

FREEBRIDGE COMMUNITY HOUSING BOARD

**Minutes of a Meeting of the Board held on
Monday 8 October 2012 at 6.30pm in the
Conference Room, Juniper House,
Austin Street, King's Lynn**

PRESENT:

Lesley Bambridge
Matthew Brown
Steve Clark
Frazer Clement
John Fox
Simon Gathercole
Bill Guyan
Ray Johnson
Paul Leader
Ian Pinches
Colin Sampson

IN ATTENDANCE:

Tony Hall	-	Chief Executive
Malcolm Fry	-	Assistant Director of Finance
Robert Clarke	-	Assistant Director of Housing
Angus MacQueen	-	Company Secretary

OBSERVERS:

Clare Flynn	-	Project Accountant (Minute Numbers 170/12 - 177/12)
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Company Secretary in the Chair

170/12 APPOINTMENT OF BOARD CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

(a) Introduction

The Company Secretary presented a report which sought to appoint the Board Chairman and Vice-Chairman.

A member paid tribute to the progress that Freebridge and the Board had made since Ray Johnson had assumed the Chairmanship and Paul Leader the Vice-Chairmanship.

(b) Appointment of Board Chairman

Ray Johnson was proposed and seconded for the position of Board Chairman. There being no other nominations, it was

RESOLVED: That Ray Johnson be appointed Board Chairman until the start of the first Board meeting following the 2013 Annual General Meeting.

Ray Johnson in the Chair

(c) Appointment of Board Vice-Chairman

Paul Leader was proposed and seconded for the position of Board Vice-Chairman. There being no other nominations, it was

RESOLVED: That Paul Leader be appointed Board Vice-Chairman until the start of the first Board meeting following the 2013 Annual General Meeting.

171/12 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

172/12 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

173/12 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

174/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Frazer Clement declared an interest in the item at minute number 185/12 – Appointment of Shareholders – as he was one of the applicants for shareholding. The Board was content that he should remain in the room during the item, but he did not vote.

175/12 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman gave an update on his activities as Chairman since the last meeting.

As well as his regular weekly meetings with the Chief Executive, the Chairman said that he had undertaken the following activities:

- He had chaired the Freebridge Annual General Meeting on 17 September 2012.
- He had attended, along with the Chief Executive, the two-day National Housing Federation Annual Conference and Social Housing Exhibition, in Birmingham. This had been an interesting event, and a useful opportunity for networking. The general mood of the Conference had been more buoyant than in previous years.
- He had taken part in the visit to Hillington Square, on 24 September 2012, by the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Influencing Team. This had been a useful opportunity for the Team to meet with residents of

Hillington Square and to gain a better understanding of the issues they faced. The local children had provided some particularly enlightening insights. The visit had also been attended by the local MP, Henry Bellingham. The Chairman thanked Lesley Bambridge for her involvement and support on the day.

- On 5 October 2012, he had taken part in a photo-shoot at a Mental Health First Aid Course being attended by a number of Freebridge employees.

The Board noted the update.

176/12 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S UPDATE

(a) Hillington Square

The Chief Executive said that the tender documentation for the Hillington Square project was about to be issued to the shortlisted constructors, after detailed work to ensure that it was robust and legally correct. It was now expected that an appointment would be made early in the new year, and that work would start on site in spring 2013.

(b) Behavioural Influencing

The Chief Executive stated that, following the visit of the Cabinet Office Behavioural Influencing Team, he had received a supportive letter from Henry Bellingham MP. The visit had helped the Team to start shaping some ideas, and it was expected that they would have some recommendations for Freebridge to consider in a few months' time.

(c) Plaxtole House

The Chief Executive reported that he had explained to both the Borough Council and the College of West Anglia the Board's decision to purchase Plaxtole House now, rather than entering into a leasing agreement initially and purchasing at a later date, in line with the original plan. The news had been well received by both agencies, and the legal process to make the purchase was now underway. Work had been carried out investigating Housing Benefit and support charges. There were now four potential new residents, to add to the 11 already in place. Five of the 11 had been undertaking one-day per week work experience at Freebridge; this had been both beneficial for the students and rewarding for the employees involved.

(d) Eastern Procurement Consortium

The Chief Executive advised that South Cambridgeshire District Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council had asked to join Eastern Procurement Consortium (EPC). They also wished at this stage to join in the contract with Foster's for external works. These requests had been approved by the EPC Board, but also required approval by the individual boards of each of the existing member organisations. Admitting additional members would increase

volumes and therefore enable price reductions, and so approval of the requests would be in Freebridge's interests.

RESOLVED: That the requests from South Cambridgeshire District Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council to join Eastern Procurement Consortium, and to join in the Consortium's contract with Foster's for external works, be supported.

(e) Awards Ceremonies

The Chief Executive said that Freebridge had been shortlisted for a National Training Journal Award for its introduction of coaching into the organisation. This was a significant achievement, given that other shortlisted organisations included very large, well-known companies.

Freebridge had also been shortlisted for a National Housing Federation Regional Community Impact Award. This was for the Jog-on Project, which Freebridge had undertaken in partnership with the Purfleet Trust and a local training company, Anne Clarke Associates. The aim of the Project was to help people establish themselves into the routine of working. It had been operating for about a year and had had a number of successes.

Freebridge representatives would be attending both awards ceremonies.

(f) Board Recruitment

The Company Secretary reported that there had been two expressions of interest in the vacancy for a Tenant Board Member, as a result of the vacancy being mentioned at Freebridge's recent AGM, and on the Out and About campaigns. One of these expressions of interest had resulted in an application. Whilst the Board was pleased that an application had been received, it was keen to ensure that the recruitment process was open and transparent, and so asked for the vacancy to be readvertised. This could be done at no cost, through the Streets Ahead magazine, which would next be published in December 2012. As a result, any appointment would not be made until February 2013 at the earliest, but the Board was satisfied that the vacancy could be carried until then without any significant detrimental impact. The Board requested that the situation be explained to both of those individuals who had expressed an interest in the vacancy.

A member asked whether his wife could apply for the vacancy. It was the Board's view that his wife could apply, but that issues around potential conflicts of interest and diversity of representation would need to be taken into account. It would be necessary to review the situation against the Rules and governance standards.

177/12 FINANCIAL PLAN UPDATE

Confidential item

178/12 REVIEW OF VARIOUS GOVERNANCE POLICIES

The Company Secretary presented a report which reviewed three governance policies.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Disqualifying Tenants in Breach of Tenancy Agreement Conditions Policy be approved, as presented.
- 2) That the Board Member Conduct Issues Policy be approved, as presented.
- 3) That the Significant Events Policy be deleted.

179/12 BOARD MEMBER AGREEMENT REVIEW

The Board considered a report which reviewed the Board Member Agreement.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Board Member Agreement be approved, as presented, including the changes described in sections 2.0 – 4.0 of the report.
- 2) That it be agreed specifically that no changes be made to the areas of the Board Member Agreement listed in section 5.0 of the report.

180/12 CLARIFICATION OF CONTRACT APPROVAL LIMIT IN FINANCIAL REGULATION 7

The Company Secretary presented a report which sought to clarify the delegated authority set out in Financial Regulation 7.

The report suggested that operational contracts worth over £50,000 for which there was budgetary provision need not require Board approval. The Board was of the view that it was irrelevant whether the contract was operational or strategic, and that it could sometimes be difficult to decide which category a contract should fall into. The important issue was whether or not the contract had budgetary provision. In order for this to be clear, it should be stipulated in Financial Regulation 7 that such contracts should be set out in a separate schedule for approval in the Board's budget report.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the officers' interpretation of the contract approval limit set out in Financial Regulation 7 be endorsed.
- 2) That paragraph 3.2 of Financial Regulation 7 be amended to read as follows (*new wording in italics*):

Up to £2,500	Informal business case to budget holder
Up to £10,000	Brief written business case to Executive Director
Up to £50,000	Brief written business case to Executive Team
Over £50,000	Full business case and project plan to <i>Executive Team if the project has budgetary provision previously agreed by the Board*</i>
	<i>Full business case and project plan to Board if the project has no budgetary provision previously agreed by the Board*</i>

**For a project to have budgetary provision previously agreed by the Board, it must have been included in a separate schedule and approved as part of a budget report presented to the Board.*

181/12 ANNUAL REVIEW OF EMPLOYEE DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Confidential item

182/12 BOARD APPOINTMENTS

The Company Secretary presented a report which sought to make the annual Board appointments.

The Chairman had previously circulated a schedule of recommendations, and these were approved as set out in the resolution below. The Board noted, in particular, that Lesley Bambridge's knowledge of the local area would be very useful on the Hillington Square Steering Group. As the Hillington Square project had been approved, and it was now only the details of the project that remained to be finalised, it was acknowledged that Lesley Bambridge no longer had a declarable interest in the project as a ward councillor.

RESOLVED: That the annual Board appointments be made as follows:

Audit Committee: Frazer Clement, Steve Clark, Simon Gathercole, Paul Leader (Chairman), Ian Pinches (Vice-Chairman), Karen Sly (co-opted member)

Lead Member for Resources: Matthew Brown

Chief Executive's Appraisal Panel: Lead Member for Resources (Chairman), Board Chairman, Colin Sampson

Complaints Panel Pool: Lesley Bambridge, John Fox, Bill Guyan, Ray Johnson, Paul Leader, Colin Sampson

E² Joint Members Group: Steve Clark, Ray Johnson, Ian Pinches

Hillington Square Steering Group: Lesley Bambridge, Ray Johnson

183/12 INVESTMENT APPRAISAL PANEL TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chief Executive presented a report which sought approval for the Investment Appraisal Panel Terms of Reference.

The Chief Executive highlighted that the effect of the Terms of Reference would be to increase delegation to officers regarding development decisions, but with checks and balances in place. The quorum for the Investment Appraisal Panel would include both operational and financial expertise, and any development schemes that it approved would be reported to the Board for information.

In answer to a question, the Chief Executive said that the Hillington Square project did not fall within the remit of the Investment Appraisal Panel, as it was not a development project. However, any proposed property purchases at Hillington Square that were made as part of the project would be covered by the Terms of Reference of the Panel.

RESOLVED: That the Investment Appraisal Panel Terms of Reference be approved as presented.

184/12 MEETINGS TIMETABLE 2013

The Company Secretary presented the proposed timetable of Board, committee and AGM meetings in 2013.

The Company Secretary highlighted that the timetable included, for the first time, two informal discussion evenings for the Board, one in April and one in July; consideration was being given to adding a third in January, to discuss issues arising from the forthcoming Board appraisal and review process. Options were also being considered for the AGM, which could result in the date of the AGM and/or the September Board meeting being changed.

RESOLVED: That the 2013 meetings timetable be approved, as presented, subject to the possibility of an additional informal Board discussion evening, in January, and to possible amendment of the dates of the AGM and the September Board meeting.

185/12 APPOINTMENT OF SHAREHOLDERS

The Company Secretary presented a report which requested the Board to consider applications for shareholding.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the applications for tenant shareholding set out in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.

- 2) That Frazer Clement be appointed as an independent shareholder.

186/12 LOCAL SUPPORT FOR COUNCIL TAX SCHEME

The Chief Executive presented a report which provided a briefing on the introduction of a Local Support for Council Tax scheme, set out the implications for Freebridge tenants, and sought to agree a response to the Borough Council's consultation document.

The report explained that the Borough Council was consulting on three options for dealing with a reduction in funding for Council Tax Benefit with effect from April 2013. Its preferred option was to spread the reduction equally across all recipients of the Benefit. When added to forthcoming reductions in Housing Benefit, this would have a significant financial impact on many people, including a number of Freebridge tenants. The Borough Council was looking at introducing a hardship fund, although the details of this were not yet known.

Board members expressed disappointment that neither Norfolk County Council nor the Norfolk Police Authority, which both received funding through Council Tax, was prepared to help mitigate the reduction in Council Tax Benefit.

The Board was keen that Freebridge should do everything possible to help tenants affected by benefit reductions. This included providing all help possible through the Tenant Welfare Team, as well as making tenants aware of the forthcoming reductions via the Streets Ahead magazine and through the Out and About campaign. Targeted communications with tenants affected should also be considered, and it was noted that this had already been done with tenants whose Housing Benefit was likely to be reduced by the new "bedroom tax". Affordable warmth was a key area in which Freebridge could help, by enabling tenants to reduce their heating bills through improvements to home insulation and heating systems.

Board Members suggested closer working with other agencies, such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Surestart, to help tenants. Officers responded that partnership working was already in place, although further opportunities would be investigated. Officers were keen to support tenants, but not to create dependency; they tended to act as a "signpost" to other agencies.

A Board Member put forward the possibility of Freebridge acting, either on its own or in partnership with other agencies, as a "broker" between people who were looking for a room and people who were wishing to rent a room out to mitigate the effects of the "bedroom tax". Officers undertook to consider this.

As well as the social impact of the forthcoming Benefit reductions, the effect on Freebridge as a business was discussed. There was bound to be an increase in arrears, particularly with the introduction of Universal Credit. This would result in a reduced availability of funds for the activities of the business. It was noted that the Financial Plan already overestimated bad debts, however, the likely consequences of the benefit reductions, and other possible changes to the benefits system, would be assessed and fed into the

next Financial Plan update. It was likely that the effect on the business would be short-medium term, as, under Universal Credit, Freebridge would be allowed to revert to direct payments once a tenant had been in arrears for five weeks. Furthermore, over time, officers would also work closely with those tenants who were in arrears, although it was stressed that eviction was a last resort. It was highlighted that not only those on benefits, but also tenants on low or fixed incomes, were increasingly struggling to meet the cost of living.

In terms of the response to the Borough Council's consultation document, the Board requested that it highlight the potential impact on tenants of multiple benefit reductions. The Chief Executive undertook to copy the response to all Board Members.

The Board noted the report and

RESOLVED: That Freebridge's response to the Borough Council's consultation document on the Local Support for Council Tax scheme be delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chairman, based on the views of the Board.

187/12 REVIEW OF THE INTERIM SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE

The Assistant Director of Housing presented a report which provided an update on the approach taken since the initial restructuring of the Sheltered Housing team in November 2011 to help address the impact of the reduction in the Supporting People Grant funding. The report also set out Freebridge's current position and the thoughts in taking the service forward.

The Board noted the report.

188/12 BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BME) LETTINGS

The Chief Executive presented a report which sought to set a new BME indicator for lettings.

In answer to a question, the Assistant Director of Housing said that West Norfolk Homechoice was understood not to be expecting a significant impact on lettings from the Military Covenant, whereby Norfolk had undertaken to give housing priority to those leaving the armed forces.

RESOLVED: That a new BME lettings indicator of 12.43% be adopted and reviewed annually.

189/12 TENANT PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Chief Executive presented a report which set out the Tenant Panel's work programme for 2012/13.

The Board was keen to increase its connection with the Tenant Panel. The Chairman said that, to this end, he would be attending the Panel's meeting in December 2012. Other ideas included the possibility of a Panel member

attending Board meetings as an observer or of members of the Panel giving a presentation to the Board. The Chief Executive confirmed that this matter was being given consideration and would be brought back to the Board for further discussion.

The Board noted the report.

190/12 APPROVED LIST OF SUPPLIERS/CONTRACTORS

The Board noted a report which provided the annual update of the approved list of suppliers/contractors.

A member pointed out that the Borough Council no longer provided pest control services; the Assistant Director of Finance undertook to remove references to this from the list.

The Company Secretary said that he would re-circulate the restricted list of suppliers/contractors (showing those that had been subject to a declaration of interest), as the version on the agenda had not printed well.

191/12 WORK UPDATE

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

- Action Sheet
- Future Work Programme of the Board.

The Board noted the update.

192/12 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

193/12 NEXT MEETING

The Board noted that its next meeting was scheduled for Monday 5 November 2012 at 6.30pm.

The meeting closed at 8.50pm, having resolved to continue to sit at 8.30pm.

CHAIRMAN