to the type of activity and to be suitably insured.
- All trainers to ensure adequate First Aid provision.

The principle for the Downs should be that all training providers who use the Downs for business purposes should do so in a safe and responsible way with due consideration given to land management, conservation and public enjoyment.

The recommendation / advice from the DAP is that: If the City Council is unable to run such a scheme, then the Downs committee should give due consideration to a fee-paying licencing scheme of its own and should be included as part of the commercial strategy within the Event and Finance team.

2 Out of Hours Security.

In recent years it has become apparent that anti-social behaviour on the Downs has been steadily increasing. This takes the form of regular incursions from the Traveller community, indiscriminate parking on the greensward, damage from barbecue use, dangerous driving on the Downs, fly tipping and the outfall of the ever-present van and caravan dwellers.

There is a perception amongst the general public that 'anything goes' on the Downs and that those responsible for the good governance of the Downs can do nothing to bring about any improvement. These agencies include the Police, the City Council and the Downs committee.

In an attempt to consider redressing this perception FODAG, the Master of the M/V and the Downs supervisor met with Avon and Somerset Police to discuss a way forward. The outcome of the meeting was positive with promises of increased cover from the Police side plus an explanation that much of what is policed on the Downs is unreported. To further improve lines of communication access to individual officer's email addresses and direct telephone numbers have been obtained. The Police side accepted an invitation to speak to the DAP and agreed to consider speaking at FOD+AG's AGM. Officers explained how they approached policing the Downs, the limitations and how finite resources are managed and incidents prioritised. Officers expressed a willingness to engage with us to bring about an improved service.

It was further agreed that much better communication and information sharing between all parties would go a long way to correcting possible misinformation. The Police side explained their approach to the management of finite resources, a need to prioritise calls, the legal limitations placed upon them and the agreed policies and procedures currently in place.

This suggests that although we may expect an improved level of service from the Police it is clear that the pressure of day to day policing a large beat will not fully address all the issues of anti-social behaviour and blatant breaches of the Downs bylaws.

Around ten years ago the Downs committee pressed to address budgetary concerns took the decision to discontinue the Downs out of hours security service. The service was provided by Bristol City Council and consisted of a two-person uniformed mobile patrol that covered evening and weekend duties. The team were in radio contact and were able to summon support when required and supply regular reports. Their presence was a visible deterrent and they were able to advise and where necessary enforce bylaw breaches.

The cost of running such a service cannot be ignored but should be balanced against the cost of escalating anti-social behaviour, damage to the Downs themselves and reputational damage to those responsible for good governance.

The recommendation / advice from the DAP is that: The Downs committee, as the principal power for governance should when funding permits give serious consideration to reinstating the out of hours security service, even if only for the summer months.

NB The Committee should note an indication that local residents may be in favour of contributing financially to such a scheme.

3 Downs Parking.

There are two main issues with vehicles on the Downs where relatively simple action could be taken to improve some localised improvements at reasonable cost.

In considering these issues it was important that any proposed action should not inhibit the free parking and use of the Downs by the great majority of users.

The issues were discussed at some length at the Downs Advisory Panel meeting on 1st September 2023. It was recognised that the advice needed to be possible, and effective, and to be of minimum cost.

Please Note: This does not address the issues of Travellers' encampments or Joy/anti-social driving.

1. Parking on grassed areas

It was thought that an improvement in signage, 'No Parking on the Grass' would be a first step to reduce the number of vehicles which park on the grassed areas of the downs.

However, it was recognised that some form of low-level obstruction such as short posts, dead hedging, tree trunks laid horizontally or ditch and bank would probably be required to obtain a major reduction.

Never-the-less however some form of enforcement backed up by a fine would probably also be needed to obtain near 100% compliance.

The recommendation / advice from the DAP is that: There should be a number of suitable signs displayed in the relevant areas, and that some sort of obstruction was considered and at first the cheap option of leaving long grass at the edges might deter some driving onto the grassed areas.

2. Long term parked vehicles

A number of vans, caravans and mobile homes have recently spread from the Parrys Lane end of the Downs to the area of Ladies Mile and Circular Road. It was considered necessary to attempt to reclaim that area before the number became unmanageable.

It was suggested that a total parking ban from 1am until 4am would solve the problem but would also leave the option for those vehicles to join those in the Parrys Lane area. Note - A temporary total ban was in place for 2 days for the latest Downs Event.

It was also thought that, as it would not be necessary to identify arrival times and departure times, it could be enforced with minimum expense by using automatic plate recognition with fines of say £500 and for any without a registration plate to be towed away.

The recommendation / advice from the DAP is that: An overnight parking ban, 1am – 4am, should be actively sought and imposed on Ladies Mile and Circular Road as soon as possible. The DAP recommendations should be considered by the Task & Finish Group as part of their current deliberations.

4 Childrens Playground.

The DAP received a request to resurrect a previous Downs committee decision in 2020 to agree in principle a proposal from Cllr. O'Rourke on behalf of Cllr. Denyer to yield land for the installation of a Childrens play area to be located near the Water Tower. This was previously put to the vote and: *“Resolved unanimously that the Committee expresses a willingness to work with Cllr. Denyer and others on the design, funding and location of a new playground on the Downs.”*

The recommendation / advice from the DAP is that: The applicant be permitted to further research planning, design and funding issues.