

THE DOWNS COMMITTEE

15 January 2024

Public Forum

Question(s)

Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge

Currently there appears to be an apparent lack of political will to deal effectively with the van dwelling community around the Downs. When the City Council returns to managing the city by committee later in the year, can Downs neighbour's and Downs users expect a more robust approach to this escalating problem?

Statement 1- Friends of the Downs & Avon Gorge

FOD+AG welcomes the opportunity to update the Downs committee on our most recent events and some of the activities planned for the coming weeks.

We remain committed to our core values to represent fairly users of the Downs and to support the City Council and the Downs Committee in the good governance of the Downs.

Towards the end of last year FOD+AG held its AGM. Members elected a committee, reviewed the activities of the organisation for the previous twelve months and listened to our guest speakers from Avon & Somerset constabulary.

The Friends of the Downs are planning a Downs summer social for members and invited guests. A date has not been finalised, but Downs committee members would be most welcome to join us.

Our winter programme of clearing deep seated litter from some of the less accessible areas of the Downs is underway. Earlier this month volunteers cleared the areas of woodland near the promenade and around the top of Bridge Valley Road.

Last year FOD+AG ran a summer evening guided tour looking at some of the great houses of the Downs and some of the residents and their retainers who occupied these properties over the last one hundred years or so. It is planned to hold another event this coming year.

Some members will be aware of a recent book launch. The book is a reissue of *Ladies Mile*, penned by Victoria Hughes. Mrs. Hughes was the lavatory attendant who managed the Stoke Road cloakroom facility from 1929 until the early sixties. Victoria writes vividly about the twilight world of the 'working girls' she encountered whilst carrying out her duties.

The reprint has been funded and organised by FOD+AG member Kerris Harrop. All book sales will be donated to the refurbishment of the toilets. FOD+AG have agreed to promote and support this initiative.

In the past few weeks FOD+AG have received from Downs neighbours anecdotal reports of a significant increase in the use of Cannabis Resin around the van and caravan encampment at Parrys lane. Neighbours report being able to clearly detect the strong distinctive odour associated with Cannabis consumption.

Perhaps more alarming are further reports about unscrupulous individuals parking caravans on the Downs and then offering these units for rent. There is a suggestion that these rentals may be linked to the fast-food delivery trade and to the mostly young men who fulfil these tasks.

There are currently over seventy units parked around the Downs.

As an organisation FOD+AG accepts that these reports are not hard evidence but clearly there is concern among the local citizenry about the use of illegal substances so close to their homes and the possible exploitation of young people with regard to caravan rental.

Statement 2 - Peter Weeks

A response to Report of Parking Task and Finish Group

I am Peter Weeks and I was in the group that brought the court case against allowing car parking on the Downs. The following comments are offered in a constructive spirit.

I make 5 points. The first is the most important.

1. Lack of enforcement There is no enforcement by the Council of parking regulations on the Downs roads. I cross the Downs at least once and sometimes several times a day. In many years, I have only ever seen a Parking Warden on Stoke Road once. The roads on the Downs have become an all-day car park-and-ride and caravan park.

In the Spring 2023 issue of the FoDAG Newsletter, p7, a FoDAG Member quotes a Parking Warden saying: "We never ticket the static caravans ..." and "we rarely bother coming up here as it is too much hassle". Whole roads on the Downs are omitted from patrols, although these roads have the same level of parking restriction as elsewhere in the city. That is damaging to the Downs and is not fair to law-abiding

people. It renders useless anything this Committee does regarding the roads on the Downs.

Enforcement must be a priority. Any parking policy without proper enforcement is futile.

2. Free parking The current 5-hour parking limit on Downs roads was set at the specific request of the Zoo to suit its visitors. With the Zoo gone, as the Report says the aim now must be to provide car parking for people coming to the Downs for recreation. A shorter time period, say 3 or 2 hours, is sensible. But see my next point.
3. Former Zoo N car park The Downs Committee needs to generate income by making this into a chargeable car park for bona fide Downs visitors. The benefits of doing this via a commercial operator are financial incentives for both operator and DC to maximise income; strong on-site enforcement; experience of managing similar car parks; stopping a takeover by van/caravan dwellers.
I noticed recently that a parking website was selling parking on the Zoo N Car Park for £4.50 a day.
A 3-hour-free limit on Downs roads, as suggested, might undercut the income of this car park. The operator and the DC would want to charge a high/market price.
4. Closing Circular Road This move would have wide support in my view. (A group Cycle Sunday proposed closing the road some years ago, to the approval of the Committee).
One option would be to simply remove a section of road, turning Circular Rd into two cul-de-sacs. This might be done near the top of Goat Gully where Circular Rd goes down a dip. Car drivers would not risk driving on the grass there. Walkers and cyclists could continue to use Circular Rd if there was a narrow walking/cycle track connecting the ends of the cul-de-sacs.
5. Amenity The phrase “amenity for Downs users” is mentioned 3 times in the Report. Amenity means making life more pleasant for people. That seems a useful guiding principle. I hope the Committee can keep the aim of improving amenity for Downs users in mind when making decisions.

Statement 3 - Adam Chivers

I object to the recommendations of the Parking Task and Finish Group to be considered at the meeting on 15 January 2024.

Nothing in what is proposed provides any (or any adequate) protection against the use of the North Car Park for non-Downs activities. If the recommendations are implemented, they

would therefore render those responsible potentially liable for the consequences of a breach of the terms of the order made on 12 May 2021 by Mr Justice Henshaw.