

Spelthorne Local Plan

**Proposal for Critical Friend Support
June 2023**



Spelthorne Local Plan: Proposal for Critical Friend Support

June 2023

Context for the Review

1. Spelthorne Borough Council submitted its draft Local Plan for examination in November 2022 with the first stage examination hearings taking place in May. However, following the Local Elections, the council requested a pause in the examination for three months which the Planning Inspector has accepted. This is to bring the new councillors up to speed with the local plan process and contents and to allow the new council to understand and review the policies where necessary. After the three month period the council will decide what is needed (if anything) to allow the examination of the plan to continue.
2. To support the Council (both the officers and Members) through this process, the Council Leadership has invited Catriona Riddell to provide some external help. Catriona is a highly qualified planner with considerable experience working both within and with local authorities to develop their plans (see CV attached). Although Catriona works across the country, most of her experience has been in the South East and specifically within Surrey, so she has extensive knowledge of the area and the issues Spelthorne is facing. In 2021, Catriona also supported the previous council in their attempt to develop a shared vision within which the local plan could be prepared but this was not adopted in the end. Catriona represents the planning profession in a number of roles at the national level and is therefore engaged with Government Officials on a wide range of issues, including future reforms to the planning system.
3. By the end of the three month pause the Inspector has granted, the council will have to decide what the next steps are for the local plan. To do this, they will have to be confident that this is the plan the (new) council would like to see come out of the examination process and be adopted, and that it reflects their vision for Spelthorne and their communities. The ultimate aim should be to keep the plan process moving forward through examination in order to have an up-to-date framework for development as soon as possible, minimising any risks in the meantime and providing the certainty needed for all those that will play a part in its delivery. To do this, and acknowledging the limited time available before a decision will have to be made, it is proposed that the council should focus on the following:
 - (1) As a matter of urgency, **revisit the Vision for Spelthorne** previously developed to see whether this still reflects the priorities of the new Council and if not, what needs to change. This will then provide a high level framework within which to test the draft local plan strategy and consider whether it is still appropriate and if not, how significant the changes are likely to be to bring the draft local plan into line with the vision. A decision will then be needed on whether any changes could be managed through the existing plan-making process and examination or whether a more fundamental change to the plan's strategy would be needed. Discussions should be initiated with the

Inspector as soon as the initial process has been undertaken and there is some clarity over the direction of travel. In either case, a new timetable should be presented along with other supporting documents at the end of the three month period so that everyone involved has some clarity.

- (2) **Prepare a full risk assessment** setting out all the risks to the council of delaying the local plan process further. This should involve fiscal risks but also risks associated with potential speculative development, impact on local communities around uncertainty and potential actions / interventions from the Government.

4. To support both processes, the council should also initiate:

- An **evidence review** to ensure that all relevant evidence is up-to-date and if not, where evidence would need to be updated or where there are any potential gaps in evidence (for example, to support the latest national policy requirements on building climate resilience and on design codes).
- **Discussions with neighbouring authorities** and statutory consultees to ensure they are fully aware of what the council is doing and why but also to improve overall collaboration in the process.
- **Discussions with local stakeholders**, particularly local communities and the development community.

The role of a Critical Friend

5. In undertaking any 'critical friend' role it is important to acknowledge that there is no single approach to plan-making, there are always different interpretations of technical evidence and there are usually many different spatial options which deliver the same objectives (albeit to different degrees). Catriona will therefore provide an effective challenge role that helps both officers and Members explore all options, including those that have not yet been considered, and determine the key risks. She will not undertake a forensic analysis of all technical evidence or local plan but will aim to help ensure that all avenues are explored in developing a sound and legally compliant plan that can be supported by the council going forward either through the current process or through a revised process.

6. Specifically, the role will involve:

- Facilitation of a workshop for both councillors and officers to explore the relevance of the previously developed Vision for Spelthorne and whether changes are needed to reflect more accurately the new Council's priorities.
- Working with officers to support the risk assessment and evidence review.
- Supporting the Council, if necessary, at the proposed meetings with neighbouring authorities, statutory consultees and local stakeholders.

- Providing independent professional advice and help to promote a healthy debate around the issues and challenges the Council faces.
- An independent report summarising the key issues and providing clear recommendations to inform the next steps.

Proposed Costs

Estimate for all support set out in Paragraph 6 between June and the end of September 2023 =

Additional Information

Catriona is available to start the commission straight away and will prioritise this work going forward to ensure that it supports the Council's current timetable, although she will be on annual leave for some of the time in late July/ early August (but will still be easily contactable for urgent queries etc).

For any further questions regarding the proposal, please contact Catriona by either email or phone (see contact details below).