



House of Commons

Housing, Communities and
Local Government Committee

Appointment of the Chair of Homes England

Fourth Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

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[Bob Blackman MP](#) (*Conservative, Harrow East*)

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Jack Dent (Second Clerk), Eldon Gallagher (Committee Operations Officer), Edward Hicks (Committee Specialist), Thomas Lacy (Committee Operations Manager), George Perry (Media Officer) and Mike Winter (Clerk).

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1 Chair of Homes England

Introduction

1. This Report follows the pre-appointment hearing we held with the Secretary of State's preferred candidate for the Chair of Homes England, one of four posts which are subject to pre-appointment scrutiny by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.¹

2. Following the resignation of Sir Edward Lister as Chair of Homes England, the Secretary of State appointed Simon Dudley to the role of Interim Chair while the Department made plans to recruit a new permanent Chair.² Mr Dudley was previously the Senior Independent Director on the Homes England Board. The recruitment process began with a new job description, updated to reflect that the role and remit of Homes England "changed significantly".³

3. The recruitment process was understandably delayed by the dissolution of Parliament and the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant interviews were not held until July 2020. The Secretary of State also reopened the competition for a short period from June to July 2020 after one of the candidates invited for interview withdrew from the process.

4. On 2 October, following the completion of the recruitment process, the Secretary of State wrote to the Committee to confirm he had selected Peter Freeman CBE as his preferred candidate for the role.⁴

Homes England

5. Homes England is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, with a variety of powers and functions within the housing market in England, including funding new affordable housing, unlocking public and private land, offering expert support, and delivering home ownership products such as Help to Buy.

The role and responsibilities of the Chair of Homes England

6. The responsibilities of the Chair of Homes England are set out in full in the candidate information pack.⁵ They include the following essential criteria:

- Comprehensive experience at Board level as a Chair or non-executive of a large organisation supporting, challenging and holding to account a strong executive team and conveying confidence in the organisation's capability to deliver on its objectives.

1 For the full list, see Appendix 1

2 [Letter from the Permanent Secretary, Melanie Dawes, on the Chair of the Board of Homes England, dated 16 October 2019](#)

3 [Letter from the Permanent Secretary, Melanie Dawes, on the Chair of the Board of Homes England, dated 16 October 2019](#)

4 [Letter from the Secretary of State to the Chair dated 24 September 2020 concerning his preferred candidate to be Chair of the Board of Homes England](#)

5 Appendix 4

- Extensive experience of stakeholder engagement in public facing positions, with proven influencing and networking abilities with diverse and high-profile key decision makers.
- Ability to show evidence of excellent judgement and ability to assimilate a range of perspectives and evidence.
- Proven track record of leadership within organisations of at least comparable scale and complexity.
- Strong commercial experience, along with notable financial and risk management acumen.
- A passion and enthusiasm for working with Government in meeting the challenges of the housing market.

The candidate

7. Peter Freeman CBE, the Government's preferred candidate, founded the Argent Group in 1981, and is a current non-executive director at Argent. Mr Freeman has also been Chair of Mayfield Market Towns Ltd since 2012. He was Chair of the Steering Group and author of 'Housing sprint - how to solve the housing crisis', published in March 2020. Mr Freeman's CV is appended to this report.⁶

8. We held a pre-appointment hearing with Peter Freeman on 12 October 2020. In line with the guidance drawn up by the Liaison Committee on the conduct of pre-appointment hearings, our questioning sought to test Mr Freeman's professional competence and personal independence. We explored the following areas:

- The candidate's priorities and motivations for applying;
- His experience of stakeholder engagement and leading organisational change;
- His potential conflicts of interests;
- Priorities for Homes England, including social housing, public land disposal, and housing quality.

Conclusion

9. **We endorse Mr Freeman's appointment as Chair of Homes England, subject to him resigning from the Board of Argent Services LLP and divesting his financial interests in Mayfield Market Towns if and when it receives an allocation, and with the assurance that neither the King's Cross project nor Mayfield Market Towns—while he has a financial interest—will make any request for Homes England funding. We also wish to make sure he divests himself of any other pecuniary or non-pecuniary interests that might benefit from Homes England support in the future. We believe this is necessary to avoid any accusations of conflicts of interests, whether real or perceived.**

Appendix 1: Posts which are subject to pre-appointment hearings before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Chair of Homes England

Chair of the Regulator of Social Housing

Commissioner for Local Administration England (known as Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman)

Housing Ombudsman

Appendix 2: Information about the preferred candidate and the recruitment campaign

Information about the preferred candidate

Following a recruitment campaign, the Secretary of State has selected Peter Freeman as his preferred candidate for the role of the Homes England Chair.

Declaration of relevant interests made by the candidate:

“I have two significant property interests that should be disclosed and managed.

1. Argent: My brother and I founded Argent in 1981. In 1998, we both stepped down from full time roles as joint chief executives a year after the purchase of the then-listed company by the British Telecom Pension Scheme. After 1998, we became co-investors in all Argent development projects including King’s Cross. I am still a director of the key Argent companies and of the King’s Cross ownership vehicle and my family are investors in it. The only Argent project in which Homes England has an interest is Brent Cross South (BXS). Homes England has recently signed a £148m loan to Argent Related for this project. Although I receive Board reports at the Argent Board with responsibility for delivering BXS, neither I nor my brother have an investment in BXS.

2. Mayfield Market Towns Ltd. (MMT): I am chairman of MMT and became a shareholder when it was formed seven years ago. MMT’s business has been promoting a new town of 7,000–10,000 homes in West Sussex. We control approximately 1,000 acres at very low purchase prices that enable us to provide the entire social and physical infrastructure at a cost of £304m without the need for grant. Most of the land is in Horsham DC, some is in Mid Sussex DC. Mid Sussex is opposed but Horsham has included Mayfields in a Reg. 18 list and will be deciding how to slim the Reg. 18 list down to a smaller number of sites for the Council to promote at a Local Plan Inquiry next year. The MMT Board believes that we have a compelling offer. We are not looking for grant from Homes England as the development is viable without. However, in time our site will form part of the broad market competition for Homes England’s Northern Arc at Burgess Hill, five miles away. It is also competition in terms of allocation for Reg. 19 in Horsham where Homes England are part of a consortium promoting “West of Ifield”. If I became Chair of Homes England, I should not receive papers concerning West of Ifield and Burgess Hill while I remain involved in Mayfields.” Declaration of relevant political activity made by the candidate required under paragraph 9.2 of the Governance Code on Public Appointments: No relevant political activity.

Proposed terms of appointment and remuneration (if any):

- Remuneration: £95,000
- Time commitment: Up to 2 days a week
- Term: Three-year term with the potential for reappointment.

Information on the recruitment campaign

Campaign Launch Date	01/11/2019
Campaign Closing Date	13/06/2020
Reason for any changes in timetable to that originally published	N/A
Advertising strategy	The Secretary of State agreed that an executive search agency should support the appointment. Odgers Berndtson were appointed to ensure we developed and attracted a diverse and strong candidate field. The role was advertised on the Cabinet Office Public Appointments website, Odgers website and LinkedIn page, Women on Boards, and on the department's social media platforms.
Advisory Assessment Panel	Jeremy Pocklington–Permanent Secretary, MHCLG–Chair; Wendy Barnes–Senior Independent Panel Member; Michael Jary - Lead Non-Executive Director, MHCLG–Panel Member; Tracey Waltho–Director General, Housing Planning & Building Safety, MHCLG–Panel Member; and, Emma Fraser - Director, Housing Markets Strategy, MHCLG–Panel Member
Number of applicants	53
Number of candidates invited to interview	8 (1 withdrew prior to interview)
Number of candidates found appointable	3

Diversity Data

Statistical disclosure control—where there are fewer than 5 candidates in any category, diversity data has not been shared as the candidate may be potentially identifiable.

Table 1: Gender

	Percent Male	Percent Female	Percent Identify another way	Percent Not declared
Applicants	77%	17%	0%	6%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	75%	<5	0%	<5

Table 2: Ethnicity

	Percent White	Percent Ethnic minority	Percent Not declared
Applicants	85%	9%	6%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	88%	0%	<5

Table 3: Disability

	Disabled	Non-disabled	Not declared
Applicants	2%	91%	7%
Shortlist (applicants invited to interview)	0%	88%	<5

Appendix 3: Candidate's CV and questionnaire

Curriculum Vitae

Founder & Non-Executive Director, Argent Group (1981–Present)

Argent Group of Companies was formed in September 1981, it was listed on the Stock Exchange in 1994. It then went private through a sale to the British Telecom Pension Scheme in 1997 at a 50% premium to the listing price three years prior. Argent entered into a series of personal joint ventures between the Freemans, key Argent staff and BTPS. Argent has been part of many joint ventures including King's Cross and Brent Cross South.

Chair, Mayfield Market Towns Ltd (2012–Present)

MMT is a special purpose company seeking to create an exemplary new market town in West Sussex.

Owner & Publisher, Freeman Publishing PLC (2000–2005)

Total guide to the property industry—in print and online.

Producer, Argent Film and Television (1982–1983)

Film production for Channel Four.

Business Non-Executive Director Roles;

- Singula Decisions (Software, Business Process Outsourcing)–(1999–Present)
- Land Securities (Property)–(2001–2004)
- MEPC (Property)–(2006–2011)

Property industry roles;

- Chair of steering group and author of “Housing Sprint–How to Solve the Housing Crisis”–2019–20;
- Chairman of the Investment Property Forum;
- BPF Policy Committee;
- Bank of England Property Forum;
- Property Week Columnist;
- Lecturer (LSE, Oxford Business School, Reading University and trade conferences)

Other Roles;

- Chairman, Artichoke–Leading Arts Charity–(2015–2018)
- Marlborough College – Member of Council and Chair of Buildings Committee–(2015–Present Member of United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Board–(2015–Present)

Questionnaire**Motivation**

1. *What motivated you to apply for this role, and what specific experiences would you bring to it?*

For nearly 40 years I have been interested in how Central Government, Local Government, landholders and developers can co-operate to develop better housing and communities. As a placemaker, I understand the needs for sustainable housing that supports communities. This is reflected in the report that I have produced: “The Housing Sprint–How to Solve the Housing Crisis” published in March 2020. I believe strongly that the landowners and developers have a duty to make developments, especially large ones, contribute to the progression of the wider community.

2. *If appointed are there specific areas within your new responsibilities where you will need to acquire new skills or knowledge?*

My career has given me many skills and attributes that I can bring to this role. However, I believe in constant learning and development and the priorities I have identified to equip me to be successful are:-

- i) The structure and key personnel at HE;
- ii) HE’s relationship holders in MHCLG and Treasury;
- iii) Feedback from a sample of other key stakeholders (Housing Associations, housebuilders, Local Authorities)

3. *How were you recruited? Were you encouraged to apply, and if so, by whom?*

I was initially approached by Lord Nash, Government’s lead independent director. He asked whether there were any potential candidates I would suggest and I suggested two. However, on investigation into the roles and responsibilities I realised that this was an opportunity where I might be able to make a real contribution and I was asked whether I would consider applying. I was already known to MHCLG from my work on the Housing Sprint, The Home of 2030 and the Holocaust Memorial. I decided to apply via the advertised route and was formally interviewed alongside other candidates.

Personal Background

4. *Do you currently or potentially have any business, financial or other non-pecuniary interests or commitments, that might give rise to the perception of a conflict of interest if you are appointed? How do you intend to resolve any potential conflicts of interests if you are appointed?*

I have two significant property interests that should be disclosed and managed.

1. Argent

My brother and I founded Argent in 1981. In 1998, we both stepped down from full time roles as joint chief executives a year after the purchase of the then-listed company by the British Telecom Pension Scheme. After 1998, we became co-investors in all Argent development projects including King's Cross. I am still a director of the key Argent companies and of the King's Cross ownership vehicle and my family are investors in it. The only Argent project in which Homes England has an interest is Brent Cross South (BXS). Homes England has recently signed a £148m loan to Argent Related for this project. Although I receive Board reports at the Argent Board with responsibility for delivering BXS, neither I nor my brother have an investment in BXS.

2. Mayfield Market Towns Ltd. (MMT)

I am chairman of MMT and became shareholder when it was formed seven years ago. MMT's business has been promoting a new town of 7,000–10,000 homes in West Sussex. We control approximately 1,000 acres at very low purchase prices that enable us to provide the entire social and physical infrastructure at a cost of £304m without the need for grant. Most of the land is in Horsham DC, some is in Mid Sussex DC. Mid Sussex is opposed but Horsham has included Mayfields in a Reg. 18 list and will be deciding how to slim the Reg. 18 list down to a smaller number of sites for the Council to promote at a Local Plan Inquiry next year. The MMT Board believes that we have a compelling offer. We are not looking for grant from Homes England as the development is viable without. However, in time our site will form part of the broad market competition for Homes England's Northern Arc at Burgess Hill, five miles away. It is also competition in terms of allocation for Reg. 19 in Horsham where Homes England are part of a consortium promoting "West of Ifield". If I became Chair of Homes England, I should not receive papers concerning West of Ifield and Burgess Hill while I remain involved in Mayfields.

5. *If appointed what professional or voluntary work commitments will you continue to undertake, or do you intend to take on, alongside your new role? How will you reconcile these with your new role?*

The appointment is for two days a week although I suspect that more time will be necessary, especially in the first year. I have a number of other non-executive positions and am currently on two charity boards (Marlborough College and UKHMF). The time commitments are compatible with the agreed time commitment to HE.

6. *Have you ever held any post or undertaken any activity that might cast doubt on your political impartiality? If so how will you demonstrate your political impartiality in the role if appointed?*

No.

7. *Do you intend to serve your full term of office? Do you intend to seek re-appointment?*

Yes. Re-appointment is three years away and I would have to make a judgement closer to the time but allowing adequate time to find a successor if that was the appropriate decision for all concerned.

Homes England

My answers to questions 8–14 below are all interim answers given that I am currently an outsider to HE. I would be happy to provide fuller answers in 3–6 months' time.

8. *If appointed what will be your main priorities on taking up the role?*

8.1. To build a strong relationship between HE, Ministers, MHCLG, The Treasury and the Select Committee.

8.2. To enable HE to act more decisively in aiding the supply of new housing of the widest possible mix of tenures.

8.3. To ensure that HE acts as a catalyst in terms of better design, sustainability and placemaking.

8.4. To distinguish clearly between Government money that needs to be (i) in the form of grant where no direct payback is required/expected; (ii) secure long term loans at low interest rates; and (iii) mezzanine/equity participations where HE has upside commensurate with role.

8.5. Ensuring HE is recognised as a trusted counterparty to Local Authorities, housebuilders, Housing Associations and the debt market.

9. *What criteria should the Committee use to judge Home England's performance over your term of office, if appointed?*

Overall, HE must be seen to have made an important contribution to the housing market in line with 8. above. At this point I am unable to suggest precise hurdles. While the HE strategic plan 2018–2023 gives a clear direction and set of objectives, it will be vital to monitor the impact of the current Coronavirus virus. We will need to respond to changing demands without losing sight of HE's fundamental aims.

10. *How much institutional independence from MHCLG do you believe Homes England needs?*

Government has established Homes England as an Arms' Length Body. The consensus (which I agree with) therefore being that engaging with the market and wider stakeholders as an independent body is the most effective approach to delivering Government's housing policy. However, it is MHCLG's Ministers who are ultimately responsible for Homes England. As the Framework Agreement with the department states, it is essential Homes England maintains an open and constructive relationship to support the Agency to deliver its strategic objectives. I see it as being important to work in partnership with MHCLG Ministers to ensure we agree deliverable housing policy; put strong governance

and oversight arrangements in place; and ensure HE has the skills and resources in place to deliver. These underpinning principles then allow for HE to have the operational freedoms and independence needed to drive progress.

11. *How much influence do you believe Homes England has in determining targets and funding for affordable housing?*

My impression is that Homes England is responsible for implementing policy rather than setting it. Ideally, a body responsible for implementation will be able to feed in views based on its experience to policy recommendations.

12. *How do you assess the public profile and reputation of Homes England?*

While the majority of the population might not recognise HE as an organisation that is not of great significance as long as within the housing industry it is a trusted partner. What is important is that it is viewed by stakeholders as an enabler in supporting delivery of a wide range of market and affordable and being proactive in assisting SME's within the construction industry.

13. *What risks do you think Homes England will face over your term of office, if appointed? How do you intend to manage them?*

There are the risks that any private sector operator runs in assembling and promoting land and taking on debt or providing finance. I have nearly 40 years' experience of handling these and in assembling the right teams to manage the risks.

HE also has the risks (and advantages) that come from public scrutiny, statutory powers and public sector finance.

As regards the latter, the imminent public spending review and the current Covid-induced financial crisis will be challenging. Overall though, the aim of addressing the Housing Crisis is compatible with the economic need to get Britain building.

14. *How would you rate Homes England's performance on the disposal of public land?*

I need to get behind press comment on whether HE could bring more plots forward quicker by understanding more about their land portfolio. Where it is. Is it ready to go? How much demand there is in the area. Whether it is best brought forward in combination with nearby land. Obviously, with the exception of the 10–20 largest sites, this would not be on a case-by-case basis but by general discussion with the executives in London and the regional offices and from discussions with agents and developers.

Appendix 4: Candidate information pack

About the role

We are a growing organisation with big ambitions and the Homes England Chair will be vital in leading the Agency and the Board through a substantial period of change. The organisation and the Government will look to the Chair to shape the strategy of the Board at pace to drive the delivery of the homes the country needs.

Key responsibilities of the Chair:

- The Chair will be responsible for the proper running of the Homes England Board. They will guide and influence the Agency at a strategic level providing confident, clear and consistent leadership. They will also lead the Agency's relationship with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who they will meet on a regular basis.
- The Chair will act as an ambassador for the Board and for Homes England, helping to build and develop collaborative strategic partnerships that support and promote Homes England's core mission. The successful candidate will influence and network with key decision makers and stakeholders and explain how the organisation is transforming.
- The Chair of the Homes England Board is expected to operate within the relevant standards and duties, including the Corporate governance code for central government departments, Managing Public Money and other relevant Cabinet Office guidance. These represent relevant benchmarks for good practice in corporate governance.
- As the Chair of Homes England, there would be further organisation specific governance documents that would be expected to operate within, including the 2018 Framework Document with MHCLG. The Chair is responsible to the Secretary of State and for ensuring to support their wider strategic policies.

Key objectives include:

- Building capacity and capability at the Board and executive level to ensure Homes England has the required experience and expertise to fulfil its mission and objectives
- Embedding effective working relationships with the department and wider government through governance processes including the Homes England Framework Document
- Ensuring the Board actively supports the running of Homes England and its ongoing transformation programme and that this is in step with changes underway at MHCLG
- Leading the Board to scrutinise and challenge the finance and performance of Homes England

- Strengthening the Board's oversight of the organisation and holding the executive to account for organisational performance. Accounting to Ministers on Homes England's performance.

Essential criteria:

- Comprehensive experience at Board level as a Chair or Non-Executive of a large organisation supporting, challenging and holding to account a strong executive team and conveying confidence in the organisation's capability to deliver on its objectives
- Extensive experience of stakeholder engagement in public facing positions, with proven influencing and networking abilities with diverse and high-profile key decision makers
- Ability to show evidence of excellent judgement and ability to assimilate a range of perspectives and evidence
- Proven track record of leadership within organisations of at least comparable scale and complexity
- Strong commercial experience, along with notable financial and risk management acumen
- A passion and enthusiasm for working with Government in meeting the challenges of the housing market

Desirable criteria:

- Evidence of leading organisational transformation
- Understanding of large-scale digital change programmes
- Experience in the housing (including social housing), infrastructure and/ or development sectors

Formal Minutes

Monday 12 October 2020

Members present:

Clive Betts, in the Chair

Bob Blackman

Paul Holmes

Ian Byrne

Mary Robinson

Draft Report (*Appointment of the Chair of Homes England*) proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 9 read and agreed to.

Four papers were appended to the Report.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Monday 19 October at 3.30 p.m.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 12 October 2020

Peter Freeman CBE, Government's preferred candidate for Chair,
Homes England

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2019–21

First Report	Protecting rough sleepers and renters: Interim Report	HC 309
Second Report	Cladding: progress of remediation	HC 172
Third Report	Building More Social Housing	HC 173
First Special Report	Waste Strategy: Implications for local authorities: Government Response to the Committee's Nineteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 363