

SPELTHORNE LOCAL PLAN

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF SPELTHORNE BOROUGH COUNCIL

1. Sir, can I first add my own welcome to that of Mr Mouawad, to you and the other attendees, to the resumption of the examination hearings into the Local Plan. The Council is grateful for the continued constructive approach you have taken during the pause and in resuming the examination sessions.
2. Much has happened since the pause to the examination in 2023. These events will be discussed in more detail shortly within the examination. A number of important matters changed in the interim, or remain in a state of flux. The Council has a new administration following the elections of May 2023. There is a new Government. Prior to that there were foreshadowed and then published changes in national policy in the form of the NPPF 2023. New important legislation has come forward in the shape of LURA 2023. Key provisions relating to local plan preparation are not yet in force, but are likely to guide the review of this Local Plan in due course. Similarly, whilst we continue to apply the NPPF 2021 for the purposes of this examination, in December 2024 the new Government published the NPPF 2024. Amongst other things that guidance makes further provision for review of Local Plans. The cases for review include those where planned provision falls below a certain percentage of local housing need as now assessed. That case will apply to Spelthorne. It is therefore clear that this plan, like many others at similar stages, will now require early review. Lastly, in terms of recent context, there is also the prospect of local government reorganisation, with Surrey CC pursuing an application to become a Mayoral Strategic Authority; and the approach of Government to Heathrow Airport is currently under discussion.

3. Notwithstanding all those changes, this Local Plan has a fundamental role to play in providing guidance to the determination of planning applications and making necessary allocations of land to provide much needed market and affordable housing, in accordance with a sustainable spatial strategy. In doing so the Plan has had to grapple with the very substantial constraints Spelthorne faces. They are set out in the examination documents. At a high level they comprise: Flood risk, with 18% of the Borough in FZ3 and a further 24% in FZ2; Waterbodies, covering 22% of the Borough, Nature Designations, over 45% of the Borough, protections for the operation of Heathrow Airport; the Metropolitan Green Belt, covering some 65% of the Borough; safeguarding for the River Thames Scheme; and the designation of waste and minerals sites.
4. Of course, a deal of work had been undertaken during the written part of the examination. This led to the answers contained in the Council's initial hearing statements to the examination, which assisted to narrow a number of the issues the examination is tasked with considering.
5. Since the pause much further detailed work has taken place on some of the key issues identified. The Council maintains its position in relation to considered release of Green Belt sites in order to allow its housing need to substantially be met, and to ensure that a number of sites can come forward in the early years of the plan, providing 5 years of housing land supply. Substantial further work, in conjunction with the Environment Agency, has been undertaken in relation to flood risk. A further SFRA of October 2024 is available to the examination, representing the culmination of several updates carried out across 2023-2024 with the benefit of detailed input from the Environment Agency. Also in October 2024, a Statement of Common Ground was agreed between the Council and the Environment Agency.

6. A version of the emerging Local Plan has been produced which indicates the Main Modifications which have been the subject of discussion to date. Amongst other things they alter the allocations made for housing land supply; provide more detailed policy guidance for assessing flood risk, and include a policy for early review of the Plan. The Council looks forward to continuing to assist your examination through the hearing sessions and afterwards.
7. A broader Spatial Portrait of Spelthorne is set out in Appendix A to the Local Plan. Spelthorne had a population of 99,000 (now 103,000 – census) and is home to over 7,500 businesses. It covers approximately 19.75 sq miles. Spelthorne is located where the continuous built-up area of London gives way to a more dispersed pattern of urban areas and villages. It benefits from good transport links to both London and the South East. As I have mentioned, the urban area of the Borough occupies 35% of the land. The balance of 65% is designated as Green Belt. The constraints within the Borough have important roles to play in sustainable planning. This Green Belt land has an important strategy role in containing the outward spread of the capital and protecting the countryside from encroachment, as well as separating some of the existing settlements. Within the Green Belt are five major water supply reservoirs and a water treatment works at Ashford Common. Spelthorne adjoins the River Thames and is low lying. Spelthorne contains areas of national and international significance for nature conservation. Most of its major reservoirs form part of the South West London Waterbodies SPA, in recognition of their international significance as a habitat for two particular species of birds. In addition, Staines Moor forms a substantial SSSI.
8. Development plan preparation in such a constrained area is, and has remained, challenging. The Council has adopted an overarching strategy which meets this challenge, addressing the issues both general and particular that are identified in the Spatial Portrait. Following the various public consultations which have taken place since 2018, and which led to this stage, the strategy has been formed by

listening to the local community. It is based on choice and balance: The choice to decide where development should take place, and the balance between meeting need against the adverse impacts of doing so. The Government intends that the planning system should be plan led. Having an up-to-date, evidence based Local Plan allows the Borough to take a proactive approach to planning for and managing growth in a way that most benefits its present and future residents, while protecting what is most important.

9. The overarching strategy of the Council seeks to meet its identified development needs in full, in a way consistent with Government guidance, whilst protecting strategically important Green Belt. To optimise density of new building in developed areas where character allows, while offering the opportunity for lower building heights in the most sensitive areas of Staines. It will preserve publicly accessible open spaces in the urban area. Additional provision will be made for family homes and affordable housing, with appropriate levels of community facilities and other infrastructure. Lastly, but no less importantly, the Local Plan will respond to the climate emergency.
10. The Local Plan as submitted contained a suite of 24 policies to effectively bring forward and deliver those benefits. The policies include Strategic Policies setting out the needs of the Borough; Place Shaping Policies to ensure high standards of design in development and the protection of heritage assets; Spatial Policies to guide development in the settlements, protect the Green Belt, support the Colne Valley Regional Park; and to recognise the importance and opportunities provided by the River Thames.
11. Specific Housing Policies will provide a wide choice of homes to address a range of accommodation needs, including provision of Affordable Housing, Accessible Homes and Specialist Accommodation, as well as meeting the needs of the travelling community.

12. Specific Environmental Policies will make provision for high standards of Green Infrastructure and, in appropriate locations, Blue Infrastructure; they will enhance biodiversity, improve the natural environment of the Borough; manage flood risk, and support strategic flood relief measures including the River Thames Scheme; they will protect, maintain and enhance existing open spaces, securing appropriate on-site open space provision within new developments. In doing so, the Local Plan will provide high levels of protection to the Local Green Spaces it designates those spaces, having been identified following consultation with the community.

13. Policies supporting economic growth will maintain and intensify the use of the Borough's employment floorspace offer, protecting in particular the five designated Strategic Employment Areas. Local centres and shopping parades will be protected and supported, recognising their value to the communities they serve. The policies of the plan make provision for appropriate levels of infrastructure to support new development, and ensure that opportunities to facilitate sustainable and active modes of travel will be taken up.

14. Heathrow Airport lies immediately north of the Borough. Some 7% of Spelthorne's population (3,525 people) work at the airport. A concentration of airport supporting facilities is located in the north of the Borough. However, the current position in relation to expansion of the airport is uncertain. In those circumstances Policy SP7 provides a framework for supporting future expansion of the airport, if done in a sustainable and integrated way in accordance with the goals set out in that policy, in recognition of the potential economic benefits and opportunities that an expanded airport could bring to Spelthorne, the wider South East, and the UK as a whole.

15. To take forward the policies of the Local Plan, Chapter 10 made some 55 specific and detailed allocations of land to address the identified needs arising to 2037. These allocations have been significantly updated since submission to respond

to the updated assessments of flood risk, further information relating to the deliverability of sites, and changes “on the ground”.

16. In doing all this the Local Plan is supported by a proportionate evidence base, and represents an appropriate strategy for the way forward to 2040.

17. Drawing these threads together, the Council seeks to progress its Local Plan, subject to appropriate main modifications, through to adoption. The plan has struck an appropriate balance, in seeking to proactively and positively resolve the inevitable tensions in planning considerations that arise in highly constrained Boroughs. The Council looks forward to progressing the plan further through these resumed examination sessions.

WAYNE BEGLAN

CORNERSTONE BARRISTERS