

Downs Advisory Panel {DAP}

Report to Downs committee.

13 November 2023

The Panel met for the third time on the 2nd November.

At the start of the meeting the chair reported that since the last meeting DAP had received three phone calls to the dedicated line and numerous emails to the DAP email address. Some emails detailed the same issues.

The phone calls were about van dweller presence and anti -social behaviour. A Downs neighbour witnessed a van dweller urinating on the Downs and two further calls from Downs neighbours, one selling up because of the van dweller situation and one where prospective buyer had just withdrawn their offer on a half-million apartment sale in Downleaze, citing the closeness of van dwellers to the property as the reason.

An email about parking at the circus –

An email about the appropriateness of certain events.

One letter addressed to Mayor Rees with DAP copied in.

Email about van dweller representation at DAP which the Panel considered inappropriate.

A further email about controlling long term parking on Downs highways.

We also received an enquiry about a uniformed and apparently armed group drilling on the Downs.

All enquires have been logged and all have had a response from DAP.

The Panel debated whether some items should go immediately to the appropriate person or would it be useful to the Downs committee to be aware.

The Panel discussed five agenda items, four of which are included in the report.

{a} The escalation of the van dwelling community around the Downs.

Two FOD+AG committee members arranged a meeting with a representative of Respect the Downs and the City Council's Senior Enforcement Officer. The purpose of the meeting was to obtain the latest updates on managing the escalating vehicle dwelling situation and to agree a positive way forward. It was agreed to invite the Enforcement officer to the DAP meeting to explore further options and agree a recommendation to the Downs committee.

The Senior Enforcement Officer reported that the Downs situation although regularly monitored is not considered of particular high priority. Wellbeing sites were few and far between and not an option that van dwellers readily accept. The

Panel accepts the aspirations of the One City Plan but the perception of the current situation on the Downs is that it is largely unmanaged.

The Panel remains conscious that there is no wish to push the problem onto other areas of the city.

The Panel discussed the various bodies and their roles in dealing with the van dwelling community. It was evident that there was a disconnect between the various entities dealing with the issue.

The Panel recommends that:

The Downs committee Traffic Task & Finish Group should accept that the only solution to bring the current situation back under control is an amendment to the Traffic Regulation Order. {TRO} This should include the acceptance of an overnight parking ban on Ladies Mile and Circular Road.

The TT&F Group should also give consideration to the following points.

- *Extend the Injunction currently in place for Downs greensward to include highways.*
- *Adopt a multi-agency approach.*
- *Identify an alternative site – Is anyone doing this.*
- *Encourage the Police to use their new powers introduced by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. The new powers deliver on the Government's manifesto commitment to tackle unauthorised encampments and the harms caused by trespassers refusing to leave land and causing harm to communities and landowners.*
- *Contribute to the City Council's Policy Review.*
- *Recommend the appointment of a full-time Unauthorised Encampments Officer.*
- *Accept that the only solution to bring the current situation back under control is an amendment to the Traffic Regulation Order {TRO} This may include the acceptance of an overnight parking ban or/and a time limited restriction.*
- *The TT&F Group should also note that inappropriate use of the Downs, which is a Site of Nature Conservation Interest in its role as part of the ecological network of the Avon Gorge would be a threat to the latter's SSSI status.*
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{b} Major Events on the Downs and their impact on Downs neighbours.

- The Panel received two emails from Downs neighbours regarding Downs events. One was concerned about permitting unmanaged parking on the grass for events and one regarding the appropriateness of certain types of events.

The Panel recommends that:

- *When booking events, the Downs committee and the City Council events team give due regard to the possible impact on Downs neighbours and to the environment and ensure that noise levels are monitored and enforced as necessary.*
- *However, Downs neighbours should make use of the City Council's complaints procedure with regard to noise pollution etc. and therefore need to be provided with information on how to do so.*

{c} Military training on the downs.

- The Panel discussed a recent report that an apparently armed uniformed military group appeared to be carrying out drill exercises on the Downs. Report asked if the Downs committee considered this wholly appropriate given the recent and heightened tensions around the world. Further investigation suggests that the group may have been part of a local recruitment organisation and were using replica weapons. The Panel acknowledges that this incident had the potential to cause alarm and confusion for some of our citizens.

The Panel recommends that:

- *This group be properly identified and that any similar planned events are booked and properly vetted.*

{d} Portway Corridor - Consultation.

The DAP chair met with the respective chairs of the British Mountaineering Council, The Walking Alliance and Bristol Cycling to discuss a joint response to the Travel/West Consultation, "*Transport Improvements to the A4 Portway Route.*" It was agreed to issue a joint statement commenting on the proposals.

In particular concerns have been raised about crossing points, varying speed limits, segregated cycle provision and Downs footpaths that exit directly onto the highway. The meeting concluded that the Gorge is of such huge merit in terms of scenery, wildlife and conservation value that it should be considered as much as a visitor destination rather than just a through -route.

The Panel recommends that:

- *The Downs committee notes the aspirations of the group who may at some stage present a fuller report and support them in recognising the importance of the Portway corridor and take the opportunity to make lasting and significant improvements.*

Robert Westlake

Chair

DAP