


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Spelthorne Borough Council

15-17 November 2022

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

Spelthorne Borough Council undertook a Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge between 15-17<sup>th</sup> November 2022. In addition to the five themes which form the core component of all Corporate Peer Challenges, the Council asked the peer team to consider the importance of the current Corporate Plan approved by the full Council and how delivery of affordable housing can be sustained. The Council also asked the team to explore Council governance issues as the committee system has been in place for a year now and there are signs that it is having a negative influence upon the speed of decision making. The Constitution locks a council into this system for 5 years unless there is a referendum. The peer challenge team was also asked to consider the related working of Overview and Scrutiny.

The peer team noted that Spelthorne had an LGA Finance Peer Challenge in November 2020 (final report received in January 2021), and as this is relatively recent and has been reported on twice to Audit Committee, this was not an area on which the peer team focused in great detail. The peer team is aware of the Public Interest Report into the Council's commercial property investments in 2017-18 published at the end of November following this peer challenge, and at the time of the peer challenge was aware that the Council's financial accounts for the years 2017-18 and onwards had yet to be finalised and agreed with its external auditors. However, it is not appropriate for the peer team to comment further on this beyond saying that the leadership of the Council recognises that it needs to address these issues and is encouraged to do so.


Spelthorne Borough Council has achieved many unique things of which they can be rightly proud, ranging from the high profile and strategic to the very local and small scale. Their Covid response was brilliant and a focus on supporting vulnerable people in their community is evident. The Council has a generally friendly and caring

staff culture where cross-service working is very good. Partnership working is also a strength with the Chief Executive being a very visible presence for all partners.

The Council is seen by partners as both commercially minded and entrepreneurial whilst at the same time being community focused. There is generally a positive can-do attitude. This commercial mindedness is evidenced by the high level of borrowing accumulated and the extensive investment portfolio that the Council has created since 2016.

Partners and officers would benefit from a clear political direction and visibility from the Council for which it needs a cohesive, functioning Councillor cohort. There is an opportunity for Councillors to have a clearer strategic vision for the future rather than spending so much time internally focused in the here and now. There is poor behaviour by some Councillors towards each other and staff which is widely recognised as damaging the Council's reputation. It is also affecting staff morale and the organisation's ability to retain and recruit staff. As a result, the relationship between the roles of officers and Members need to be clearly defined and respected in order to create trust.

The committee system brought in quickly last year at the behest of Councillors, is not yet working well enough as a decision-making forum to create consensus to take forward important plans for the Council and the Borough. There is now an opportunity to review it to make it work. The delay in decision making by Councillors on some key issues is costing the Council money, specifically, servicing the cost of borrowing and delaying potential developments to the tune of £170,000 per month. This means the Council cannot unlock the value of its own assets nor deliver the required homes and ultimately may risk sustainable service delivery. Therefore, Members need to fully appreciate the financial implications of their decision making - or of not making decisions.



Officers should also review the volume and content of the information in reports that they are providing to Councillors to assist them in their decision making. Financial and economic implications of decisions need to be clearer and financial data in the reports needs to be consistently presented in order to give the decision makers confidence in the information. It may also be worth making the social, community and environmental benefits of decisions clearer up front to help Councillors consider the wider benefits to their residents.

The present situation is leading to much frustration for officers and Councillors and leading to poor behaviours by some Councillors. The leadership group of officers and Councillors need to recognise that they should work together to resolve this situation. There is talent, knowledge and experience in the senior officer team and the Councillors need to use it well to help achieve their corporate and community objectives for the Borough. There needs to be a recognition that some Member behaviour is affecting the Council's reputation, is costing the Council money, is affecting staff morale, and could ultimately affect the delivery of Council services for local residents and businesses.

Other recommendations and comments are included in the body of the report.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

### 2.1. Recommendation 1

All Members need to identify what they have in common in terms of shared priorities and objectives for your Borough and your residents and use them to progress the delivery of your shared ambitions for Spelthorne.

### 2.2. Recommendation 2

Then share your agreed political ambitions for the Borough to create a longer-term vision embodied in a broadly agreed Corporate Plan.

### 2.3. Recommendation 3

Take the opportunity you now have to reset the officer / Member working relationship and agree how it will work differently going forward for the benefit of your residents.

### 2.4. Recommendation 4

The discrete but complementary roles of officers and Members need to be better understood by all to improve working relationships.

### 2.5. Recommendation 5

Take the time today to plan for tomorrow. Do not put off the 'non-urgent strategic' work you need to do.

### 2.6. Recommendation 6

Members need to respect officers' roles and give them the time and space to focus on delivering the important priorities you have agreed.

### 2.7. Recommendation 7

Recognise the risk of continued poor behaviour by some Members and the likely impact on the organisation and your reputation as a Council and a place. Take steps to address it.

## **2.8. Recommendation 8**

Continue your efforts to address the issue of outstanding audits of the financial accounts.

## **2.9. Recommendation 9**

Review the working of the committee system by looking at best practice elsewhere to consider how to create a system that is fit for purpose.

## **2.10. Recommendation 10**

Engage in financial training for Members to promote a better understanding of financial implications, project viability and creating robust business cases.

## **2.11. Recommendation 11**

Improve the balance between communication and meaningful engagement whereby people feel listened to and heard. Use this in the context of evidence and need, to drive priorities and take people with you.

## **2.12. Recommendation 12**

Consider how the LGA can continue to assist with the above recommendations on this reset journey.

# **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

## **3.1. The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected Member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Kathy O'Leary**, Chief Executive, Stroud District Council
- **Councillor Chris Hossack**, Conservative Leader of Brentwood Borough Council
- **Councillor Sarah Rouse**, LGA Independent Group Executive Member and former-Leader of Malvern Hills District Council

- **Bob Watson**, Strategic Director Finance & Customer Service, Surrey Heath Borough Council
- **Fiona Bryant**, Director of Enterprise and Sustainable Development, Cambridge City Council
- **Kate Blakemore**, Strategic Director, Great Yarmouth Borough Council
- **Marcus Coulson**, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

### 3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the Council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the Council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the Council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the Council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the Council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the Council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the current Corporate Plan and the delivery of affordable housing as a priority. The Council also asked for a deep dive into Council governance issues because the committee system has been in place for over one year and there are signs that it is having a negative influence upon the speed of decision making. The Constitution locks Councils into this system for 5 years unless there is a referendum. The Council



asked the peer challenge team to consider the related working of Overview and Scrutiny.

Spelthorne had an LGA Finance Peer Challenge in November 2020, and as this is relatively recent and has been reported on twice to Audit Committee, this was not an area on which the peer team focused in great detail. The peer team is aware of the Public Interest Report into the Council's commercial property investments in 2017-18 published at the end of November, following this peer challenge, and at the time of the peer challenge was aware that the Council's financial accounts for the years 2017-18 and onwards had yet to be agreed with its external auditors. However, it is not appropriate for the peer team to comment further on this beyond saying that the leadership of the Council recognises that it needs to address these issues and should be encouraged to do so.

### **The Peer Challenge process**

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read, acting as a 'critical friend to the Council.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite at Spelthorne Borough Council in Staines-upon-Thames, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than forty meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 125 people including a range of Council staff together with Members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and Members.


## 4. Feedback

### Key messages

Spelthorne Borough Council has done many unique things of which it can be rightly proud, these range from the high profile and strategic to the very local and small scale. This was illustrated by the fact that the Council's response to Covid was brilliant and is clearly evidenced through the Council's own report that explains in detail how the Council showed leadership and foresight to respond to the pandemic creatively. The report can be found [here](#). The peer team would like to commend Spelthorne Borough Council on this response and the way it supported its local communities in so many positive ways. A reflection by the Council on two years combating Covid is included [here](#) which illustrates an organisation that delivers services well through clear leadership, prioritisation and committed, hardworking staff responding flexibly to benefit local residents and businesses. The Council can be satisfied that its response to the pandemic was admirable.

As it has emerged from the acute aspect of the Covid experience, the Council has spent time and effort looking at what recovery work needs to be done and implemented a detailed Recovery Action Plan. This outlines a wide range of actions the Council is going to be taking to assist residents and businesses to address future need. The updated plan can be found [here](#).

From this evidence and from what the peer team read, heard and saw throughout this peer challenge process, Spelthorne Borough Council feels like it has a generally friendly and caring staff culture where cross-service working is very good. Cross-



service collaboration on resident and business focused work during the pandemic and recovery period were cited as good examples in several different discussions with the peer team.

Partnership working is generally a strength for the organisation and is outlined in the current Corporate Plan where it lays out the aim of developing strong partnerships in all sectors of the community, businesses and with other authorities and health, so that knowledge, skills and expertise can be shared to help shape priorities and effectively deliver on them. These examples are detailed later in the report. Partnerships could, however, be even stronger in future with a combined Member and officer approach, which seeks shared benefits and outcomes across all the partners.

The Chief Executive is a very visible presence for all partners, who consistently referenced his availability and responsiveness. What some partners and all the officers would benefit from would be a stronger and clearer political direction and visibility from the Council Members. In the view of the peer team, the Council is doing well but could achieve even more with a cohesive functioning Councillor cohort, which it recognisably does not have at this present time. There is an opportunity for Councillors to develop a clearer strategic vision for the future rather than spending so much time internally focused in the 'here and now'. The democratic make-up of the Council is complex and fragmented. This gives rise to a perception that the Council is focussed on internal political issues at the expense of giving a clear vision that engages its partners.

Added to this there is poor behaviour by a small number of Councillors which is widely recognised in the Council. This is damaging the reputation of the Council as well as negatively affecting staff morale and there was evidence that this was also affecting the ability of the Council to retain and recruit staff.

This poor behaviour by some Members is distracting officers from completing tasks that could take the Council forward and benefit the community. The excessive number of internal complaints being processed is diverting officer resource that could be better deployed. The roles of officers and Members and how they interrelate needs to be clearly defined and respected under the provisions in the constitution, in order to create trust between these key groups and a more effective working environment.

Spelthorne had an LGA Finance Peer Challenge in November 2020, and as this is relatively recent and has been reported on twice to Audit Committee, this was not an area on which the peer team focused in great detail. The peer team is aware of the Public Interest Report into the Council's commercial property investments in 2017-18 published at the end of November, following this peer challenge, and at the time of the peer challenge was aware that the Council's financial accounts for the years 2017-18 and onwards had yet to be agreed with its external auditors. However, it is not appropriate for the peer team to comment further on this beyond saying that the leadership of the Council recognises that it needs to address these issues and should be encouraged to do so.

The committee system that was introduced quickly last year at the behest of Councillors is not yet working well enough to create consensus to take forward important plans for the Council.

Whilst officers are satisfied that they delivered the committee system within the tight timeline prescribed by the Members, the impact of such a significant shift in the way decisions are made and scrutinised, seems to have been underestimated on both sides. There appears to be little evidence that this transformative shift was resourced effectively and as a result Members at least have still not adapted to this new way of making democratic decisions. Some of the provisions within the committee system

and its supporting constitution make decision making more complex, which can add to both the political tension within the committee system itself and undermine the confidence of partners in its observations of the functioning of the democratic system. In order to improve the functioning of this newly adopted system, there is now an opportunity to review it to make sure it works better for everyone. Seeking to learn from other councils that have an established and effective committee based democratic system should be considered in order to help the Council move forward.

The delay in decision making by Councillors on some key issues is costing the Council, specifically, servicing the cost of borrowing and delaying potential developments which is currently running at £170,000 per month. This means the Council cannot unlock the value of its own development sites nor deliver the required homes and ultimately may risk service delivery. Therefore, Members need to fully appreciate the financial social, and environmental impact of any delays in their decision making.

The present situation is leading to much frustration for officers and Councillors and leading to poor behaviours by some Councillors. The leadership group of officers and Councillors need to recognise that they should work together to resolve this situation. There is talent, knowledge and experience in the senior officer team and the Councillors need to use it well to help achieve their corporate and community objectives for the Borough. There needs to be a recognition that the current lack of cohesive working is affecting the Council's reputation, is costing the Council money, is affecting staff morale, and could ultimately affect the delivery of Council services for local residents and businesses.

#### 4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

A significant strength for Spelthorne Borough Council is that business-as-usual services are generally seen as good and efficient. This is a perception shared by those who receive the services and those who deliver them. This is a key strength of Council activity that needs to be recognised by those who set Council priorities and ensure that this approach is supported.

The Council can be rightly proud of the discretionary services it provides above the minimum statutory requirements. There was clear evidence of personal commitment, passion for community and significant goodwill provided by the staff involved. The self-assessment for this Corporate Peer Challenge described a great deal of good service delivery by Council staff and the peer team had the privilege of witnessing and hearing about a number of them of which the following are examples:

- **Day care centres** – such as the Fordbridge Day Centre which is one of four day centres the Council runs that provide local people, typically older people, with the opportunity to meet together thereby reducing social isolation and supporting wellbeing.
- **The Step Up and Step Down initiatives with the NHS** is where Spelthorne Borough Council is the lead authority for the set-up of a step-down project across North-West Surrey Alliance to support hospital discharges. The Chief Executive sits on this partnership of health system partners where the Council has negotiated the testing of a new hospital ‘step-down’ service with Spelthorne delivering an integrated ‘wrap-round’ intermediate care package to support timely discharge of older residents from acute settings.
- **Fire Station in Sunbury** – where the Council is working with Surrey County Council to potentially deliver a community offering within their new fire station at Sunbury Cross.
- **Independent living** – the White House is a newly built Council facility that provides accommodation for one year to those that would otherwise be ‘on the street’ homeless. We heard impactful stories where residents have been able to get their lives back together during

this time and move on to find work and their own accommodation.

- **Optimisation of Assets to provide affordable homes** – The West Wing saw the Council officers moving their office space into part of the Council Offices and utilising space they no longer have a need for to develop twenty-five high quality affordable rental flats.
- **Approach to homelessness and resettlement** - the Council provides contract funding to Citizens Advice who provided housing, employment and accredited financial advice to 2,215 residents in 2021/22. The Council has used the Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative fund to appoint a Rough Sleeper Coordinator and Outreach worker who is dedicated to support rough sleepers into accommodation, and who adopts a 'no second night out' approach. As a result, Spelthorne does not currently have any entrenched rough sleepers and is recording its lowest average number of rough sleepers.

The Council has opted in to support up to 8 families find accommodation in private rental sector under the Afghan Relocation Assistance Programme and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and is actively working to support guests arriving under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The Housing Options team is working with the North-East Surrey Family support team to ensure wrap-around support is provided to refugees upon arrival to ensure community integration, effective resettlement and prevention of homelessness.

- **Spelthorne in Bloom** - the Council has won numerous Green Flag awards for its gardens, parks and cemeteries. The Sunbury Walled Garden and Staines Cemetery were named overall category winners at this year's South and South-East in Bloom Awards in October.
- **Public realm** - Reinforcing the preventative approach, over the past year the Council has also installed ten outdoor gyms in parks across the borough (Ashford, Laleham, Shepperton, Staines-upon-Thames, Stanwell Moor and Sunbury). These outdoor gyms provide communities with free access to a good variety of equipment to improve health outcomes for those that may not otherwise be able to afford gym

membership. The Council's leisure partner, Everyone Active, is also working to secure funding to deliver outreach sessions using these facilities.

**Other areas of work the peer team heard about were:**

- **Youth Hub**, One particularly successful example of partnership working has been the creation of a Youth Hub. Aimed at 16-24-year-olds, the Youth Hub offers advice, training and mentoring for young people currently not in education, employment or training, those with special needs and disabilities, as well as young carers/parents. The initiative is being delivered by the Council in partnership with A2 Dominion, Brooklands College, Association of Learning Providers (ALPS), Ashford Youth and Community CIC and Transfer to Transform, under the leadership of an external Partnership Manager.
- **Working with business partners**, The Council's pro-business approach to economic development means it actively works with partners to deliver for the wider community. For example, Berkeley Homes (currently building the Eden Grove development in Staines-upon-Thames) have been involved with a number of events at the Youth Hub.

Whilst there is a Corporate Plan that runs between 2021-2023 and covers relevant priorities and ambitions, there is now an opportunity to develop a longer-term vision and strategy to provide an agreed direction for the Council beyond the elections in May 2023 and for which there is greater Councillor leadership, supported by officers. The resulting strategy should have objectives that are outcome oriented and easily measurable in order to evidence that they have been delivered. The priorities that form the Corporate Plan need to be based both on evidence of need, which may include provision of homes, known environmental pressures, economic data, health statistics etc., and the feedback from your communities ascertained by consultation. A combination of this aspirational feedback and evidential data can then be used to plan and deliver services and investments.

At present the narrative of the Corporate Plan is centred around opportunities that



arise for development. The values that under-pin this approach are commendable in that they aim to deliver services for local residents and businesses. However, the narrative could be improved by relating it directly to available evidence and the assessed needs of the people and businesses in the Borough. This would help to articulate the wider community, social, and environmental benefits of such developments whilst also confirming a robust economic business case.

#### **4.2. Organisational and place leadership**

The Chief Executive has a strong and positive relationship with businesses who state that he is their key point of contact in delivering the strategic vision as well as directing operational solutions to issues as they arise. Some community partners would welcome a more collaborative dialogue and approach to working together as they sometimes feel they are being told things that have been already decided, giving the impression of inflexibility, rather than always being in a dialogue of coproduction. As a result, the peer team recommends that as the Council continues to deliver its consultation exercises, it should ensure it is able to deliver a Council-wide listening approach to its communications.

Whilst recognising that there is much proactive ward Councillor work, there is an evidential void in the role of community leadership from the elected Members of the Council on more strategic matters. For instance, the organisation's response to the pandemic, whilst as already stated was admirable, was largely officer led.

The senior team reported that they often work long hours, answering emails well outside of normal office hours. The peer team encourages the senior officer team to raise their awareness of the message this sends out to others about a work / life balance and to model the behaviours that they want to see in their fellow officers. Similarly, Members should also have reasonable expectations around responses, especially when contacting the officer team out of hours.

#### **4.3. Governance and culture**

The Council is seen by partners as both commercially minded and entrepreneurial whilst at the same time being community focused. There is generally a positive can-do attitude. This commercial mindedness is evidenced by the high level of borrowing accumulated and income stream being sustained the extensive investment portfolio that the Council has created since 2016.

It is this commercial income that has enabled the Council to deliver a number of different highly-valued services and initiatives across the Borough that it otherwise would not have been able to do. The officers are seen as great ambassadors for the Council and are responsive when partners and others get in touch. The Councillors however appear distracted with internal political discussions that are a feature of political tensions in the organisation, rather than looking at the bigger external picture of delivering Council priorities for the broader benefit of the community as outlined in the Corporate Plan.

The committee system was introduced at speed just over a year ago, at the behest of Councillors, replacing the Leader and Cabinet Model. It does not function well, which is recognised by many people the peer team spoke to. There is now an opportunity to review how it could work better. Some areas of detail that could be included in this work would be; the length of meetings, the number of committees, the political balance of the committees, the role of the Chair and Vice-Chairs, the formula system for allocating lead committee roles, timing of meetings, frequency of meetings, the length and accuracy of reports, the ability of the system to encompass effective forward planning, clarity around who sets the agenda for committee meetings and how to ensure that everyone understands what respectful behaviour in these meetings looks like and to make sure it occurs. The number and scope of issues listed above outlines the scale of the task ahead.

The peer challenge team also heard about the potential abuse of privilege by some Members in their dealings with some officers. It was reported that a small number of Councillors request preferential treatment from the Council such as the frequency of street cleaning and waste collection and the provision of leisure services. From what the peer team heard, not only does this demonstrate a fundamental disregard for the fair allocation of resources across the Borough, it amounts to a potential abuse of

privilege which needs to be robustly addressed by the organisation. If it is not, there is the risk of bullying claims by staff and reputational damage as a result.

#### **4.4. Financial planning and management**

This LGA peer challenge team is not able to comment on the annual statement of accounts and level of long-term borrowing. At the time of the peer challenge the 2017/18 audit results were still awaited and the KPMG Public Interest Report into the Council's commercial property investments in that year had not been published.

The senior officer in charge of finance at Spelthorne is very experienced as is his finance team. This is a strength and suggests there is resilience and capacity available to manage financial issues. There is however a general need for a greater understanding of financial issues for the majority of Councillors and other officers. The detailed understanding of the high level of borrowing, investments and contracts that Spelthorne has developed in the past five years is held by a small number of people with significant knowledge and expertise. This group could be widened in order to ensure the Council has increased resilience to manage these demands.

In a related issue some Councillors reported that the length and quality of finance reports rendered it difficult for them to fully grasp the issues at hand and therefore be able to understand their options and decision-making. Therefore, whilst recognising the need for an appropriate level of facts and detail there is an opportunity to write finance and investment reports with the Councillor audience more in mind to enable better informed decision-making.

The peer team acknowledges some of the work done by officers around transparency of the financial performance of its asset portfolio, the delivery of treasury workshops for Members and also the work done in assisting Members to understand how the commercial function interrelates with the Council's finances using illustrative means.

The Council Corporate and Service Risk Registers are well linked, and it is recognised best practice that risk management and mitigation need regular review to ensure the Council remains focused on the most relevant risks and mitigation

strategies whilst continuing to manage newly emerging risks. Those in the organisation recognise that the Council needs to manage its future borrowing in the light of rising interest rates which could cause the cost of debt financing to rise for new borrowing or the need to refinance the maturing debt. The Council is also aware that HM Treasury is reviewing its consultation on a revised Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy which may impact on the annual revenue cost of medium-term debt, which in turn may challenge the viability of future projects if the annual revenue provision for debt repayment increases the overall cost of a project or programme.

#### **4.5. Capacity for improvement**

The peer team believes that there is an opportunity to reset with the coming local Council elections in May 2023 when there is anticipated to be a cohort of new Councillors as some of the longer serving Councillors are deciding to step down. The peer team urges those leading the Council to maximise this opportunity to reset the tone and culture of the organisation and revisit its training and induction programme for new Members, correlating this work with previous comments around the need for the effective functioning of the committee system and Member Code of Conduct.

There is also an opportunity to reflect on how the Council's transformation programme, digital strategy, workplace accommodation and ITC equipment could better support the move to hybrid working and dovetail with the hybrid working policy. Many of the Council's staff commented on their perceived inability to fully participate in meetings due to the lack of access to a camera. At present the Council operates a mix of desktop (without cameras) and laptops (with cameras), whereas many councils with hybrid working policies have moved to a situation where all staff and Councillors have laptops, with docking stations and additional monitors at office workstations, so that wherever they are working, they can join meetings using their cameras. The peer team noted that some meeting rooms are equipped with cameras to facilitate participation in online meetings, but the peer team's own experience of this would suggest it would be helpful to review how well this works (including the quality and strength of the Wi-Fi signal). It is also important to ensure that the IT and

mobile accessibility of those in more placed based operational teams are equally considered.

A number of partners fed back that when the Council joined online meetings without cameras, it was considered a little 'rude' when everyone else had cameras on, and staff felt embarrassed by this. The peer team would encourage the Council to reflect on the need to be visibly present in online meetings as well as at in person meetings, and for the senior leadership team to take the lead on this in their approach to internal online meetings.

The peer team would also encourage the Council to reflect and act on the findings of the recent staff survey, which the peer team appreciates is the intention of the senior leadership team. The staff survey showed an improved response rate on previous years but illustrated that whilst staff are clearly invested in their jobs and confident in their abilities to do them well, they did not feel that the organisation was delivering fully on its obligations, which could be correlated to the evident workplace tension between officers and Members and the lack of political leadership. There is an opportunity to address this and to consider improving the recognition for the good work that frontline staff do to help improve morale across the organisation, especially given the political pressures within the Council and the impact of this on staff. It would be helpful to reflect on whether this recognition should come from Members.

## Housing

The peer team was very pleased to see the example of very good collaborative working between officers and Members at Spelthorne Borough Council in the development of the emerging Local Plan to progress it to submission stage. There is perhaps the opportunity for other areas of the Council to look at this example as well as best practice in other authorities in the light of the need to improve the Member and officer collaborative approach.

The knowledge drive and commitment of the teams to deliver affordable housing and supported housing has been demonstrated successfully through examples such as the West Wing and The White House (referenced earlier in this report). As a result of earlier work Spelthorne Borough Council has developed an ambitious pipeline of sites to deliver affordable housing at increased scale and pace. However, politicians

are going to need to accept the need for higher density in urban areas if they wish to continue to protect the green belt, as set out in the Local Plan that has been agreed and submitted. With this in mind Councillors need to understand the necessary and vital relationship between density and viability especially in the delivery of the appropriate level of affordable units within proposed schemes. It may be helpful, in drafting future short and clear decision reports, to focus on the potential wider social and environmental benefits for residents of the developments as well as presentation of a robust business case.

## 5. Next steps

The LGA recognises that the senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer challenge team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in session, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, **Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser for Berkshire, East Sussex, & Surrey**, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mona is available to discuss any further support the Council requires on email: [mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk](mailto:mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk) or telephone 07795 291006.

***On behalf of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Team November 2022:***

**Marcus Coulson**

Senior Regional Adviser

**Local Government Association**

Tel: 07766 252 853

Email: [marcus.coulson@local.gov.uk](mailto:marcus.coulson@local.gov.uk)