



OFFICE OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON BUSINESS APPOINTMENTS

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George Freeman MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

April 2021

Dear Mr Freeman

I am writing to you with reference to your work with The Norfolk Way, The Bridge of Hope and The Big Tent.

The Government's Business Appointment Rules (the Rules)

The Committee advised you in December 2020 that you were in breach of the Government's Rules for failing to seek advice in relation to your work with Aerosol Shield Ltd. The Committee asked you to tell us about any other work you have undertaken without consulting the Committee in advance. You informed us of a number of other roles¹ and have now confirmed you have made the Committee aware of all other roles.

The Norfolk Way

The Norfolk Way is a not-for-profit social enterprise founded in 2007 by you and local businesses, promoting a vibrant rural economy and enterprise in Mid-Norfolk. You said you saw the need for an independent organisation to act as a catalyst for positive, sustainable and entrepreneurial change in rural Norfolk. The website states it is '*...an unincorporated community organisation, managed by a Board of members, the running costs were covered by ticket sales for [its] events, and sponsorship*'.

The Bridge of Hope

¹ You have informed us about work relating to: Ryse Hydrogen Limited, Resume Foundation, Reform for Resilience, Heamcro, The Norfolk Way, The Bridge of Hope and The Big Tent.

You told the Committee you founded the Bridge Of Hope with the Resume Foundation. The Bridge of Hope helps charities showcase their job-ready talent to progressive employers who embrace “Inclusive Recruitment” - removing the barriers to hiring the best new talent from disadvantaged groups. While it hopes to provide an inclusive talent network to feature across all sectors, the Bridge of Hope is piloting it in the horse racing industry.

The website states ‘...*the British racing industry has universally embraced the project and can rightly lay claim to be the world’s first industry or sport to truly embrace Open Recruitment*’. Its aim is to ‘*provide hope to those who have taken a stumble in life, through a meaningful, new career. Our vision is Job Access For All*’.

The Big Tent

The Big Tent is a charitable foundation dedicated to creating space for non-partisan conversations about big policy issues and giving a voice to places and people left-behind, particularly focussed on regeneration. The website states it wants to help people in areas that are in need of regeneration to unlock their vision, encourage them to move beyond their day-to-day constraints and give voice to what can be done if enough belief, enthusiasm and coordination is brought to bear on local opportunities.

You informed the Committee you have been involved in these not-for-profit projects over the last 10 years. You noted this work predates your time in government and all three not-for-profit projects were declared on your register of interest when you returned to government as a minister, as you retained an interest.

As these projects began some time ago and were continued during your time in office these are not considered as new appointments or employment for the purposes of the government’s Business Appointment Rules, and these do not require advice from the Committee.

The Rt Hon Lord Pickles

Mr George Freeman MP

Relevant correspondence, from letter dated 17th March 2021 from George Freeman

Dear Lord Pickles,

Application for approval for new start up projects on post-Covid recovery and Regeneration. Thank you for your helpful advice following our recent exchange of letters. I wanted to apologise again for my misunderstanding of the ACOBA process and to reiterate that I genuinely didn't understand that ACOBA guidance was needed for any/all work embarked upon by former Ministers (including for charities and not-for-profit projects). I thought it only applied to commercial work which might have any connection with my former Ministerial portfolio.

Please find attached Application Forms for:

- four roles relating to my various pro-bono not-for-profit projects on post-Covid regeneration:
 - The Reform for Resilience Commission: an international not-for-profit alliance project to make the case for a stronger commitment by international governments post-Covid to population health resilience;
 - The Resume Foundation / Prosper 4 Jobs: a private-public skills alliance for training the hard-to-reach long term unemployed;
 - HAEMCRO: the not-for-profit blood cancer clinical research Social Enterprise;
- The Norfolk Way
- The Norfolk Enterprise Festival
- The Big Tent Foundation
- The Bridge of Hope

Background

Not-for-Profit Projects

On leaving Government unexpectedly last February, I have been working to help these existing projects survive the Covid charity financing crisis: restructuring them so as to survive, secure new funding and be able to help the post-Covid economic recovery emergency we will soon face. To that end I have been exploring through the last 9 months a number of ways to help support the post-Covid recovery and the UK's ability to shape post-Covid 'healthier and cleaner growth'. Through that a number of projects have started to take shape which being not-for-profit and unrelated to my previous role I simply didn't realise I needed ACOBA permission to work but which I now understand I do. (If they were straightforward commercial 'Appointments' or 'Employment' I would have filled in an ACOBA application form – as I have now (attached) but as speculative new not-for-profit projects I genuinely wasn't clear from the Ministerial guidance that these all needed ACOBA approval.

You asked me to explain the background to my work on Hydrogen and the proposed work (now no longer proposed) helping RYSE assess the commercial feasibility of industrial hydrogen conversion.

As an East Anglian MP I've been very concerned about the proposal for multiple point-to-point connections of offshore wind energy via multiple sub-stations on the East Anglian coast, and arguing that we would be better with a single connection which could also support

a large scale hydrogen hub for East Anglia. Through that work I had suggested and offered to help RYSE develop a business plan for the conversion of Hydrogen to help create an East Anglian commercial market for green hydrogen in the heavy equipment sectors of agriculture and agri-haulage, which I have long commercial experience of given my professional career in AgriTech.

As explained to ACOBA officials, as soon as I understood that any work like this has to be agreed with ACOBA before being confirmed, I terminated the contract. No payment has been received and with the pace of developments in hydrogen conversion in the last three months, no ongoing work on assessing commercial feasibility to facilitate conversion is now proposed or planned, and this project no longer exists.

Given the specific circumstances of this case and my apology – repeated here – for misunderstanding the process, I hope the Committee will understand that whilst I was remiss in not seeking guidance earlier, there is nothing in the actual work which contravenes the ACOBA guidelines, and that given no work has been done and no payment received, the Committee will agree that the case is now closed.

Request for ACOBA Approval.

Your officials have been extremely helpful in going through all these projects and advising how best to proceed, and that I should apply formally with a cover letter to explain the particular circumstances of these projects to seek ACOBA approval.

I hope and trust this letter explains why I am now applying to ACOBA for approval of my proceeding with these projects so that I am not continually reported in the media as ‘in breach of the anti-corruption watchdog for failing to register them properly (for which I apologise again), and that given the nature of these projects and the background you and the Committee feel able to grant approval so that:

- the pro-bono projects can continue

Yours,

George Freeman.

George Freeman MP
Member of Parliament for Mid Norfolk