

# **ABOUT THE PLAN WHY (ALMOST) NO-ONE LIKES IT WHY IT LEAVES STAINES UNPROTECTED**

## **About the plan**

The single factor that has driven the development and content of the Council's Local Plan is what it calls the 'government-imposed housing target' of at least 618 new homes to be built in the borough every year for 15 years (a total of at least 9,270). This is almost four times the Council's achievements in recent years. The government insists the concept of 618 being a 'target' is a fantasy. But the Foreword to the plan's main document talks of little else. And nowhere in it is there a coherent explanation for why the Council insists that 55 per cent of the 'target' (5,000+) *must* be built in Staines!. This will mean peppering the town with tower-blocks of tiny flats to accommodate a 50 per cent population increase! Urban wreckage through grotesque overdevelopment. Little wonder that only one of the nine ward Councillors in Staines voted for it ... along with all but two Councillors from other wards in the borough (who were no doubt very happy somewhere else would bear most of the pain).

The 'Spelthorne Local Plan' itself is 260 pages. An important supplementary document for Staines residents is the 150-page 'Staines Development Framework'. In all there are more than 40 documents of supporting evidence on the Council website dealing with other essential specific topics such as the Infrastructure Delivery Plan, Greenbelt Assessment, Retail and Town Centre Study, and Sustainability Assessment. The total package is more than 3,000 pages!

Of course, it is a plan for the borough as a whole, so not all of it by any means is related to Staines. But you need to go through pretty much all of it to find the bits that are! It is available on-line ([www.spelthorne.gov.uk/localplan](http://www.spelthorne.gov.uk/localplan)).

The Council's officers and their consultants are currently running a 'public consultation' on the plan and have organised events across town to explain it and answer questions. There are a number of problems with the plan, beyond its impact on Staines. When published, it had a number of important gaps, not least because most of what is needed to deliver it is expressed as aspirations rather than commitments let alone certainties. Part of the explanation for this is that most of what is required to make the plan work must be provided by other authorities and developers. This helps to explain why the plan says the Council "*will support proposals that facilitate new and improved public and sustainable transport links, education facilities, healthcare services, and social and community uses in accessible locations*".

## **Why (almost) no-one likes it**

As noted earlier, only one of the nine Councillors representing the three Staines wards voted for the plan. All but two of the Councillors representing wards outside Staines voted for it. But all were struggling to say something good about it when it was discussed by the full Council. Even the chairman of the committee responsible for it said he didn't like it much.

The housing 'target' that is the basis of the plan is ludicrously, perhaps unachievably, high – a view broadly shared by Councillors. But the committee responsible for the plan and officers driving the exercise decided to stick with the so-called government housing 'target' regardless. They turned their backs on even considering a more achievable and less damaging alternative despite the government saying the Council had the opportunity to do so (see 'A better alternative').

Staines residents and residents' associations, and Councillors for the three Staines wards, don't like the plan because of the urban wreckage it will inflict on the town. Close to 4,000 residents signed a petition in 2020 calling on the Council to prevent 'high-rise hell' in the town and ensure a more proportionate distribution of the housing number across the borough. Also in 2020, the Council and Conservative Group Leader (then as now) Cllr John Boughtflower joined our Coalition partners in a photoshoot to protest against the proposed high-rise hell in Staines.

Here's what Cllr Boughtflower, Cllr Ian Beardsmore (chairman of the committee responsible for the plan), and Cllr Ian Harvey (leader of the break-away United Spelthorne Group) say in their joint Foreword to the main document: *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 ... so as a Council we are faced with producing a Plan that pleases no one or having no Plan at all.*

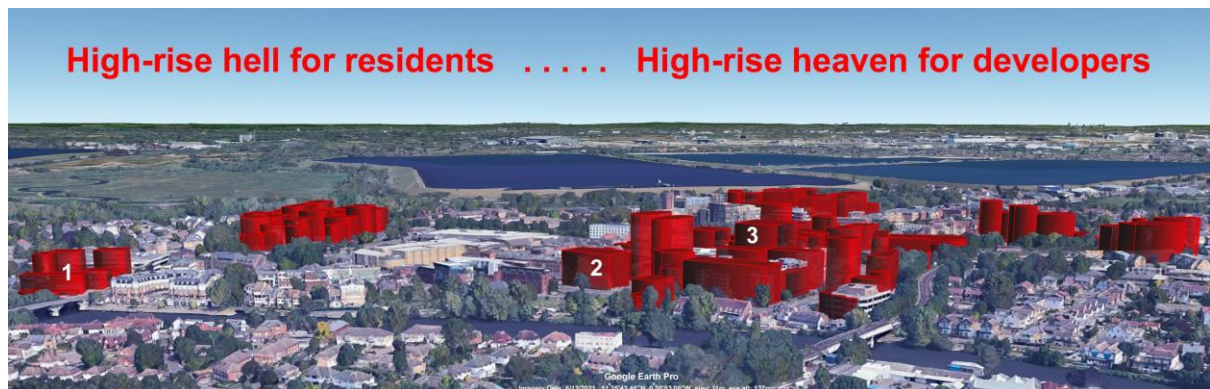
The only people most likely to love the plan as it stands are therefore predatory property developers and a few others with commercial interests that can prosper in the town!

### **Why it leaves Staines unprotected**

The Riverside Residents (Staines) Coalition fought a campaign against '*High-rise hell for residents – High-rise heaven for developers*' in Staines from mid-2020 until the Spring of 2022. When it became clear this battle was lost we decided to focus our ambitions on limiting its worst excesses. We asked the Council to make two simple amendments:

- 1 We (together with Staines Councillors) thought it was perverse and unnecessary for the plan to set in stone for 15 years that Staines should be forced to take 55 per cent of the borough's entire housing target. We therefore sought an amendment that would have given the Council elbow room to vary the allocation as and when conditions and opportunities changed. This was rejected.
- 2 We liked the draft plan's proposal to protect sensitive areas in Staines (the Conversation area, riverfront, and immediately adjacent to existing residential areas) with zoning arrangements to ensure they could not be blighted by tower-blocks. The Council insisted there had to be scope for exceptions. We therefore proposed an amendment that would have ensured a clear and very limited definition of what might constitute an 'exception', and that there should be a robust and challenging process to achieve 'exception' status. This too was rejected without explanation. The plan now has a very broad and loose definition of what might qualify as an 'exception' and no clarity on who will decide. Experienced and predatory developers will see this as a hurdle they can easily kick over.

This leaves Staines virtually unprotected. We believe it is quite wrong for the Council to claim in its Foreword to the plan that: "*The decision of this Council to produce a Plan that does meet the imposed housing target means that we will have policies that allow us to defend the Borough against damaging developments in our most precious areas*". This may be true for elsewhere in the borough, but it is clearly not true for Staines.



*This illustration from the 3D model is based on information from the Council and other sources relating to the location, height and foot-print of featured buildings. Adjustments will be made as new reliable data becomes available. The reality may be worse than illustrated. Also note: (1) The Arora hotel/apartment development illustrated is smaller than that detailed in the Council's contract with Arora; but Councillors have been told privately Arora now wants to build a smaller hotel, with the whole development of eight storeys close to the river and 12 storeys further back. The configuration of the buildings in the illustration above may not be accurate. (2) The Debenhams building illustrated does not include a high-rise redevelopment. However, an application for twin-towers of 14-storeys was rejected recently by the Planning Committee (and may go to appeal), and the Council's plan assumes a high-rise development of some sort on the site. (3) The Council has yet to announce what it has in mind for the redevelopment of the Elmsleigh Centre, and this may well be bigger than represented above.*