

## Notes of the Tenant Panel Meeting

Held on 12 February 2021 at 9.45 am held virtually

**Attendance** – Tenant Panel Facilitator, Governance Coordinator Anne, Frances, Sandy, David H, David W and Roger.

**Apologies** – Annette, Charlotte

**Declarations of Interest** – There were none.

**Work Programme** – This was noted.

	Item
<b>1</b>	<p><b>Notes of the Last Meeting held in January 2021 and Matters Arising</b></p> <p>They were approved as a correct record, and the matters arising report was noted which contained updates from the Governance Coordinator on follow up work agreed at the last meeting.</p> <p>The work programme was noted.</p> <p>A Panel Member queried the minute in relation to the Tenant Checked logo to go on forms and leaflets and the Governance Coordinator and Director of Housing agreed to discuss further outside the meeting.</p>
<b>2</b>	<p><b>Housing – Various Items</b></p> <p><b>Placeshaping Update including Garden Assistance Scheme</b> – The Placeshaping Manager and Assistant Placeshaping Manager (Estates) attended the meeting for this item. The Assistant Placeshaping Manager (Estates) shared that the consultation for the garden assistance scheme was now complete. There were 250 spaces available on the scheme and the projects aim was to ensure that the help was targeted towards those who needed it the most and as a result 79 tenants were able to reduce their level of assistance increasing capacity for others. The project would be further reviewed in March after the first cuts take place. Following a query from a Panel Member the Assistant Placeshaping Manager (Estates) advised a review of how we signpost tenants to alternative external gardening services would need to take place to understand what was possible, but for now the initial project would be rolled out and kept under constant review. The Governance Coordinator noted an update on the scheme sometime after March.</p> <p>A Panel Member commented that sheltered housing tenants had to pay a service charge for up keep of their gardens and felt this should be the same for general needs housing, even if was a part payment for the service. The Panel Member added that any funds raised could generate employment of another employee to cover more work. The Assistant Placeshaping Manager (Estates) advised that affordability will be reviewed in time.</p> <p>A Panel Member queried whether Freebridge were going to review food boxes provided to vulnerable tenants at this time such as a fresh supply of fruit and vegetables was providing difficult to get with online shopping coming in frequently. The Placeshaping Manager shared that focus was on the most vulnerable at this time with food parcels and wellness packs being distributed to those in need. She added that the team would be focused on planning its work for the next 12 months.</p>

A Panel member questioned whether Freebridge publicised its help to tenants widely enough. The Placeshaping Manager shared that the hardship fund was publicised. The Director of Housing shared that there was not many customers that self-referred themselves for help to Freebridge, and it was mainly through staff or partner agencies, and she suggested that it may be a piece of work worth undertaking to review how information is made available and to ensure consistency. She added that it would be good to see referrals from other agencies as well as customers directly. The Governance Coordinator noted for the work programme as a future item.

#### **Freebridge Five Year Strategy Continued**

The Director of Housing shared that if the Panel had any immediate questions or reflections to share offline however, it would be a standard item on the agenda going forward. The Governance Coordinator agreed to note.

#### **Self-Assessment – Housing Ombudsman Code of Complaint Handling**

The Director of Housing agreed to circulate the self-assessment document to the Panel after the meeting for any comments at the March meeting. She explained that as a requirement of the Code the Housing Ombudsman required providers to self-assess themselves against the Code of Complaint Handling by the end of December 2020 which had been achieved. She added that the Customer Service Committee had reviewed the assessment results, and she had agreed to update them on the further improvement activities identified at their next Committee meeting. The Director of Housing shared that the Freebridge complaints process was compliant but there was awareness that we do not always do exactly what or when we say we are going to do. The self-assessment was not required to be sent to the Ombudsman but they requested it to be published on the Freebridge website – it is currently available on the complaints information page.

Following a query the Director of Housing shared that there were improvements to be made on the response times for complaints and more work to be done around learning outcomes. However, she shared that from quarter 2 to quarter 3 there had been an improvement in response times.

#### **Customer Service Committee Update and Minutes**

The Director of Housing advised that the Panel were welcome to share any comments or queries they had based on the minutes of the Customer Service Committee meeting held in January. She added that the Chair of the Customer Service Committee writes a report to the Board following meetings to highlight significant issues.

Following a query the Director of Housing shared that Independent East was a group of local housing associations based in the east that shared best practise and benchmarking data.

### **3 Quarter 3 Performance and Complaints and Compliments**

The Tenant Panel had received the latest quarter 3 performance and complaints and compliments reports. Panel members made the following comments or queries which were answered by the Director of Housing:

- The Director of Housing advised following a query that there was not one repair causing a trend specifically, but that the efficiency of the repairs system and processes overall needed improvement and there were some issues regarding communication and keeping people up to date.

- The Director of Housing advised following a query that the new charter and code Freebridge were expected to publicise complaints processes widely and if the service was not good then Freebridge would want to know.
- Regarding a comment about additional homes being built compounding service issues, the Director of Housing advised that Freebridge didn't want to reduce access to housing because of problems with repairs and that the service required improvement regardless; the Director of Assets in March would be able to update the Tenant Panel on improvements to planned work going forward.
- A Panel Member commented that an increase in repairs could be down to covid with people being at home more where items break as a result or get noticed in greater volume in a shorter space of time. The Director of Housing shared that there was certainly an element of this but not perhaps the main driver as prior to covid there had been some outstanding repairs too.
- A Panel Member commented that there was far too many complaints, but it was good to see that Freebridge appear to be trying to do something about it.
- A Panel Member felt that tenants were reporting routine repairs now but maybe they should take into consideration the times we are living in, and things may take longer to get resolved.
- A Panel Member commented that appointments being made and kept was around 90% but the satisfaction was low and this trend appeared to be at odds.
- A Panel Member commented that a lot of complaints seemed to be in regard to poor communication, because the tenant had not been called back or spoken to but that needs to be dealt with at the time.
- A Panel Member commented that it was okay to call in regard to a survey following a repair, but for years they have made the point that staff have not called them back when they have asked them to. The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that many times over the years with other managers from Freebridge, the issue of call backs had been a continued issue raised by the Panel.

The Director of Housing shared in response to comments made that:

- There were around 25,000 repairs a year which is higher than we would perhaps expect and may be linked to the balance with planned maintenance
- A better planned maintenance service should mean less responsive repairs.
- There was a limited pool of companies in West Norfolk and national companies don't often tender for our work although Freebridge are reviewing what can be done to make our work more attractive to other companies
- As part of the decent homes work we had regular satisfaction surveys to assess contractor work, but as that work finished the feedback did not continue in the same way.
- End of job surveys were new in the last couple of weeks, but there still needed to be more individual responsibility for calling tenants back.
- Complaints information would show in-house and contractor related complaints and compliments going forward and how they were performing.
- The Director of Assets would be reviewing the timescales on repair categories of urgent and routine and would be able to share more at the March meeting.

The Director of Housing thanked the Tenant Panel for their comments and she left the meeting at this point.

4

#### **Repairs and Maintenance Update**

The Head of Service Delivery attended the meeting to provide an update on the repairs and maintenance service and answer any queries.

The responses were given following queries:

- If any phone call isn't received back it is never the intention not to do so, and will always endeavour to do so and if this does happen he apologises.
- Operatives were phoning customers in advance to visits to check over covid working arrangements. Jobs were being reviewed to ensure that any delay was not at detriment to the property.
- He receives feedback from forums and meets with customer services on a weekly basis to review any issue and to review if processes need improvement. He shared that whilst operatives are in a property to complete repairs, if there are repairs that cannot be completed they are asked to call them into the service centre whilst present with the tenant to rearrange.

Since his last update the restrictions around covid had changed and his team were adapting the way that they worked to ensure that the measures were in place by minimising the risk to everyone. The main area was the joined up working between the teams in Freebridge with a new Director of Assets who was responsible for Property Services but also the assets team where planned maintenance is arranged from. He explained they were looking to improve the service and identify works to pick up on within an annual maintenance cycle. He shared that the team were now following up with customers post repair to find out if the repair had been satisfactorily carried out and whether covid working arrangements followed like wearing gloves and masks.

A Panel Member shared that it was good news to hear about the follow up phone calls, and it was a better way to get a clear picture of what is happening on the ground.

Following a query about contractors the Head of Service Delivery advised that he met with Elecsure monthly, who now carry out courtesy calls to customers after their appointments are completed as a result of attending the last Tenant Panel meeting. He shared that the contractors were aware of Freebridge's key performance indicators. Following a query regarding other contractors the Head of Service Delivery shared that other contractor meetings maybe bi-monthly we discuss productivity, KPIs, accidents, incidents and virtually. The Governance Coordinator agreed to coordinate the information.

Following a query in regard to a specific supplier on drainage clearance, he felt there was not enough suppliers available for some works and they were reviewing a procurement programme to get more suppliers to deliver more specialist maintenance and repairs.

The Tenant Panel Facilitator thanked the Head of Service Delivery for his attendance, and any additional questions could be sent to the Governance Coordinator and the left the meeting

5

#### **Street Ahead Magazine Review**

The Communications Business Partner attended the Tenant Panel to discuss ideas around the future of Freebridge's Streets Ahead Magazine. He shared that Freebridge

are working on a new five-year plan and thought it would be a good time to review the provision of Streets Ahead to ensure that it achieves what's needed from a tenant and Freebridge perspective, while providing good value for money. He shared it was a quarterly magazine sent to every tenant, shared owner and leaseholder. He shared that it was useful in helping provide information that the regulator requires us to our tenants including performance information, complaints data, how to make them that the regulator wishes us to share with you and update on projects that Freebridge are working on. Feedback suggested that some find it useful but some less so. The first issue was in 1989 by the Council but at that time we didn't have Wi-Fi or smart phones or even the internet.

A Panel member agreed with what he had mentioned about the world moving on and thought sending the information in Streets Ahead via email might be a good idea as older people seem to have got the lack of it all through necessity.

A Panel member shared that it was OK to move things to email etc. but it was easy to lose sight of those people who don't have laptops, devices - and not everyone likes reading it online. They suggested that a choice might be better ie doing it online for some while producing a printed copy for others, and perhaps phrase it that unless we hear from you we will send it to you on email.

A Panel Member shared that she would like to read about all the help Freebridge are providing for vulnerable people during COVID-19 in Streets Ahead. They added that it will help to show the support that Freebridge provides for people, that many do not know about. The Communications Business Partner shared that some of the work Freebridge had been doing had already been featured in the magazine and further details would be covered in the next issue.

A Panel member shared that over the last year many of those of age had embraced technology, so age was now less of a barrier as many in their 80s and 90s are now communicating with their families using electronic devices. They added that the way forward could be to use social media. He knew of those that 12 months ago had never used technology but now are and are very pleased to do be doing so.

A Panel member stated they preferred a printed copy as they liked to have a physical copy in front of them, a copy that would always be to hand if needed.

The Communications Business Partner confirmed that Freebridge were already using social media to engage with tenants (and the wider world) and confirmed that if Panel members had ideas after the meeting, he would be happy to accept them via email. He also confirmed that there would be a piece on this subject in the next Streets Ahead. The Governance Coordinator made a note to update on this in a few months.

The Communications Business Partner left the meeting.

**6 Any Other Business**

The Director of Housing arrived back in the meeting.

**Ombudsman Residents Panel**

The Director of Housing shared that the Housing Ombudsman were establishing a Residents Panel to work more transparently and involve customers in their work going

forward. They are inviting applicants to apply to be on the Panel from customers of all landlords who are members. . The Director of Housing agreed to email information to the Tenant Panel, and if anyone wished to apply support and assistance can be provided, or members could apply directly instead if they wish. The Governance Coordinator agreed to circulate information to the Panel after the meeting.

The following questions had been captured offline by the Governance Coordinator and brought to the meeting to be covered as a discussion:

**Should the Tenant Panel have annual reviews and targets to meet like internal Freebridge departments have?**

The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that individuals were free to collect their own personal targets and end of year personal review. He added that there was a contract for taking part and if Panel members have things that the Panel could have as a target to email to the Governance Coordinator.

**How do Freebridge recover costs from tenants who do not comply?**

The Director of Housing advised that Freebridge did have recovery methods in place but if there were any specific queries relating to the issue to email the Governance Coordinator.

It was noted that previous questions offline in relation to the Board would be provided to Simon Smith for him to include in his attendance in March as well as a response to the quarterly questions in the report to Board. The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that rolling lists were being developed alongside the agenda to capture points and themes from Tenant Panel questions and would include the quarterly messages to the Board. The Panel felt they needed to provide more information to Simon on what they were interested on receiving feedback on. The Governance Coordinator would be pulling together the lists.

It was also noted that a Panel Member commented online that was shared with the Director of Development that they had been pleased to see the mention of properties being homes and not buildings.

**Extra Meetings – For subjects which are in-depth –** The Panel wished to request specific extra meetings on certain subjects. The Tenant Panel Facilitator advised that the away day was a good opportunity. He shared that it was better to use them sparingly as the Tenant Panel Meeting was the main vehicle, and where there was not enough time in the meeting the Panel can request it and Freebridge can advise. A Panel member suggested that they could do work in between on email and get together odd times to discuss those comments before coming to a meeting. The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that email traffic has been increasing where it was previously contained within the meeting, and in the Director of Housing's point about the electrical leaflet that is okay to have email discussion on some issues such as reviewing a leaflet which you can do outside meetings and then come together in meetings for discussions.

**Further to work on the Electrical Leaflet there was an additional issue in regard to access she would like to receive panel's comments on.**

The Director of Housing agreed to share further comments needed offline with the Tenant Panel on this issue. The Governance Coordinator agreed to action.

	<p><b>What do other associations do in terms of recruiting Panel members. What is the current plan for recruitment new Panel members?</b></p> <p>The Director of Housing shared that a different approach was being tried to fill current panel vacancies; previously tenant panel recruitment had been predominately advertised through streets ahead but it may limit exposure to some customers. She shared that Freebridge were going to launch a recruitment campaign in the same way for staff and board members, using social media though not a paid post it works well for voluntary roles elsewhere. The Governance Coordinator shared that they were working on branding documents and bringing the style of the role description in line with employee recruitment. The Director of Housing shared that there may be a virtual online event for those interested to ask questions and if any Panel members also wished to attend that would be welcomed. All agreed that they would be happy to be involved in an online event.</p> <p>A Panel member suggested contacting shareholders for interest in applying. The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that there was a variety of reasons why they had to leave but very few in regard to the Panel themselves. A Panel Member shared that there was quite a lot that goes into these meetings, and there needs to be a broader explanation of the commitment and what to expect which as an improvement to the recruitment process. A Tenant Panel shared that it was hoped there could be a process that brings forward more customers to be on the Panel so that there can be longer serving members as well as new.</p>
<p><b>7</b></p>	<p><b>Meeting how did it go</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive fun</li> <li>• Good meeting</li> <li>• Informative</li> <li>• Brilliant</li> <li>• Clarification</li> <li>• Has been informative</li> </ul> <p>The Tenant Panel told the Tenant Panel they had done really well today and thanked Director of Housing for their contribution.</p>
<p><b>8</b></p>	<p><b>Date of Next Meeting</b> – Friday 12 March 2021, 9.45 am – 1.45 pm, via Zoom. Meeting Closed at 1.55 pm</p>