



BOARD MEMBER INFORMATION PACK

August 2020

Thank you for expressing an interest in becoming a Board Member.

United Communities and Solon South West have been working together for some months on a proposed merger, which would create a new organisation for Bristol and surrounding areas. The new organisation would become Bristol's largest housing association and would play a vital role in driving forward the agenda for affordable housing and stronger communities in the city.

As a new Board Member you would join us at an exciting time. We want your support in bringing United Communities and Solon together, to create a Housing Association that is fit for the future and able to address today's challenges.



I've been particularly proud of how the organisations have come together recently to jointly respond to the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak in Bristol. Our new Coronavirus Community Fund was set up in a matter of weeks, with a promise to deliver £100,000 in grant funding to local groups across the city. As I write this foreword, we are well on our way to achieving that aim. This collaboration illustrates our shared values and ambitions, which are vital to our future success and the resilience of the communities in which we are based.

We are particularly looking for people with a combination of:

- Experience of living in social housing;
- Customer service and engagement; and/or
- Community involvement.

All Board members must be able to demonstrate a commitment to our values and support our vision.

Additionally we want to build the diversity of the Board and we warmly welcome applicants that reflect the communities where we work.

Attitude and values are as important as technical skills, so if you believe that you are not the sort of person that would normally be on the Board of a housing association, you might be just the person we are looking for.

I hope you are as excited as I am by this opportunity and will feel encouraged to apply for the role. You will hear from some of our existing Board Members later on in the pack.

James Taylor (Chair Designate)

Introduction

This information pack is designed to give a brief insight into the work of Solon and United Communities for prospective board members. We would be happy to discuss any aspect in more detail with you before you apply – please contact Bianca Saad on 0117 916 7793. If you are recruited to the Board, full induction training will be given. The areas covered in this pack will therefore be more fully explained in the context of the role, during your introductory months.

Coming together

We believe we can achieve more by working together than we can as separate organisations. The new organisation would become Bristol's largest housing association and would play a vital role in driving forward the agenda for affordable housing and stronger communities in the city.

Despite the challenging times, good progress has been made on the journey towards a new organisation over recent months. Board members and executive teams are actively working on how the new organisation can meet its ambition to deliver excellent customer services and have recently created a customer service proposal that will hugely benefit its residents. We are also determined to turn into a destination employer, where people will want to work and develop their careers. Staff from both United Communities and Solon have already been helping shape what this will look like.

Our purpose and vision

We are in the process of developing our values with the support of our staff and our residents and more work will be done in October. Our initial thoughts are that the new organisation will be:

- Focused on Bristol and surrounding areas
- Providing 'roots and wings' for local people
- Supporting the most vulnerable
- Customer and community focused
- Delivering consistent high-quality services
- Actively developing new homes
- Providing fulfilling and secure employment

Our Values

We are in the process of developing new values with the support of the staff teams, Executive and the Board. The initial proposals are that the values would reflect the following attributes:

- Ambition
- Innovative, agile and brave
- Empathy with communities and their needs
- Reflecting diversity
- Transparency and accountability



Our History

United Communities was established on 1st April 2013 when two Bristol-based housing associations, Bristol Community Housing Foundation (BCHF) and United Housing Association (UHA), began working together in partnership. We legally merged in 2017.

BCHF celebrated its 10th birthday in 2012. Within the first ten years BCHF successfully completed over 450 homes as part the major regeneration project of Upper Horfield as well as other housing projects across Bristol.

United HA was formed in 1986 with the prime objective of advocating and providing good quality, affordable housing and related services for the black and minority ethnic (BME) community in Bristol. It was set up because the needs of the BME community were not being met satisfactorily by the local authority or existing housing associations.

Solon Housing also has a long heritage in delivering quality affordable renting housing. First established in 1974, Solon played a major part in improving private sector properties in Clifton with a help of a local authority grant. Based on their early success, they were invited to work in Housing Action and General Improvement Areas being set up in Bristol. This brought Solon into Easton, which they have a close association with to this day.

For further information about us, please visit our websites – <http://www.unitedcommunities.org.uk> and <http://www.solonswha.co.uk>.



How is the Board organised?

The primary purpose of the organisation is to provide social housing - often referred to as affordable housing - which can be for rent or sale. The maximum level of rent that can be charged by housing associations is set by the Government. Rents are set at levels that allow people with fewer choices in the housing market to afford them.

The Board currently has 12 members. The maximum number of consecutive terms that a Board member can be on the Board is three, limiting service to nine years before a break must be taken. The Board sees this as very much a maximum term, and you should expect to serve between three and six years in normal circumstances.

The Board meets at least six times a year, with meetings lasting 2-3 hours. We appreciate that our Board members are likely to have other commitments so we meet in the late afternoons. There are also up to three annual away days for Board members and occasional PR events and other meetings to attend. There are also opportunities to join one of our sub-committees focusing on such areas as Customer Service or Audit and Risk.

What is the role of the Board?

The purpose of the Board is to direct and control the organisation's affairs. The Board sets the overall aims and objectives and ensures that the organisation is meeting them and complying with legal requirements promoting the lasting interests of the organisation.

The Board does not run the organisation on a day to day basis as it has paid professional staff to do this. The Chief Executive and the Executive Team are responsible for the operational management of the organisation. The Board delegates full operational powers to the Chief Executive to act and authorise decisions on its behalf.

The Board's key functions are to:

- (a) Define and ensure compliance with the values and objectives of the new organization
- (b) Establish policies and plans to achieve those objectives.
- (c) Approve each year the Budget, Financial Statements and Annual Report, before publication.
- (d) Establish and oversee a framework of delegation and systems of control.
- (e) Make decisions that might create significant financial or other risk to the organisation or which raise important issues that might clash with our vision and values
- (f) Monitor the organisation's performance in relation to the plans, budgets, controls and decisions.
- (g) Appoint (and if necessary dismiss) the Chief Executive and be represented in the appointment of key second tier managers.
- (h) Satisfy itself that our affairs are conducted lawfully and in accordance with generally accepted standards of performance and propriety.
- (i) Ensure compliance with statutory and regulatory obligations, including equal opportunities.



Do the Board Members receive payment?

It has been agreed that Board members will receive payment for their role. The levels of payment will be agreed by the new Governance and Remuneration Committee in October but as a guideline, current Board Members in United Communities receive £1900 per annum. All Board members can claim travel, childcare and other expenses properly incurred by them in connection with their attendance at Board meetings. We will give you full details on the procedures and claim forms covering both the claiming of expenses and any payment once you have been appointed.

Do I need to have previous experience as a Board Member?

No previous experience is required - it is more important that you share the values of the organisation and are willing to bring the benefit of your own unique perspective to the Board. We want individuals who are willing and confident to challenge existing thinking in a positive way so that the Board and the organisation can get the benefit of different experiences and backgrounds. Working together is also key to a successful Board as well as is the ability to stand back and look at the bigger picture. We are committed to providing support and training for those individuals stepping into a board role for the first time.

Do Board members receive training and induction?

The new Board will provide development and training for all Board members, starting with your appointment. All new members will be provided with an induction pack including the major policies, Business Plan, Annual Report etc. and will be invited to meet the Company Secretary and Chief Executive as part of their induction. The induction plan will include also a review of the first papers and principal issues for the next Board meeting as well as a chance to meet residents and staff. There is also an annual training programme for Board members. In previous years this has included attendance at National Housing Federation training events designed for Board Members, financial support for attending sector conferences as well as tailored sessions for the Board on relevant topics prior to a Board meeting. We can also arrange for Board members to 'shadow' United Communities staff colleagues and 'buddy' with an existing Board member to learn more about the organization and the role.

How frequently should I attend Board meetings?

Board members must be committed to attend at least 75% of all Board meetings (including strategy sessions) in a year. Given the limited number of meetings the Chair hopes that board members will exceed this minimum requirement. The agenda will be sent to you at least five days in advance of the meeting, electronically, and it is expected that you will have read all the reports in advance of the meeting.

The Board delegates some decision making to the sub-committees such as Audit and Risk or Governance and Remuneration.

How does the Board operate?

A Housing Association is governed by Rules setting out its purpose and how it operates. It must also adhere to legislation and the requirements of its regulator, the Regulator of Social Housing.

We also have a framework of internal best practice policies and procedures. In common with much of the not-for-profit sector, Board members are expected to operate to the highest standards of probity, and this means that they cannot obtain personal or family gain from their Board position. We have clear processes in place to explain to board members of their particular duties in this respect.

Will I be personally liable?

All Board members are required to be shareholders, and their liability as a shareholder is limited to the value of the £1 share purchased.

However, a Board member's potential liability is greater because the Board is ultimately responsible for the acts of the organisation. This should be taken seriously but the risk should not be exaggerated – there is no known case where an individual board member of a housing association has been made personally liable.

Also remember that the Board is supported in carrying out its responsibilities by the Chief Executive and other members of staff, and insurance cover is in place to protect Board members against personal liability for matters arising from their role as Board members.

What considerations have you made on accessibility for Board Members?

Most meetings take place in our offices which are designed to be accessible including lifts and disabled toilet facilities. We are also looking at the benefits of virtual meetings but we do expect Board Members to be able to attend meetings in person for the majority of the time. If we arrange meetings in other venues, any requirements are also taken into account when choosing that venue.

Board papers can be available in larger print and we would be keen to make reasonable adjustments based on individual requirements.

Are we a Charity or Company?

We are a Community Benefit Society registered with charitable rules. This means that we are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority rather than Companies House or the Charity Commission.

Hear from our current Board Members on what it is like to be on the Boards of Solon and United Communities



“Hi, I’m LaToyah and I have been a United Communities Board Member since September 2019. I have found it an incredibly rewarding experience, have learnt a lot about good governance and have been inspired by the work we do here at United Communities. The new organisation will be one with integrity that values its customers and takes real pride in the quality of service delivered.” – *LaToyah McAllister-Jones, Board Member United Communities*

“On joining the Board, I have found other Board members to be very welcoming and this, coupled with a comprehensive induction process, has allowed me to feel comfortable in contributing and feeling part of the organisation.” – *Michael Halloran, Board Member United Communities*



“I joined the Board to learn more about the intricacies of how things work. It was eye opening to see all that went on behind the scenes and how many decisions are made by the Board. More diversity is required on the Board which I believe is being actioned by the merger. The merger will shake things up and illuminate what needs to be changed. I think it will make good progress.” – *Michelle Harper, Resident Board Member Solon South West*

Details of how to apply are on our websites <https://www.unitedcommunities.org.uk/> or <http://www.solonswha.co.uk/> or email recruitment@solonswha.co.uk. If you would like to talk to someone about the role, please contact Bianca or Rebecca on 0117 916 7793 and they will be happy to put you in touch with someone who can help.

Base: Bristol

Remuneration: From £1900 plus expenses per year

Closing Date: 4pm on September 22nd 2020



Role Profile – Board Member

Purpose of role

The Board is collectively responsible for the direction and control of the organisation and each individual Board member must carry out their duties and responsibilities in accordance with the constitution of the organisation, the law and regulatory requirements.

Core tasks and responsibilities

As a minimum, we ask that all Board members:

- devote sufficient time to Board work, including preparing for and attending meetings, training sessions and other events as required
- consider and understand documents, tables and statistics
- challenge and ask questions
- work as part of a group
- listen to and respect the contribution of others and contribute to group discussion
- be flexible and support collective decisions
- uphold the vision, values and objectives of the organisation
- act professionally, with integrity and in the best interests of the organisation
- maintain confidentiality
- adhere to the principles and practice of equality, diversity and inclusion
- commit to involving and consulting residents and stakeholders
- adhere to the National Housing Federation (NHF) Code of Governance and NHF Code of Conduct.
- be able to respect boundaries between executive (staff or day to day) and governance functions.

It also helps to have an interest in social housing and the motivation to make a difference. Board member responsibilities include:

- leading change and continuous improvement
- defining and ensuring compliance with the vision, values and objectives
- establishing strategies, policies and plans to achieve the vision, values and objectives
- approving each year's budget and accounts
- establishing and overseeing an appropriate framework of delegation and control

- making decisions that might create significant financial or other risk to the organisation or which raise important issues that might clash with our vision and values
- monitoring organisation performance in relation to plans, budgets and decisions
- read and digest reports prepared by staff and advisors and contribute to appropriate debate of key issues amongst Board members to ensure decisions are well founded.
- appointing the Chief Executive
- attending induction and at least 75% of meetings and training events and at least one Annual Away Day, the AGM and informal meetings and other events during the year.
- joining at least one committee which support the Board
- participating in activities that will develop skills and knowledge (such as training and appraisal)
- acting as ambassadors for the organisation and not taking part or being involved in activities which may bring organisation into disrepute
- acting with the same skill and care as any prudent person managing their own personal business affairs
- ensure key principles of diversity, inclusion, involvement and empowerment are evident in decision making

Board member skills, qualities, experience and understanding

In order to govern properly, the Board as a whole must have a diverse range of skills, qualities, experience and knowledge. We do not expect Board Members to have skill or experience in all areas but each Board member is expected to have experience and knowledge of one of these areas:

- Direct knowledge of the needs and aspirations of the communities and people the organisation serves
- Customer service
- Legal and governance matters
- Financial and treasury issues
- Asset management
- Organisational development and human resources
- Risk and performance management
- Communications, marketing and public relations
- Housing management
- Business transformation and change
- Property development

Training and support would be given in all cases to ensure board members feel able to comment on and provide scrutiny on the strategic priorities of the organisation.

The following are a list of personal qualities that we would expect from a Board Member.

- Commitment to the mission and values of the organisation as a not for profit charitable housing association
- The ability to think and operate in the bigger picture understanding the priorities of the organisation

- Able to analyse and assess key information to monitor the performance of the organisation against the given goals
- Take into account the views of others but also be able to influence based on their own experience and opinions
- Solve problems and make decisions based on a variety of views and information
- Can communicate with confidence with a range of people including colleagues, residents and partners
- Sound judgement based on integrity and ethics
- Respects others, particularly those from diverse and different backgrounds
- Has energy and enthusiasm

Other Guidance

- All Board members share the same legal status and have equal responsibility for decisions taken that affect the success of the organisation.
- Each Board member must act only in the interests of the organisation and not on behalf of any constituency or interest group.
- No one who serves as a Board member should be in a position to gain or benefit from their dealings with the organisation.