

## Interview with the board member

### The one with the military background...

Jonathan Foster, a former British Army officer with financial expertise and current founder and director of Series 72 Investments, a property investment company, has recently been appointed Board Member at Bush Homes, an association that develops shared ownership homes and works on regeneration projects, and at Inkerman Housing Association, a provider of quality housing services to assist the elderly to live in safe and dignified independence, five months after joining the Get on Board scheme.

We asked him why he wanted to become a voluntary board member, what the recruitment process was like and what his first impressions of his new role are.

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### What inspired you to apply for a voluntary board member position?

JF: I began my career as a British Army officer, where dedication to service and particularly during my time in Bosnia and Northern Ireland, to the community were fundamental. Having transitioned from the military to the private commercial sector, I wish to resume my active role in the community. I believe that the provision of affordable housing is a key means of assisting the less fortunate and one which has become increasingly important with the dramatic rise in property values. Inkerman Housing Association and Bush Homes address the issue of high housing costs in very different ways, but have the same objective of providing the best services possible while most efficiently employing limited resources. Their respective management teams work hard to achieve this, and deserve support and strategic guidance from their boards.

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### How did you find the Get on Board process?

JF: The process was well coordinated between the National Housing Federation and the associations which sought candidates via the Get on Board scheme.

### What was the recruitment process like?

JF: The associations had clearly done their homework regarding my candidacy, and tailored the recruitment process accordingly. It was therefore important that I had learned about the associations' organisations and services in order to be certain that I was meeting with associations which suited my skills and interests. As a result, my initial meetings were very constructive and led to my invitation to meet each association's board prior to my appointment.

### What aspects of your new role are you particularly looking forward to?

JF: The regulatory and financial framework of housing associations is undergoing significant change. Adaptation of strategy, and possibly of organisational structure, will be the responsibility of associations' management teams and boards, who will have to work closely in concert with each other to ensure all changes in legislation, accounting rules, local council support, and other areas are understood, assessed and factored into decision-making. My impression is

that the demand on board members will be greater going forward, as will the intellectual reward for being involved.

**How do you think this new role will benefit you and your development?**

JF: An enormous area of the property and housing sector is largely unknown to the public, and I have been as uninformed as most people about the influence and impact of housing associations. I have a steep learning curve ahead, which I have no doubt will give me great satisfaction.

**How much time do you think you'll devote to the role?**

JF: It is difficult to say at this point, although I believe that to be effective with each association I have joined will require more time than the quarterly board meetings and annual AGM.

**What advice would you give other volunteers who may be considering joining the board of a housing association?**

JF: The diversity of housing associations is illustrated by the very different services which Inkerman and Bush Homes provide. Find an area which interests you – be it services for the elderly or the disabled, or shared ownership schemes – and you will find several associations for which you will be a good fit.

**What Paul Doe, Chief Executive of Shepherds Bush Housing Association, parent company of Bush Homes, and Jane Turner, Chair of Inkerman Housing Association's management committee, say...**

**What type of skills do you usually look for in a board member?**

PD: The skills we seek are different each time we recruit as we try to capture a range of skills across each of our boards.

JT: We carry out an annual skills audit, we seek volunteers to become interested in the work of the association who possess the skills needed at the time, these vary over the years. This year financial, legal and management skills are needed to supplement those we already have. In addition a board member needs to be a good communicator.

**Do they need to have a housing background?**

PD: No. We provide support and training including external training for tenants in particular. The key requirement is for a balance of backgrounds and skills.

JT: Not necessarily. It can be very useful for board to have members with a wide breadth of experience, bringing new ideas and fresh ways of doing things. What is essential is that volunteers coming onto the board have commitment and a willingness to learn.

### **How long does it usually take to appoint a board member?**

PD: We usually seek to interview within one month, then invite the new applicant to the next board meeting where they can take a view on us, and the board on their skills.

JT: This depends on the calendar of board meetings. The process following initial expression of interest is to send out information; arrange an interview; take up references; if Chair agrees, invite to a board meeting as an observer/potential board member, where other board members will ask questions. Following this the Board will make a decision. If favourable the potential board member will be asked to become a shareholder which is the prerequisite for membership of the Board. The process can take six weeks or more.

### **What are the key responsibilities of a board member?**

PD: Strategic direction, performance review and evaluation, positive feedback, acting as a critical friend when needed and being enthusiastic about our work. We ask that members sign a commitment letter, attend our meetings, read our reports and get involved with staff in helping forge a direction on key issues.

JT: First and foremost to be part of a team. Second, to accept the responsibility of strategic management and financial control.

To become fully integrated a new Board Member will need to work towards

- getting to know the work of the Association
- understanding the needs of the client group
- a willingness to attend board meetings regularly
- attending training courses
- joining a sub-committee if possible
- being proactive in both board and committee meetings

### **What sort of time involvement are we talking about?**

PD: Bush Homes has four board meetings a year and an annual away day.

JT: This will depend on the time the volunteer has available. Basic essentials are attendance at board meetings, AGMs and time spent gaining knowledge of social housing. The minimum is 10 days a year, but I would hope for more.

### **How would you 'sell' the experience to someone thinking about becoming a Bush Homes board member and an Inkerman Housing association management committee member?**

PD: Bush Homes is meeting the needs of many people who aspire to home ownership but cannot afford the costs of outright purchase. It therefore offers an exciting, innovative environment to people with property, management,

commercial, legal and policy skills who want a mix of the strategy with operational service. Bush is also part of a larger group involved in all types of social housing provision in West London so there are many opportunities to widen one's knowledge and skills on the board.

JT: Joining the board of Inkerman Housing Association, a very small association, provides the volunteer with real hands-on experience at the strategic level of running a sheltered housing scheme from grass roots upwards. This can be an excellent jumping off point for anyone thinking of entering the housing, social care or health fields. Through training and meeting others in the sector, wider knowledge of social housing is gained. Volunteers come with experience in other fields and different skills. These combine to make a strong board.

All skills are useful; people who say they have no skills are often wrong – what they have is good sound common sense, a skill in itself. In addition the experience will provide a wider knowledge of social housing and the range available, how the funding works and how social housing relates to the community. A commitment to giving time on a voluntary basis sits well on a CV. People volunteer for personal satisfaction and to gain experience, it is important to find out what the volunteer's goals are and help them achieve these. Our aim is to help towards this.