

# **Proof of Evidence: Councillor Lee Dillon**

## **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 Lee Dillon, a Councillor for the Thatcham North East Ward for both Thatcham Town Council and West Berkshire Council. I have been a Thatcham Town Councillor for 2007 - present and a West Berkshire Councillor for 2007-2011 and 2015 - present. I am currently the Leader of Thatcham Town Council and the Leader of the Opposition as the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group of West Berkshire Council. I live within Thatcham North East Ward.
2. I have worked for the last 13 years for a major social landlord - in housing management, community investment and resident engagement. This involves working directly with home owners across tenures to help create sustainable communities.
3. The boundaries of the Town Council area and West Berkshire Council's North East ward differ slightly. The site is within the parish of Thatcham, with the parish boundary running along Lawrences Lane. The West Berkshire Council ward also includes the housing to the west of Lawrences Way, including the cul-de-sac part of Lawrences Lane, Acorn Drive and Southend.
4. In this proof of evidence, I describe my experience of the bank holiday weekend of 27-29 August 2021, over which the site was occupied and development started, and my engagement with concerned and affected residents.

#### **2 The weekend of 13-15th August 2021**

5. I was first contacted early on Saturday morning by residents of Lawrences Lane, Acorn Drive and Southend; they were concerned about the level of ground works taking place in the lane, the disruption this was causing to local roads with heavy goods vehicle causing delays at the roundabout on Floral Way, and damage done to trees in the lane itself. I therefore attended the site to see for myself what was happening.
6. The site was open, so I walked onto site with my West Berkshire Councillor ID badge around my neck. There were approximately thirty workmen on site carrying out heavy ground works and putting down hardcore. I approached a workman on a mini-digger and asked to speak to the site foreman or owner. I was told no-one on site fitted that description. I asked what they were doing to the land, but was told they didn't know and was just doing as they were told. By Saturday morning they had already cleared the land where the bases are

now sat and hardcore was down in all but one of the plots. I then reported this to the WBC out-of-hours service to ask for a response from our planning team.

7. I attended the site again on Sunday. The construction work had continued through the night so the site was even more developed than my previous visit. I had a conversation with the landowner and some other people who had been on site the previous day, but who had not then made themselves known to me or answered my questions. It was only then apparent what the purpose of the works was for.

## **2 Impact on amenity**

8. I have lived in Thatcham for my whole life (apart from university) and went to school in Cold Ash, so I am well aware of the value of Lawrences Lane to local residents. School children use it as a safe walking route to St Finnian's Primary School in Cold Ash. During Covid it became one of the busiest walking routes in the town, as it gives direct access to the AONB that starts at The Ridge at the northern end of the lane.
9. The Town Council recognises this value to residents, and before these works had started it had already applied to WBC to have the lane turned into a non-vehicle access route to encourage the same level of pedestrian travel as seen during Covid.
10. Lawrences Lane is seen within Thatcham as the start of the countryside, and the works carried out have made the lane less attractive, have caused greatly increased vehicle movements (the closure of the lane is further north than the entrance to the site that the occupiers use) and clearly resulted in loss on green infrastructure.

## **3 Impact on local residents**

11. Whilst the physical impact of the works is clear, the social impact is just as important. Local residents enjoyed a quiet country lane - and over one weekend, without any warning, saw the character of their lane destroyed. Trees were cut down to allow access for large vehicles (trees not on the owner's property) and construction machinery ran day and night, ruining a quiet bank holiday weekend. As residents had been given no advance notice of these works, the trust that could have existed between both groups was immediately broken. Further integration into the wider community has also been impacted by the damage done to the local environment such as the value of the lane to the community.
12. Residents have expressed a clear belief that these works were carried out over a bank holiday weekend to give the greatest opportunity to complete the works before enforcement action could be taken. This has led local residents to believe these are not the actions of a group that want to embed themselves with the existing community, but one that seeks to force acceptance.