

# THE DOWNS COMMITTEE (AGM)

Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act 1861

Minutes of the Downs Committee – 13 November 2023

# DRAFT

## Members present:

**Bristol City Councillors:** Kye Dudd, Paula O'Rourke, Steve Pearce (Chair/Acting Lord Mayor), Steve Smith, Christine Townsend

**Society of Merchant Venturers:** Mike Bothamley (Vice-Chair), Robert Bourns, Mark Burchfield, Fiona Francombe, David Freed

**Officers present:** Ben Skuse (Area Parks supervisor), Kevin Jay (Finance Manager – Growth & Regeneration), Sharon Radnedge (Parks Commercial Manager), Harriet Shannon (City Events & Festivals Manager), Steve Hunt (Events Officer), Anna Stevens (Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Manager), Steve Gregory (Democratic Services), Caroline Duckworth Treasurer (SMV)

## 1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions made.

## 2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Paul Goggin (Chair/Lord Mayor), Cllr Philippa Hulme, Cllr Andrew Varney, David Powell (SMV), Bevis Watts (SMV).

## 3. Declarations of Interest

None declared.

## 4. Membership for 2023/24

### Bristol City Councillors

Councillor Kye Dudd

Councillor Paul Goggin (Chair/Lord Mayor) (Substituted by Councillor Steve Pearce see Minute 5)

Councillor Philippa Hulme

Councillor Paula O'Rourke

Councillor Steve Smith

Councillor Christine Townsend

Councillor Andrew Varney

### Master and 6 Merchant Venturers

Mike Bothamley (Master/Vice Chair)

Robert Bourns

Mark Burchfield

Fiona Francombe

David Freed

David Powell

Bevis Watts

**Resolved: That the Downs Committee membership for 2023/24 be noted.**

## **5. Chairing arrangements**

Members noted that the current Lord Mayor, Councillor Paul Goggin, would be absent due to ill health for approximately three months. Standing in place during this period would be Councillor Steve Pearce, Acting Lord Mayor.

The Vice-Chair of the Committee was the Master of the Society of the Merchant Ventures, Mike Bothamley, and would assume the Chair at Downs Committee meeting in the Chair/Lord Mayor's Absence.

**Resolved:**

- i. That the interim chairing arrangements regarding the Chair of the Downs Committee be noted.**
- ii. That the appointment of Mike Bothamley as Master of the Society of Merchant Ventures and Vice-Chair of the Downs Committee be noted.**

## **6. Retiring Members**

### **Bristol City Councillors**

Jos Clark

Katy Grant

### **Merchant Venturers**

Jonathon Baker

Patrick Despard

Members of the Committee expressed their sincere appreciation for the work that the outgoing members had done for the Downs Committee.

**Resolved: That the retirement of members of the Downs Committee listed above, be noted.**

## **7. Delegations**

**Resolved –**

- i. That the Committee re-establishes the Events and Finance Sub-Group, full membership to be confirmed.**
- ii. That the Committee agrees to set up Task and Finish Groups as necessary.**

## **8. Dates & Times of future meetings**

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> January – 2pm at City Hall

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> March – 2pm at City Hall

Monday 10<sup>th</sup> June - 11am at Merchants Hall followed by lunch and a bus tour of the Downs

Monday 16<sup>th</sup> September – 2pm at City Hall

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> November – 2pm at City Hall

**Resolved: That the Downs Committee meeting dates for 2023/24 be noted.**

## **9. Minutes of the Last Meeting**

**Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting on 18 September 2023 be approved as a correct record.**

## **10. Action Tracker**

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

## **11. Matters Arising from the Events and Finance Group**

The draft Minutes of the meeting were noted.

Sea Walls Toilets - regarding planning permission for the proposed development, if it remained within the existing footprint, it was understood that only change of use would need to be approved, however this would need to be further checked and confirmed.

Circus on the Downs – following consultation with the council’s legal team it had been confirmed there was no longer a requirement to go out to tender.

## **12. Public Forum**

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

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

Statement 2: David Redgewell - South west transport Network

Statement 3: Susan Carter - Downs for People

Regarding statement 3 the committee noted with regret that Downs for People had not agreed to extending the zoo’s use of the north car park beyond the end of this year. DfP had called for the site to be restored to amenity use and any parking that remained be made available for Downs users only, with any profits going to the Downs Committee.

## **Questions**

Two questions were received from David Redgewell - South west transport Network

The Committee was unable to provide answers to question 1 regarding progress made on the Downs to bring parking restrictions and charges as part of a green travel plan. Members asked that relevant officers be contacted to reply to David Redgewell directly.

Noted that question 2, regarding commenting on the plans for the improvement to the A4 Portway for walking and cycling, new bus lanes from Hotwells along the Avon Gorge to Shirehampton and Portway park and ride bus and rail interchange, was outside of the remit of the Downs Committee.

## **13. Downs Manager post**

The Committee noted the job description and person specification that had been circulated for information. The position had been advertised twice to date, but the response so far had been poor.

A meeting between Councillor Paula O’Rourke, Mike Bothamley and Harriet Shannon (City Events & Festivals Manager) had been arranged to progress this with emphasis being placed on the strategic and entrepreneurial nature of the role to attract a wider range of candidates, this would include changing the job title to better reflect the role.

Although the position was initially for a one-year fixed contract it would be made clear going forward that subject to the position becoming totally self-funding the intention was that the role would become a permanent position.

## **14. Refurbishment of Changing Rooms and Improvements to the toilets on Circular Road**

This item was considered jointly with agenda item 20 (Infrastructure Task & Finish Group).

### Refurbishment of Changing Rooms

The Committee noted that the Infrastructure T&F Group had recommended that the present building should be refurbished rather than continue with earlier plans to demolish and extend as the costs associated with this were considered to be prohibitive.

The refurbishment approach would mean that the building could only accommodate 12 changing rooms together with the required disabled facilities and male/female referees changing rooms. This would mean that kick off times would have to be staggered.

Total estimated costs were thought to be in the region of £1.5m with sources of funding to include a combination of grants from Sports England, the Football Foundation, application for CIL funding and an appeal to local philanthropy.

On being put to the vote it was unanimously -

**Resolved – That the recommendation by the Infrastructure T&F Group to fully refurbish the existing building be approved.**

### Infrastructure T&F Group

The Committee noted that due to Bristol City Council spending constraints, the only way to have decent toilets in this location (to include disabled facilities) would be to include a small café and require the café operator to maintain the toilets as part of their lease obligations.

The T&F Group concluded that the café/kiosk and toilets could be created within the existing footprint, so there would be no encroachment on the Downs. It was further considered that planning permission should only be required for change of use of part of the existing building from toilets to café although further advice would need to be obtained to check this and any other permissions which might be needed.

The T&F Group had not taken the proposal any further but suggested that an allowance of £150,000.00 would cover the cost. This would however be a project for the new Downs Manager to deliver.

On being put to the vote it was unanimously -

**Resolved – That the recommendation by the Infrastructure T&F Group to create a café/kiosk and toilets within the existing building footprint to avoid encroachment on the Downs, be approved.**

## **15. Downs Advisory Panel**

The Committee received a report of the Downs Advisory Panel (DAP). The Panel had met for the third time on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November.

The Panel had discussed five key items, four of which were included in the report with recommendations, these were -

- a) The escalation of the van dwelling community around the Downs
- b) Major Events on the Downs and their impact on Downs neighbours
- c) Military training on the downs
- d) Portway Corridor - Consultation

After discussion the committee expressed its particular concerns –

- 1) The apparent armed uniformed military group appearing to be carrying out drill exercises on the Downs and the lack of any contribution to upkeep regarding their use of the land. This would need to be monitored.
- 2) The van dweller issue was escalating, and it was suggested that the Council should appoint a bespoke officer to coordinate action to deal with this.
- 3) Parking by both general users and van dwellers needed to be controlled by an amendment to the current Traffic Regulation Order (TRO). This should include an overnight parking ban on Ladies Mile, Circular Road and top of Parry's Lane.
- 4) The Downs was internationally recognised as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest in its role as part of the ecological network of the Avon Gorge, this was also recognised by Natural England and its work on the impact on biodiversity. This needed to be taken fully into account.

Having regard to the concerns expressed the Chair directed that the DAP report be forwarded to the appropriate Cabinet members of the Council, as below, to initiate a multi-agency approach to solving these issues -

Councillor Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health, and Communities

Councillor Donald Alexander Cabinet Member for Transport

Councillor Kye Dudd Cabinet Member for Housing Services and Energy

**RESOLVED – That the report be noted, and the DAP report be forwarded to Cabinet Members as outlined above.**

## **16. Downs Management Report**

The Area Parks Supervisor summarised his report drawing members attention to the key points in particular the winter programme of work as below –

- Leaf removal from the Promenade
- 4 new memorial benches installed
- Removal and repositioning of 3 existing benches due to Ash die back
- Annual survey, repair and re wood stain of existing bench stock
- Downs scrub management plan (Black Rock Quarry, Birdwatchers)

- Bridge Valley Rd rock face clearance works (New Year)
- Football pitch provision twice a week (putting up/taking down football equipment, marking lines, spiking, chaining, adding sand as necessary).

In addition, extra resource had to be given regarding litter bin emptying through the winter season, historically this was a quieter time but due to the number of van dwellers using the resource this now meant ongoing work. Although it was welcomed that litter bins were being used it did place an additional strain of finite resources.

**RESOLVED – that the Downs Management report be noted.**

### **17. Events Report**

The Events Officers introduced the report and drew members attention to the confirmed events for 2024, as set out in paragraph 3 of the report, and the Events and festivals that had taken place since the last Downs Committee. There had only been a couple of noise complaints received one had related to the Forwards Festival and one to the Circus.

**RESOLVED – That the Events report be noted.**

### **18. Finance Report - Forecast for 2023-24**

The Committee received the Forecast report for 2023-24. The key outcome was that Gross income for 2023-24 was currently forecasted to be in deficit by £39k, expenditure was forecast to be overspent by (£107k), resulting in a net deficit of (£146k).

Given the loss of potential income from the north car park usage not being extended, members asked that a supplementary finance report be submitted to ascertain the financial impact this would have for the Downs and to formulate a contingency plan to mitigate this.

**RESOLVED – That the Forecast report for 2023-24 be noted and a further report brought back to outline a contingency plan regarding loss of future income in relation to the north car park.**

### **19. Downs Community Engagement Report**

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 October and November 2023.

Members noted that in October and November the learning and community engagement programme was expecting to directly engage with 1083 people (as of 28 November) and had currently engaged with 614 (as of 13 November).

The Project Manager emphasised in particular the following points –

- 1) AGDW was running its first pilot A level session in November to expand its reach into secondary education. The pilot A level session from South Gloucestershire and Stroud College were not being charged. If the pilot scheme was successful future events would be charged.
- 2) The contact at Adoption West had been forwarded an outreach plan but no response to date. The Engagement Manager had since followed up with the initial contact in order to take the offer forward during the winter or spring.
- 3) Accommodation solutions for the Community Engagement Team were ongoing as the team had to vacate current accommodation by the end of 2024. Interim arrangements were being considered but there were storage problems associated with this. Other options were being looked at including discussions with partner agencies. The Conservation Hub once completed would resolve many of the outstanding issues.
- 4) Some members of the Downs Committee would be attending the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife talk and walk Friday 17th November 2-4pm.

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 Downs Community Engagement report be noted.**

## **20. Infrastructure - Task and Finish Group**

This item was considered under Minute no. 14.

## **21. Parking - Task and Finish Group**

The Committee was advised that the report had been delayed pending the outcome of discussions about the north car park with Downs for People. Now it was known that an extension to the use of the car park was not being permitted the report would be submitted to the next Downs Committee. Some concern was expressed that as the north car park would not be in use from 1 January 2024, it might become a target for more van dwellers.

Regarding the wider problem of parking on the Downs consideration was being given to extending TROs to include the top of Parry's Lane and the Circular Road. Noted that 19 van dwellers were currently parked on the Circular Road.

## **22. Any other business**

None.

## **23. Date of next meeting**

Monday 15 January 2024, 2pm at City Hall.

*Meeting ended at 4.07 pm*