

Downs Committee Principles

Adopted by the Downs Committee 20th May 2022

Purpose

This document is intended to set out the high-level principles by which the Downs Committee manages the Downs for the people of Bristol. This is not a detailed work plan and is not intended to replace the role of the Committee in making individual decisions. The purpose of this document is:

- To provide a framework of agreed principles within which officers can work and the Downs Committee can make decisions; and
- To provide some clarity and certainty to stakeholders and the public about how the Downs is managed.

Vision

An open downland that is protected forever for the wellbeing and enjoyment of the people of Bristol.

Background

The Downs consists of 412 acres of common land in north Bristol. It is governed under an act of Parliament dating from 1861 when the two landowners (the City Council and the Society of Merchant Venturers) combined their land to create an open space for the people of Bristol. The Act establishes the Downs Committee to manage and maintain the Downs. This is made up of equal numbers of representatives from both landowners. The Act places some constraints on how the committee works, which could only be changed by a new act of parliament, such as the fact that it must be chaired by the Lord Mayor of Bristol. The committee is an independent body, not part of the Council or of the Merchant Venturers.

Principles

Principle 1 – Space for recreation – Under the Downs Act 1861 the Downs is a “place of public resort and recreation” for all of the people of Bristol. This includes exercise, social activities and use for health and wellbeing. The Downs Committee will always give great weight to this fundamental role in its decision making.

Principle 2 – Space for nature conservation – The Downs also has a critical role as an open green space for nature conservation, clean air and education in the context of declared climate and ecological emergencies. The Downs Committee will always give great weight to this role in decision making.

Principle 3 – Funding – The Downs Act places a responsibility on Bristol City Council to provide funding for the maintenance of the Downs and the Council accepts this role within reasonable limits. However, the ambition of the Downs Committee is to support Bristol City Council in saving public money by raising revenue to fund the maintenance of the Downs. Bristol City Council may act as custodian of Downs funds, but these will always be ring-fenced under the management of the Downs Committee (the Committee should make detailed arrangements with the Council regarding the management of Downs funds). The Committee will seek to raise funds from as many diverse sources as possible which are compatible with these principles and will engage with stakeholders in developing new income sources.

Principle 4 – Events – Events held on the Downs are an important part of its fundamental recreational purpose as well as a way of generating funds. The Downs Committee will organise 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 will 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 Downs Committee works with Bristol City Council’s licencing and site permissions teams to manage the process of authorising events on the Downs.

Principle 5 – Buildings and infrastructure – The Downs Committee will not sanction any development which fundamentally alters the character of the Downs as an open green space, or which harms the fundamental objectives described here. The Downs is protected from development under the Downs Act and general planning law and nothing in this document changes or outweighs those statutory protections.

Public highways on the Downs are the responsibility of the Highways Authority (Bristol City Council). The Downs Committee has no jurisdiction over them.

There are existing buildings and other infrastructure (paths, sports and play equipment etc) on the Downs, and developments will focus primarily on repairing, updating or where necessary replacing these existing items in a way which is compatible with these principles. Any proposal will be resisted unless there is a strong case that it supports the principles.

Principle 6 – Openness and involvement – the management of the Downs should be as open and transparent as possible. Under the Downs Act the responsibility and authority for decision-making rests ultimately with the Downs Committee. The committee will keep its practices and structures under review to ensure that stakeholders (i.e. those who live, work or operate on and around the Downs) and the wider public have the best opportunities to understand, contribute to and challenge the decision-making process. Decisions will be taken in public unless there are legal or commercial reasons for information to be withheld.

Meeting procedures will provide clarity over the management of any real or perceived conflicts of interest.