MINUTES OF MULTI STOREY FLATS TASK GROUP

3 NOVEMBER 2010

PRESENT:

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

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), Debbie Dawson (Scrutiny Officer), Elizabeth Routledge (Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer).

Before commencing the meeting, members were advised that Cllr Mrs Watson had stepped down from the Group due to other commitments.

12. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 October 2010 were approved and signed by the Chairman, subject to the date of the meeting being changed from 6 October to 5 October.

13. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Srivastava.

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15. PROGRESS REVIEW

The Head of Housing gave a brief presentation to the Group, summarising key findings and conclusions to date. A copy is attached as Appendix 1 to the Minutes.

The presentation was split into five sections: Overview, High-Rise Tour, Positive Aspects, Negative Aspects and Next Steps.

A report had also been circulated, giving additional detail concerning what had been learnt so far, what conclusions had been drawn and what areas could be explored further. Possible areas for further consideration were:

- Heating – in relation to affordability, carbon footprint or adaptability?
- Reducing service charges – potential impact on services.
- Allocations – policy changes?
- Environmental improvements – communal gardens, play areas, etc.
  (Evidence required for this to confirm a priority for tenants)
- Advertising properties more widely. Do we need to yet?
- Addressing worklessness

All of the above would have time and cost implications.
Members and Officers had visited the five multi-storey blocks in the town on 18th October and the Scrutiny Officer tabled notes of that site visit (copy attached as Appendix 2 to the Minutes).

Key points of discussion by the task group were:

Heating and Insulation

A key concern for members was the affordability of heating in the flats. As gas was not permitted in high-rise flats, electric storage heaters were the primary source of heating. These were an expensive form of heating, particularly for those tenants who paid for their electricity through individual card meters. Members questioned whether this was the most affordable and economical method of payment.

Additional comments and suggestions made concerning heating, and energy in general, were:

- As energy consumption monitors seemed to be freely available, it might be worthwhile obtaining a quantity and distributing them to a cross-section of tenants and asking for their feedback, in order to enable a better understanding of energy consumption in the flats.
- Tenants could be offered an opportunity to receive guidance on how to use the storage heating system more efficiently and economically. Members suggested more modern storage heaters might be more efficient.
- The Head of Housing commented that the issue of energy was a huge and diverse topic and that it would be necessary to concentrate efforts on what the council’s objectives were and how they met the needs of the tenants. There was a need to clarify whether the key concern was energy efficiency, energy cost or reducing fluctuations in temperature. Results, if successful, could be applied to other housing stock.
- Because of the disproportionate expense of card meters, the Head of Housing suggested that it might be possible to assist tenants in looking at energy suppliers to find the best deal for their particular circumstances. The Operational Housing Manager commented that a group had been set up to look at energy tariffs and the outcome of the research in this area was awaited.
- As well as considering heating, the topic of insulation was discussed. As the flats’ walls were concrete, it wasn’t possible to use cavity wall insulation, but it may be possible to consider some sort of insulating board within the flat.
- Alternative forms of renewable energy were discussed, such as solar power and wind power and whether there may be opportunities to generate energy within the Council’s housing stock. Members felt that the future investigation of such opportunities could be one of the Review’s recommendations.
- It was felt that, when considering the issue of heating, the general issue of room temperature in the flats should not be forgotten (eg. too hot in summer).

Service Charges

Were they affordable? How could they be reduced? And, if so, what would be the service implications?

One particular problem experienced by tenants was the inability to clean the exteriors of windows which were fitted with restrictors. If a contract cleaner was taken on, the service charges would increase. A survey of tenants had found little appetite for this. It was also unclear that the condition of windows was demonstrably deterring re-letting of flats.
Members made various suggestions such as the windows being cleaned in the period between a tenant leaving and a new one moving in, windows being treated with a self-cleaning substance or windows being replaced with self-cleaning glass. All of these suggestions would have financial implications.

Security Arrangements

Did they represent value for money? What would be the impact of reduced security arrangements on service charges? This issue would need further investigation and would benefit from feedback from the tenants.

Environmental Improvements and Communal Space

Members were interested in considering whether there were simple changes that could be made to make the environment at the flats (both sites) more attractive and to provide more communal space. This might encourage more people to take up tenancies when they became available.

One member suggested that the communal area around the flats could be used as plots for growing fruit and vegetables. This had been done in Sheffield and had created a sense of ownership amongst residents. The Mayday Trust had considered a project like this, and the idea could be pursued with them. Officers pointed out that there were some health and safety considerations in using land within the immediate vicinity of the blocks. It was suggested that the task group could talk to the Council’s Parks and Open Spaces team to discuss the potential for making environmental improvements to the open spaces around the flats.

The garage site at Biart Place had potential to be redeveloped, with the aim of making the site more attractive, as had happened at Rounds Gardens. At the moment, 16 of the garages were let, 19 were empty and there was no waiting list. Members felt that redevelopment of the site was something that should be considered in the medium-term.

Tenant Profiles

Members felt it would be of benefit to have some analysis of tenant profiles within the blocks, including the numbers receiving housing and other benefits, and the proportion of long-term and short-term tenants. These profiles could help identify where there are more vulnerable tenants who would benefit from additional ‘soft’ support. There may be potential for the Council to give some direction to the development of multi-agency solutions to address the range of needs experienced by some tenants, building on the work already undertaken by the Mayday Trust.

Allocations and Meeting Housing Needs

The group were concerned about the extent to which the Council was contributing to meeting housing needs in the borough through its existing stock. The number of single people requiring accommodation was growing each year, and each year that their needs were not being met, the proportion of needs not being met was growing. The needs of older single people seemed to be being met more than those of younger people. Members recognised that 8% of overall stock available to single people was unfair and debated whether redesignation of some of the high rise accommodation should be considered to better reflect the UChoose household
profile. Could some other housing stock be redesignated to take account of these needs?

The group agreed that care would have to be taken if redesignating stock in order to create the right ‘mix’ as there were examples elsewhere where mixing different generations, with different lifestyles, in high rise accommodation had been unsuccessful.

It was noted that the turnaround time for empty flats was on average only slightly below the Council’s target for length of voids. The Council was already taking some steps to address this, for example by using the plasma screen in the reception area to promote these properties. Members felt that enhanced marketing of the flats was not a high priority.

However, some simple steps might be made to enhance the desirability of the flats to potential tenants. The void flat that members had visited at Biart Place seemed dark (although the electricity was off at the time) and the décor quite shabby, and this did not show off the potential of the flat. Officers commented that they could not arrange for electricity to be available as tenants chose their own suppliers and were not obliged to inform the council who they used. It was suggested that tenants be asked to identify their utility suppliers when ending their tenancies.

There was an issue about the condition that some flats were left in. Pre-termination inspections had been piloted, ending earlier in the year, and this may be revisited as part of an end to end review of the void process. Members were advised that, rather than the council decorating flats between tenancies, new tenants were encouraged to take up a decorating allowance offered by the council so that they could choose their own décor. This proved more cost-effective for the council.

The Strategic Housing Manager spoke about a tenancy sustainment pilot initiative, in conjunction with partners that was being investigated to support younger tenants, for example, to undertake basic DIY.

Members felt it would be useful to know some of the reasons why tenancies at the flats were sometimes refused. Officers would investigate and report back to a future meeting.

SUMMARY

It became clear during discussion that in order to build the evidence base for the review and confirm the priority areas for more detailed consideration, it was important to talk to tenants directly about their priorities and the problems they were facing. It was suggested that a programme of visits be organised, to take place in mid January, when members could visit the flats. Advance notice could be given via an article in the Tenant Times and it was also suggested that Estate Officers might be willing to circulate leaflets. This direct approach was considered better than using surveys to find out tenants’ views.

Key areas to explore with tenants were:

- What are the key issues for them?
- How could the Council help to make their tenancy more affordable?
- What additional support do tenants need?
RESOLVED THAT-

(1) Officers draw up a series of draft questions to be put to a sample of tenants in the high-rise blocks;

(2) A series of visits to the flats to pose these questions be arranged; and

(3) Information be brought to a future meeting of the task group about:
   - Reasons for refusal of high rise tenancies
   - Analysis of tenant profiles within the high rise blocks, including numbers in receipt of benefit and length of tenancies

16. ONE PAGE STRATEGY

A revised one page strategy was considered. No further amendments were suggested.

17. NEXT MEETINGS

It was agreed to carry out a series of visits to the flats to meet tenants and discuss their experiences of living in the multi-storey blocks and how they could be improved.

A briefing session to discuss the strategy for the visits was planned for Monday, 6\textsuperscript{th} December at 5.30pm followed by visits to the flats as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, 11\textsuperscript{th} January 2011</td>
<td>4.00pm – 7.00pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, 13\textsuperscript{th} January 2011</td>
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<td>Saturday, 15\textsuperscript{th} January 2011</td>
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Feedback from the visits would be discussed at a meeting to be held on Monday, 14\textsuperscript{th} February at 5.30pm.

CHAIRMAN