

## Foreword

Spelthorne's Local Plan has been many years in the making, with many bumps along the road. The journey has not just been difficult and challenging, it has gone way beyond that. It has been divisive, bruising and at times unpleasant. It has fractured communities and turned councillors against each other. The reason for the acrimony is easy to discern: the government's brutal housing targets which eclipse everything else in the Plan-making process.

Forget the semantics that it is a 'housing need' figure; it is for all practical purposes a rigid target. Every statement by an MP that it is not mandatory looks increasingly vacuous as authority after authority has seen their plan fail at the housing number hurdle.

We are charged by the government to keep our Plan 'up to date', but to do this we are forced to use data that is now a decade old and we have been specifically banned from using more up-to-date figures. No Spelthorne councillor wants to build on our Green Belt, nor do we want to populate our town centres with sterile, high-rise blocks. But that is what Westminster is demanding.

We all recognise the need for new homes, especially affordable housing, but 618 homes per year, compared to the target of 166 in our Core Strategy from 2009, represents an increase that will damage our environment and ruin the character of our small and highly constrained borough. We have repeatedly and consistently challenged the Government to review its methodology, but to no avail. The Government methodology is deeply flawed and is focused on a misleading algorithm for what is needed without any real consideration of what is possible. So as a Council we are faced with producing a Plan that pleases no one or having no Plan at all. The methodology we are required to use to calculate our housing need uses household growth projections from 2014 but using the subsequent figures would give us a need of 347 homes per year and therefore would have a significantly moderated impact on the Borough.

Other authorities, in trying to find acceptable solutions, have made no progress over years of seemingly futile attempts to advance their Plans that do not meet the imposed housing need. This approach runs the very real risk of leaving planning decisions to be made in a local policy vacuum. The outcome of recent Planning Appeal decisions has demonstrated how vulnerable Spelthorne is when we are unable to demonstrate our progress and ability to meet our housing targets.

The decision of this Council to produce a Plan that does meet the imposed housing target means that we will have policies in place that allow us to defend the Borough against damaging developments in our most precious areas.

Although most of the attention is understandably focused on housing numbers, the Plan also includes important policies that reflect our local concerns and needs.

- A robust Affordable Housing policy that will see us increase significantly the number of homes that meet the needs of our community.

- Actions to address the effects of climate change and protect and enhance local biodiversity.
- A strategy to make sure that there is infrastructure in place to support existing and future residents, with a delivery plan that sets out how this will be achieved and funded.
- Policies that will support economic recovery and encourage more employment into the borough.
- A new Staines Development Framework will help the Borough's largest town to develop and grow in as sensitive a way as possible and that takes account of its existing assets and distinctive character.

In order to demonstrate the ability to meet the imposed housing targets, it has proved necessary to release some Green Belt land. Our Plan calls for the release of 0.7% of the existing Green Belt area. This is being done with the greatest reluctance and on the basis that it will ensure protection of our largest and most valued open spaces. Before any Green Belt release was contemplated, every possible area of previously developed land was considered in detail.

The focus of our efforts on this Local Plan has been first and foremost to represent the interests of all our residents. Whilst we have had our hands tied by the Government on many aspects of the Plan, we have done our best to minimise the environmental impact and define constructive policies to arrive at a compromise that delivers a workable strategy for this Borough.

It is councillors who are responsible for agreeing the final shape of the Plan, but the massive amount of complex and detailed work has been done by a small group of Council officers. This has taken several years and crossed three political administrations. Our officers have answered hundreds of questions, many of them more than once. The Plan documents have been produced by these officers with great professionalism, considerable hard work and exemplary patience. It is their advice and guidance which will be minutely tested by the Inspector and other interested parties. As councillors we recognise the enormous amount of hard work that the officers have done to get to the Regulation 19 stage, and we thank them for their efforts.

There are no councilors who would willing endorse every aspect of this Plan and the net effect will be to increase housing densities and make Spelthorne a less attractive place to live. However, on balance we believe that by carefully considering all the available options and the constraints imposed by central government, it is better for all residents that we put forward our proposals, framed by our understanding of local needs, rather than run the very real risk of planning decisions being taken out of our hands.

Councillor Lawrence Nichols, Leader of Spelthorne Borough Council