

FREEBRIDGE COMMUNITY HOUSING BOARD

Minutes of a Meeting of the Board held on Monday 9 December 2013 at 6.30pm in "The Barn", 2 Chapel Lane, King's Lynn

PRESENT:

Ray Johnson (Chairman)
Steve Clark
Frazer Clement
Simon Gathercole
Tony Hall (Chief Executive)
Sean Kent (Deputy Chief Executive)
Ian Pinches
Colin Sampson

IN ATTENDANCE:

Shendi Keshet - Director of Finance (Minute Numbers
205/13 - 213/13)
Angus MacQueen - Company Secretary

205/13 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Lesley Bambridge, Matthew Brown, John Fox and Paul Leader.

206/13 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2013 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

207/13 MATTERS ARISING

(a) Zoots Nightclub Site (Minute Number 184/13(a))

The Chief Executive said that key dates for the Zoots Nightclub site project had been sent round to the Board. These had included starting demolition in November 2013, but this had now been delayed until January 2014, owing to an issue with a power cable. This had created some pressure on the timescale, as a condition of the grant funding provided by the Homes and Communities Agency was that the project was finished by December 2014. In answer to a question, the Chief Executive advised that the Homes and Communities Agency had not been contacted about the situation, as the timescale was still achievable.

(b) Hillington Square (Minute Number 184/13(b))

The Chief Executive stated that the Hillington Square project was progressing well. There had been a small amount of slippage as more asbestos than expected had been found. Demolition had started, as had piling for stair and

lift cores. The church had recently been used for a Christmas music concert held by Springwood High School; refreshments had been provided in the café.

(c) Providence Street (Minute Number 184/13(c))

The Chief Executive said that the purchase of Providence Street was progressing, with the provisional date for completion being 17 January 2014.

(d) Probation Service (Minute Number 184/13(d))

The Chief Executive reported that the Director of Housing had visited housing schemes in Great Yarmouth, to increase understanding of how Freebridge might work with the Probation Service.

(e) Fraud Action Plan (Minute Number 188/13)

The Chief Executive confirmed that the fraud action plan had been submitted to the Regulator, but nothing further had been heard from the Regulator on this as yet.

(f) Queen Elizabeth Hospital Trust (Minute Number 203/13)

The Chairman reported that Freebridge had been invited to make a nomination to the Governors' Council of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Trust. The Chairman and the Company Secretary would be meeting early in the new year with their counterparts at the Trust to find out more about the role, after which an appointment would be sought from the Board.

208/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

209/13 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman said that, in addition to his weekly meetings with the Chief Executive, he had attended the Board's away weekend held on 22 - 23 November 2013. He felt that the weekend had been very successful and thanked the Executive and the other staff involved for their work in preparing for it.

The Chairman added that he would shortly be attending a meeting of the Eastern Region housing association chairs, organised by the National Housing Federation.

210/13 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S UPDATE

(a) Norfolk Community Foundation

The Chief Executive reminded the Board that Freebridge operated two endowment funds in partnership with the Norfolk Community Foundation: the Grassroots Fund which contained around £72,000 and the Community First

Fund which contained around £200,000. An opportunity had arisen to add to the Community First Fund, and it was suggested that Freebridge pay in a further £50,000; the Government would then pay an additional £25,000 into the fund.

The Deputy Chief Executive explained that it was likely that around £17,000 grant funding would be available to distribute from the Community First Fund by the end of the year. An option could be to use “crowd funding”, whereby community groups used the internet to gather funding for specific projects. Freebridge could help the groups to do this and provide match-funding from the Community First Fund. In this way, more projects could be supported. “Crowd funding” encouraged commitment and sense of ownership among the community, and it was understood that there were no similar initiatives in Norfolk.

In answer to a question, the Deputy Chief Executive explained that Norfolk Community Fund applications to Freebridge were considered by a panel comprising staff and tenants.

The Deputy Chief Executive offered to bring a full report on this issue to the Board. The Board was content, however, that the Executive should proceed along the lines described, provided that the Board received regular updates on progress. It was stressed that, as well as any larger projects that it may be possible to support, smaller projects should also continue to benefit.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That Freebridge contribute a further £50,000 to the Community First Fund operated in partnership with the Norfolk Community Foundation, subject to funder approval.
- 2) That Freebridge work with community groups to identify and support projects which could be jointly funded by “crowd funding” and by the Community First Fund, and that the Board be provided with regular updates on this initiative.

(b) Queen Elizabeth Hospital Trust

The Chief Executive advised that he had met with the Strategy Director of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Trust. They had identified three areas of possible joint working that merited further investigation. These were:

- provision of staffing accommodation and helping to manage staff moves into the area;
- provision of accommodation and support for elderly people who were well enough to leave hospital but not fit enough to return home; and
- provision of accommodation and support for elderly and vulnerable people who were not ill enough to justify admission to hospital but required some additional care.

It was understood that a report on these issues would be made to the Hospital Trust's Board.

The Board acknowledged that working closely with the Hospital Trust, to help it improve its service provision, was part of the Freebridge vision of "A Better West Norfolk".

(c) Nationwide Community Fund

Confidential

(d) Flooding and Storm Damage

The Chief Executive reported that no Freebridge properties had been affected by flooding or storm damage following the recent severe weather. In answer to a question, the Chief Executive said that, had any Freebridge tenants been affected, they could have called at any time of day or night and an emergency response would have been provided if necessary. They would, in any case, have fallen within the emergency plan operated by local agencies.

The Deputy Chief Executive added that he had been impressed by Freebridge's insurers, who had proactively been in touch the day after the severe weather to offer to help with any claims.

(e) DAWN Database

The Chief Executive said that a suggestion had been made at the Board's recent away weekend that Freebridge could make use of the Borough Council's DAWN database, which contained a range of information about West Norfolk. However, it had now been ascertained that the Council no longer maintained the database; only historical data was available. The Board considered the possibility of Freebridge resurrecting the DAWN database itself, but it was decided that the resources involved would be prohibitive.

211/13 FINANCIAL PLAN UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed Philip Porter, of Beha Williams Norman Limited, Freebridge's treasury management advisors, who gave a presentation on issues around the Financial Plan. Copies of the slides used in the presentation were tabled.

In answer to questions, Philip Porter made the following points:

- Some analysts believed that there could be a triple dip recession. However, it was generally thought, including by the Governor of the Bank of England, that the UK economy was on the road to recovery, subject to very careful management.
- The Regulator expected all Board Members, not just those with a financial background, to have a clear understanding of the Association's finances.

The Deputy Chief Executive said that, although the figures were still in draft, indications from the recent actuarial evaluation were that Freebridge's pension deficit was not as bad as had been anticipated.

The Chairman thanked Philip Porter for a very useful presentation. It was noted that Mr Porter would address the Board again in the new year, regarding refinancing options. Mr Porter withdrew from the meeting.

The Board then considered a report which provided an interim update on key changes to the approved Financial Plan and the impact of such changes.

The Board acknowledged that, in theory, the funders could refuse to accept a revised Financial Plan and insist on Freebridge operating under the existing version. However, in practice this would be extremely unlikely to occur, as the relationship with the funders was well managed by the Freebridge Finance team. It was noted that a cautious approach had been taken to security provided, and that this had provided comfort to the funders. At some point, after the next version of the Financial Plan had been produced, it would be necessary to establish the optimum level of debt in consultation with the funders.

It was noted that the Hillington Square project continued to represent a significant risk to the organisation. The risk would be more quantifiable once Phase 1 had been completed. It would not be appropriate to pursue refinancing options until this risk had passed.

Some concern was expressed at possible reduced levels of rent inflation after 2016. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that sensitivity analysis would be undertaken around this.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the interim update to the approved Financial Plan be noted.
- 2) That specific 2014/15 known financial objectives, as outlined in Appendix 1 to the report, be agreed.

212/13 ANNUAL RENT INCREASE 2014/15

Confidential item

213/13 REVIEW OF THE PROCUREMENT POLICY

The Director of Finance presented a report which provided an interim review of the Procurement Policy, pending a full review in June 2014.

The Board was pleased to note that the revised Policy included the European Union's new definition of value for money.

RESOLVED: That the Procurement Policy be approved, as presented.

214/13 BUSINESS PLANNING PROCESS 2014/15

The Chief Executive presented a report which made recommendations for the business planning process 2014/15, following the Board's two-day planning workshop.

Members were pleased to note that the risk appetite exercise had produced similar outcomes from the Board and Management Team.

It was highlighted that it was now proposed to hold 12 Board meetings per year. It was anticipated that the business of each meeting would take about one hour, leaving time for Board "thinking sessions", which would be an opportunity to consider issues around strategy. An annual programme for the "thinking sessions" would be drawn up, although this could change if a pressing issue emerged. Board Members would often be asked to do some background reading to prepare for the sessions. "Time to Think" training would be provided early in the new year to help the Board gain maximum value from the "thinking sessions".

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the business planning process for 2014/15 be approved.
- 2) That the risk appetite matrix, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.
- 3) That a series of Board "thinking sessions" throughout the year to inform new strategy be approved in principle.
- 4) That a stakeholder Business Planning Day be held, based on the theme "A Better West Norfolk is a Diverse West Norfolk".

215/13 REVIEW OF VARIOUS HOUSING POLICIES

The Deputy Chief Executive presented a report which reviewed the following Policies: Appeals, Allocations and Lettings, Starter Tenancies, and Tenancy.

It was stressed that Freebridge should give clear reasons if either refusing a tenancy or limiting criteria for applicants.

The Board expressed its thanks to the Head of Housing Services for a very good report.

RESOLVED: That the Appeals Policy, Allocations and Lettings Policy, Starter Tenancies Policy, and Tenancy Policy be approved as presented.

216/13 REVIEW OF THE BOARD MEMBER AGREEMENT

The Company Secretary presented a report which reviewed the Board Member Agreement.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Board Member Agreement be approved, as presented.
- 2) That the position on Board Members' ICT provision be noted, and that it be agreed not to move to fully "paperless" arrangements at this time but to seek to enable personal choice.

217/13 RECOMMENDATION OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

The Company Secretary presented a report which set out a recommendation from the Audit Committee.

RESOLVED: That it be agreed to extend by two further years, until March 2016, the existing arrangement with PricewaterhouseCoopers for internal audit, on the terms presented to the Audit Committee.

218/13 REVIEW OF LOCAL OFFER TO CUSTOMERS

The Deputy Chief Executive presented a report which reviewed the Local Offer to customers.

The Board was pleased to note that the suggestion to reduce the response time to letters and emails had been agreed with staff, and asked that its thanks be passed on to the staff involved.

RESOLVED: That the suggested changes to the Local Offer be approved, as follows:

- Reduce the response time to letters and emails from ten working days to five.
- Rewrite the section on boiler servicing as its own paragraph in bold, to highlight its importance.

219/13 APPOINTMENT OF SHAREHOLDER

The Board considered a report which listed an application for tenant shareholding.

RESOLVED: That the application for tenant shareholding set out in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.

220/13 BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BME) LETTINGS – FOLLOW-UP REPORT

The Deputy Chief Executive presented a report which, following on from the report presented to the previous Board meeting, provided further detail behind the BME lettings figures that had been lower than expected.

The Board noted that there appeared to have been no inadvertent discrimination on the part of Freebridge, but that the situation should continue to be monitored. The need to maximise community cohesion was highlighted.

The Board noted the report.

221/13 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

The Deputy Chief Executive presented a report which outlined Freebridge's current working practices with regard to safeguarding. The Deputy Chief Executive asked that his thanks to Lesley Bambridge be recorded, as she had raised a question about Freebridge's safeguarding procedures following a high profile case in the national media. This had led to a review of procedures which had revealed some areas for improvement.

The Board noted that the Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy was due for review early in the new year.

The Board was pleased to note that there was to be additional safeguarding training for relevant staff, and requested that a briefing also be provided to the Board.

In answer to a question, the Deputy Chief Executive said that the Housing Director was effectively the lead officer for safeguarding, although this was not formally documented. This role would be assigned to a senior officer and documented within the Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy as part of the forthcoming review.

The Board noted the report.

222/13 WORK UPDATE

The Company Secretary presented the work update, which included the following:

- Action Sheet
- Future Work Programme of the Board.

The Company Secretary said that, following the decision to hold 12 Board meetings per year (minute number 214/13 above refers), the Board discussion evenings listed in the work programme would be replaced by Board meetings.

The Board noted the update.

223/13 COMMITTEE MINUTES

Ian Pinches, Chairman of the Audit Committee, presented the minutes of the Committee's meeting held on 11 November 2013.

Ian Pinches advised that he and the Deputy Chief Executive would shortly be meeting with Freebridge's lead partner at Grant Thornton, the External Auditor, to seek assurances regarding the operation of next year's audit.

224/13 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- **Board Payment**

The Chairman said that the issue of introducing payment for Board Members had been raised both at the Board's recent away weekend and during the Board appraisal process. The Board would be asked early in the new year whether it wished to pursue the introduction of Board Member payment and, if so, to determine a number of details around the process for doing so.

225/13 NEXT MEETING

The Board noted that its next meeting was scheduled for Monday 20 January 2014 at 6.30pm. (This had previously been designated as a Board discussion evening.)

The meeting closed at 8.45pm.

CHAIRMAN