

Coventry Stadium Appeal

APPEAL REF: APP/E3715/W/23/3322013

Coventry Stadium, Rugby Road, Coventry, CV8 3GJ

Proof of Evidence of Mark Sexton

Director, Thurrock Hammers Limited



1. I am Mark Sexton, a director of Thurrock Hammers Limited whose registered office is at Bellefield House, 104 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0RG, a company incorporated in 2019 to restore Speedway in Thurrock. I have been involved in Speedway in various capacities for over 50 years. I was not involved in the management but was the Community Liaison Officer for Lakeside Hammers from 2009 until Lakeside Hammers ceased to trade as a result of the closure of the Arena Essex site by its current owner.
2. My first visit to a Speedway meeting at Coventry Stadium was in May 1976. In the following years until its closure in 2016 I attended numerous British Finals, the National League Riders Championship in 1987 and numerous other team events. I know Coventry Stadium to be one of the best Speedway venues in the United Kingdom.
3. In his cross-examination of Neil Allen, Mr Goatley KC raised an issue which Mr Allen was not able to answer or address. As a result, a false and misleading impression may have been created which I am concerned will mislead the Inspector and which I am in a position to rectify.
4. Mr Goatley KC suggested that the attempt to reinstate Speedway in Thurrock would be frustrated by the insolvency of Thurrock Council. This is not the case.
5. In or around 2010 Grays Athletic Football Club based in Thurrock lost its ground to development. No replacement facilities were established. I have been informed by Councillor John Kent, former leader of Thurrock Council, that the Council put in place specific policies (Thurrock Council refs: CSTP9, PMD5) to protect sporting facilities following of the loss of the Grays Athletic ground to ensure that such a loss would not be repeated.
6. Those policies were applied in the case of Aveley Football Club, where the creation of a new ground with associated facilities including 3G training pitches was a condition of planning permission for residential development of its ground.
7. The Speedway track is situated on the Arena Essex site, a 125-acre site close to the Dartford Bridge and the M25 in Thurrock. The current owner's planning application is for 2,500 dwellings. Its proposed section 106 budget is in excess of £29 million in money or money's worth (as published on the Thurrock Council Planning Application website) (p. 1 of Appendix MS1). Whilst the application of the funds suggested by the site's current owner ignores Speedway and the national and local policies, our Campaign seeks to ensure that part of this budget will be applied to satisfy the NPPF requirements and Thurrock Council's current policies to protect sporting facilities at risk as a result of proposed development and our Campaign has engaged with the Planning and Political processes to do so.
8. As a result, to reflect the policy, precedent, budget and substantial local, regional and national support Thurrock Council unanimously passed a motion on 25 January 2023 to support the retention of Speedway in Thurrock viz *Thurrock Council resolves to use the Local Plan process to support the retention of **Speedway** in Thurrock and identify a new home for Grays Athletic.*
9. At no time has any funding been sought from Thurrock Council, neither will any funding be sought in the future. At no time has any suggestion been made that Thurrock Council will construct or manage a new Speedway facility. Its insolvency will not interfere with the application of the NPPF, current Council policies or the section 106 funds in question.
10. On the contrary the objective is, in addition to the preservation of the existing or the creation of new Speedway facilities, to use the planning process to ensure that part of the section 106 budget is applied to create a Speedway facility with additional community benefit.

11. Parts of John Eady's evidence in chief have been inaccurate. I address the relevant points to rectify them.
12. Lakeside Hammers ceased to trade at the end of the 2018 season when the Arena Essex site was closed to all forms of motorsport by its current owner. There was no other track in Thurrock or in the wider Essex area on which Lakeside Hammers could race.
13. At the request of Jon Cook, the promoter of Lakeside Hammers, who I am sad to say has since died, I met a Director of the current owner of the Arena Essex site, London Strategic Land Limited, on 29 November 2018 to ask for the site to be made available for use for Speedway. The request was refused.
14. This decision brought to an end 35 years of Speedway on the Arena Essex site during which time it was Thurrock's highest level and best attended team sporting activity, average spectator attendances being significantly in excess of the Borough's non-league football clubs. Speedway again found itself suffering from a lack of a stake in the ground and a victim of the decision of a landowner, the land tenure issue which has been identified during this Appeal Hearing.
15. In his evidence Mr Eady referred to the company of which I am a Director, namely Thurrock Hammers Limited. He did so by suggesting that the Lakeside Hammers team moved to the Rye House Stadium and became the Thurrock Hammers. This is not correct. Thurrock Hammers Limited had not been incorporated at the material time and has never raced at Rye House Stadium.
16. The arrangement of racing at Rye House in 2018 was because sufficient dates for Lakeside Hammers to complete its fixture obligations were not available at Arena Essex, another example of the land tenure problem.
17. Mr Eady also failed to mention a key fact to put what he claimed to be the attendance figures between 2008 and 2017 in context.
18. Lakeside Hammers competed in the Sky Sports Elite League, the highest tier of professional speedway in the UK, between 2008 and 2016.
19. Lakeside Hammers competed in the National Development League in 2017. This is a semi-professional league in which the best riders do not compete and which typically attracts lower spectator numbers.
20. In 2018 Lakeside Hammers competed in the Championship, which is the second fully professional tier of British Speedway. I do not know the exact attendances figures but am aware from my work as Community Liaison Officer and my track day attendances that the 2018 attendance figures were significantly higher than those reported by the landlord in 2017. This is not reflected in the evidence given by Mr Eady.
21. Over 3,000 spectators attended the final Lakeside Hammers meeting at Arena Essex on 14 September 2018.