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Dear Councillor Farrance

Shapley Heath Stakeholder Engagement

Thank you for your letter, as it allows the Council to expand upon its position.

The Council regularly receives questions and queries regarding our work to explore a Garden Community. As you will be aware, our principle is to provide visibility to our residents on what we are doing and how the project is proceeding. With this in mind, it has been our approach since the inception of the project, that where questions are asked, we provide the answers via our Frequently Asked Questions. This is to ensure our communities, residents, businesses and all key stakeholders, can see the answers and know that there is a single version of the truth.

Firstly it would be useful to recall that Cabinet considered and approved the list of stakeholders to engage as part of their consideration of the next steps for the Garden Community; you will be aware that following this, all of the organisations named in your letter, have been invited to be part of this stakeholder process

As you allude to, a question has already been raised regarding the issue of presence of officers at the Stakeholder Thematic Groups and also the Stakeholder Steering Group. As such the following response has already been posted online under our FAQ's:

The Garden Community project is a council run project and therefore it is entirely appropriate that council officers sit on the Thematic Groups and the Steering Group as key stakeholders and technical experts. The Council operates within multiple disciplines and employs experts within these disciplines accordingly, many of whom have significant experience. To exclude these experts from the Thematic Groups and the Steering Group would be perverse and seriously limit the collective expertise of these groups. As the Council does and will continue to work within its community, its presence as stakeholders accords with the spirit of the project. As the Cabinet are the ultimate decision-making bodies for this project, no conflict of interest arises. The Stakeholder Forum Terms of Reference confirms that *"The Stakeholder Forum, (Steering Committee and Thematic Groups), will be supported by members of the Garden Community Project Team as appropriate."*

This recognises that the Stakeholder Thematic Groups have been established to create a safe space, for all voices, to talk about what an exemplar garden community at Shapley Heath could look like. Neither the Thematic Groups nor the Stakeholder Steering Group are decision making bodies; this is vested in Cabinet, supported by information or recommendations from the Garden Communities Opportunities Board.

However, they provide the time and space to allow for the exploration of the 'art of the possible' and to delve into specific topics, which could help inform the more strategic conversation.

As outlined above, on this basis, this provides no conflict of interest for Hart District Council staff and accords with the spirit of the project. It is also entirely consistent with other forums and working groups, where officers are full participants (rather than just present in a secretariat role) such as the Health and Wellbeing Board, Community Safety Partnership and the multi-agency approach to flooding and others.

I note that you included a chart referencing the chairmanship of the Stakeholder Thematic Groups, as well as the representatives, chosen from amongst their peers, to represent their views on the Stakeholder Steering Group.

As you will be aware, the appointment to these positions were taken through a democratic voting process. Clearly for a person to be appointed to represent the views of the group, they must first indicate that they wish to put themselves forward for this role.

This saw a wide variety of different representatives, from a broad sector of our groups putting their names forward and from this, their peers selected voices from We Heart Hart, Rural Hart Association and many others, including some of our own staff to represent their views. The same approach was taken in each group.

For information, only two people sought nomination at the Stakeholder Steering Group and as there were two roles available, they were appointed uncontested.

Yours sincerely

Graham Cockarill
Portfolio Holder for Place
Hart District Council