Matter 1: Requirements, Vision, Strategy, Objectives and Sustainability

Issue 1: Has the Council complied with all the legal requirements, and in particular the duty to co-operate, and are the Core Strategy’s proposals for sustainable growth deliverable, clear, sufficiently justified, effective and consistent with all relevant national policy?

1.1 What measures has the Council taken to comply with the duty to co-operate, with which local authorities has that co-operation taken place and what has been the outcome of that co-operation? What documentary evidence is there of that co-operation, and what evidence is there in the Core Strategy of the effectiveness of that co-operation?

1.2 Have there been any discussions at any time with a nearby Borough or District to accommodate any unmet need, and has any nearby Authority requested the Council to meet any of its needs? And what was the outcome of any such request? For example, are any arrangements or understandings in place between the Council and Sheffield City Council? In which ways has the Council acted as a “good neighbour” in matters of town and country planning?

1.3 Are all cross-boundary issues satisfactorily addressed?

1) It is evident that Rotherham and Sheffield are at completely different stages in their plan making process and therefore it makes it awkward for these two authorities to work together and engage on an equal basis to meet development requirements as advocated by NPPF at Paragraph 179. There is a lack of a consistent evidence base and so there appears to be no coherent strategy for dealing with housing need across the Housing Market Area. As such, timing is a major issue and there is a strong case to suggest that both Core Strategies should move forward in parallel with one another since it is difficult for Rotherham to pre-judge the level of future growth and policy direction for Sheffield particularly when there is such a strong inter-relationship between the delivery of housing between the two authorities.

2) The Government also expects that cooperation should be a continual process of engagement from initial thinking through to implementation. The RSS recognised Rotherham and Sheffield as a joint housing market area for the purposes of strategic planning and this was reflected in the RSS housing requirement for the two districts. Whilst the two authorities did embark on a joint SHLAA, the more important SHMA required to inform housing needs have been progressed independently by each Authority.
3) We learn in the letter from RMBC to the Inspector dated 26 July 2013 that they approached Sheffield City Council in 2009/10 to undertake a joint SHMA covering the Sheffield and Rotherham Housing Market Area but at that time Sheffield City Council had recently adopted the Core Strategy and had no need for further evidence so RMBC proceeded independently. It is interesting to note that rather belatedly, it would appear that there is now a sentiment for both Local Authorities to work together in future as part of the new SMHA being prepared by Sheffield City Council so that it can encompass the Housing Market Area. Nevertheless, this is some way off and due to timing and costs we remain sceptical whether this will actually happen. A more likely situation will be for RMBC to decline further involvement particularly if they have an adopted Core Strategy in place at that time (i.e. the roles will be reversed compared to 2009/10). With the absence of a combined SMHA for the whole HMA and the lack of clarity between the key parties involved, it is difficult to see how they are working together to produce a coherent strategy that not only meets the needs of their own district but also includes the needs of the wider area and this is seen as being contrary to NPPF.

4) The ‘Forecast of Populations and Households for the Sheffield City Region’ report published in March 2013 was the first time there has been a broad consistent update objectively assessment of future housing needs available to inform and test emerging development plan documents across the Sheffield City Region as a whole. This does not convey a sense that both Local Authorities have been testing a consistent evidence base from ‘initial thinking’. Indeed, during the early stages of the Core Strategy consultation process, Sheffield City Council registered concern about the proposed reduction in Rotherham’s housing target pending a review of housing requirements across the City Region which illustrates the fact that Rotherham have been working independently on setting their own targets rather than working together with Sheffield City Council from first principles to achieve common goals and plan strategically across local boundaries to meet anticipated development requirements. Therefore, the Memorandum of Understanding between both authorities appear to introduce temporary measures to appease Sheffield rather than commitment to a joined up approach.

5) Whilst the focus of this Hearing is on testing Rotherham’s housing requirement in the context of the duty to cooperate there has to be an underlying assumption that Sheffield’s housing target of 1,350 dwellings per annum is fixed for the foreseeable future and that this figure can be delivered. However, from the range of household projections being considered for Sheffield over the next 20 years the current housing requirement seems significantly lower. Within the Memorandum of Understanding there appears to be a hint of recognition by Rotherham that agreement could be reached with the Sheffield City Council that they are likely to accommodate more than the 1,350 dwelling a year in future to reflect the up to date projections. However, without a mechanism in place to consider this issue in parallel with Rotherham’s circumstances, it is difficult to see how fair and meaningful constructive cooperation between the two Authorities can take place. Instead, the Memorandum of Understanding effectively becomes an agreement to confirm that at some time in the future, both plans will need to be reviewed (presumably at the same time). The processes creates an imbalance to assess Rotherham’s future development requirement without any real commitment by Sheffield City Council to an evidence base or overall agreement as to the likely level and range of housing that might be needed in the HMA for the next 15 years (ie leaving to
one side their adopted Core Strategy is based on the RSS figures). For the duty to cooperate to work there needs to be a consistent approach between the Authorities and applying the housing projections from the 2008 base it projects an annual need of between 1,951-3,000 dwellings per annum in Sheffield which is significantly more than currently planned for. In the ‘Forecast of Populations and Households for the Sheffield City Region’ Report it concludes that the current planned housing growth is lower than all the other scenarios which again leads to the conclusion that adjoining authorities such as Rotherham in particular will be required to accommodate this growth within the next 15 years.

6) Given there is a close association between the two Authorities this is an important issue that has not been properly addressed as part of the duty to cooperate. The seriousness of this issue is further heightened by: the recent significant dip in under-delivery of sites in Sheffield against their current requirement; Sheffield already has a 5 year Land Supply deficit; and the emerging City Policies and Sites DPD does not allocate sufficient level of housing for the Plan Period to meet the current plan for housing growth.

7) Given the considerations above, a comprehensive assessment of the best way of distributing growth across Sheffield City Region in particular the Sheffield/Rotherham HMA should be undertaken and agreed before RMBC make the decision to plan for a reduction in local provision compared to the RSS requirement. The Forecast of Populations and Households for the City Region Report together with a jointly prepared SHMA provides the obvious vehicles for taking this forward.

1.4 Is the plan period, 2013-2028, the most appropriate one? Should it be longer? Should it be unspecified, i.e the next 15 years?

8) Within the Publication Version of the Core Strategy reference to the Plan Period was 2013 to 2028 but wording relating to this timescale was amended in the Focus Changes and it has become unclear as to the exact start date although there is continued references to the timescale of 15 years. We would suggest that the 15 year period is in accordance with the advice of NPPF but this should commence at the time of adoption which on current estimates is likely to be March 2014 based on the Council’s April 2013 Local Development Scheme. This would appear to be acknowledged in Focus Change No.60 at Page 40.

9) An implication of this is that the backlog of underperformance of housing delivery against the housing requirement will also need to be rolled forward and based on the housing trajectory at Page 44 of the Focus Changes, this would require an additional 250 dwellings pa to be found given the anticipated net additions of 600 dwellings between 2013 to 2014 (assuming the annual requirement stays at 850 dpa).

10) There is also the issue that RMBC are proposing to defer fundamental issues such as a comprehensive view of Green Belt to the Sites and Policies DPD which is not scheduled for adoption until July 2015. This would be a delay of over a year should it be agreed that the 15 year start date of the Core Strategy Plan would commence when it is adopted. This situation is not conducive to boost housing supply in the short term.
1.8 Has the Core Strategy been positively prepared and, if so, in which ways? Subject to more detailed discussions with regard to housing, employment and retail, does it fully meet the objectively assessed development needs of the area? And does it do so with sufficient flexibility to adapt to change? And what might be the consequences of any insufficient flexibility?

11) Given Rotherham’s strong relationship with Sheffield and the evidence base that has recently emerged, it is difficult to reach the conclusion that RMBC will meet the full objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing within the Housing Market Area. As Sheffield progress forward with their own Local Plan Review, this is likely to lead to significant changes in circumstances. As a result of the Duty to Cooperate and the provisions that have been put in place to encourage flexibility such as: the housing requirement would not be considered the ceiling the reference to safeguarded land; and allocating additional sites to create a further 10% margin, we consider these would not be sufficient to address the fundamental changes likely to be required. A collective review of the housing requirement across the Core Strategy in light of the forthcoming SCR Growth Plan is likely to trigger an early review of Rotherham’s Local Plan but there is no reference to specific indicators threshold/trigger point that should be monitored as part of the Memorandum of Understanding between the two Authorities.

12) Safeguarded land is also referred to in the Memorandum of Understanding to provide potential flexibility but it is acknowledged that this can only be released through a formal plan review and so cannot be used as a mechanism for positive planning to accommodate any unforeseen needs arising in the short to medium term.

1.10 Have exceptional circumstances been demonstrated to justify any alteration to Green Belt boundaries? Is the matter adequately considered in the Core Strategy, or is too much reliance being placed on the Sites and Policies DPD? Should any additions or deletions be made to the locations identified in Policy CS4 for broad extent of changes? Are paragraphs 5.2.11 and 5.2.41 consistent?

1.11 Are the proposals for safeguarded land justified, with particular regard to the areas of search?

13) To satisfy the objectively assessed housing need for RMBC and the Housing Market area, Green Belt release will be required even at the lower rate of housing projections advocated by RMBC. The assessment work in the SHLAA clearly demonstrates that the Council cannot accommodate its development needs within the existing Urban Area and based on this information, we consider that exceptional circumstances have been shown to justify the principle of altering Green Belt boundaries. Whilst there is an acknowledgement that the principle of Green Belt will be removed to accommodate the development requirements in identifying settlements within the Borough, there is no certainty within the Core Strategy which will hamper the release of housing land. This issue is an important consideration and should be considered at the Core Strategy stage rather than to be delegated to the Sites and Policies DPD so that clear spatial choices about where development should go in broad terms can be achieved.
14) We consider that the evidence provided by the 2012 Strategic Green Belt Review provides a proportionate level of evidence to assess the Spatial Objectives of the Borough against Green Belt purposes. This approach would create certainty so that deliverable sites that are only constrained through Green Belt policy restrictions can be brought forward sooner. This is particularly important given the Council’s track record of under delivering against previous housing targets. It would also deliver earlier in the process sites that are attractive to the market and would assist in boosting significantly the supply of land in the short to medium term which would in turn address the current 5 year housing land supply shortfall.

15) In terms of the locations identified for the broad extents of changes to Green Belt we support this spatial pattern of development as it will lead to the delivery of development in the most sustainable locations. However, there is a strong likelihood that further Green Belt releases than currently planned would be required in order to meet the objectively assessed need for the housing market area.

16) The principles identifying the broad location of search for safeguarded land is also supported but the reason for identifying safeguarded land seems to be misguided by RMBC in its efforts to reach agreement with Sheffield City Council in terms of the Duty to Cooperate and create flexibility. Based on the objectively assessed housing need there is a strong indication that safeguarded land will be required at some time during the current Plan Period rather than satisfying any longer term needs beyond the Plan Period as recognised in NPPF. Based on current evidence a situation could arise whereby an early review of the Core Strategy is triggered as a result of further assessment work undertaken by Sheffield City Council as part of their SMHA and part of Rotherham’s proportions of the safeguarded land is subsequently allocated for development. There will be no additional flexibility in meeting the long term development needs and in light of this scenario there would be strong pressure to further amend the Green Belt at the subsequent Plan Review. This approach conflicts with the NPPF which advises that once reviewed, Green Belt Boundaries should endure and stretch well beyond the Plan Period (i.e. 15 years). It is not considered that identifying safeguarded land equivalent to 5 years supply beyond the Plan Period (i.e. 4,250 dwellings based on RMBC’s current target) is sufficient to satisfy the NPPF guidance.

17) The NPPF also advises that Local Authorities should satisfy themselves that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the Plan Period. We consider that the purpose of safeguarded land in Rotherham’s case is to try to provide flexibility should they need to take a greater share of Sheffield’s growth in future (i.e. within the next 15 years) rather than to prevent the amendment of Green Belt boundaries at the end of the Plan Period (i.e. beyond 15 years). Merging these two separate issues together would put pressure on further Green Belt releases.

18) The argument that safeguarded land will experience development pressure sooner rather than later is further strengthened when consideration is given to SCC positions regarding Green Belt review. SCC acknowledge the need for an early review of Green Belt but in the context of “a Strategic Review of the Green Belt Across South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire” (Sheffield Housing Monitoring Report July 2013) rather than localised within their own district.