MULTI-STOREY FLATS TASK GROUP – 9TH MARCH 2011

A meeting of the Multi-Storey Flats Task Group will be held at 5.30 pm on Wednesday 9th March 2011 in Committee Room 1 at the Town Hall, Rugby.

Councillor Ms C Robbins
Chairman

A G E N D A

PART 1 – PUBLIC BUSINESS

1. Minutes – to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14th February 2011.

2. Apologies - to receive apologies for absence from the meeting.

3. Declarations of Interest.

   To receive declarations of –

   (a) personal interests as defined by the Council’s Code of Conduct for Councillors;

   (b) prejudicial interests as defined by the Council’s Code of Conduct for Councillors; and

   (c) notice under Section 106 Local Government Finance Act 1992 – non-payment of Community Charge or Council Tax.

   Note: Members are reminded that they should declare the existence and nature of their personal interests at the commencement of the meeting (or as soon as the interest becomes apparent). If that interest is a prejudicial interest, the Member must withdraw from the room unless one of the exceptions applies.

   Membership of Warwickshire County Council or any Parish Council is classed as a personal interest under the Code of Conduct. A Member does not need to declare this interest unless the Member chooses to speak on a matter relating to their membership. If the Member does not wish to speak on the matter, the Member may still vote on the matter without making a declaration.

*Any additional papers for this meeting can be accessed here via the website.*

**Membership of the Task Group:**

Councillors Ms Robbins (Chairman), Butlin, Mrs Hotten, Roodhouse and Srivastava.

Co-opted Member: Dr Alan Thompson

*If you have any general queries with regard to this agenda please contact Claire Waleczek, Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer (Team Leader) (01788 533524 or e-mail claire.waleczek@rugby.gov.uk). Any specific queries concerning reports should be directed to the listed contact officer.*

*If you wish to attend the meeting and have any special requirements for access please contact the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer named above.*
Agenda Item 4

Multi-storey Flats Review – 9 March 2011

Draft review report

1. BACKGROUND

At the task group’s last meeting on 14 February 2011 it was agreed that the main item of this meeting would be to consider a draft review report and proposed action plan.

The draft review report is attached at appendix 1 for consideration by the group. Members are asked to consider whether the report accurately reflects the findings and conclusions of the review and to identify any amendments or additional points they wish to include. A number of specific queries are highlighted in the report.

The draft action plan will be tabled at the meeting, following discussion with service officers.

2. NEXT STEPS

Members are asked to determine the arrangements for finalising the review report and action plan, and whether a further meeting is required.

If the final amendments are minimal it should be possible to report to the Customer and Partnerships Committee meeting on 14 April 2011, and to Cabinet on 18 April 2011 subject to any amendments by the Committee.

Debbie Dawson, Scrutiny Officer
3 March 2011
A REVIEW OF RUGBY BOROUGH COUNCIL’S MULTI-STOREY FLATS

March 2011

Draft report for discussion at Task Group meeting on 9 March 2010
CONTENTS

To be added
**TASK GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

The task group consisted of the following members:

Councillor Ms Carolyn Robbins (Chairman)
Councillor Peter Butlin
Councillor Mrs Gwen Hotten
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse
Councillor Ramesh Srivastava
Dr Alan Thompson (Co-opted member, Rugby District Tenants Association)

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Please contact:

Debbie Dawson Scru tin y Officer tel: 01788 533592 email: debbie.dawson@rugby.gov.uk

Claire Waleczek Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer tel. 01788 533524 email: claire.waleczek@rugby.gov.uk

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Group thanks the following for their contribution to this review:

Steven Shanahan, Head of Housing, RBC
Emma Rolfe, Estates Management Team Leader, RBC
Michelle Dickson, Participation and Development Team Leader, RBC
John Hier, Strategic Housing Manager, RBC
Liz Dunlop, Operational Housing Manager, RBC
Adam Seed, Property Maintenance Officer, RBC
Dave Sinclair, Estate Officer, RBC
Melvyn Chase, Estate Officer, RBC

All the tenants who took time to speak with task group members during the consultation exercise in January 2010 or made written submissions to the review group.
CHAIRMAN’S FOREWORD

TO BE ADDED

Councillor Carolyn Robbins
Chairman
**1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The task group considers that the council’s high rise flats are an important and viable part of the council’s housing stock. The task group recommends that the council should invest in maintaining and improving the flats to ensure they are retained as desirable and affordable accommodation for tenants.

In view of this the Task Group proposes the following specific recommendations:

### IMPROVEMENTS THAT COULD BE MADE QUICKLY AND AT LOW COST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>Tenants should be asked to identify their utility suppliers when ending their tenancies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### MODIFICATIONS OF EXISTING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Where possible, the electricity supply should be retained in flats during void periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>Pre-termination inspections should be reconsidered as part of a forthcoming end-to-end review of the void process, to improve the condition of void flats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>The cleaning regime at the flats should be reconfigured to target need and help reduce costs for tenants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>A review of the CCTV provision and concierge service should be undertaken with a view to reducing costs for tenants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td>Phased lighting or use of sensors should be introduced to help reduce the cost of lighting within the service charge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SIGNIFICANT PROPOSALS WHICH WILL REQUIRE COMMITMENT OF TIME OR FINANCIAL RESOURCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **7** | A review of heating in the high rise flats should be undertaken by officers and the task group reconvened to consider the proposed options when this is completed, as a second stage of this review. This should include:  
- a detailed study to establish where heat is lost and what measure could be taken to improve energy efficiency in the flats  
- once the heating problems are more fully understood, options for replacing the current storage heaters with more energy efficient heating methods  
- work with energy suppliers to explore the most cost-effective tariffs available for tenants  
- a programme of support for tenants to encourage more efficient use of the storage heaters |
| **8** | Opportunities to generate alternative forms of energy within the Council’s housing stock should be investigated in the longer-term. |
The possibility of replacing windows with self-cleaning glass or treatment of windows with a self-cleaning substance should be explored.

The Council should work with partners in the Local Strategic Partnership to develop multi-agency solutions to address the support needs of tenants and, in particular, to tackle the concentration of worklessness within the flats.

The redevelopment of the garage site at Biart Place should be explored in the medium-term.

The council should review its stock profile and reconfigure the accommodation available as necessary in order to ensure it meets housing needs more adequately.

**Note:** Recommendations are listed in order of priority within each category.

### 1.1 Alignment with the Corporate Strategy

The review relates to the following corporate priorities:

*Priority 2: Meet the housing needs of our residents now and in the future.*
2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 Background

A proposal for a review of the future of multi-storey flats in the borough was submitted to the overview and scrutiny work programme workshop on 1 April 2010 by the Customer and Partnerships Committee and the Sustainable Inclusive Communities Portfolio Holder. The rationale for the proposal was that “the future of the flats needs careful consideration. They are unsuitable for families who need houses with garden space. Maintenance costs are high and when they become unfit for purpose, the space needs to be used in the best way to fit current demographics.”

A draft one page strategy for the review was agreed by the Customer and Partnerships Committee on 24 June 2010.

2.2 The One Page Strategy

The ‘one page strategy’ is the name given to the scoping document for the review. It defines the task and the improvements being aimed for and how these are going to be achieved. The review’s one page strategy, finalised by the task group in September 2010, is as follows:

**What is the broad topic area?**
To consider the future role of the council’s multi-storey flats at Rounds Gardens and Biart Place (five blocks in total).

How does the accommodation contribute to meeting housing needs in the borough, delivering a sustainable Rugby and providing value for money?

Could the land on which the flats are sited be used more effectively to meet the housing needs profile of the borough?

**What is the specific topic area?**
Is the maintenance of the multi-storey flats a viable economic concern in light of the current HRA subsidy and rent restructuring formula regime or any future potential move to self-financing HRA from April 2011?
What are our current policies concerning allocations to multi-storey flats and how effective are they?
Do the flats contribute effectively to corporate priority 2: meet the housing needs of our residents, now and in the future?

**What is the ‘unreasonable’ ambition of the review?**
That, regardless of the homes on the sites, the sites provide desirable and secure for homes for people where they choose to stay, and where they can stay as their circumstances change at a cost that they can afford to meet.

**How well do we perform at the moment?**
What information is provided from the structural surveys?
What are the flats’ contributions to reducing energy consumption?
What is the feedback from the tenants of the flats?
Are they easy to let; and do people stay once they take up the tenancy?
Why do people refuse tenancies that they have bid for under the UChoose scheme?
Are the flats affordable for the tenant and for the council as a landlord, including heating, maintenance and service changes?

**Who shall we consult about the current service and about how we can improve it?**

Tenants  
Rugby and District Tenants’ Association  
Other social landlords  
Maintenance contractors  
Mayday (who lease the top-three floors of Ashwood Court)

**What other help do we need?**

Dr Alan Thompson, Chairman of Rugby District Tenants Association co-opted member of the group  
Other organisations or local authorities who manage high rise accommodation  
Some training and facilitation support for meetings  
Consultation with potential funders and regeneration and funding advisors such as the Homes and Communities Agency  
Research  
Internal support from officers from the Housing service, from finance officers in Resources, from systems support in CIS. Potentially from planners in Planning and Culture.

**How long should it take?**

6 – 9 months

**What will be the outcome?**

A report to Cabinet to make recommendations on the medium to long-term future of our multi-storey flats.

### 2.3 Key Questions

At its first meeting the task group identified the following key questions to be addressed in the review:

- 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?
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Fact-finding

In order to develop the evidence base for the review, the Panel considered a wide range of data and information. This included:

- Briefings from officers from the Housing service, covering
  - structural surveys of each of the multi-storey blocks
  - building fabric and maintenance
  - security arrangements
  - allocations policies
  - estate management issues
  - housing needs data

- High-rise survey data, October 2009

- Consideration of notional remodelling of Biart Place site by a preferred partner.

In October 2010 the task group members also undertook a site visit to the blocks at Biart Place and Rounds Gardens, including the CCTV and concierge service control room and the Mayday Trust in Ashwood Court. Members met with the Estate Officers as part of these visits.

3.2 Tenant consultation

Task group members conducted structured interviews with tenants in their flats over three sessions (two late afternoon / evening and one Saturday afternoon) in January 2011. Members used a survey form agreed in advance, with a series of broad questions. In total, 63 survey forms were completed out of a total of 315 flats (approximately one fifth), including several that were left with tenants and returned to the council. A letter was sent to each flat prior to the visits to advise tenants about the consultation exercise. As a result of this, some additional feedback was also submitted from tenants.

The aim was to provide a strong evidence-base for the review and to elicit as much qualitative feedback from tenants as possible about the issues of concern and interest to them. The survey questions were designed to be open enough to provide feedback both to validate potential areas of concern identified by the task group, and to identify those issues that did not have currency with tenants.

3.3 Background papers

The agendas, reports and minutes relating to this review can be found online at www.rugby.gov.uk, following the links to the Committee Papers system and then clicking on ‘Multi Storey Flats Task Group’.
4. FINDINGS

4.1 Meeting housing needs

4.1.1 Stock profile

The Council’s multi-storey flats are situated over two sites in Rugby – at Rounds Gardens in the town centre, and Biart Place in the Winfield / Benn area. Each block contains 63 flats, with 6 to each floor, other than the ground floors which accommodate communal laundries, bin and shed areas. There are 315 flats in total, with the breakdown of accommodation as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>location</th>
<th>1-bedroom</th>
<th>2-bedroom</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biart Place</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounds Gardens</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Royal Court at Rounds Gardens is designated as an over 50s block. There are two leasehold flats on each site that were sold under ‘Right to Buy’.

Overall, the Council’s housing stock profile is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property type</th>
<th>General needs</th>
<th>Older people</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bed-sit</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-bed bungalow</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-bed bungalow</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-bed flat</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>1231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-bed flat / mais</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-bed flat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-bed house</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-bed house</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-bed house</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-bed + house</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2491</td>
<td>1441</td>
<td>3932</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost 50% of RBC’s one-bed flats available for general needs are in the high rise flats, and around 75% of the total number of two-bedroom flats.

4.1.2 Housing needs

The UChoose household profile at September 2010 was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Number of applicants</th>
<th>% of applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single-person</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 1</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 2</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 3</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 4</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant + 7 or more</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2498</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Single-person applicants make up 41% of the total number of applicants registered on UChoose (at September 2010). This proportion is higher than in the wider population, and will continue to grow as the number of single-person households increase, and these needs continue not to be met.

The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2008) predicted that the number of one-person households would increase to 36.5% of households by 2026, compared with 28% as at the 2001 census. This equates to 16,831 one-person households by 2026.

Single people under 50 have access to only around 8% of our total stock. 12% of the general needs stock (296 dwellings) and 78% of the sheltered stock is available to single people.

It is also notable that there is a far higher proportion of 16-24 year olds and a far smaller proportion of over 60s on the housing register than in the wider population. Currently older one-person households are relatively better catered for in terms of affordable housing than young single people, although this may change as the population ages.

### 4.1.3 Allocations and lettings

UChoose, a sub-regional choice-based lettings scheme, was launched on 31 March 2010. It is a web-based system and, at September 2010, there were approximately 2000 people registered. Uchoose applicants are categorised into five priority bands, ranging from applicants who are statutory homeless and have high housing needs, to applicants with no housing need. The scheme enables applicants to bid for vacant properties.

The Council operates a High Rise Charter which enables families with young children (under 12 years) to move on from multi-storey accommodation after 2 years. The charter enables these tenants to transfer to Band 2 two years after the date of tenancy or two years after the birth of first child. The Charter is being reviewed as it fulfilled a particular need before the UChoose system was introduced. There is some anecdotal evidence that take-up of this entitlement has reduced since the introduction of UChoose.

The average length of a high rise tenancy in Rugby is 8 years, with the maximum tenancy cited as 42 years. In the first six months of UChoose, 26 high rise properties were let. These properties took on average 33 days to let, which is higher than other council accommodation, though not significantly so. The turnaround time is on average only slightly below the Council’s target for length of voids. The task group learnt that one property had been rejected six times. High rise flats are generally harder to let and steps were being taken to address this, for
example by using the plasma screen in the reception area to promote these properties.

During their site visit to the flats, members looked around a void flat in Biart Place. The flat was dark (as the electricity was cut off) and the décor was in poor condition. Members felt that this did not show off the potential of the flat very well to prospective residents. Officers advised that it was not possible to arrange for electricity to be available as tenants chose their own suppliers and were not obliged to inform the council who they used.

There are some issues regarding the condition that some flats are left in. Pre-termination inspections were piloted, ending earlier in 2010, and this may be revisited as part of an end to end review of the void process. New tenants are encouraged to take up a decorating allowance offered by the council so that they are able to choose their own décor. This proves more cost-effective for the council. The task group learnt about a potential tenancy sustainment pilot initiative to support younger tenants that was being investigated with partners. This would include help with basic DIY skills.

Overall, the task group members were struck by the very positive comments a large number of people made about living in the flats in the tenant consultation exercise. In fact, only four respondents said that there was ‘nothing’ they liked about living in the flats.

### 4.1.4 Tenant profile

Tenancy records show that the average tenant age is 47 years, the oldest being 94 years and the youngest 17. Approximately 63% of tenants are in receipt of housing benefit and there are known to be high levels of worklessness in the flats.

The top three floors of Ashwood Court are leased to the Mayday Trust, comprising six one-bed and twelve two-bed flats. Task Group members visited the Ashwood Court Scheme, which provides specialised support, life skills training and accommodation for vulnerable adults. Clients include young people leaving care, those with moderate learning difficulties and recurring mental health problems, victims of abuse, ex-offenders, those with a history of substance misuse and victims of family breakdown. Often clients will be referred to Mayday by a range of statutory agencies, including social services, the police and the probation service.

During the tenant consultation exercise, task group members met with some tenants elsewhere in the flats who have health and mental health issues. Some of these tenants require additional support from housing officers with operational procedures, as well as managing bills.

The consultation exercise highlighted concerns about the suitability of the flats for families with young children, with several tenants commenting that the flats are not appropriate accommodation for such families – both for the families themselves and for neighbours who may be disturbed by the noise made by young children. Officers reported that the introduction of the UChoose choice-based lettings scheme may resolve some of these issues through applicants’ natural choice, with families not bidding for the flats. The impact of choice-based lettings was being monitored by officers.
Royal Court was the only block where a number of people stated in the tenant consultation that there was nothing they would change about living there. A significant number of Royal Court residents also mentioned friendly neighbours as something they liked about living in the flats.

4.2 Future viability of the flats

4.2.1 Stock condition

A structural survey was commissioned in 2010 for all five high rise blocks. Phase one was carried out on all the blocks to establish the structural condition of the outside of the buildings, the need for any urgent remedial repairs work and whether any further investigation was needed. It was reported to the task group that the buildings were found to be structurally sound, and the survey also found that the concrete used in the panel fabrication was of a very high quality.

The flats are relatively spacious – this was mentioned by 13 of those surveyed as one of the things they liked about living in the flats. Each block has two lifts – one serving the odd floors, the other the even ones with both servicing the 10th floor. Overall, officers reported that they are well maintained and rarely out of action, and this was broadly supported in the tenant survey with only two negative comments about the operation of the lifts. There are three secure car parks that are fob controlled.

Since 2007 the Council has carried out a programme of work to reduce risk and spread of fire throughout the blocks, including smoke seals on communal doors and fire doors fitted in each flat. The Council has also decorated the internal areas of all the blocks using a five-coat paint system that inhibits the spread of flame. The works were supervised and certified by ICI.

Biard Place is fitted with UPVC double glazed units. The high rise blocks at Rounds Gardens have aluminium framed windows. These were originally single glazed but were replaced with double glazed units in the 1990’s. Tenants are unable to clean the exteriors of windows due to the restrictors that are fitted, which prevents windows from being opened more than four inches. If a contract cleaner were to be taken on, the service charges would increase. A survey of tenants conducted by the housing service during the review period found little appetite for this, although in the task group’s consultation exercise three comments were made specifically about window cleaning. In total, seven tenants mentioned windows as something they would like to change, some of the other comments relating to condensation. However, it is unclear that the condition of the windows is demonstrably deterring the re-letting of flats.

Damp and condensation were reported as problems by a number of tenants surveyed by the task group. Officers also reported that there have been instances where water penetration from the flat above had caused water damage below.

The flats are heated by storage heaters as gas is not considered suitable for high rise flats due to the safety risk presented. The walls are concrete, and therefore it is not possible for them to have cavity wall insulation. As a result, the flats can be
Appendix 1

difficult to keep warm, with 26 of the tenants interviewed referring to this as a problem in the winter (see 4.4.1 below).

Members felt that the outside appearance of the Biart Place flats was unattractive, and that this contributes to some of the stigma attached to the flats. Officers advised that the cost of cladding or otherwise improving the outside appearance of the blocks was now prohibitive.

At Biart Place the garage site has the potential to be redeveloped, with the aim of making the site more attractive, as happened at Rounds Gardens. Currently 16 of the garages are let and 19 are empty, with no waiting list.

4.2.2 Potential redevelopment

The task group received a detailed presentation about possible remodelling opportunities for the high rise flats sites, with a case study of Biart Place. A preferred partner was asked to indicate what they could notionally fit on the site – including the garage site and sheltered housing on Clifton Road – which currently accommodates 132 homes in total.

The suggested scheme presented to the task group offered 61 homes, incorporating:

- 6 x 1-bedroom apartments
- 17 x 2-bedroom apartments
- 24 x 2-bedroom houses
- 14 x 3-bed houses

This profile would result in a net loss of 71 homes.

Members were presented with some of the factors that would need to be considered if the flat sites were to be redeveloped, and some of the costs involved. These included the following:

- Equality impact assessment – consideration would need to be given to the impact the new profile of housing would have on meeting the housing needs of specific groups.

- Cost of decanting tenants – those tenants affected would need to be re-housed within the Council’s remaining stock and potential discretionary disturbance payments would need to be made to them. Payments could amount to around £818,400 in total for the Biart Place site alone. There would also be a loss of income from rents and service charges. Re-housing would be dependent on the availability of suitable properties, and it is not possible for the council to control the number and nature of properties coming back for re-let. Re-housing would also have an impact on meeting the demand of the waiting list and fulfilling statutory duties in respect of homelessness

- Project management – a team would be needed to oversee the project, including procurement, design, decanting of tenants and building. The blocks would also need to be managed for security reasons whilst they are being emptied, and there would be issues regarding the viability of services such as estate officer and CCTV whilst income from rents and service-charges is reduced.

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Appendix 1

- Costs of demolition and rebuild – it is not possible to give notional costs until the site has been formally assessed and due diligence works have been carried out. The costs of demolishing high rise flats would certainly be high. There is also potential for negative land value as a result.

- Maintenance costs and income – the costs and considerations above can be compared with the ongoing maintenance costs and income received. Maintenance costs are £204,015 per annum for Fairway and £208,918 for Green Court. Income received from rent and service charges is £237,986 per annum for Fairway and £245,760 for Green Court.

Based on this information, the task group took an early view that demolition and redevelopment was not a viable option to pursue. The focus of the review therefore shifted to consider what medium and long-term issues needed to be addressed to maintain the properties as desirable and affordable homes for the foreseeable future.

4.3 Service charges

4.3.1 Charges

The weekly rent and service charges for each of the sites in 2010/11 are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rounds Gardens one-bed</th>
<th>Rounds Gardens two-bed</th>
<th>Biart Place one-bed</th>
<th>Biart Place two-bed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net rent</td>
<td>£57.97</td>
<td>£65.78</td>
<td>£56.48</td>
<td>£64.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estate officer</td>
<td>£15.96</td>
<td>£16.52</td>
<td>£15.96</td>
<td>£16.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal lighting</td>
<td>£1.39</td>
<td>£1.39</td>
<td>£1.39</td>
<td>£1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal cleaning</td>
<td>£2.62</td>
<td>£2.62</td>
<td>£2.62</td>
<td>£2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>£77.94</td>
<td>£86.31</td>
<td>£76.45</td>
<td>£85.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The task group were aware that areas for improvement identified in the review would most likely need to be funded through increased charges to tenants. With high levels of worklessness within the flats, the task group felt that retaining the service charges at their current level, or reducing them, was the priority, in order to ensure their affordability to tenants and minimise housing costs as a proportion of potential salary.

To explore this further, one of the questions in the tenant consultation asked tenants to rank the elements of the service charge in priority order. This provided some insight into the relative importance attached to the services delivered. The results of this are outlined in the sections below. Overall, tenants appeared to be generally satisfied with the level of services included in their charges.

It should be noted that the Council receives other income from the flats, other than that received in rent and service charges. This includes income from the lease of 3
floors of Ashwood Court to the Mayday Trust (£63,741 per year) and mobile mast site rental (£16,645 per year).

### 4.3.2 CCTV and Concierge Service

Security arrangements for the flats are robust, with secure entry provided through the concierge service and approximately 280 CCTV cameras in place and monitored by the control centre at all times. Residents have access to the buildings via electronic fob readers. Visitors access the blocks by contacting the concierge (based at the control centre) who alerts the resident to the fact they have visitors. In the High Rise Survey in October 2009, 83% of residents expressed satisfaction with the concierge service. 91% of residents said they felt safe in their flats.

The task group wanted to explore whether the security arrangements as a whole represented value for money. Through the tenant consultation exercise they sought to establish whether there was any potential to reduce the security measures, and the extent to which this would impact on tenants’ actual and perceived safety in the flats.

The consultation exercise found that tenants valued the concierge and CCTV service and considered them an important security feature at the complexes, although some felt that there were too many cameras. There was no feedback to suggest that the service was considered to be more important at particular times of day. ‘Feeling safe and secure’ was one of the top things tenants liked about living in the flats, mentioned by 17 people who were interviewed. 33 respondents ranked the concierge service as most important or second in importance, and 28 ranked CCTV as first and second in importance.

### 4.3.3 Estate Officers

At the time of the review there were two estate officers, one based on each site. The role of the estate officer is to supervise the high rise sites and monitor the control centre CCTV, in conjunction with the housing officers. They aim to foster good relations with tenants by providing a friendly and reliable presence on the estate. They are on hand to discuss problems and complaints with tenants and to supervise the estate office during opening hours. The estate officers are also fully trained to help release persons trapped in the lifts when failures occur and conduct daily health and safety checks of each block.

Estate officers play an important role as a reassuring presence and in dealing with problems of anti-social behaviour and nuisance. The estate officer will deal with initial complaints, making visits and issuing warning letters relating to:

- Minor noise nuisance (first report)
- Misuse of fob (first 2 incidents)
- Abuse to concierge (first 2 incidents)
- Dog(s) kept in flat
- Smoking in lift and/or communal areas.

If the Estates Officer is unable to resolve the issue following a visit to the resident and/or two warning letters being issued, and further reports are received, the reports are passed to the appropriate Housing Officer for further action.

90% of residents expressed satisfaction with estate officers in October 2009. However, in the tenant consultation exercise undertaken by the task group, the
estate officers were rated as the least important service covered by the service charge, with 36 ranking this as 5\textsuperscript{th} or 6\textsuperscript{th} in importance out of the six elements of the service charge. This was equally the case in all of the blocks. The task group was informed that one of the estate officers had taken voluntary redundancy as part of the 2011/12 budget process, and so the service was already being reduced.

4.3.4 Cleaning

Cleaners work Monday to Friday in the flats, and clean a floor in each block each day, meaning that every area is cleaned on a weekly basis. On their visit to the high rise flats in October 2010, task group members observed that, generally, the communal areas were clean and tidy, and there was no visible graffiti. It was suggested that this was in part due to the installation of CCTV, with the lifts and stairwells particularly improved. It was notable from the tenant consultation that at Royal Court in particular residents tended to clean communal areas themselves and took pride in the block.

63\% of residents expressed satisfaction with the cleaning of the blocks in the High Rise Survey in October 2009. In the tenant consultation there were several positive comments about the cleanliness of the flats, although two comments were made that there was a need for a cleaner at the weekend.

In order to bring down costs, the task group felt that communal cleaning was an area that could be considered for reduction but it was emphasised that there should be no risk that the standard of cleanliness within the complexes would return to previous levels.

4.3.5 Communal laundry

Somewhat surprisingly, the communal laundry service was rated as important by over half of those interviewed (33 ranked this most or second most important) and members found it was particularly valued by those who did not own their own washing machine. A number also made use of the dryers.

Some concerns were raised about washing being removed from machines by other tenants, with one comment made about theft from the laundry room.

4.3.6 Communal lighting

Comments from the consultation exercise showed that lighting is an important factor to tenants as a security measure, and particularly important for people who work or are otherwise out in the evenings or at night. Some comments were made that the lights do not need to be on all the time. Reference was made to phased lighting which had been trialled and was thought to have the potential to save money.

4.4 Areas for improvement

4.4.1 Heating

The flats are heated by storage heaters as gas is not permitted in high rise buildings. Residents pay for their electricity through individual card meters. Storage heaters are an expensive form of heating and residents also pay a premium for card meter payment.
Heating emerged as one of the key concerns for the task group in the review, and two of the questions in the tenant survey were used to explore further whether this was an issue for tenants and to try to establish what the main problems were regarding the heating. In particular the task group wanted to understand whether the problem was around energy efficiency, affordability or adaptability of the heating.

The consultation exercise confirmed that heating is a significant issue for tenants. 18 respondents cited heating as something they would change about living in the flats – twice as many as the next factor cited in response to this question. When asked specifically about heating, 52 of the 63 respondents said there were problems with regulating the temperature in the flats in the winter, while only 9 respondents said this was an issue in the summer. The key issue was cost of heating, with 46 respondents making reference to high costs. Commonly respondents said that heating cost around £5 per day in the winter. 26 referred to the flats being cold and difficult to heat in winter, 16 referred to problems with damp and condensation and 13 said that the temperature was difficult to regulate.

The Task Group members observed that older tenants and longer term tenants appeared to understand better how to use the heating system as economically as possible, but even in these cases the costs were high. It was noted that some tenants were using additional heating such as halogen heaters in their flats. This was a particular issue where young children lived in the flat as the heaters could be potentially dangerous. Some tenants had informed members that they lived in one room in the winter as they could not afford to heat their whole flat, and two had mentioned ill-health problems as a result of the damp and lack of warmth.

Officers informed the Task Group that the Council’s Sustainability Officer had undertaken work at the multi-storey flats with regard to energy efficiency, including social tariffs offered by some energy suppliers, reducing damp, and use of storage heaters in flats. Information was also given at new tenants’ six monthly reviews if necessary.

The consultation exercise also suggested that part of the heating problem was due to lack of insulation, draughty windows, and draughts from the corridors. This requires further investigation to establish the true cause of the problem.

Card meters are disproportionately expensive, and again a number of tenants commented negatively about this payment method. Officers advised that a group has been set up to look at energy tariffs and the outcome of the research in this area was awaited. It might be possible to assist tenants in looking at energy suppliers to find the best deal for their particular circumstances.

4.4.2 Communal space

The task group noted that there is no communal room or space in the high rise blocks. It was notable that an active Residents’ Association at Royal Court had led to some environmental improvements, with the potted plant displays provided by residents in Royal Court greatly enhancing the appearance of this block.
Members were interested in considering whether there were simple changes that could be made to make the environment at the flats more attractive and to provide more communal space. In Sheffield there was an example of the communal area around the flats being used for community allotments, and this idea had been suggested by the Mayday Trust in Rugby. The task group were advised that there were some difficulties in using this land due to issues relating to access to cabling for CCTV and door entry, which is located below the surface.

However, in the tenant consultation exercise, only one minor comment was received with regard to communal areas and this concerned the shelters at the front entrances to the blocks, which leaked. Otherwise, there was no demand from tenants for more communal space or other environmental improvements, other than a couple of comments from people who would like a garden.

4.4.3 Window vents in communal areas

A number of tenants interviewed by the task group complained about the window vents in the corridors in the flats at Rounds Gardens, which cannot be closed. There had been a pilot of windows that can be closed in cold weather but no further action had been taken. The design of the windows causes draughts which can contribute to difficulties in heating the flats.

4.4.4 Water pressure in Rounds Gardens

The tenant consultation also highlighted a particular problem with water pressure on the top floors in the Rounds Gardens flats. Tenants described problems with hot water cutting out at times of peak demand. The water company had been contacted and advised that the issue is not about water pressure but that a pump is required.

4.4.5 Noise and anti-social behaviour

Noise was the second most cited issue that tenants raised as something they would change about living in the flats. On the other hand, six tenants (an equal number from both sites) commented positively about the quietness of the flats. Since January 2010 housing officers have dealt with 6 noise complaints. Noise can travel up and down as well as across the floors and lift shafts, and officers advised that residents can expect a reasonable amount of everyday noise due to the nature of the flats’ construction.

In the tenant consultation, there were a proportionately high number of comments about noise and anti-social behaviour raised by tenants in Ashwood Court. Anti-social behaviour includes problems with litter, rubbish thrown from upper floor flats, smoking and drunkenness in communal areas. It was reported that anti-social behaviour has reduced because of the pro-active work of officers.

Housing officers have a close working relationships with the Police and drugs raids have been undertaken in the flats, and arrests made. In the past 12 months housing officers have taken successful possession proceedings against 3 tenancies in respect of drugs nuisance.
4.4.6 windows and condensation

The third most cited factor that tenants would change in the flats was the windows, with seven respondents referring to this. In particular comments revealed a particular problem with excessive condensation leading to damp and mould problems. One tenant commented that their curtains had frozen to the windows during cold weather and that curtains needed washing on a weekly basis as a result of condensation.
6. CONCLUSIONS

The review drew the following conclusions from the evidence that it gathered:

6.1 Future of the flats

The task group concluded that the demolition and redevelopment of the sites does not make economic sense, particularly as the buildings have been found to be structurally sound. In addition the high rise flats make an important contribution to meeting housing needs in the borough, providing a significant proportion of single-person accommodation. The needs of this group of applicants (41% of the UChoose household profile) are not currently able to be met from the Council’s existing stock and redevelopment of the sites would be likely to further reduce the amount of single-person accommodation available.

6.2 Letting the flats

The flats are slightly more difficult to let than other council accommodation. However, the task group concluded that this was not a significant issue, and that enhanced marketing of the flats – such as creation of a ‘show flat’ – is not a high priority at this time.

It was felt, however, that some steps could be taken to improve the attractiveness of the flats to potential tenants. It was suggested that tenants should be asked to identify their utility suppliers when ending their tenancies in order to make it possible to retain an electricity supply during the void period. Pre-termination inspections should also be reconsidered as part of a forthcoming end to end review of the void process, to address the issue of flats being left in poor condition.

The costs of cladding or otherwise improving the outside appearance of Biart Place were considered to be prohibitive.

6.3 Meeting housing needs

The council has a disproportionately small amount of stock for younger single people. However, the Task Group did not consider that this could be addressed by re-designating the multi-storey flats at Royal Court. It was clear that there was a positive community spirit amongst Royal Court residents which could be threatened if the block was opened up to younger people. However, the mismatch between housing needs and the Council’s stock profile is an issue that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The flats are not particularly suitable for families with young children, and any review of the high rise charter should ensure that some mechanism remains to minimise the amount of time such families remain in high rise accommodation. Officers should continue to monitor the impact of the new choice-based lettings system on the type of accommodation provided to young families.
6.4 Heating and insulation

The cost of heating the flats in the winter is very high and there is a serious issue around affordability of heating for tenants on low incomes. There are several aspects relating to heating that require further consideration:

- Energy efficiency – a detailed study is required to establish where heat is lost and what measures could be taken to improve energy efficiency in the flats
- Heating systems – once the heating problems are more fully understood, consideration should be given to replacing the current storage heaters with more energy efficient heating methods, suitable for high rise accommodation.
- Use of card meters – the council should work with energy suppliers to explore the most cost-effective tariffs available to tenants
- Education – for some tenants there remains an issue around them understanding how to use storage heaters most efficiently, and more could be done to support tenants, building on previous work by the Council’s Sustainability Officer

There is detailed operational work to be undertaken by service officers to address these points, and the Task Group felt that they should reconvene when the work is completed to consider costed options to address the heating problems, as a second stage of this review.

6.5 Energy generation

There are opportunities to generate alternative forms of energy within the Council’s housing stock, drawing on examples from other local authority areas of which members were aware. Whilst not an immediate priority, the task group felt that the future investigation of such opportunities should be one of the review recommendations.

6.6 Windows

Tenants do not wish to pay an additional service charge to cover the cost of cleaning windows. However, replacement of windows with self-cleaning glass, or treatment of windows with a self-cleaning substance could be explored. This would help to improve the general appearance if the flats.

As part of the energy efficiency study referred to at 6.4 above, consideration should be given to whether replacement of the metal-framed windows at Rounds Gardens would help to improve energy efficiency and to address the problem of damp and mould.

6.7 Support for tenants

There are high levels of worklessness amongst the tenants in the high rise flats, and a number of vulnerable tenants with particular health and mental health needs. 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. In particular this should tackle the concentration of worklessness in the flats.
6.8 Service charge

There is potential to review the services funded through the service charge in order to bring down costs for tenants:

- Communal cleaning could potentially be reduced, though care should be taken to ensure standards of cleanliness do not drop to previous levels. A reconfiguration of the cleaning regime may allow for cleaning at the weekend and greater focus on those areas particularly in need of cleaning, rather than simply cleaning by rota.
- Consideration could be given to reducing the number of CCTV cameras installed in the blocks, or to reducing the hours when the cameras are monitored and / or the concierge service is provided. This would require further consultation with tenants to establish if there are times of day when the service is less important.
- Phased lighting, or use of sensors could be introduced to help reduce lighting costs.

The tenant consultation feedback supported the decision by the council to reduce the number of estate officers by allowing one of the two estate officers to take voluntary redundancy. It also showed that the communal laundry is valued by many tenants and the task group concluded that it should be retained on both sites.

6.9 Biart Place garage site

Given the low use of the garages at Biart Place and the unattractiveness of the site, the task group considered that redevelopment of the garage site at Biart Place should be considered in the medium-term, as had happened at Rounds Gardens.

6.10 Communal space

Although there is no communal room or space at the high rise flats, the tenant consultation gave no indication that this is a matter of concern to tenants and so the task group concluded that there was no imperative to pursue this further.