

# **Dog park neighbour traumatised by tragic blaze past**

**A friend of a woman who died in a caravan fire with her pet dogs has told of the trauma caused after a dog walking business set up on the site of the tragedy.**

Audrey Schonwalder fought back tears as she urged East Lothian councillors not to give permission for the business to carry on operating on the field where Julie Melville and her pets died over six years ago.

She said the noise created by the dogs on the site had sparked panic attacks and left her feeling trapped in her home, which lies next to the field, as she was reminded of the night her friend lost her life.

Mrs Schonwalder, who suffers from COPD, told a meeting of the council's planning committee: "My COPD has worsened since they have been walking the dogs there, the noise and the trauma I go through. I can't open my windows, I can't go outside, I feel trapped."

Ian Troke, of Harry's Hounding Around dog walking service, had applied for retrospective planning permission to operate the company from the field, at Thorntonloch, near Torness.

Julie Melville lived on the site in a caravan for several years with her pets before the fire in October 2018 which sent

shockwaves through the local community.

Recalling the loss, Mrs Schonwalder said: "My good friend Julie had pedigree sheep that won prizes at local shows along with her chickens, goats and two horses and last, but not least, five beautiful dogs.

"The dogs barked at any walker or car passing her gate and I felt she was protected as she lived on her own.

"In October 2018 we were awoken by numerous blue lights flashing, flames were exploding out of her windows and her door blew off.

"Before we reached the junction we could hear dogs barking and a woman's voice, it was not hers, only wee Mindy the whippet survived. The other dogs were found beside her body.

"I couldn't look at the field for more than a year because it broke my heart.

"I did start to improve until the dog walkers came. As soon as they started barking, and fighting, I went into a panic attack. I have COPD and my doctor said this triggers anxiety and makes panic attacks worse, it is like a mega asthma attack."

Local councillor Lyn Jardine, who called in the application to be discussed at the meeting, commended Mrs Schonwalder for coming before committee to speak about her experience of the site.

She urged the committee to consider restricting hours of operation at the business adding: "We have a very rural community here which is sparsely populated but we do know noise travels a significant distance."

Mr Troke told the committee he was aware of the impact of noise and worked hard with his team to ensure it is kept to a minimum.

He said three vans brought up to 50 dogs to the site every morning during the week but they all left by 12.30pm each day.

He said: "The noise, when we first get there in the morning and let three van loads of dogs out there is a little bit of commotion as you can imagine. You have 40 to 50 dogs who all want to talk to each other when they get out the vans but within about five minutes that calms down.

"They are dogs, they will bark but that happens during the day only on one-offs. We very rarely have mass noise or an altercation which creates an awful lot of noise."

Asked if dogs had ever been excluded from the business he said he had only done it twice in six years – once with a German Shepherd who had behavioural issues and once with a chihuahua who just "wouldn't shut up".

He said: "Those two dogs' owners were politely informed we could not take them back."

Planning convenor Norman Hampshire backed a proposal to allow the business to operate for one year with monitoring and restrict hours of use on site.

He said as a local ward member he had also had concerns raised about the business urging its operators to find a way to work with their neighbours.

He said: "I would say to the applicant you are bringing this business to this rural community, people live there, that is their home, and you need to do everything you can to try and minimise any impact on them while you operate this business."

Councillor Colin McGinn said he had constituents who used the service adding dog walking businesses like it were providing a valuable support to dog owners post pandemic as he backed the application.

However Councillor Jeremy Findlay told the committee: "As the

planning committee we are not here to support new businesses but the people living in our communities.”

He added: “You could hear the emotion in the objector’s voices. I think this is a step too far for people living in this area.”

The committee agreed by eight votes to one with Councillor Findlay objecting, to allow the business to operate for one year with operating hours restricted to between 8.30am to 1pm Monday to Friday with an additional condition that the dog area would not be leased out or used out with those hours.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter