Dear Mr Shepherd

Rotherham Core Strategy

As you know, I have recently prepared the draft Matters, Issues and Questions (MIQ) which will be discussed at the Pre-Hearings Meeting on 23 August 2013. My intention is that the Questions will form the agendas for the Hearings to be arranged as part of the examination of your Council’s Core Strategy. Before those Hearings start on 22 October 2013, however, I consider that it would be useful if you would provide me with some initial clarification on 2 particularly important matters. These are the Duty to Co-operate and housing numbers.

As you know, the Duty to Co-operate is a statutory requirement. Whilst it may be that the Council has complied with the process which underpins the duty, I must have regard to the outcome of the co-operation with, for example, Sheffield City Council. I must also be advised of the way in which that outcome is reflected in the Core Strategy in terms of its policies, proposals and explanatory text. This is a matter to which a number of representations refer and, indeed, you have prepared a Background Paper on it. It would be useful, however, to be provided with further information to convince me that the Council has fully abided by the duty in terms of process and outcome.

I am also concerned about the amount of housing which the Core Strategy proposes. Policy CS6 refers to a net additional dwelling total of 12,750 for the period 2013 to 2028, this being an average of 850 net additional dwellings per annum. To this number, the Policy explains, should be added any shortfall in the delivery against that average target from April 2008 to the adoption of the Core Strategy. I note also that Focused Change 61 states that the overall requirement and individual settlement targets should not be considered as ceilings. Also relevant is the Additional Proposed Change No 6 which expands Policy CS6 c (i) which refers to sites which are deliverable and make a significant contribution to achieving the objectives of the Core Strategy. It would appear that, following these and other proposed changes, Sheffield City Council has withdrawn its objection to the Core Strategy.

These proposed changes appear to me to introduce an element of flexibility into total housing numbers, implying that they could be exceeded in suitable circumstances. Even so, the Regional Strategy to 2026 envisaged an annual net addition to the dwelling stock 2008-2026 for Rotherham of 1160. I appreciate that this Plan is now revoked, but I need to be convinced that the substantially lower annual addition proposed in the Core Strategy can be justified. It is especially important to do so at a time when the National Planning Policy Framework sets out the Government’s intention to boost significantly the supply of housing.

A number of representations refer to your Council’s proposed level of housing in the Core Strategy, claiming that it is far too low. The lower the overall housing figure is, the fewer the number of affordable homes are
likely to be, and this adds to my concerns about housing numbers. I have read various documents which you have submitted, including Background Papers. Nevertheless, I should welcome further explanation of the annual housing figure of 850 dwellings, the projections which have informed it and the reasons why it is so much lower than that envisaged by the Regional Strategy.

You will have noted that these 2 matters appear in my draft MIQs and there will be an opportunity for them to be discussed at the relevant Hearings. Before then, however, and in the light of your response to this letter, it may be appropriate to arrange an exploratory meeting to discuss them.

Yours sincerely

Richard E Hollox

Inspector

11 July 2013