

THE DOWNS COMMITTEE

Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act 1861

Minutes of the Downs Committee – 18 September 2023

DRAFT

Members present: Cllr Paula O'Rourke, Cllr Kye Dudd, Councillor Philippa Hulme, Cllr Steve Smith, Cllr Christine Townsend, Patrick Despard (Vice-Chair), Jonathan Baker, Mike Bothamley, Robert Bourns, Bevis Watts

Officers present: Jonathan James (Head of Natural & Marine Environment Parks), Ben Skuse (Area Parks supervisor), Harriet Shannon (City Events & Festivals Manager), Steve Hunt (Events Officer), Anna Stevens (Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Manager), Steve Gregory (Democratic Services)

1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies for Absence

- a) Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Paul Goggin (Chair/Lord Mayor), Mark Burchfield, David Freed and Kevin Jay (Finance Officer).
- b) The Committee noted the recent news regarding the Lord Mayor's health. Members gave their best wishes to the Lord Mayor.

3. Declarations of Interest

None declared.

4. Minutes of the Last Meeting

Resolved - That the minutes of the previous meeting on 12th June 2023 be approved as a correct record.

Matter arising – Minute 7 DAG, the Chair (LM) at last meeting undertook to contact AFA regarding the risk faced by gas bottles on the Downs but was unable to do so due to ill health. It was noted that AFA's primary concern was the risk of fire from barbecues as it posed a greater risk of fire on the Downs. Parks Supervisor agreed to look into this further.

5. Action Tracker

The Chair ran through actions from the previous meeting. Further updates were included arising from issues raised during discussion at the meeting.

6. Matters Arising from the Events and Finance Group

The draft Minutes of the meeting were noted.

Members were informed that the content of the draft Minutes regarding the Downs north car park was incorrect, and this had led to a degree of misunderstanding namely that the points relating to the North car park were a suggestion, not a formal proposal, pending full and transparent discussion with all interested parties, and that the Downs Committee acknowledged the implications of the Court Order.

The main aims of the suggestion were to maintain an important source of income and avoid inappropriate parking elsewhere on the Downs in the future.

Going forward the Committee felt that better communication was needed between the interested parties so that full and proper discussion could take place leading to amicable agreement. It was agreed that an informal meeting be arranged between representatives of the Downs Committee and Downs for People to progress this issue. If an extension of the current arrangements could be agreed, then a variation of the Court Order could be investigated.

The Bristol Tree Forum also expressed the view that the trees on the north car park were on land that was part of the Downs and that this needed to be clarified prior to the S106 agreement being completed by planning officers and the zoo site developers.

A further point needing clarification was the figure quoted in the minutes (item ii under matters arising) about the level of income from the north car park. This would need to be clarified by the Finance Officer.

7. Public Forum

The following public forum statements were received and noted by the Committee.

Statement Number 1: Robert Westlake – Friends of Downs and Avon Gorge

Statement Number 2: Susan Carter – Downs for People

Statement Number 3: Mark Ashdown – Bristol Tree Forum

Questions were received from:

Susan Carter – Downs for People (2xQ)

Answer to Q1 regarding wildlife on the Downs being of global significance - The Wildlife Project Manager confirmed that the Downs is a Site of Nature Conservation Interest, a local designation which is given for a variety of reasons. The Avon Gorge is a SSSI (national designation) and a SAC (international designation). Natural England has been asked for

advice as to how much impact some misuse of the Downs and the Avon Gorge by the public is having on the rare species and the Gorge's SSSI status. NE will be carrying out a study as such next year. The WP manager also pointed out that preserving the ecological balance of the Downs is essential to the Downs being a sustainable green space for the people of Bristol.

A supplementary question was asked about a possible tutorial being arranged for members of the Downs Committee regarding habitat for wildlife. The Wildlife Project Manager undertook to arrange this.

Answer to Q2 about costs of Sea Wall café proposal – answers to be supplied after the meeting by the Finance Officer.

Mark Ashdown – Bristol Tree Forum (2xQ)

The two questions submitted had already been answered during discussion under agenda item 6.

8. Downs Advisory Panel

The Committee received a report of the Downs Advisory Panel (DAP). The Panel had met on the 1st September 2023 at the Zoos Centre for Education and discussed issues common to the Downs and included ant-social behaviour, the Roma Gypsy situation and van and caravan dwellers. There had also been reports of dangerous driving on the Downs, fly tipping, parking on the greensward, inconsiderate joggers, harassment by dogs.

The report covered four main items, and each had a recommendation(s) from DAP as outlined below, for the Downs Committee to discuss and consider.

A. Unauthorised Commercial Activity on the Downs

Implement a licensing scheme for commercial operators similar to that done by some other local authorities.

DAP recommendation that if the City Council was 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.

RESOLVED – That the Head of Parks investigate and review the legal and commercial issues associated with a licensing scheme for commercial activities on the Downs.

B. Out of Hours Security

DAP recommendation 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.

RESOLVED – That due to Downs Committee limited financial resources DAP explore the option of local resident associations contributing to a security scheme.

C. Downs Parking

There are two main issues with vehicles parking on the Downs, parking on grassed areas and long-term parked vehicles.

- i. DAP recommendation for grassed areas, that there should be a number of suitable signs displayed in the relevant areas, and that some sort of obstruction be considered with a first option being leaving long grass at the edges which might deter some from driving onto the grassed areas.
- ii. DAP recommendation for long term parking, 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.

RESOLVED –

- 1. That for parking on the grass, leaving grass to grow longer be tried in appropriate areas and review how that works. Also consider tree planting in appropriate areas of the Downs eg Sea Walls.**
- 2. That for long term parking this be reviewed by the Task and Finish Group taking into account the views of local ward councillors where appropriate.**

D. Childrens Playground

DAP recommendation that the applicant be permitted to further research planning, design, and funding issues.

RESOLVED – That the Downs Committee reiterate its willingness to work with Cllr. Denyer and others on the design, funding, and location of a new playground on the Downs.

9. Downs Management Report

The Area Parks Supervisor summarised his report drawing members attention to the key points in particular –

- a) Football pitches ready to go for the 23/24 season. Bristol Downs League, Wednesday 6th September. Bristol University, Student Union, Wednesday 27th September.
- b) There was a new circus operator this year and a new small one-day charity event. Bristol University Welcome Fair, officers were working with organisers for this year's event at Parry's Lane.

- c) The current year had been a particularly difficult one in terms of the presence of the travelling community at the Downs which had caused some concerns with the operation of some events at the Downs. A regular dialogue with the associated BCC officers and event operators had helped to alleviate concerns.
- d) Due to last year's drought conditions, there were still some losses amongst the tree stock at the Downs. The latest being a large Red Oak outside the mansion house on the Promenade, once the stump had been removed another tree could be planted to replace it.

RESOLVED – that the Downs Management report be noted.

10. Events Report

The Events Officers introduced the report and drew members attention to the confirmed events for 2023, as set out in paragraph 2 of the report, and the Events and festivals that had taken place since last Downs Committee.

With regard to complaints relating to events on the Downs, members were requested to let the Events Team know so they could be formally recorded.

Following a request from members the Events Team undertook to provide a link to our online map illustrating what parts of the Downs could be used for events. Alongside the Parks officer and Events officer to pull together a report on the time needed between each event and where the potential gaps were.

RESOLVED – That the Events report be noted.

11. Finance Report - Forecast for 2023-24

The Committee received the Forecast report for 2023-24.

A question was raised about accessing CIL money, the Head of Parks said that he would contact the S106 and CIL Project Manager to investigate.

RESOLVED – That the Forecast report for 2023-24 be noted.

12. Downs Education Report - Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project

The Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Manager gave a detailed summary of activities of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife learning and community engagement programme for July, August, and September 2023.

The Project Manager added that the work of the project had been particularly challenging due to the travelling community being on site and issues associated with some of the

occupiers relating to litter and anti-social behaviour, in addition to litter from the general public and van dwelling community.

Members noted the concerns raised and expressed the hope that the revised protocols agreed, following the recent DAP meeting, with the police would make a significant improvement in terms of access to individual police officers via direct telephone numbers and email addresses to report incidents of this nature and that this would help to mitigate problems going forward.

Members welcomed the report and the activities achieved to date and thanked the Project Manager for all the hard work that had gone in to the project.

RESOLVED – That the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project Downs Education report be noted.

13. Parking - Task and Finish Group

Members were advised that the issue of parking on the Downs needed to be urgently resolved. Councillor O'Rourke would engage with the Director Management of Place to progress this. It was noted that this was essential as next year the Downs north car park would no longer be a managed facility.

14. Spoil Heap on Observatory Road

The Committee was reminded that a large pile of rubble and soil contaminated with lead had been left since May this year next to a play park in Clifton following drainage works. The issue of its removal was a matter of dispute with the work contractor and the Council over who should pay for its removal. Solutions had been put forward to expedite the removal of the spoil heap, pending clarification of legal/procurement protocols.

15. Any other business

It was noted that this was Jonathan Baker's (MV) last meeting as a member of the Downs Committee. Members thanked Jon for his contribution toward the work of the committee and offered their best wishes for the future.

16. Date of next meeting

Monday 13th November, 2pm at City Hall.

CHAIR

Meeting ended at 4.20 pm