

TRANSCRIPT OF CPC TEAM FEEDBACK PRESENTED IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER ON 17 NOVEMBER 2022

Leader Chris Hossack:

The partners we have spoken to, and officers could really benefit from clear political direction from the Council this is very important. What we all know in this room is that this Council is challenging because Spelthorne is quite unique, and you have a complex political makeup and large number of groups. That cannot be avoided it's the nature of the council – this statement cannot be avoided.

You could achieve even more with a cohesive, functional Councillor cohort. Kathy has just spoken about all of the great things you have done and can be very proud of; quite frankly I was really moved by some of the things you do in the community. When I spent time with people in day centre yesterday, and when we met with the chap in the White House it was apparent how you as a Council have shown me how you have changed people lives.

Think about what else you could achieve with a cohesive functioning Councillor cohort. I have used the word functioning as I have been told by members of this council that you are not functioning - you are dysfunctional. Think about what else you could achieve if you all came together.

There is an opportunity for members to have a clear and strategic vision for the future rather than spending too much time internally focused on the here and now. You guys create the weeds; there are a number of councillors getting bogged down in the weeds; the non-important things which leads to officers chasing their tails. The things frankly, your residents would not give too hoots about – please stop doing it.

There is poor behaviour by some members which is widely recognised as damaging your reputation and it is affecting the morale and ability to retain and recruit staff. Think of the outcome of that - if that continues. If you cannot retain and recruit staff, you do not get stuff done. If Councillors set the vision and tone and things they want to deliver for their place and people, and the staff are hollowed out of this building because morale is in the decline you won't get anything done then you have got real problems. You need to think about the damaging behaviour going on.

The roles of officer and members we think, needs to be clearly defined - you need to understand difference between what officers do and what members do; and you need to respect those boundaries and you need to build trust between you.

The residents out there see you as one team, one council - Its one team you need to think about and whether you can be closer together in working together on that. You would be so powerful if you can manage that. You are already powerful enough and you could be so powerful if you recognise that.

This is recognising that you know you have to address the issues in the outstanding audit of the financial accounts. There is not much more we can say about that, but it is important and we need to highlight it.

It is Important to recognise the Committee system is not yet working well enough to create consensus in order for you to take forward the important plans of the council - you have real opportunity to review it and to make it work for you.

Key messages to take from this based on our observations are that we have been here for two days – these are not our words but what we have heard.

Delaying decision making is costing you money, servicing the costs of borrowing, and delaying developments. Think about this when you look at the reports, there is a chapter at the end called financial implications. If the S151 officer is suggesting some risks and if you went against the officer recommendation - that money is important and does all the great things so bear that in mind

SBC cannot unlock the value of sites nor deliver the required homes that risk service delivery you have ambitions and a need and pressure to deliver affordable housing growth and housing - you can't afford to sit on this pressure it explodes. Members need to fully appreciate the financial implications of their decisions making or not making decisions, delaying costs, wrong decisions can cost, go back to my point about financial implications and officers advice.

This situation is leading to much frustration for officers and councillors, and we believe is leading to some of the poor behaviours by councillors. Putting a tension into the system you don't need – when there is tension this creates an emotional response.

The leadership group of officers and members should recognise they need to work together to resolve the situation outlined. It's a two-way street Officers and Members need to make an effort. If you are difficult to engage with try to make yourself easier to engage with – it helps everyone This goes for members and officers alike. There is talent knowledge and experience in the senior officer team and councillors need to use it well.to help achieve your objectives.

Councillors say what they want to deliver, because they are residents themselves and are doing it for their residents, and the officers do the do. The officers do the delivery not the members they have the oversight.to make sure what you've asked to be done happens; as long as it's the right thing and its affordable.

There needs to be recognition that the intense political dance is affecting your reputation and costing money and ultimately effecting the delivery of council services for your residents and businesses. Think of the longer term and consequence of perpetuation of this current issue - it will only go downhill and

end in a negative place and then you will facing some really tough decisions - not the good decisions you've been making and the innovative decision you can be so rightly proud of. You would become an organisation that doesn't deliver for Spelthorne. Think of your reputation - you could be so proud of the things you have done but you're getting known for the petty things.

Five core components

Local priorities and outcomes

We observed business as usual services are generally seen as proficient some are really outstanding you aspire to do really do well in those. You should be rightly proud of your discretionary services which are very good – you go over and beyond in these areas. We have seen stunning example of this – a couple of things we wanted to mention which we have seen for ourselves -

Day Centre
Step up and Down
Business Hub
Independent Living
Homelessness and Settlement
Staines in Bloom
Public realm

You do really good work in this area, and you should be proud of your local priority and outcomes. You should be really proud of this organisation.

There is an opportunity to develop your longer-term vision and strategy for greater councillor leadership which is supported by officers. Councillors as residents represent their residents and put forward the strategy, they know what they want they know what they want Spelthorne to be - that's where you've lived and worked for many years. Officers should be supporting you in this. There are opportunities for strategy and objectives to be outcome orientated but they need to be measurable. You have a strategy until the early part of next year. You can't disagree with the strategy, which is good, but you don't want to write a strategy in such a way which is published on your website– you can't disagree with it because it's so generic. We all want good homes, care for community and to protect the environment which is all good and we can universally agree with it. You need to be specific - how do we know when we are delivering on it, use smart objectives, how do you know how you have achieved it - one thing to look at is smart objectives; be specific, how do know when you are going to achieve it by. One thing to look at and publicise is local evidence this needs to be based on what you are delivering.

You are good at communicating and listing you need to build on that listening collate it and use as evidence for your decision making. Officers and members need to work together to better understand the needs of residents based on that evidence, use it; that is how democracy works. The residents

tell you what they want, sometimes they tell you things that are not workable, that's the challenge of being a politician - sometimes we like to say yes too often but can you afford to do that? Sometimes it's not workable and we have to say no but you still have to listen to your residents and where possible accommodate them in what you deliver and where possible it will help to gather the evidence to support it wherever you can then this can be used to deliver your strategic vision.

Viewpoints

We spoke to a lot of people and a lot of businesses and here the Chief Executives strong and positive working relationships with businesses in Spelthorne Borough business community came through.

Communities would like a more collaborative dialogue with you and an approach to working together as they recognise that you could bring a lot of power to their arguments if they worked closer with you. It's not a big criticism just something to think about – the power of partnership and the power of a shared agenda and objectives.

Continue to develop your listening approach to communications but as a whole council approach you have done excellent consultations and engagement with a number of residents on a number of things and we have looked at it and members are missing in equation you need to sometimes recognising the strong link – members are elected here to service their communities and they can be really important in that communication, members need to recognise their role in that communication and dialogue – something you need to work on together.

We encourage senior officer teams to model behaviour – do as I do not as I say - this is a little bit of a reminder that health and wellbeing is very important and more so coming out of the pandemic – you have a hard-working culture driven by member demands, there is a number of you working 24/7 – this can lead to officer burnout. The Chief Executive cannot expect staff to drop boundaries and go home at 6 or 7pm and then go home and pick up family life. You just need to think about what you are modelling - staff look to you and exhibit that behaviour – look at the importance of this.

The Council is seen by partners as entrepreneurial, and community focussed and with a can-do attitude – you can be proud of this. The Council seems to be very commercially minded; people around the country know about Spelthorne Borough Council, because of commercial mindedness and bold decision. You deliver and punch above your weight in terms of discretionary services and you deliver it very well. People do a fantastic job – create vehicles to deliver care and contact with the community. These don't come for nothing but because of commercial mindedness up to this point. Officers are seen as great ambassadors for the council, and they are responsive. Note I am saying Officers - I think there is a massive opportunity for the profile of councillors to be raised. Quite often partners were talking about the Chief

Executive and that was noted. This might be a symptom of no overall control situation and fragmentation of groups and politics; certainly, it is a by-product of it.

Councillors appear to be seen to be focussed on the internal politics rather than the external bigger picture. Internal politics is petty and not important to your residents' they look at the bigger picture for the future outside of the chamber.

Governance and Culture

The Committee System was introduced at speed. There is an opportunity to review that now which needs to be considered - for instance; the number of meetings, the length of meetings, the timing of meetings and accuracy of reports, forward planning relating to the corporate strategy, what's for decision and what's for information - why are you sitting for 3 hours noting a report? The setting of the agenda on the way you behave in that democratic forum to make those decision key.

There is an abuse of privilege by members. We are a community of taxpayers largely speaking we all pay tax there is no preference and it is right and fair that there is a fair allocation of services and there is no way, through political or ward representation that one set of residents should be getting more than others. Manipulating the system for privilege for personal gain is unacceptable and should not happen. Fairness is the key word. Resources is finite and cannot be allocated to one member, particularly if other members cannot get stuff done because one ward is taking all the resources. It is happening and, in our view, we cannot not call this out.

Financial Planning

We've been here 2.5 days - KPMG have been looking at accounts for 4.5 years – the peer challenge is not here to comment on your accounts/audit reports – we know you are working on this and have measures in hand to deal with it.

You have got an experienced finance team, we feel there is a general need for greater understanding of financial issues facing the Council and the steps you are taking to address the situation with councillors could also be used to improve this for officers. It would help if you understood that – lots of officer are worried and they don't need to be quite so worried if they understood the financials – a lot of people would get reassurance for that.

We all write finance reports with audits in mind – but you need to bear in mind who your audience is – we use acronym's, etc think about who is accessing the reports. Think about the mum standard - would she understand it? Yes, technical bits need to be in the report but there is a straightforward way to present this. Your risk registers are well linked. Risk management needs to be regularly reviewed – this is a general observation. Put mitigations in place.

You recognise the council needs to manage future borrowing in the light of rates rising it is important to say this in this context for you. We are all aware that the Treasury is revising the minimum review policy and this will impact on debt for all of us - you need to think about this as you are in the spotlight and need to deliver your programme.

There is a golden opportunity to reset with the coming local elections in May - maximise this opportunity to reset the tone. I understand a quarter of your members are stepping down – some are well-respected – I met one this morning who was an inspiration. Who comes in and what you will be dealing with is all about the induction programme - refer to the culture of the people, they will need to understand the traditions, it's not just about the technical aspects. It's about respect, seize the opportunity to do this with good number of new members

Take the opportunity to reflect on current transformation programme, the review of your hybrid working policy and IT equipment. Make sure your IT doesn't let you down or spoil your reputation if cameras off. Update your digital strategy and listen to what staff tell you about the working culture from your surveys. Going back to my point - members can affect capacity -if you are tying up officers, they are not doing what's important to residents. Stop complaining about each other, show respect and officers may be able to do good things for you.

Housing

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on the Local Plan – this is really a good example of where officers and councillors have a good collaborative working structure – this is quite an achievement, and the local plan can be difficult to do without this. I commend you for that. It's such a good example of how you need to work together - you can do collaborative working.

You have the knowledge, drive, and commitment of teams to deliver affordable housing and supported housing. You have demonstrated this successfully with some of the projects we looked at – the White House and West Wing. You have developed an ambitious pipeline of sites to deliver at an increased and scale and pace. However, if you are to progress these, then you need to accept the need for high density in urban areas if you are going to protect the green belt. This is set out in local plan which you have agreed. You need to think about that and you need to understand the necessary and vital relationship between density and viability of sites.

Recommendations

Let's go through these. Forgive me I may be direct. These recommendations are a challenge to you all and an action plan. Look at these as a challenge based on critical friends, partners. If you came to Brentwood, you'd have recommendations so don't think this is any of us thinking we're better than

you are. You'd do the same if you'd gone through it with a tooth comb as we have at Spelthorne.

1. All members need to identify what they have in common in terms of priorities for your borough and your residents and use that to progress together to create shared ambitions. It's so important for Spelthorne Borough Council. You have vastly different views and a diversity of political opinion and that presents a challenge. None of you got elected to do a bad job. You got elected for a certain reason. If you talked together and compared notes, you'd probably find you have a lot in common. Use that commonality and purpose and shared vision to shape a plan and you've got an opportunity to do that next year. Yes, I expect difference but there always will be. We all care about housing, community, our environment and delivering good services. We all care about that. Because of the nature of your political makeup, for a plan to be successful for your residents, it needs as many shoulders behind it as you can possibly get and that's a challenge for you all because you are very diverse in your political makeup so seek what you have in common.

2. Once you've done that, share your agreed political ambitions for the borough to create a longer-term vision for the corporate plan. You need a new corporate plan to be written next year. The political makeup I'm afraid may well be different. We all look at that. We all look at the national picture and we see how that may affect us locally. It's absolutely critical that as many of you as possible put your shared political ambitions into that plan so whoever is in the driving seat is behind it and broadly has support whilst there may be some difference of opinion, not in what you'd doing but how you're doing it. So you must seek to do that.

3. Take the opportunity you now have, and this is a milestone – it's not every day the LGA come to you and feedback to you in as frank a way as we are. The opportunity is now to reset the officer-member working relationship and agree how it will work differently going forward for the benefit of your residents.

4. Fix your relationship between yourselves – there is a them and us in this organisation I'm afraid and the residents are caught in the middle. Fix it. The roles of officers and members need to be understood better by all to promote better working together. It can take a while to understand that. While Team Spelthorne comprises of all officers, members and frontline staff, there are distinct responsibilities – stay in your lane. Don't overstep. Members aren't there to advise officers. Officers are there to advise members to make good decisions.

5. Take the time today to plan for tomorrow. If, as you are, so bogged down in the weeds, some of it very negative thorny weeds, you're not going to take the time out to think about what you need to do for tomorrow. It's asking those questions where does Spelthorne need to be in five, 10 years from now. You have to take the time out to do it and do the thorny work around recommendations one and two. You've all got to get together to fix this as you're so bogged down with dealing with things being thrust upon you and my

fear is you're not looking as far ahead not looking at the bigger picture items. I understand there's a massive issue with the Thames, flooding, climate change and I know you're pressing that as hard as you can and some partners can definitely come to the table – that's one example of the things so important for this borough so you need to take the time out to think about that.

6. Members need to respect officers roles and give them the time and space to deliver on the priorities for you that you have agreed. That's how it works. I think it's good to repeat this. Once you've agreed a corporate plan, a vision, a strategy that you want to take forward on behalf of your residents, you have oversight to see they're doing that. It's the officers that do it, right from the guys that sweep the streets to the ones who enter into negotiations on big commercial deals and all points in between. You need to give them the space to do that stuff. If you don't give them the space, you've got officers trying to chase their tails – it's not important to your residents at all.

7. Recognise the risk of continued poor behaviour and the likely impact on the organisation and your reputation as a Council and a place. I've taken this on what I've listened to and heard some stark descriptions by Spelthorne and by others have described. It's not good. Your residents don't want to be described that way. Your residents look to you 39 members and officers in this Council to uphold the reputation of Spelthorne and if a handful of people ruin it, they ruin it for 100,000 people. Please don't do it. What you do affects the place as much as it affects the organisation.

8. Continue your efforts to address the issue of outstanding audits of the financial accounts. I won't comment on that further – you know you've got a job to do and deal with that in the way you need to.

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. I won't go into that. You've got a constitution. I've had a scan through and think there are ways to improve things. The constitution is a toolkit to help you guys as Councillors transact business that is good business and you transact it effectively. Rowing until all hours of the night, repeating things, filibustering – all of this can be controlled by the constitution. You really need to look at that to help you do business well and help you get home to see your wife, see your family etc.

10. Financial training to promote a better understanding of financial implications, project viability and robust business cases. This comment is directed at the whole council – officers, staff and members. Spelthorne have a very high profile. We talked about you being entrepreneurial, business minded – all these good things. Therefore, it's a challenge for local government across the piece. Because of the reduction in support – I'm not going to be political but I'll say it as a fact – the RSG is depleted. We've had to go to commercial space and being a Council is different from five, 10 years ago. We've got to be switched on, we've got to be sharp and we've got to know our numbers. We've got to understand the implications of decisions and we depend on officers to give us good financial reports, secure advice on

financial implications, trustworthy advice on financial implications. When a project is brought forward, because you guys are big on projects. We've listed some of the projects you've done and the projects you want to do. There needs to be a business case to support those projects and those business cases need to be robust. Officers, if you want the support of members to make those decisions and deliver those things for the Borough, you need those business cases to be absolutely solid as the members need to trust and say I get it, you've explained it well, it's without error, it's clear, it's concise, let's vote on it. It's as simple as that. You all need to shift forward in that finance space.

11. To 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. I mentioned it earlier, in an ideal world, we'd take everyone with us, and everyone would agree with every decision we make. We know that's not the world we live in but what we can do is we make sure that we have made every effort to take people with us and they fully understand the journey and they fully understand the reasons for the decisions that this Council makes or the decisions it doesn't make. You're doing that well but it's about building on it – it's not saying you're not doing it, it's about building on it and keep the focus and sharpen it and keep doing it better.

12. Finally, consider how the LGA can continue to assist with all the above recommendations on this reset journey. I can't emphasise it enough. There is so clearly a need to reset, despite the fact. I'm amazed you do as much as you do knowing there is disfunction. Think about how much more you can do. You need to reset because Spelthorne residents will benefit even more from what this organisation does for them. So, we will help you. It's not there's 12 recommendations, off you go, good luck, back in six months. There are actions in that – you need to draw on the resources that are available to help you do better. I'll say it in many ways you're doing better as a borough than many other districts and boroughs in spite of everything that goes on with some of the infighting and some of the bad behaviour that we've discussed on this. What does that look like? Maybe it's training, maybe it's getting people on the leadership development programme. Maybe it's mentoring. That's our offer to you and that's for you to take up or not take up.