

# **Proof of Evidence: Councillor David Lister**

## **Land at Lawrences Lane, Thatcham, West Berkshire**

Change of use to 7 no. Gypsy/Traveller pitches comprising 7 no. static caravans, 7 no. day rooms, 7 no. touring caravans and associated works

### **Appeal Reference: APP/W0340/W/22/3292211**

(West Berkshire Council Planning Application No: 21/02112/FUL)

#### **1 Introduction**

1. I am Councillor David Lister, a Thatcham Town Councillor for the Thatcham West Ward and a resident that lives locally to Lawrences Lane. I have been a Thatcham Town Councillor since April 2018 and have performed duties including Leader, Deputy Leader, Finance Chairman and member of the Planning and Highways Committee. I live in Blackthorn Drive which is about a 5-minute walk to the location of the proposed gypsy and traveller site. I regularly walk up/down Lawrences Lane for exercise, often daily, so am very familiar with the area.
2. During the period of 27-29<sup>th</sup> August I was the Leader of the Town Council and a member of the Planning and Highways Committee.
3. I am a Chartered Engineer with the Engineering Council, hold a degree in electrical engineering from Strathclyde University, and a master's degree in renewable energy from University of East London.
4. In this proof of evidence, I address my experience of the bank holiday weekend of 27-29<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and in the immediate days that followed. This evidence is provided from my memory of that weekend, from a combination of information that includes phone calls, social media interaction, and face-to-face conversations with residents in the local areas.

#### **2 The weekend of 27-29 August 2021 and in the immediate week that followed**

5. During the bank holiday weekend, I was on a family camping holiday but was monitoring my phone regularly. I first started to become aware of concerns from residents on the Friday evening, 27<sup>th</sup> August, via direct message and postings on social media apps. The first messages were inquisitive – asking whether there was any expectation related to permitted development on Lawrences Lane. However, by the end of Friday evening, I began to receive and observe messages on social media that referred to large convoys of heavy vehicles that were queuing up on the access to Lawrences Lane, including vehicles that were backing up onto Floral Way.
6. On Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> August I monitored a series of messages on social media (Facebook and Twitter). Residents had posted their distress at the noise through Friday night, the uncertainty of what was happening, and concern at the heavy vehicles blocking the Lane

restricting access for other users – pedestrians and vehicles alike. It was immediately apparent to me that unauthorised development was progressing as I am familiar that the area is outside the permitted development boundary, and I was aware that no planning application had been submitted and reviewed by the Town Council Planning Committee that could explain such a significant development.

7. By early evening on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> August, I had returned home (Blackthorn Drive, Thatcham) and walked up Lawrences Lane towards the site. By this time, the site had been gated, a high fence had been erected, and there was continuous heavy machinery noise associated with earth moving. I received further messages from concerned residents through the day enquiring as to what was the development, why it had continued through the previous night-time, and when it would finish. Accounts from residents indicated that the work had been continuous from approximately 7pm Friday evening, through Saturday and Sunday.
8. On each of the following days of the next week (30<sup>th</sup> August through to 5<sup>th</sup> September) I walked up Lawrences Lane and passed the site. There was continuous activity and noise from heavy equipment until at least Tuesday, 31<sup>st</sup> August. Sometime during this week, I was invited onto a residents WhatsApp Group who were sharing pictures of the heavy vehicles that were using the lane. One image indicated that a large lorry has completely blocked the lane to the extent that a resident was having to squeeze against it and an adjacent earth-bank to pass by. At times the lane was effectively impassable for pedestrians, and was often blocked to other vehicle users.
9. Through the week, it was clear from messages received and face-to-face conversations with residents living close to, and immediately opposite the site, that there was an increasing sense of concern and worry. Residents had expressed concern on multiple issues: uncertainty, worry about extent of development, continuous noise, and concern for safety when using the Lane due to increased car-usage on the lane in addition to heavy vehicles.
10. On one occasion during this week, as a pedestrian I encountered a car that I felt was travelling too fast for the lane. This car pulled up to the gated access of the site, where the driver was met from a person from the site. I spoke to the driver and asked him to drive more slowly and to be considerate to pedestrians, families, and cyclists using the lane. I can't recall exactly the words spoken by the driver in response but can say that it was an aggressive and threatening response which left me shaken.

### **3 Amenity impact on local residents**

11. The overall impact to residents has been of distress. The development commenced on a Friday night of a bank holiday weekend when it was impossible to obtain information from the primary local authority, West Berkshire Council. Many residents were angry, seeing a development proceed so quickly without break over many days, which included many heavy vehicles and earth moving. Other residents were concerned for either personal safety, or safety to property, as they had experienced curt or threatening language when approaching drivers of vehicles or workmen on site. Residents expressed their feeling of unfairness: if they were to develop their property or land then authorised consent would

need to be obtained, whilst the approach taken on the Gypsy site was seen to be contrary to the structures that we respect as a society. Taken together, this has created a sense of distrust and isolation between the Gypsy community and existing residents.