

Downs Advisory Panel [DAP]

Report to Downs Committee

March 11th, 2024

The Panel met last month at Merchants Hall to discuss a range of issues raised by local citizens, FOD+AG members and Downs Users.

Incidents reported to DAP:

Since the last meeting of the Downs committee the Panels dedicated email address and phone line has received over two dozen emails and 6 phone calls. Every enquiry has received a prompt response. All communications have been recorded and it is the intention of the Panel to make this data available online in the future.

Several items of concern raised from external sources have been dealt with directly by the Downs Supervisor or helpful information has been supplied to the enquirer by the Panel.

In addition to direct communications the Panel is regularly copied into emails from Downs users and neighbours to Darren Jones MP, the elected Mayor, City Councilor's, BCC Officers and senior Police personnel.

At the last meeting of the Downs committee, I reported that a Downs neighbour had made a complaint to the Ombudsman about the City Council permitting the Downs to be used as an unauthorised permanent campsite, without planning permission. The Ombudsman has rejected the claim citing that Bristol City Council had followed correct procedure and its own Policy in dealing with the situation.

Most contacts to the DAP still relates to the van dweller presence including ongoing complaints about numbers, the lack of any apparent enforcement, dumped rubbish, effluent disposal, cannabis consumption, a claim that unit/units are being offered for rent and one caller complaining about witnessing the unedifying vision of one gentleman blatantly urinating directly onto a Downs footpath from the door of his caravan.

The Panel discussed five agenda items.

{1} Report of the Parking Task and Finish Group (inc. The North Car Park)

The Panel noted that The Downs committee had accepted the report of the Parking Task and Finish Group and was broadly supportive of the aims and aspirations outlined in the report.

The Panel discussed the positive aspects of the proposals including allowing the natural features of the Downs to recover, Downs users able to enjoy their amenity in peace and safety without disturbance from traffic, less parking on the grass, a reduction in commuter parking, assist in the better management of the van dwelling community, reduced likelihood of illegal driving on the grass and potentially less rubbish left behind. However, the Panel was not unanimous in its support for the longer term aspiration to close Circular Road.

External contributors and Panel members raised concerns about the impact of proposed restrictions including difficulty of access for disabled people, people from wider Bristol who would have difficulty parking (note bus access to the Downs is poor), climbers who need heavy equipment near Sea walls, Downs League football teams, access for hot air Balloon recovery, emergency services access and personal security with less passing traffic/(observers).

The Panel discussed a range of solutions that that could be used to implement restrictions, ranging from physical barriers on Circular Road and Fountains Hill, to timed restrictions on access/parking enforced by ANPR cameras at strategic points. A toll or charge could be applied to vehicles accessing or parking on the Downs, again enforced using ANPR cameras.

The logic for the proposed free period of 3-hour parking was discussed, this was less than the 5 hours previously introduced to accommodate zoo parking. Skepticism was raised at the last Downs committee meeting that once a potentially costly parking enforcement system had been implemented whether free parking would still be affordable, i.e., enforcement would come at a cost.

An external approach to the Panel suggested that enforcement of car parking with no other change would not work as enforcement of van dweller parking is not currently enforced and there seems little political commitment to deal with removal of van dwellers. How would any new Traffic Regulation Order {TRO} work unless it was effectively enforced.

The North Car Park.

The Panel acknowledged the prompt action to secure the North car park perimeter.

The benefit and need to recover lost revenue from parking on the North car park site is accepted. The Panel discussed a letter from FOD+AG member Peter Weeks presented as a Public Forum Statement at the last Downs committee meeting which reminded members of their responsibilities under the law but accepted that a paying car park for Downs visitors could make a significant financial contribution.

The Panel notes that the management of the car parking would be undertaken by a commercial organisation and part of the stipulation would be the intent that the provision of parking is reserved for Downs users. This will be difficult to enforce but feedback from Downs users can be monitored to understand if there is a problem.

If the car park is to be managed commercially then alternative commercial opportunities should be explored. The site is too valuable to be considered solely as a car park and has significant potential.

Much could be done to the North car park site to make it a more functional car park and make it a more pleasant and greener environment, even provide some recreational/amenity space. Create a linear park with attractive features. A suggestion that 10% of the first 5 years' income be given for site improvements such as tree, hedge planting, seating, and landscaping.

The Downs Act precludes any permanent structure, but temporary or seasonal pop-up concessions could be investigated. Mobile units selling refreshments, a coffee-cart, dog grooming products and charging points for electric vehicles for example could be considered as potential income generators.

Recommendations.

The Downs Advisory Panel thanks the Parking Task and Finish group for their efforts in concluding the report.

The report is divided into two parts; the first dealing with managing parking on Downs highways and the second the future management of the North car park.

{Part 1} The Panel supports the principal aims to better manage parking around the Downs as detailed in the report. However, the actual solution and implementation must address the key requirements of Downs user groups listed earlier.

{Part 2} The Panel supports a partnering arrangement for the North car park to create a pay and display car park for Downs users.

The Panel recommends.

{a} That the Downs committee seek a detailed feasibility report from traffic managers on how a suitable scheme {TRO} could be costed, implemented and enforced in the short term.

{b} A further study to address the longer-term implications/possible opportunities of closing Circular Road.

{c} Support for a commercial partnership to manage the North car park.

{d} That consideration be given to maximizing the potential commercial opportunities presented by the North car park.

{e} That when in post the Downs Commercial manager considers the North car park as a commercial priority.

{f} That the car park be made an attractive feature with a suitable landscaping scheme.

{2} Back-to-Back Music Events

Events held on the Downs are an important part of its fundamental recreational purpose as well as a way of generating funds. The DC organises an annual programme of events which fulfils these aims and which provides for as wide an audience as possible, including small and culturally diverse events.

This must always be balanced with the other fundamental purpose of conservation. It must also recognise that temporarily restricting access to parts of the Downs for events has an impact upon other recreational uses. Events can also cause disruption to neighbours and other users of the space. The committee should always be mindful of these impacts when arranging the events programme, and in particular must ensure that the significant majority of the Downs remains fully accessible to the public for a significant majority of the time.

The Panel considered two elements. Firstly, the impact on Downs users and Downs near neighbours and secondly the possible impact on the local wildlife and the biodiversity of the Downs.

The Panel considered the benefit or not of two events running consecutively or for events to be suitably spaced. There are obvious economies of scale with organisers sharing infrastructure which in turn should help the Downs financially. It was noted that many of the residents with front facing properties were often elderly and that many residents moved away from the Downs during major musical events. It was clear that SPRA had established a good working relationship with the current event organisers and had been able to negotiate concessions independently.

The estimated time duration of the 'build' to accommodate a music event was only an 'extra few days' if two events were held 'back-to-back' compared with just one.

The disturbance from the build activity and the loss of amenity space whilst the build in situ would not be significantly increased, but certainly a lot less than two events requiring two builds. There would of course be two evenings with 'loud' music close together, however that may be better than two events some time apart.

In terms of impact on biodiversity, the duration of two back-to-back events are less than two separate ones, and hence there is an argument that the impact on biodiversity may be less, and maybe true for e.g. grassland recovery, which is a Downs feature. An issue was raised about the impact on bats, again the number of loud music nights is the same, just closer together. It's likely that the bat habitat areas are in the trees well to the side of the arena, and on one side quite close to the residential area, so efforts have already been made to reduce noise in this area.

The Panel recommends.

{a} That residents are kept fully informed in advance of any 'back-to-back' event arrangements.

{b} That residents can comment on those arrangements.

{c} That an article should be prepared to be pinned on the new FODAG noticeboard and circulated to local amenity groups.

{d} That the Events team ensure that new events {for example, the Circus} are made fully aware of noise restrictions and that events are suitably monitored.

{e} That the Events & Finance Group seek to provide a diverse range of events.

3 Any Other Business

The Panel discussed three added Downs related agenda items that have been dealt with locally or by the Downs supervisor. There are currently no further recommendations from the Panel.