

A BETTER ALTERNATIVE

The government has opened the door. So why won't the Council walk through?

Spelthorne Borough Council set its face long ago against considering any alternative to meeting what it has called 'the government housing target' for a minimum of 618 new homes to be built in the borough every year for the next 15 years. This is almost four times more than the 166 target the Council has been working to since 2009. A more equitable distribution of the borough's housing 'target' or simply a lower housing delivery number would save Staines from the worst excesses of 'high-rise hell'.

There is currently direct conflict between the Council and the government on what the Council calls 'the government housing target'. But even if the 618 number must be met, which the government challenges, there's no need to dump more than half of it on Staines.

Government position

The government has made its position very clear:

- Spelthorne MP Kwasi Kwarteng says the government insists 618 *"is not a target or a minimum ... Councils can decide their own housing requirement once they have considered their ability to meet the needs of their area. This includes taking local circumstances into account, and the Secretary of State is aware of the constraints in Spelthorne."*
- Answering a question on *"unrealistic housing targets"* and the need for *"greater flexibility on housing numbers"*, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the House of Commons in June this year *"Part of the genius of levelling up is that it will encourage us to take some of the pressure, some of the heat, out of the south east of England which has been overburdened for decades – and we can do it."*
- Also in June, the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove MP, said the government will be *"taking steps to ensure that the Planning Inspectorate, when it is reviewing a local plan and deciding whether it is sound, does not impose on local communities an obligation to meet figures on housing need that cannot be met given the environment and other constraints in particular communities."*

Council position

But the Council is sticking with the decision it took some time ago to ignore alternatives to the 618 number. It generally thinks that government pronouncements to date on flexibility are "vacuous". The Council says that if and when it determines there is a genuine opportunity for a lower housing delivery number it will not be difficult to modify the plan they have just published.

The government's acceptance that there are special circumstances and constraints affecting Spelthorne will have derived in part from the Council giving it a number of reasons why it thinks a lower number would be justified for Spelthorne. The case was based on a number of constraints in the borough including the considerable amount of the greenbelt that is actually water (reservoirs etc), and extensive areas subject to flooding. The one important thing missing from the Council's case,

however, was the urban wreckage the Council believes it cannot avoid inflicting on Staines if the current 'target' has to be met. We believe this would have been a powerful and graphic additional argument for a lower number and don't understand why it wasn't made.

Even less do we understand why the Council has made no attempt to take the government at its word and produce a Local Plan with a lower housing delivery number as an alternative to the current version which it says itself will "*damage our environment and ruin the character of our small and highly constrained borough*". The Council has said that the current Plan can be modified easily to accommodate a lower number if this becomes available. So, even given the urgency to get a Local Plan approved, it could have produced this as the much preferred 'plan A' with what is now the current plan as a very distant and unwelcome back-up 'plan B'.

Conclusion

The Council's insistence that 618 is a minimum target, when the government insists it isn't, and the Council's refusal to put this to the test, begs a few questions. Just saying it doesn't believe the government's pronouncements without putting them to the test must be challenged. Having committed to 618 so long ago, would it just be too embarrassing to take a different course? Has the Council set its heart on 618, come hell or high water, for reasons undisclosed? Does it not have the bottle or imagination to go for something less catastrophic?

Staines is the borough's largest town (with 20 per cent of its population today) so should perhaps expect to be a focus of development. But there can surely be no argument that insisting 55 percent of the borough's entire housing target *must* fall on Staines, leading to a 50 per cent population increase, is grotesquely disproportionate and unjustified. The Council should have put to the test the government's implied invitation to consider a plan with a lower housing delivery number if the Council believes, as it says it does, local constraints would justify it. And it should at least have given itself some flexibility to reduce the impact on Staines as and when circumstances change and opportunities emerge elsewhere in the borough.

The outcome our coalition of residents' organisations seeks, and will now work to achieve, is:

- To ensure the government and the Council have a serious adult conversation to resolve whether a Local Plan with a lower and far less damaging housing delivery number is a genuine option, and to ensure such a plan is put to the Planning Inspectorate.
- To persuade the Planning Inspector to reject the Spelthorne Local Plan as it stands on the grounds that it is not 'legally compliant' or 'sound', insist on the kind of amendments we proposed (see 'About the Plan') as a minimum, and ensure there is a credible plan to deliver the needed infrastructure.
- To ensure that if/when either of the above happens, the benefit of it will fall disproportionately in favour of Staines to redress the disproportionate and unjustified damage of the plan submitted to the Planning Inspectorate.