

ENGLISH HERITAGE RESPONSE TO INVITATION BY THE REGIONAL ASSEMBLY ON URBAN RENAISSANCE SELECT COMMITTEE

1. English Heritage is the Government's adviser on the historic environment. We have a staff in the South East region of 12 specialist advisers on managing change in the historic environment. It is therefore neither possible nor necessary for us to engage with every regeneration issue. We will usually seek to get involved in schemes which include proposals with the potential for major change or damage to nationally important heritage assets. Increasingly we aim to engage 'upstream' with any proposers of change to important historic assets, especially where master planning or development briefs are involved. Working in partnership with agencies and individuals involved in changing the historic environment is a fundamental part of how we work.

2. The major contribution of the historic environment to urban renaissance has been underscored very recently in the ODPM Select Committee report published yesterday, 29 July 2004:

'There was overwhelming evidence to the Committee that improving the environment and securing the re-use of buildings which have historic value can make an important contribution to the regeneration of urban areas. This was particularly in terms of achieving successful regeneration schemes which

- Acted as a catalyst to the regeneration of a neighbourhood or district
- Boosted the local economy and created jobs
- Reinforced local cultures, instilled a greater sense of pride and confidence in a neighbourhood, and
- Achieved better use of natural resources'

HC47-1 paragraph 4

3. Our views on the impact of SEEDA on urban renaissance below are structured according to the key questions identified in your letter of 28 June. One further preliminary observation, however, is that urban renaissance (UR) is not an 'end state' but a continuing process. 'Achievement' is therefore difficult to assess without clear-cut goals, objectives, targets and indicators. Given the broad, dynamic and long-term nature of UR, there is also the prospect that as progress is made in a particular direction, horizons and priorities will change. Mindful of the prominence of the UR agenda, SEEDA needs to develop and put in place a set of bespoke targets and indicators to assist evaluation and the targeting of resources across the region, yet which are at a high enough level to over sail these inevitable changes in emphasis over time. English Heritage would be pleased to contribute to the genesis of these targets.

4. The key challenge, from the historic environment perspective, is to achieve UR while respecting the context within which new development takes place. It must not be forgotten that the vast majority of development needed to meet future requirements is already in place, or is committed.

Successful renaissance therefore calls for a better understanding of the character of urban areas, the significance of their historic assets and their vulnerability to change. An example of the contribution English Heritage can make is the Thames Gateway Characterisation Project, which has already delivered a strategic level characterisation of the historic landscape, including urban settlements, to inform the proposals for new development and to ensure that existing urban areas benefit positively from it. In a welcome similar move, SEEDA has recently offered to fund the completion of the Conservation Management Plan for Bletchley Park, home to the founding fathers of modern computing during the Second World War, as part of the wider master-plan process.

5. Key priorities for achieving urban renaissance include:
 - Sustainable development and reducing the need to travel
 - Quality in urban design.
6. In terms of sustainability and reducing the need to travel, urban containment, intensification around transport nodes and mixed-use developments are key considerations. So also is making the most of previous investments, whether based upon town or local centres, the reuse of existing buildings and previously developed land and making use of spare capacity in existing infrastructure. Urban renaissance needs to address wider suburban areas as well as town centres and obsolete industrial areas. These are themes common to the evolving South East Plan and SEEDA's investment programmes will need to reflect these priorities.
7. The poor quality design of much of the urban realm has contributed to its economic and social problems. Recent years have seen a greater awareness of the need for good urban design as well as building design, and an acceptance of the legitimate role of public bodies in delivering such guidance. Urban renaissance relies upon quality in design and the benefits to be gained from reinforcing local character and identity. The need for master planning to be informed by characterisation must be reinforced. There is an important role in encouraging innovation and good practice through demonstration projects. SEEDA's collaborative work with the Building Research Establishment on the Sustainability Checklist web-based tool is commendable, as is the prospect of a SEEDA-sponsored South East Centre of Excellence in Renaissance at Medway.
8. Urban renaissance is unlikely physically to affect every street and neighbourhood in the region except in the widest possible sense through a change for the better in design of roads, public realm, development and sense of place. This is not the sole remit of SEEDA but the part it plays in 'raising the quality bar' can provide a lead. Such examples could be captured by SEEDA as best practice case studies for dissemination. English Heritage is itself preparing a compendium of good practice derived from the well-received 'Changing London' booklet (copy enclosed).

9. The importance of the public realm to urban renaissance is recognised in our work on the Streets for All initiative, being developed in partnership with CABI and the Department for Transport, which provides advice on managing, sustaining and enhancing the historic character of our streets and public spaces. Guidance already exists for London but will be rolled out regionally later this year. We are already working with CABI Space on the revitalisation of urban spaces across the country and with the HLF on their Urban Parks programme as well as their Townscape Heritage Initiative grant schemes, where we provide the specialist input and monitoring to ensure the successful completion of their projects. Our role in championing quality streetscapes may be of assistance to delivery of SEEDA programmes.
10. One of the key barriers to progress in the region is the inflation of acquisition costs by development aspirations, particularly housing, which take little account of the effect of uses on the areas' quality of life and economy. The master-plan process assists this, but too often may happen after the site is acquired. The effect of this is to squeeze margins so heavily that quality of design both of buildings and spaces is severely compromised. Given that much of the South East is pressured by residential 'hope' values, a wider understanding is needed from the outset of the necessary sustainable mix of uses, the future economic management of these sites and how they may contribute to the community.
11. A good model for this is in Ryde, where English Heritage worked with the Ryde Development Trust (RDT) in developing character assessment work as a key preliminary to a wider community vision for Ryde. SEEDA's role has been helpful in backing up the need for character and visioning work prior to releasing development funds as part of the Ryde SRB program. We also worked with the RDT and the local retail group to raise the profile on business street presentation and public realm. The works have resulted in a successful Townscape Heritage Initiative bid to the HLF for the town (common fund about £2m) The partnership has raised the profile of design in context within the town.
12. The skills crisis in the historic environment is a second key barrier. This applies not only to the skills in traditional building required for proper maintenance of historic assets but also to skills amongst communities and indeed local authorities in assessing the impact of proposals for change. English Heritage's regional capacity building programme includes developing the national Building in Context publication produced jointly with CABI into a toolkit. Using regional case studies the programme includes design workshops and conferences as well as community characterisation training to develop a method of developing skills and training to deliver good quality design in the historic environment.
13. Turning finally to the existing joint working with SEEDA, English Heritage is an active member of the Regional Design Panel, funded by SEEDA, which is having an important impact on improving interventions in urban areas.

English Heritage is also a member of the Urban Renaissance Advisory Group (URAG) reporting to the Assembly as well as being involved in the Suburbs Task force which reports to the Advisory Group. We have also supported the Design Champions club, contributing to events in Brighton and Oxford and to Urban Renaissance workshop/conferences held by SEEDA in Reading. English Heritage has also recently been invited to become a member of the Seaside Towns Project being established by SEEDA, which will also involve HLF, English Partnerships and local authorities.

14. This is a welcome step forward on our experience of SEEDA Projects in the recent past. For example in Hastings although SEEDA funded the Conservation Area Appraisal for the town centre, the timetable for delivering projects effectively prevented the study from informing proposals for physical renewal. Major projects have raised tensions between SEEDA's economic aspirations and the need to manage change in the historic environment in a sustainable manner. Similar tensions have emerged in Medway at Chatham Maritime, although our experience at Rochester Riverside has been more productive. If English Heritage is to play the enabling role that its expertise allows, we should be given the opportunity to engage at the earliest stage in urban renaissance initiatives.
15. English Heritage welcomes the closer working relations that have grown up in recent months and looks forward to a deepening partnership with SEEDA. The struggle we had with SEEDA to have the historic environment recognised in the RES as a powerful resource for urban renaissance is itself, after yesterday's Select Committee report, surely consigned to the past.

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