Ed Hammond
Scrutiny Officer
Strategy and Improvement
Civic Centre
Station Road
Harrow HA1 2XF

Dear Ed

Further to Councillor Green's letter of 19 March 2007 I am writing to you with our comments about the Scrutiny Review Group's report titled "Review of Cultural Services – Beacon Case Study". I would be grateful if these could be passed on to the Scrutiny Committee Members in advance of their meeting.

Home is keen to continue its successful partnering relationship with the London Borough of Harrow. We see the Beacon as an important part of the regeneration of Rayners Lane. It is a landmark building designed to positively promote Rayners Lane and integrate it into the wider local area. Our aim was to provide a focal point for community development through the delivery of training and employment initiatives, sports and cultural activities.

Setting up a new venture of this kind has been extremely challenging and with the benefit of hindsight there will always opportunities to see how things could have been done differently. The report has highlighted a number of issues that we are aware of and want to address. We recognise and staff openly discussed, with the Review Group, our concern that some local residents were critical about how the Beacon was being used. We agree that improved communications will help to achieve a better understanding of why decisions are made. The Beacon Management Committee has recognised that there are governance issues that need to be addressed. The development of a community trust will be challenging but we are keen to work with residents and partners to move it forward.

However I feel that the report lacks balance in that it has failed to recognise the many achievements that have been made in the initial year in terms of the range of

activities that are available from the centre, the number of people who have attended, and its success in integrating Rayners Lane with the wider community.

The Review Group do not appear to have interviewed members of the Rayners Lane Estate Committee (RLEC) which is the body that discusses and approves strategic decisions relating to all aspects of the regeneration. RLEC which includes three Harrow Councillors and members from RLETRA has overseen the planning and development of the Beacon.

The report rightly recognises that there are some tensions between RLETRA and Home. This is not unusual in lengthy regeneration projects that are half way through the programme. RLETRA are disappointed that the rebuilding of the estate is taking longer than originally planned. Residents waiting to move to new homes are frustrated, their living conditions have deteriorated and they feel let down. Given the choice they would have preferred that Home completed their new homes before the Beacon. This has led to resentment about the Beacon, this is something that we have to work through but it is likely that there will continue to be criticism until the new homes are completed. The wider context of the regeneration is therefore impacting on how the Beacon is perceived.

Whilst the report makes some constructive recommendations, it is not clear what role the Council sees itself having in relation to the Beacon. During the planning stages the Council recognising the lack of sports facilities in the area agreed to contribute a one-off payment of £280,000 towards the building costs of £2.7m and a further £50,000 towards equipping the building. The Council negotiated a community use agreement for the Beacon which set targets for the number and type of users and usages. It included pricing criteria and opening hours. However the Council made it clear that it would not contribute to the running costs of the building and that Home would be responsible for the operation of the Centre. It should be noted that no other financial contribution has been received from the Council towards the operation and management of the Beacon or towards subsidising any community events. Despite this the report reads as though Home is managing the Beacon on behalf of the Council. This is clearly illustrated by recommendation 6 which suggests that the Council organises a summit to set out a new strategic vision for the Beacon.

The Council's role and involvement needs to be clarified and agreed with Home. We welcome this discussion and would welcome contribution from the Council. We must be clear about who owns and manages the Beacon if we are to avoid further feeding into the confusion about the Council's role both for stakeholders and residents. It is not appropriate for the Council to hold a summit; such an approach would add to communication difficulties rather than provide solutions.

Moreover whilst there is recognition that holding a summit would require funding there is no mention of the resources that would be required to develop and deliver an

outcomes action plan. In addition holding a summit is likely to raise expectations which if they cannot be delivered will become a further issue for criticism levelled at the Beacon.

This is not to say that Home does not want to participate in wider consultation about the Beacon. We are keen to improve on the current situation however we want to do this in a measured way. A first step maybe to look at the issue as part of the first year community use agreement review.

Turning back to the report there are some points that I would like to raise:

1. The report does not detail a list of contributors and yet it gives considerable weight to unidentified witnesses.

2. I must take issue with the section dealing performance monitoring information. The performance data reflects the information required by the Community Use Agreement. When staff met the review group they explained that we were in the process of collecting data and gave a snapshot of where we were for illustrative purposes. This is an ongoing process and we expect to have a higher percentage of return information for the annual review in May 2008. The report question the reliability of our information without providing any evidence to question the validity of the data.

3. Staff have no recollection of receiving support from council officers carrying out work "to prepare them for the imminent increase in community development work …as a result of the Beacon opening." Nor have Home staff been aware that the Council staff "had problems engaging with them. (Page 15)

4. RLETRA and a wide range of residents were engaged in consultation to support the development of training to support residents in to employment over a number of months. In addition RLETRA are members of a wider providers group that meets to support the development of training services for the Beacon however they have attended only one of the four meetings held to date.   (Page 16)

5. Recommendation 7 refers to the formation of a multi-agency forum, incorporating "professional" stakeholders to establish a new performance management framework for the Beacon, and to maintain buy-in to the central principles enunciated by the local community. I feel that my comments about the summit are equally relevant to this proposal. I must also point out that such a group already exists in the form of the Employment and Skills Group chaired by Claire Codling, Senior Professional – Harrow Council. It is unfortunate that Claire was not invited to speak at the scrutiny committee in the first instance.

The performance management framework is an issue for the Beacon Management Committee. Home has established a Community Partnership looking at social, community and economic issues and the implementation of the Neighbourhood Plan. We recognise that this needs to be enhanced and would welcome the Council's input and participation. This would help to provide the synergy that the Review Group seek to achieve.

I will be attending the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 1 April and will be happy to elaborate on any of the points raised.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Lees
Managing Director