

Notes of the Tenant Panel Meeting

Held on 18 December 2020 at 9.45 am held virtually

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

Apologies – Sarah, David W, Charlotte and Annette.

The Tenant Panel Facilitator welcomed the Panel members to the last meeting of 2020. Jo had resigned due to other commitments.

Declarations of Interest – There were none.

Work Programme – This was noted.

	Item
1	<p data-bbox="264 591 1473 620">Notes of the Last Meeting held in November 2020 and Matters Arising</p> <p data-bbox="264 627 1473 723">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. All actions were resolved.</p> <p data-bbox="264 763 699 792">The work programme was noted.</p> <p data-bbox="264 831 1473 893">It was noted that it was important that Tenant Panel Members raised issues within the context of general customer service and processes.</p> <p data-bbox="264 931 1473 1095">The Panel reviewed their agenda format annually and confirmed that they were satisfied with it. If any panel member wished to have a hard copy by exception, they could request through the Governance Coordinator. There was an issue with mime cast for receiving hard copies of the agenda, the Governance Coordinator agreed to follow up with ICT. The Governance Coordinator agreed to survey Tenant Panel Members for hard copies.</p>
2	<p data-bbox="264 1135 866 1164">Annual Update from the Chair of the Board</p> <p data-bbox="264 1202 1473 1335">The Chair attended the Panel annually and wished to share his reflections over the past year and for the future. There were covid affecting the external environment issues as well as the internal one where recruitment of a Chief Executive this year had both changed the way Freebridge operated and thought. He added the following points:</p> <ul data-bbox="316 1373 1473 1984" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="316 1373 1473 1435">• Considering covid, new Chief Executive, Grenfell Enquiry report and Social Housing Report, there were common themes to reflect on and draw out.<li data-bbox="316 1442 1394 1471">• Freebridge has to engage and communication more effectively with customers.<li data-bbox="316 1478 1473 1574">• He had been participating with the Placeshaping organisational Chairs and all needed to think at an operational local level with more customer engagement to better understand needs and how services are delivered.<li data-bbox="316 1581 1473 1644">• Freebridge repairs and maintenance service with all the best intentions needed improvement to provide a swifter service.<li data-bbox="316 1650 1473 1713">• Freebridge needs to get better at holding itself and Committees to account in order to deliver.<li data-bbox="316 1720 1473 1816">• Freebridge needs to build more homes for people in West Norfolk and ensure that they work for modern families and people who live in them. The new Director of Development will be supporting this drive to take this forward.<li data-bbox="316 1823 1473 1984">• The Board will be signing off the next five-year plan and a new financial plan in 2021, which will see Freebridge appearing and operating very differently. The last 14 years had been fit for purpose and it must be celebrated in what had been achieved since that time, but now was the time to step up and define what was a good housing association to be an excellent one.

Panel Members individually shared the following views:

- The repairs service needed many improvements as reputation wise it was not the best in their view.
- The idea of building new homes was great, but less homes with better quality in their opinion was more important.
- Excellent ideas but a long way to go and to get a good name with repairs side of the business would push Freebridge forward the most.
- Repairs would be improved if contractors were not relied upon as much as this caused the biggest problems in their view. They felt that more of Freebridge employed staff could be managed better.
- They were pleased with the reflections shared and had been pleased to hear from a previous visit to the Panel meeting that the views of customers was the Chief Executive's top priority and that she wished to engage with residents more.
- On the topic of quality vs quantity of house building, there were very modern architectural advances that meant house-building types could be achieved without high costs.
- Take on more apprenticeships as they had noticed there had not been so many accompanying Freebridge employees in recent months as there had been over the years.
- Communications and callbacks to tenants needed improvement, and there was no quality control carried out following repairs by direct employees or contractors.
- Building new homes was good but in every road in Norfolk there must be an empty property left to decay through probate perhaps, and was of the view that Freebridge and the Borough Council should work together to address this issue. They added that the county was losing green fields at an alarming rate.

The Chair shared that he could not disagree with these comments as the repairs service for a long while needed improvement. He believed that it could all be turned around as it was all about operational issues and it would get resolved through strong leadership and having proper systems in place such as scheduling. He added that a new Director of Assets Graham Wilson would be joining Freebridge in January and the Chair was confident there would be a quick change over 2021.

The Chair shared that he was delighted with the Chief Executive and she was proving to be an asset to the organisation and it was very clear where there were areas for improvement were operationally in particular repairs and how we engage with customers.

The Chair responded to the points raised that in terms of quality of house building that he agreed personally that homes should be quality and that they had the right type of space inside and out. He had recently viewed the homes that had been built in Norwich at Goldsmith Street, which won the RICS awards, and met with the designers who had done a fantastic job; with good design and it was his belief that this was what Freebridge should be aiming for.

The Chair shared that he was in favour of an apprenticeship scheme and that he wished to set up a Freebridge academy to accommodate all teams.

Following a further point raised by a Panel Member the Chair shared that there were some grants for house building available but it was his preference that development funding was not reliant on this.

The Chair shared that the quality of the job needed to be top priority even if there were delays in carrying them out, but with the right system in place you can schedule and ring to confirm that it will be done and when. He agreed that there should be a quality check and quality checks from feedbacks via customers directly. The Chair shared also that new homes didn't necessarily mean new build, additional homes was new homes plus bringing though back properties to the market such as shops, homes and factories etc.

A Panel member asked the Chair how he saw tenants being integrated into the structure at Freebridge. The Chair felt there was a formal part through the Customer Service Committee as a sub-committee of the board looking at the customer KPIs and service standards, but independently there has to be a Tenant Panel in his opinion, which serves as a conscious brain of the organisation on behalf of the tenants. In his own view, there was scope in moving back to a more local engagement level via a satellite model.

A Panel Member asked what the Chair thought about tenants working alongside Freebridge staff with a two-way conversation being more direct, with maybe tenants on the Board to give a tenants view. The Chair agreed with the point that there needed to be opportunities to work with customers and tenants on specific projects such as task and finish groups.

As the session time had ended, it was agreed should the Panel have any further questions for the Chair to contact the Governance Coordinator. The Chair shared that it had been an interesting year and thanked the Panel for continuing to commit through the year to help and support Freebridge, which was greatly appreciated. The Tenant Panel was the key beating heart of the organisation in his view and would continue to be so. The Tenant Panel thanked the Chair for his attendance and he left the meeting.

3 Social Housing White Paper

The Director of Housing attended the meeting to discuss the social housing white paper with the Tenant Panel. It had been circulated in advance, together with a summary by HQN (Housing Quality Network) and a briefing paper that she had provided to the Board in November.

In answer to queries raised by Panel members, the Director of Housing clarified that the Tenant Panel had not previously been a designated tenant panel about the complaints process, as they were involved in Complaints Panels already at that time. She added that the Board had approved permanent changes to the complaints process in the summer, which removed Complaints Panels in order to speed up complaint resolution. But now that Tenants don't have direct involvement in the complaints process, it was the Ombudsman and Housing Regulator's intention in the social housing white paper (via the safety bill) to remove reference to a designated person in the longer term.

A Panel Member commented that they understood that the government wanted a complaints process that was quicker but it didn't necessary mean that this provided a good process and they were concerned if a tenant asked to use a designated person and they were unable to do so at this time what would Freebridge do.

The Director of Housing suggested that once that filter of a designated person has been removed there perhaps needed to be a discussion around how tenants were involved in the complaints process, but it may be many months until the changes detailed in the white paper are in place. They added that in the new year it would be something Freebridge would want to review, but not as a designated person to be involved in complaints.

A Panel Member shared that a complaints process in their view could be quicker rather than slower with tenants involved in complaints.

A Panel Member had raised a query regarding section of the paper about having your voice heard, such as regular meetings and being on the Board. And although Freebridge had obtained a V1/G1 status, they queried whether there was there anything else that Freebridge were doing to meet the requirement of the customer voice? The Director of Housing shared that Freebridge were starting to shape the next five-year strategy and the first year action plan, the Tenant Panel would discuss this at their meeting in January. Freebridge were looking to have engagement with tenants on the customer charter and would be looking to increase the way tenants could tell them what they think. She added

that the intention will be to involve customers in more ways, and we would need to engage with tenants on how they wished to be involved. She shared that the Tenant Panel would be kept up to date and it would be heavily involved over the next year to shape this piece of work.

The Director of Housing shared that the Leadership Team and the Board would be continue to discuss the identification of a senior person or board member in regard to the health and safety aspect of the white paper and more information would be shared with the Panel on this in the future.

The Director of Housing shared that also in the white paper there was the issue of transparency on performance, how money was spent, how we pay highest earners like the Chief Executive and Directors, performance on repairs and other traditional landlord functions. She added that the white paper wished for landlords to continually kept customers up to date using the latest technology such as an app.

A Panel Member commented that physical engagement was not always successful so anything that could be done using apps in the modern way would be acceptable in their opinion.

The Director of Housing shared that the most disappointing aspect of the white paper, was that there had been many points in the green paper about stigma in social housing, however this had not been brought forward and she was interested to hear the Panel's views on the matter. A Panel Member commented that the external work to homes was important as tenants were judged in their communities by its appearance.

A Panel Member suggested that Freebridge consider whether the support available was widely advertised enough to tenants. They added that they felt that the stigma attached to social housing was a national one, and as the view that only people who were disadvantaged in some way lived in social housing came from people who owned their own houses and they felt this view might not ever change.

4 Review of Complaints Leaflet

The Director of Housing continued in the meeting to receive comments on the complaints leaflet. The Panel members shared the various following comments:

- A Panel member felt that the leaflet was very long. They felt that it might be two leaflets. They felt that the Ombudsman information could be a separate leaflet to cut the pages down.
- Some things in the leaflet was repeated.
- There were lengthy explanations of how to contact tenants.
- There were too many words and it should be succinct and precise.
- The address of the Ombudsman should be at the front in a prominent position and not at the back.
- It should be clearer with just the stages of a complaint with a link to find more information on the website or if they can ask for more.
- The information sent to customers needed to communicate with a diverse number of people and felt the leaflet was laid out for all to understand.
- If anything was, too long customers may not read it, so it needs to make the important points without waffle.

The Director of Housing shared the following options for review

- A flow-chart not just all the policy wording as a leaflet as it was now. An example was shared with the Panel.
- The Ombudsman wanted tenants to understand all the stages of a complaints process in detail but we could point them to a separate leaflet.

- There did need to be shorter sentences rather than a full explanation.
- The Government wished for customers to be more aware of what the Housing Ombudsman can help with and how to contact them.

The Panel felt the example of the flow chart was good. The Director shared that she would come back to the Panel with a further draft and would continue to develop until the Panel agreed that it was a final version. The Governance Coordinator agreed to make a note for a future agenda.

Following a query the Director of Housing shared that style guidelines at Freebridge covered font and colours, but not language, which she hoped to develop in future.

The Director of Housing agreed to come up with wording that could be added to customer facing documents that the Panel review for the Panels approval and the Panel agreed to forward any suggestions they may have.

5 Customer Service Committee Pilot Progress Update

Through the year the Tenant Panel would receive a verbal update from the Director of Housing on the progress of the Customer Service Committee pilot and would be involved in evaluation post-summer time.

Director of Housing wished to highlight that there had been only one meeting of the Committee so far and the minutes of the meeting included on the Tenant Panel's agenda hopefully gave a flavour of the discussion and the standing agenda items the Committee was going to receive.

A Panel Member felt that it was early days yet to know how the pilot may progress though they felt it was probably here to stay, and they had made they feelings known throughout that it is a duplication of what the Tenant Panel does and they did not understand it but would wait and see what happens.

Another Panel Member also felt that it was early days to comment on the pilot.

The Director of Housing clarified following a query that the Committee was not part of the complaints process and if there were any tenants involved, she would discuss with the Tenant Panel and not that of the Committee. She added that the Committee had received the same performance information as the panel with the breakdown and they will be asked to identify trends, for example, there is much work to do with the repairs service and so it will be their job to pull out and highlight to the Board specific issues.

Panel Members shared that they were still unclear what the difference was between the Committee and the Panel.

The Director of Housing wished to reassure the Panel that in the new year there would be a review of our Governance arrangements and governance of the organisation overall, and because it is a new committee its terms of reference will change over time. The Tenant Panel Facilitator shared that the Tenant Panel were independent and the Committee was that of the Board, and as a Committee, they have a wider scope to scrutinise and set their agenda in agreement with the organisation. The Committee will focus on customer focus to drive through resolutions, which is not where the Panel comes from in raising issues for Freebridge and asking them to look at it. He added that the Committee would be there to ensure that the 'wheels are turning' and things are happening.

The Governance Coordinator suggested that metaphors could be used to describe the distinctive differences between the Tenant Panel and the Committee, in that you could imagine the Tenant Panel and the Board to be two different people, but the Committee was part of the Board person not an additional person. Both people come from different

	viewpoints, but they are not the same person.
6	<p>Key Messages to CEO</p> <p>The Panel had wished to add this to their agenda for discussion. The Director of Housing continued in the meeting.</p> <p>A Panel Member wished to thank the Director of Housing for her engagement in the meeting. They added that a company was judged by how they deal with something when it goes wrong rather than when it goes right.</p> <p>Following a comment the Director of Housing agreed to keep in her sight and share with managers, that when a tenant wishes to speak to a manager that they should be communicated with.</p> <p>The Tenant Panel agreed that as there may be sometimes gaps between seeing the Chief Executive that they will send questions or comments to them on email via the Governance Coordinator should there be a need, and not to structure an item on the work programme.</p>
7	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>The Placeshaping Manager and Director of Corporate Services and Culture joined the Director of Housing online to wish the Panel a Merry Christmas as it was the last meeting of 2020.</p> <p>The Panel noted that Freebridge had continued to hold a V1/G1 (Viability 1 and Governance 1) accredited by the regulator. This was the top most accreditation that could be received in reviewing these aspects of the business.</p>
8	<p>Meeting how did it go</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very informative meeting and entering exciting time • Very interesting and several points still to make but will put into an email. Thank you. • Been nice to see so many of the Panel has done good homework as the white paper was very dry reading, but it was heart warming so many did homework. • Excellent people come in a day to talk to the Panel, the Chair of the Board and the Director of Housing. And as things seem to be going at the moment, good chance to have good outcomes in the future. • Informative, fun and joyful. <p>The Director of Housing shared that she felt that the meeting had gone well with good and open honest discussions.</p> <p>The Panel thanked the Director of Housing for all the work she had done over the past year. And Thank you to the Governance Coordinator for the information she provides the Panel and assistance through the year. And thank you to the Tenant Panel Facilitator for their support in the year. The Panel wished to thank the Director of Corporate Services and Culture for her support of the Panel early on in March and April 2020 when the first lockdowns and outbreak of the virus ensued.</p> <p>The Tenant Panel were thanked for keep going over what had been a very difficult year, and since March first engaging over the telephone and then all moving over to online meetings using Zoom was excellent with no large gaps in engagement resulting.</p> <p>A Panel member shared that by zooming more as part of their Tenant Panel role this had brought her more into the digital world and as a result had been curious of its other uses to help in everyday life.</p>

	The Tenant Panel wished to thank the Community Caterer for providing some gifts to them as a thank you from Freebridge.
9	Date of Next Meeting - Friday 15 January 2021, 9.45 am – 1.45 pm, via Zoom. Meeting Closed at 1.45 pm