Rotherham MBC Publication Core Strategy

Inspector’s Matters, Issues and Questions for Examination at the Hearing

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

Issue 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?

The response to answering this question is based specifically on the context of promoting the Bassingthorpe Farm proposal and we consider that exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated to remove the Study Area from Green Belt and to revise the boundary accordingly. Whilst Policy CS4 confirms that the Broad Location for Growth at Bassingthorpe Farm will be removed from Green Belt, this is proposed to take place through the Sites and Policies DPD but we consider sufficient justification and evidence base work has been undertaken so that a decision on the alteration to Green Belt boundary in this particular case can be made as part of the Core Strategy process.

Delivering Rotherham Spatial Strategy

The underlying objective of the Core Strategy is to deliver the largest proportion of growth to the Rotherham Urban Area and this is clearly set out within Policy CS1. As a result of focusing growth to Rotherham Urban Area to satisfy sustainability objectives, it is recognised through the SHLAA and the Strategic Green Belt Review that there are a lack of suitable land and sites to meet identified housing, employment and other development needs within the existing settlement boundary. This evidence base work provides justification for exceptional circumstances for alterations to the Rotherham Green Belt Boundary (CS paragraph 5.2.12).

Housing Needs and Land Supply

Based upon the evidence contained within the SHMA together with the modelling of the effects of employment growth and the trend towards high levels of migration particularly from Sheffield there is a strong likelihood that Rotherham will continue to experience high levels of housing need during the lifetime of the Plan Period.

Alternative Site Assessment

Bassingthorpe Farm has been considered alongside other reasonable alternatives within the Council’s Integrated Impact Assessment 2013 (RSD/3). The IIA concludes that all of the alternative broad locations were potentially viable options but in planning terms not all of
them would respect the spatial strategy and settlement hierarchy. Reference to Tables 5-8: ‘Summary of Rationale for Discarding or Selecting Broad Locations for Growth Options’ provides the detailed summary and the decision and rationale for selecting the Bassingthorpe Farm options.

The justification for considering Bassingthorpe Farm as the preferred site was due to it being well located in relation to the town centre and sustainable transport opportunities. The new community at Bassingthorpe Farm will be close to the urban area and would provide existing community and social infrastructure and enable the provision of new social infrastructure.

Green Belt Assessment Evidence

The Council has already undertaken a Strategic Green Belt Review to assess its relative contribution to fulfilling the purposes of Green Belt Policy and demonstrating the lack of suitable sites within settlement boundaries. As part of the Bassingthorpe Farm Concept Framework Report a more detailed Green Belt Assessment has been independently undertaken on behalf of the land owners and provides a more in-depth assessment of the impact of the Study Area on the purposes of Green Belt. This body of evidence recommends that the Green Belt Boundary can be altered to remove the Study Area from this designation and we consider significant weight can be given to this issue particularly when considering alongside the other exceptional circumstances.

Considering Bassingthorpe Farm as a Strategic Allocation

As justified within Issue 1.15 below, we are of the opinion that the overall body of evidence that has contributed to the preparation of the Concept Framework Report (KSD/6) to justify the suitability and delivery of Bassingthorpe Farm is proportionate with the stage of work normally expected to justify a strategic allocation. Six key tests are identified and we consider the level of work undertaken confirms the soundness of allowing Bassingthorpe Farm the opportunity of becoming a strategic allocation.

Based on estimates of initial delivery timescales of the Bassingthorpe Farm project, the underlying conclusion reached within the Concept Framework Plan is that the delivery of 1700 dwellings within the Plan Period will be difficult to achieve given lead-in periods and build out rates even if certainty of a strategic allocation is achieved within the Core Strategy.

Issue 1.15 - should the Core Strategy identify land at Bassingthorpe Farm as a Broad Location for Growth?

Summary Response

Bassingthorpe Farm should be seen as a formal strategic allocation within the Core Strategy rather than as a Broad Location for Growth which would be subject to the timescale and programme of the emerging Sites and Policies DPD. It has been demonstrated through the evidence work undertaken by Council Officers and the team of consultants commissioned by the landowners drawn together in the Concept Framework Report (KSD/6) that this is proportionate with the stage of work normally expected for justifying a strategic allocation.
Background

The Bassingthorpe Farm proposal has been subject to partnership working between Council Officers at Rotherham MBC, key statutory stakeholders and a specialist team of consultants acting on behalf of the landowners. This process has been overseen by the Advisory Team for Large Application (ATLAS) who have acted as facilitator to provide both spatial planning and project management advice to promote and support joint working arrangements and structures with the parties involved.

This process has ensured that the preparation of the Concept Framework Report and the supporting evidence has been rigorously and comprehensively assessed. It has been guided by six key principles (page 14 KSD/6) to test the overall soundness of the approach and ensure the proposal is suitable, achievable and deliverable. An overview of these tests are examined below.

It is clear from the Publication Version of the Core Strategy that one of the main reasons for the Council pursuing a Broad Location for Growth at Bassingthorpe Farm rather than promote a Strategic Allocation was the focus and priority of RMBC in seeking to release brownfield sites first (see Paragraph 5.2.73). Linked to the issue of preventing the release of greenfield land too early in the Plan Period was the decision made by RMBC not to undertake a comprehensive review of the Green Belt boundary at the Core Strategy stage in the process but to delegate it to the Sites and Policies DPD. This approach culminates in the reluctance found in Policy CS6 to bring forward Bassingthorpe Farm until 2018 unless there is considered to be a shortfall in housing supply to deliver the five year requirement.

As demonstrated by the level and detail of the evidence work that has been undertaken during the process which was initiated in March 2011, we are of the view this is sufficient and proportionate to justifying the soundness of delivering a strategic allocation.

There is also the issue of the Council being unable to achieve its delivery and its housing trajectory targets and Bassingthorpe Farm is a key component in the housing strategy. As such the earlier the certainty can be achieved regarding its formal allocation the sooner the masterplanning and application process can progress so that the target of 1,700 dwellings can be achieved within the Plan Period.

The Six Evidence Delivery Tests

Within the Concept Framework Report, six tests are referred to at Page 14 under the heading ‘Delivery Evidence Approach’ and it has been recognised by all parties involved in the process that by adopting a proportionate response to address these issues this would demonstrate the soundness of the project to allow the opportunity for the formal adoption of a strategic allocation within a Core Strategy.

1. Identify clear objectives/aims intended for the overall development.

The collaborative approach of the key parties since March 2011 (in particular the workshop sessions) has allowed a clear vision and site specific development objectives to be considered and agreed within the context of an interdisciplinary approach. The key place-
making components for the site have been captured and these have been subject to further
testing and examination through a Public Exhibition and presentation to Council Members. It
is recognised that the vision and objectives will need to be re-visited over time but the
evidence has fully informed the process to arrive at clear objectives that have been agreed
with to key members of the project team. This vision and objectives can be found in Section
3 of the Concept Framework Report.

2. Identify site constraints including those that are fixed and those that need to be
overcome.

Section 6 of a Concept Framework Report provides an overview of the comprehensive
baseline assessment work that has been undertaken to inform: the site constraints and
Opportunities; the level of mitigation required; and impact on development capacity and
viability.

This detailed evidence work comprises:

- Visual and Landscape Character and Sensitivity Appraisal;
- Green Belt Assessment;
- Heritage Assessment;
- Archaeology;
- Greenspace Analysis;
- Ecological Analysis;
- Surface Water Drainage;
- Movement and Transport;
- Contamination/Land Stability;
- Services and Utilities;
- Market Demand/Need Assessment.

These technical studies have identified constraints and we have been able to provide
sufficient clarity on exclusions and limitations to development. The constraints have
identified are categorised into: fixed constraints (something that is absolute and cannot be
relocated); flexible constraints (something which may be considered developable subject to
mitigation measures); and unconstrained land (land unaffected by constraints).

In terms of the flexible constraints areas, these have been subject to further sensitivity
testing particularly in relation to Ground Conditions, Landscape/Heritage Setting, Ecology,
Drainage and Land Ownership Issues (i.e. use of allotment). Adapting an interdisciplinary
approach, these constraints have also been continually tested against the evolving vision
and development objectives.

All principle findings and outcomes have been considered on a collaborative basis within the
project governance structure other than the weight to be given to the Green Belt
Assessment prepared by Smeeden Foreman. Their report assessed the sensitivity of the
study area against the five purposes of Green Belt having regard to key documents such as
the Rotherham Strategic Green Belt Review – April 2012 and Rotherham Landscape
Character Assessment and Landscape Capacity Study prepared in January 2010.
The Green Belt Assessment for the Bassingthorpe Farm Study Area was independently commissioned by the landowners and is still under review by RMBC without agreement being reached as to whether the conclusions and recommendations are accepted. We would invite the Inspector to consider the evidence requesting the removal of the Bassingthorpe Farm Study Area from Green Belt given the detailed justification undertaken. Figure 12 at page 51 in the Concept Framework Report recommends a proposed revision to the Green Belt Boundary. This proposes the removal of Green Belt land for the defined Study Area but it also suggests a further area be removed to the north of the Study Area and designated as safeguarded land. We would recommend that as part of the case for supporting a strategic allocation for Bassingthorpe Farm, the Study Area is removed from the Green Belt with Cinder Bridge Road providing a clearly defensible revised boundary. Any extension further north of the Study Area can be revisited as part of the Sites and Policies DPD. Furthermore, given the Green Infrastructure led approach for the Bassingthorpe Farm proposal (see vision and objections) there is a strong justification in the body of evidence to demonstrate that the loss of Green Belt will be adequately compensated by enhancing key features and facilities through the creation and improvement of existing Green Infrastructure (see the Green Infrastructure Framework at Figure 24 in the Concept Framework Report).

3. Agreeing the overall quantum and distribution of uses across the site.

Within the context of the overall vision and development objectives as well as examining the wide range of constraints and opportunities, the Project Team have collaboratively agreed the broad disposition of the development parcels. These have been continually tested as new information has become available and the design evolution process moves forward.

The initial objective was to ensure the Study Area have capacity to accommodate a target of 2400 dwellings (with 1700 units being delivered in the Plan Period) and 11 hectares of employment land. The distribution of land uses has been informed by the development of a series of Framework Plans (i.e. Green and Blue Infrastructure, Movement, Placemaking, Land Use and Sustainability) and these draw upon the key elements of the evidence base as well as being informed by the overall vision and objectives.

As part of this process, the high level principles and distribution of all land uses including education, community and retail facilities have been established. The detail of the scale, type and design of Green Infrastructure including open space provision has also been examined at an indicative level to test its overall planning and delivery.

4. Identify the mitigation and infrastructure needs to ensure that development is viable, attractive and sustainable.

The ‘flexible’ constraints within the Bassingthorpe Farm Study Area has been tested against various mitigation measures and options to demonstrate possible development opportunities to seek to accommodate the scale of development envisaged. For example, there are sensitive heritage assets within and around the Study Area. The concept scheme identifies appropriate standoff distances (exclusion zones) and recommendations of strategic screen planting are proposed. Other mitigation measures include the introduction of appropriate highway junction improvement works to facilitate the increase in vehicle traffic as well as the identification and treatment of the former open cast areas in order to ensure that
appropriate development platforms can be created and these correspond with the feasibility and viability of proposed land uses that form part of the urban extension.

Section 7 of the Concept Framework Report provides an in-depth assessment of the likely infrastructure requirements associated with Bassingthorpe Farm together with anticipated costs. The table at Page 91 of the Concept Framework Report brings together a provisional list of infrastructure requirements dealing with transport, green, social and service infrastructure provision. The information is based upon a series of factors including: the scale of development; informed by the technical requirements of the evidence base work; as well as ensuring that the development would achieve an attractive and sustainable development based on the overall agreed vision and objectives.

Viability considerations have also been explored in detail alongside the ability of the scheme to facilitate the mitigation measures and the infrastructure costs. As can be seen from Section 11 of the Concept Framework Report, a preliminary viability modelling assessment has been undertaken by DTZ to test the costs and values of the project.

The initial viability work highlights a wide range of variable measures that could (when considered collectively) significantly influence the overall costs and lead to different viability outcomes. However, the project partners acknowledge the impact of planning obligations, and infrastructure enabling works and there is a general consensus of opinion that as the project moves forward a pragmatic and realistic approach can be adopted. This approach will ensure that viability can be refined to allow a deliverable scheme that maintains the appropriate level of mitigation and infrastructure requirements whilst continuing to ensure an attractive and sustainable development is achieved.

5. **Set out the inter-related phasing of all elements (infrastructure and development) and within this context, the source of funding and timing of delivery.**

The Concept Framework Report examines the phasing and delivery options within Section 12. DTZ has provided evidence of current and anticipated market conditions. They have advised that based on the characteristics of the housing market three sales outlets within the Bassingthorpe Farm site should be feasible and factoring an allowance for affordable housing, the average build out rate has been estimated to around 125 dwellings per annum. A take up rate of 0.6 hectares per annum was also recommended for the employment provision.

Alongside this evidence has been the distilling of the Concept Framework Plan to show specific employment and housing development parcels to start to examine indicative phasing over the lifetime of the construction. Four time periods 0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years and 16 years onwards is set out in a table at Page 152 of the Concept Framework Report and also includes the phasing and delivery of the likely social infrastructure. The recommended delivery approach factors in: likely market conditions; the ability to create a sense of place and ensure sustainable connectivity from ‘day one’. It also gives weight to viability considerations so that significant upfront expenditure could be deferred to later in the programmes if required.
6. The identification of the next steps in terms of an implementation route map recognising that the Concept Framework will need further refinement beyond demonstrating there are no showstoppers.

It is recognised that further work is required to investigate various matters such as determining who will be responsible for delivering infrastructure and by when. However, we believe the information and evidence base assessment work provides a sufficient level of detail and is proportionate with the work normally associated with justifying a strategic allocation within a Core Strategy document. Through the rigorous test of evidence we have been able to demonstrate that there are no major showstoppers associated with facilitating the required scale and mix of development identified for Bassingthorpe Farm.

The report also demonstrates a collaborative and constructive working arrangement that will provide a firm foundation for overcoming the more detailed challenges. Section 13 of the Concept Framework Report sets out the planning route map acknowledging key milestones that will influence planning timescales. There is also a delivery implementation route map which demonstrates the length of time likely to be required upon commencement of the masterplan/design code work to starting housing construction (estimated at 33 months).

Other than acknowledging the more in-depth detailed work relating to: viability sensitivity testing, reviewing the phasing strategy; exploring sustainability initiatives and commencing the detailed masterplan/design code, we consider that the only fundamental issue preventing the site being considered as a strategic allocation is the reluctance of RMBC to accept the findings of the Green Belt assessment work in advance of the comprehensive review. We would argue that in so far as the Bassingthorpe Farm site is concerned, Green Belt matters have been adequately considered and exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated to remove the Study Area from Green Belt for the purposes of securing a strategic allocation so that required level of housing numbers can be achieved in early course within the Plan Period.