

## Topic Paper 2 - The Journey of our Local Plan

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper sets out the background to preparation of the Local Plan, including the ember engagement and the consultations undertaken.
- 1.2 Spelthorne's current key Development Plan document, the Core Strategy and Policies DPD, was adopted in 2009 and can be found here: <https://www.spelthorne.gov.uk/article/17620/Development-Plan-2009>.
- 1.3 The journey of the Local Plan began back in 2014 with work starting on the Staines Development Framework SPD (SDF) in earnest back in 2020. Both documents have been a collaboration between 21 Members on a cross party basis, via two task groups: the Local Plan Task Group and the Staines Development Task Group. Since June 2020, the 'collective team' have spent over 100 hours in task group meetings (Tables 1 and 2 below) and debated matters at 11 Cabinet and Environment and Sustainability Committee meetings (Table 3 below) and a full meeting of the Council.
- 1.4 The SDF is intrinsically linked to the Local Plan and will be adopted alongside it, although as supplementary guidance it does not require examination like the Plan does. Instead, it will be a core document and has been submitted with the Local Plan. It was agreed by the Environment & Sustainability Committee on 8 November 2022 as the final version, subject to any changes to the overarching Policy SP1: Staines upon Thames in the Local Plan.

### 2 Where are we now?

- 2.1 Spelthorne Council submitted its new Local Plan to Secretary of State on 28 November 2022. The next steps will be for an inspector to be appointed, who will examine the Plan and advise us if it is 'sound' and can be adopted. To reach this point, the Local Plan has been through three rounds of extensive public consultation. There have been two rounds of public consultations on the draft SDF (Table 4 below).
- 2.2 Pivotal to a lot of councillor debate has been whether or not the Borough should meet its housing need in full. This has been debated vociferously by councillors throughout the development of the documents. Each time, councillors have reached the conclusion that the right approach is to meet our need. Throughout preparation of both documents, the Council has made continued and compelling attempts to central government to have our housing number reduced.
- 2.3 The Regulation 19 and SDF consultation commenced on 15 June 2022, ending on 5 September 2022 (the Regulation 19 consultation was extended to 21 September 2022). A consultation strategy was agreed by both task groups, which include physical events again plus a dedicated 10-page section of the summer edition of the Bulletin, the Council's magazine delivered to every household in the Borough (appx 40,000).
- 2.4 The starting point for the examination is the assumption that the Council has submitted what it considers to be a sound plan. The Submission Version of the Local Plan is positively prepared, based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements; is justified by robust evidence; can be delivered; and is consistent with national policy. The Plan is positively prepared, based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements; is justified by robust evidence; can be delivered; and is consistent with national policy. We have also carried out our responsibilities under the Duty to Cooperate and engaged effectively with our neighbouring authorities. As such, the Plan

is considered to meet the test of soundness and is therefore a step closer to examination and eventual adoption.

- 2.5 We consider this to be a positive Plan for the Borough that spreads the impact of development and is considerably preferable to the no Plan or out of date Plan consequences we currently face. The small amount of Green Belt release enables us to deliver significant benefits and although much has been made of this ‘pain’ in political messaging, in reality even with a lower housing need figure officers would still recommend most of the Green Belt sites for allocation to deliver those benefits.

### 3 Background

- 3.1 The table below sets out in full the background and journey so far for both the Pre-Submission Publication Version of the Local Plan and the Staines Development Framework. This work has been a collaboration between Members on a cross-party basis over several years, supported by officers in the Strategic Planning Team. The Local Plan Task Group comprises a Member from each ward plus the chair and vice chair of the task group and the vice chair of Environment and Sustainability committee (16 in all). The Staines Development Task Group comprises all Members from each Staines ward plus the chair and vice chair of the Environment and Sustainability Committee (12 in all). Overall, 21 of the 39 Spelthorne councillors have been directly involved in this process.

Stage	Decision date	Key information	Housing need pa
<b>Local Plan Issues and Options</b>	Cabinet 24 April 2018	Four options 1) to intensify brownfield (previously developed) sites in the urban area, (2) release Green Belt (3) maximise development opportunities in Staines upon Thames or (4) a combination of these approaches.  Consultation May – June 2018	NPPF places great emphasis on meeting housing need  Between 552 and 757*
<b>Local Plan Issues and Options</b>	Cabinet 26 September 2018	Agreed response document - published September 2018	590
<b>Local Plan Preferred Options</b>	Cabinet 25 September 2019	Agreed fourth option – combination of approaches  Releasing 1.6% of green belt and a further 100 units per year in Staines (identified through Staines Development Framework)  Consultation November 2019 – January 2020	603**
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Cabinet 8 April 2020	Agreed the appointment of David Lock Associates  DLA appointed May 2020	

<b>Covid-19</b>	<b>From March 2020</b>	<b>National lockdown and move to remote working</b> Strategic Planning team redeployed to welfare work until late Spring	
<b>Local Plan Preferred Options</b>	Cabinet 23 September 2020	Publication of consultation response document. Rearward assessment of responses only – no decisions on future direction of the Local Plan	606**
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Task Group Autumn – Winter 2020	Developed an Analysis and Review Paper Considered elements to be included within the Objectives and Options consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) Sustainable and inclusive growth</li><li>(2) Resilient and inclusive town centre</li><li>(3) People friendly streets and spaces</li><li>(4) Sustainable access</li><li>(5) Integrating riverside with open spaces</li><li>(6) Access to useable and attractive recreation facilities</li></ul>	
<b>Local Plan – revised housing figure</b>	Cabinet 4 November 2020	Local Plan Task Group wanted to consider a ‘brownfield only’ strategy Decision to proceed with the lower provisional housing number to determine level of development  December 2020 – Government do not proceed with lower figure	Government consultation dropped figure to 489***  606****
<b>Local Plan</b>	Task Group Autumn – Winter 2020  Task Group	Examined scope to increase density and yield assumptions on brownfield sites to lower the deficit to be met by Green Belt sites  Call for Sites exercise (developers and landowners)	606****

		Considered whether there was scope to identify further opportunity sites	
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Cabinet 29 March 2021	Agreed the Analysis and Review report  Agreed the Objectives and Options report, and consultation questionnaire  Consultation 18 May to 29 June 2021	
<b>Spelthorne moves from Cabinet system to Committee system – May 2021</b>			
<b>Local Plan – revised strategy</b>	E&S Committee 13 July 2021	Meet small deficit by releasing 0.6% of Green Belt  No longer include an additional allocation for Staines  Considered a list of further potential Green Belt sites	611****
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	E&S Committee 6 October 2021	Agreed the publication of the consultation response document	
<b>Local Plan</b>	Task Group Autumn 21 – Spring 22	Further consideration of site allocations  Developing and reviewing the draft policies	611****
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Task Group Autumn 21 – Spring 22	Developing proposed zoning areas for the town.  Developing 6 big ideas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) Connecting to the rivers</li><li>(2) Development that respects character</li><li>(3) Healthy streets for people</li><li>(4) New open spaces</li><li>(5) Redevelopment of Elmsleigh and Tothill</li><li>(6) Design for urban living</li></ul>	
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Task Group 31 March 2022	Agreed the draft SDF could proceed for consideration by E&S Committee.	
<b>Local Plan</b>	Task Group 6 April 2022	Review of publication draft of the Local Plan  Discussion on climate change (low to zero carbon) and accessible homes	618****

		Whether Plan could be amended should the standard model for housing need change Concerns remain over the zoning approach in the SDF Agreed by majority to support the draft Local Plan for consideration by E&S Committee	
<b>Local Plan and Staines Development Framework</b>	E&S Committee 26 April 2022	Both documents recommended to Council for final consultation and submission	618****
<b>Local Plan and Staines Development Framework</b>	Council 19 May 2022	Both documents agreed to proceed by a majority of 3:1	618****
<b>Staines Development Framework</b>	E&S Committee 8 November 2022	Post consultation version agreed as final draft	

\* Figure from Strategic Market Housing Assessment, which was the way of calculating need at the time

\*\* Figure derived from government standard methodology

\*\*\* Figure derived from revised provisional government standard methodology

\*\*\*\* Figure derived from government standard methodology – higher due to annual calculation

- 3.2 In addition to the work undertaken by previous iterations of the task groups, the current Local Plan Task Group and Staines Development Task Group have met on 57 occasions since their inception in June 2020, equating to over 100 hours of meetings. This is a considerable amount of involvement in plan preparation in comparison to other authorities but demonstrates the commitment to achieving the task with as much input from every ward and every political grouping as possible.
- 3.3 Table 1 sets out more detail around the work of the Local Plan Task Group, whilst Table 2 sets out the work of the Staines Development Task Group

**Table 1**

Local Plan Task Group	Number of Meetings	Time
Since inception June 2020	34	61 hours
Discussion Topic	No. of meetings per topic	
Sites	15	26 hours
Strategy	7	13 hours

Policies	5	8.5 hours
Infrastructure Delivery Plan	2	3.5 hours
Other	5	10 hours

**Table 2**

Staines Development Task Group	Number of Meetings	Time
Since inception June 2020	24	46 hours
Discussion Topic	No. of meetings per topic	
Analysis	2	3.5 hours
Objectives and Options (including consultation)	4	6.5 hours
Objectives and Options (feedback)	3	5 hours
Locations for higher densities (zoning)	6	13 hours
Riverside	2	3 hours
Infrastructure Delivery Plan	2	3 hours
Post consultation amendments	1	1.5 hours
Other	5	10.5 hours

- 3.4 In addition to the work of the Task Groups, decisions have been made by councillors at all key stages of the development of both the Local Plan and the Staines Development Framework. This has been a critical part of the process, ensuring that all the relevant information has been provided to councillors to ensure open, transparent and informed decision making. It has also enabled an ongoing, robust debate to be held within a public arena. This process has enabled councillors to periodically check and review the direction of travel.

**Table 3**

Councillor Decision	Body	Date
Consult on 4 options for the <b>Local Plan</b>	Cabinet	24 April 2018
Agreed consultation response document for the <b>Local Plan</b>	Cabinet	26 September 2018
Agreed the fourth option (combination) for the <b>Local Plan</b> for consultation	Cabinet	25 September 2019
Agreed the appointment of consultants for the <b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Cabinet	8 April 2020
Agreed the consultation response document on Preferred Options for the <b>Local Plan</b> for publication	Cabinet	23 September 2020
Agreed to proceed with the lower provisional housing figure for the <b>Local Plan</b> in anticipation it would be formally adopted	Cabinet	4 November 2020
Agreed the Analysis and Review report, the Objectives and Options report, and the Objectives and Options consultation questionnaire for the <b>Staines Development Framework</b>	Cabinet	29 March 2021
Agreed the revised strategy for the <b>Local Plan</b> (meet housing need, release approximately 0.6% of Green Belt and no longer include an additional housing allocation for Staines)	E&S Committee	13 July 2021
Agreed the publication of the consultation response document for the <b>Staines Development Framework</b>	E&S Committee	6 October 2021
Agreed Submission Version of <b>Local Plan</b> (now 0.7% Green Belt release) and draft <b>Staines Development Framework</b>	E&S Committee	26 April 2022
	Council	19 May 2022

### Public consultation

- 3.5 All the documents leading up to this point have been the subject of full public consultation, where all our residents, businesses and interested parties have had the opportunity to have their say. Key stages have been agreed through the formal decision-making process (see Table 3 above). Whilst the Plan must comply with national planning policy and guidance, there are decisions to be made locally on the overall strategy and direction of the Plan and these have been Member-led, with support and professional advice from officers, taking account of consultation feedback. Table 4 below sets out the formal consultation steps to date and the level of engagement.

**Table 4**

Consultation	Dates	Number of people or organisations responding
<b>Local Plan</b> Issues & Options	14 May – 25 June 2018	247
<b>Local Plan</b> Preferred Options	5 November 2019 – 21 January 2020	437 plus seven petitions of several hundred signatures each
<b>Staines Development Framework</b> Objectives & Options	18 May – 29 June 2021	745
<b>Local Plan</b> Regulation 19	15 June – 21 September 2022	370
<b>Staines Development Framework</b> Final Draft	15 June – 5 September 2022	47 (many comments related to the Local Plan and were considered there)

- 3.6 Consultation strategies have been agreed by Members of the respective task groups, which have aimed to reach as many people in the Borough as possible through a variety of methods. These have included pull-out sections of the Bulletin or leaflets sent to every household in Spelthorne, physical events such as public meetings at the Council Offices and stalls in areas of high footfall (prior to Covid-19), and making use of social media, especially during pandemic restrictions when physical interaction was more limited.

#### Housing need number

- 3.7 Throughout preparation of both documents, the issue of housing need has been prevalent. The table in this report sets out how the Council's housing need figure has altered as we have progressed through the various stages of plan preparation. The Council has made continued and compelling attempts to have the standard method for calculating need amended to reduce the figure for Spelthorne.
- 3.8 Correspondence setting out our efforts can be found here: <https://www.spelthorne.gov.uk/article/20561/Council-challenge-the-Government-and-local-MP-on-housing-numbers>. Without a change to the method itself and with our current rate of under-delivery against objectively assessed need, the strategy has remained to aim to meet our need in full and that balancing the benefits of doing so against the limited harm of releasing just 0.7% of our Green Belt amounts to Exceptional Circumstances to allow us to amend the boundaries. Evidence produced for the Local Plan shows that whilst the need figure is high, we can deliver on this number without resulting in adverse impacts such as to the highway network, the environment or local infrastructure and services, subject to investment identified through the Infrastructure Delivery Plan.
- 3.9 It is also worth noting that the zoning proposals for Staines are only likely to be considered sound by the inspector if we are meeting the housing need in full throughout the Plan period. Zoning effectively limits potential housing supply by stipulating maximum heights and densities in certain more sensitive locations in the town, which could be seen as contrary to national policy on optimising development opportunities in urban and sustainable locations such as Staines. Our defence to this is that overall we will be meeting housing need and therefore this allows us the choice to consider limiting development potential in some areas where justified.

## **4 Current position and consideration of alternative options**

- 4.1 The topic paper titled Spatial Strategy outlines the aim of the Local Plan to deliver choice and balance for our residents. The Strategic Planning Team has been responsible for producing and commissioning the full evidence base to support the Local Plan, which has required updating at various points of the process due to the passage of time. The volume of work produced is indicative of just how much supporting evidence is required for the production of a Local Plan and the difficulty in keeping the evidence up to date when there are delays in production. The full evidence base is available online.
- 4.2 The decision to submit the Local Plan is key to ensuring progress can be made to deliver on the timetable set out in the approved Local Development Scheme (LDS). It is crucial that the new Local Plan is in place before the deadline of December 2023 which has been imposed on all Councils by central government. Failing to do so runs the very real risk of control of its production being taken away from Spelthorne.
- 4.3 The LDS was updated last year (in part due to the early stages of Covid when the team resource was reallocated to assist with the Council's pandemic response, but also as a result of changes in the political leadership) and again on 8 November 2022. Even so, key milestone dates have already slipped as a result of additional time needed by the relevant task groups to agree elements of both documents, and the time taken to review the Members' 'vision' that was later dropped from further consideration. The LDS gives an adoption date of September 2023, although this is dependent on keeping to the timescales, and the lead-in time and length of the examination (this is largely out of our hands).
- 4.4 This overall delay of over 18 months has unfortunately held up completion of key pieces of evidence that relied on a decision being made on the overall strategy and selection of sites, such as the transport assessment, viability assessment and the Infrastructure Delivery Plan. Whilst these have now been completed, they and other evidence will only remain current for a limited period of time before they need updating again.
- 4.5 Different options for the Local Plan strategy have been considered at various stages of its preparation, as set out above. The Submission Version of the Local Plan represents the most reasonable option for meeting our housing need. It proposes only a small loss of Green Belt (just 0.7%), reduces the impact on Staines by providing the opportunity to limit some building heights and densities in sensitive areas in Staines through zoning proposals in the Staines Development Framework, maximise affordable housing and allows for more family homes with gardens to be built. A brownfield-only strategy would have delivered some 98% of new units as flats.
- 4.6 The Local Plan, together with the Staines Development Framework, delivers for our important areas of Green Belt, for the future of Staines and for the needs of our residents. It prevents the process from becoming a battleground between those that want to preserve all our Green Belt and those who do not want overdevelopment in Staines. It prevents landowners and developers of the least preferred sites from taking advantage of our inaction and it allows us to keep control of our Plan. It is positively prepared, based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements; is justified by robust evidence; can be delivered; and is consistent with national policy. As such, the Plan is considered to meet the test of soundness and will withstand the rigours of examination and be capable of eventual adoption.
- 4.7 We have demonstrated that we have areas of Green Belt that could be released for development without causing significant harm to the integrity of the remaining Green Belt and that the benefits of doing so outweighs that limited harm. This is explored further in the Exceptional Circumstances topic paper.
- 4.8 The Local Plan is the one document which has the most impact on how the Borough will look, and what facilities it will provide for future generations of residents and businesses. Whether or not the Borough should meet its housing need has been debated vociferously by councillors over a considerable period at numerous LPTG meetings, Environment and Sustainability Committees (including the one on 13 July 2021 which agreed the strategy), as well as motions to Council on an alternative 'Vision' for the borough. Each time, councillors have reached the decision that the right approach is to meet our need.

- 4.9 Members were made aware of the recent decision made by neighbouring Elmbridge Borough Council on their Regulation 19 Local Plan, which was to only meet two thirds of their housing need, and not to release any Green Belt. Their public consultation started just after ours and finishes on 29 July 2022. As an authority we will need to consider our position on their unmet need, but are currently minded to object to the overall soundness of their Plan. There is the risk that an inspector examining their plan, should it reach that stage, would say Spelthorne's Plan should meet some of their unmet need, as happened at Waverley Borough Council where housing need from Woking and London was imposed. This would be fiercely defended as we do not consider this to be an acceptable approach when Spelthorne has made the difficult and arguably brave decision to release Green Belt to meet its own need when Elmbridge hasn't. Work has been ongoing under the Duty to Cooperate mechanisms with Elmbridge and further information can be found in the Duty to Cooperate Compliance Statement and Elmbridge DtC topic paper.

## **November 2022**