

## **RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY - SELECT COMMITTEE ON URBAN RENAISSANCE**

I am delighted to be able to respond to the consultation on behalf of the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM). The ATCM brought together a group of Town Centre Managers (TCMs) from across the region, representing a wide variety of centres by size and situation, came together to prepare this response.

**The ATCM:** The ATCM is the national body representing practitioners and other interests concerned with the management of town and city centres. We have active members in all English regions, as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our members work in nearly all of the largest 300 centres in England and in many others besides. Typically a town centre management initiative is a partnership, which brings together the local authority, police, retailers, landowners, employers and other interests. In many cases this partnership works to develop a vision, strategy and action plan for a centre and to oversee the implementation of the same.

The ATCM also leads the National BIDs Pilot Project, which is currently working closely with the ODPM to develop a new form of management for town and city centres. In taking this forward we are working in partnership with 22 pilot centres nationwide, which includes Maidstone and Reading from the South East.

In general we believe SEEDA is doing a good job in bringing forward policies and actions that will benefit town and city centres in the future. The majority of TCMs and their partners involved in their initiatives hold SEEDA in relatively high esteem, a noticeably better response than in some other regions. We have a number of comments to make, however, and these are set out below with references, where relevant, to the respective section of the draft document. Where we have proposals to make, we have underlined them.

**Discussion Issue 1** What is the role of SEEDA in the context of the housing dimension to the Sustainable Communities plan and the skills dimension to the Egan review and their application to urban renaissance?

We believe that it is important to maintain a healthy balance of mixed-use development, and SEEDA have done this. There is a need for objectivity and to resist government pressure from time to time, while recognising the need for housing land. Controlled growth is needed with such a diverse economy in this very large region. Recognition that policies must be broad because of this diversity is welcomed.

The need for skills development to support the implementation of these aspects of the plan is evident. The RCE should lead on this.

**Discussion Issue 2** Are SEEDA's resources for urban renaissance enough or spread too thinly, especially in the context of the government's expectations of RDAs and the level of funds provided to the RDAs?

The RDA's approach does seem to us to be working in that a joined up approach to projects such as Reading Station demonstrates that there is a permeated approach to UR across the organisation. However, it would be useful to find a way to test this. For example, the Countryside Agency is charged by national government with conducting a "Rural Proofing" exercise across major departments annually.

There may also be benefit in looking at how SEEDA's funds work with other agencies. There is a feeling that AIF could be a driver for this, but they are not working well at present. There is an issue over the balance of funds between capital and revenue.

SEEDA's capacity to achieve is constrained by staffing. At the same time it is generally believed that current allocation of funds is correct with revenue funds being spent on region-wide initiatives and capital projects being centred on areas of deprivation. There is, however, an issue here regarding the ability of SEEDA to support necessary investment to maintain the competitiveness of other parts of the region. Major infrastructure investment is required in some cases and an earlier intervention may save time and money in the long run.

**Discussion Issue 3** What is the specific role of SEEDA relative to the Assembly, EP, CABE, Government Office South East, the local authorities and others in implementing national and regional policy agenda for urban renaissance?

No comments to make

**Recommendation 1** Develop and monitor measurable indicators of urban renaissance, relating to as many aspects of SEEDA's activities in the area as possible.

While this is a very broad topic, we agree that a range of indicators or success criteria should be established. Neither the RES nor Business Plan clearly indicates what success should look like. The fact that the regional assembly is looking at town centre policy is encouraging and we like the healthcheck type process, which could provide early indication of a need to intervene. The ATCM would be interested in exploring with SEEDA the collection and dissemination of a range of Key Performance Indicators relating to town centre performance, and particularly to assess the impact of renaissance initiatives (both large and small) as a pilot for the nation as a whole.

There will be a need to focus on SEEDA's impact on the process.

**Discussion Issue 4** How can AIFs be used more effectively to support the delivery of urban renaissance?

The AIFs are still evolving. They act as a facilitator and provide guidance, especially on technical issues, and partnership working. This will involve a change of mindset, which is happening albeit slowly. Areas can be very large and issues of connectivity have arisen. There is a need for stability in order to give this initiative time.

**Discussion Issue 5** SEEDA is recognised as being effective in setting up partnerships for area-based regeneration and development sites, but how could SEEDA then best help partnerships deliver urban renaissance or address specific blockages?

We feel that this is a strength. In order to take this forward there may be a need for specific, specialist advice for key areas e.g. development and planning. Though there are a number of

useful in-house resources within SEEDA such as the Design Panel, we feel that this could be taken further. We have one simple proposal: Where Town Centre Management partnerships work most effectively, they have become key drivers in delivering urban policy and urban renaissance at ground level. We would like to see all TCM initiatives in the South East fulfilling this role. We believe that SEEDA could assist this, and hence better help existing and new town centre partnerships deliver the urban renaissance, through the appointment of a South East Town and City Centres Manager who would work with the ATCM to develop the capacity and expertise of initiatives across the region.

**Discussion Issue 6** How can SEEDA ensure master planning is more than a vision, but also an on-going process to facilitate urban renaissance?

The vision is just part of the process and should be seen as such. The programme should be ongoing and evolving. We are convinced that the private sector should be brought in earlier in most cases. The consultants report suggests that they do not understand the master planning concept in its entirety. The general feeling was that SEEDA do this very well (Shoreham and Hastings being examples). SEEDA has an important facilitation and advocacy role and need to ensure that their partners have as good an understanding of the whole process including the commercial viability of the eventual scheme.

**Discussion Issue 7** Should SEEDA ensure that renaissance activities focus on deprived areas, and include measures that ensure benefits reach those in most need, or recognise that renaissance is a broader concept (encompassing regeneration) which is relevant to all urban areas in the South East.

We have indicated earlier that the need for balance is important, as the region's growth areas will indirectly impact on deprivation. We must ensure that we do not just move deprivation from one area to another. Intervention needs to be holistic and long term. There is a perception that development is being focused more on currently deprived area than on "blue-chip" areas that are seen as sucking in developments already. This is not necessarily so. SEEDA needs to ensure that its influence and activity are used across the region.

**Recommendation 2** Ensure wider sustainability considerations are built into all of SEEDA's urban renaissance activities.

We accept this very woolly recommendation but would indicate that sustainability does already seem to be at the heart of SEEDA's work.

**Recommendation 3** Maintain the impetus in raising awareness and adoption of good design and the use of master planning to guide development.

Whole-heartedly agreed.

**Discussion Issue 8** How can SEEDA address more convincingly the urban renaissance skills agenda, including the rapid implementation of the regional Centre of Excellence?

See our answer to Issue 1.

**Recommendation 4** To maximise the wider impact and effectiveness of its activities, SEEDA should develop and disseminate good practice more effectively –

for example, through guidance notes showing the practical detail of 'how to' or lessons learned, rather than press releases.

This is also linked to Issue One and the skills agenda. Yes, good practice dissemination through guidance notes etc are useful. However, we recommend that networking, like the South East TCM network, be supported. Interest groups often learn so much more simply by talking and sharing with others (with similar issues) than by the printed word.

**Discussion Issue 9** Urban renaissance is more than a set of projects and a team, it is a theme which, arguably, permeates all of SEEDA's Development and Infrastructure Division and beyond. However, is this recognised by all SEEDA staff as well as its senior management?

For example, to what extent are urban renaissance principles applied in all aspects of SEEDA's development activities?

See comments on Discussion Issue 2 and our recommendation.

**Discussion Issue 10** Despite the lack of empirical data on SEEDA's urban renaissance activities, in the context of limited resources, what are the most cost effective and efficient actions for SEEDA to focus upon?

Continue to implement the existing RES and Business Plan. Overall, the ATCM South East is pleased with the contribution made by SEEDA. There are some things that can be done better, but we do not suggest any radical shift in activity. In other words the existing strategy to implement urban renaissance is broadly correct.