MINUTES OF MULTI STOREY FLATS TASK GROUP

23 SEPTEMBER 2010

PRESENT:

Members of the Group: Councillors Butlin, Galsworthy, Mrs Hotten, Ms Robbins, Roodhouse, Srivastava and Mrs Watson

Co-opted Member: Dr Alan Thompson, Rugby District Tenants’ Association

Officers: Steve Shanahan (Head of Housing), Liz Dunlop (Operational Housing Manager), John Hier (Strategic Housing Manager), Emma Rolfe (Estates Management Team Leader), Adam Seed (Property Maintenance Officer), Debbie Dawson (Scrutiny Officer), Elizabeth Routledge (Democratic Services Officer).

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED THAT – Councillor Ms Carolyn Robbins be appointed Chairman of the Task Group for the duration of its work.

2. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION

The Group welcomed Steve Shanahan, Head of Housing and his team to the meeting.

Mr Shanahan introduced his team and gave a brief overview of what they intended to cover in a series of introductory briefings. He also issued an invitation to members to a Mayday Trust Open Day on 6th October to find out more about the organisation. The Mayday Trust was a significant stakeholder, occupying three floors of one of the Council’s high-rise buildings.

Adam Seed, Property Maintenance Officer, gave an overview of the condition of the multi-storey flats in the borough (copy attached as Appendix 1 to the minutes).

The following points were highlighted:

- The flats in question were situated over two sites in Rugby, one in the town centre known as Rounds Gardens and the other towards the edge of town known as Biart Place.
A structural survey for all 5 blocks (2 at Biart Place and 3 at Rounds Gardens) had been commissioned. Phase one had been carried out on all blocks to establish structural condition of the external of the buildings, the need for any urgent remedial repair works and if further investigation was needed. The buildings had been found to be structurally sound.

Fire Prevention Works: The Council had carried out work to reduce risk and spread of fire throughout the blocks. The Council had also decorated the internal areas of all the blocks using a five-coat paint system that inhibited the spread of flame, by producing steam. The works had been supervised and certified by ICI.

CCTV/Security: Approximately 200 CCTV cameras had been installed to all five high rise blocks, managed by the control centre. Residents had access (recorded) to the buildings via electronic fob readers.

Lifts: Each block had two lifts – one serving the odd floors, the other the even ones with both servicing the 10th floor. Overall, they were well maintained and very rarely out of action.

Heating: Council flats were heated by storage heaters which, unfortunately, were not the cheapest form of heating. Gas was not considered suitable for heating high rise flats due to the safety risk presented. Once the future of the flats was known, other methods of heating could be investigated.

Windows/Window Cleaning: Originally, the windows had the facility to open fully on a central hinge to allow cleaning by residents. However, restrictors had been fitted to prevent them from opening more than four inches for safety reasons. Residents were encouraged to open the windows for improved ventilation and to avoid condensation. Members asked whether any health problems had been reported due to poor ventilation – officers were not aware of any.

Flooding: There had been instances where water penetration from the flat above had caused water damage below. It was the Council’s policy that they would put right any structural damage in such an incident. However, residents’ own fixtures and fittings, plus any internal decoration were the responsibility of the resident.

Overall Performance: From a structural point of view, the buildings were sound and in good condition. Security was robust. The internal layout of the flats was considered spacious.

Mr Seed was thanked for his presentation.

John Hier, Strategic Housing Manager, then proceeded to give a presentation on high rise and allocations (copy attached as Appendix 2 to the minutes).

The following points were highlighted:

- UChoose, a sub-regional choice-based lettings scheme, had been launched on 31 March 2010. It was a web-based system and assistance was available for access by vulnerable customers. There were approximately 2000 people currently registered.
- UChoose Banding: There were five priority bands ranging from applicants who were statutory homeless and had high housing needs, to applicants with no housing need.
- High Rise Charter: This enabled families with young children (under 12 years) to move on from multi-storey accommodation after 2 years. The Charter was to be reviewed as it fulfilled a particular need before the UChoose system was introduced. Anecdotal evidence suggested that take-up had reduced. Investigations would be taking place into the continued need for the charter and the reasons why the take up had been lower.
- **High Rise Lettings**: In the first six months of UChoose, 26 high rise properties had been let. These properties took on average 33 days to let, which was higher than other council accommodation. One property had been rejected six times and investigations were underway to find out the reasons for the rejections.

- **Advertising High Rise**: It was recognised that high rise flats were harder to let. It was intended to increase advertising and the possibility of a show flat was being considered.

Mr Hier was thanked for his presentation.

Following the presentations, members raised the following points:

- Once the future of the flats was known, further investigations should be made into:
  - Energy consumption, perhaps employing a medium of generating energy within the fabric of the buildings to alleviate costs.
  - Improved insulation – it wasn’t possible to use cavity insulation. However, there might be other methods which could be used such as plasterboard with soundproofing and insulation properties. This would also help to reduce CO² emissions.
  - Alternative forms of heating, such as a new German system, which was more economical than storage heating.
  - Rounds Gardens – officers would check whether there was still an operational camera situated on this site to monitor emissions from Cemex.
  - Reasons why some properties are more difficult to let.

- It would be useful to have information on how other authorities had managed their high rise properties.

- It would be useful to have more statistical information made available such as:
  - What was the turnover of tenancies (compared with other council accommodation)?
  - What type of accommodation was offered in each high rise block?
  - Were there many voids?
  - Why did it take longer to re-let some properties?
  - Were rejections related to floor levels?
  - Tenant profile of individual blocks – including demographics, length of tenancies and reasons for rejection
  - Whether there were particular patterns in the tenancies of certain groups of tenants (eg. Are young people likely to move more?)
  - The costs of maintaining the buildings, including security costs, compared with conventional housing

Officers would look into these matters and report back to a future meeting of the Group, as appropriate to the agreed programme of work, as the review progressed.

Members felt that the key questions to be addressed by the review would be:

- Do the multi-storey flats house people well in places they want to stay?
- Should the Council maintain the flats?
- If so, how does the accommodation need to be improved?
RESOLVED THAT-

(1) Mr Shanahan and his team be thanked for their presentations; and
(2) Officers report back to a future meeting of the group with the detailed statistics requested, as detailed above.

5. REVIEW OF THE ONE PAGE STRATEGY

The Group considered the draft one-page strategy for the review and suggested the following amendments:

Paragraph 2 of *What is the broad topic area?* to read: ‘How does the accommodation contribute to meeting housing needs in the borough, delivering a sustainable Rugby, and providing value for money?’

The first line of *What is the ‘unreasonable’ ambition of the review?* to read: ‘That, regardless of the homes on the sites, the sites provide desirable and secure homes for …’

The second line of *How well do we perform at the moment?* to read: ‘What are the flats’ contributions to reducing energy consumption?’.

*What other help do we need?* It was agreed to co-opt Dr Alan Thompson, Chairman of the Rugby and District Tenants’ Association, as an expert witness. Consideration would be given at a later date regarding inviting residents to participate in the review. It was felt that input should also be sought from other organisations or local authorities who managed high rise accommodation.

*How long should it take?* Six – nine months.

RESOLVED THAT- the one-page strategy be approved, subject to the amendments as detailed above.

6. PROGRAMME OF WORK AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Members had been advised that it was the Head of Housing intention to arrange a series of induction sessions in order to appraise members as quickly as possible of the key considerations in this review.

The following meetings were confirmed:

Tuesday, 5th October 2010  5.30pm
Task Group Briefing
Long term future of the flats, ASB, Management of Buildings

Monday, 18th October 2010  2.00pm
Site Visit and Task Group Briefing
Transport would be arranged

Wednesday, 3rd November 2010  5.30pm
Meeting of the Task Group

CHAIRMAN