



**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
FINDINGS OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON SEEDA AND URBAN
RENAISSANCE**

Contents

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. The Select Committee Approach**
- 3. Context for Urban Renaissance**
- 4. SEEDA's Commitment to Urban Renaissance**
- 5. Quality Design**
- 6. Local Partnerships**
- 7. SEEDA's Role in Urban Renaissance**
- 8. Addressing the Skills Gaps**
- 9. Monitoring and Evaluation of SEEDA's Activity**
- 10. Learning the Lessons**
- 11. Conclusion**
- 12. Recommendations**

Annex

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Regional Assembly established a Select Committee to review the work of the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) in respect of urban renaissance. The brief of the Committee was to examine the impact of SEEDA on the physical regeneration of the region's urban communities, including through the potentially positive interaction between health, education, employment, regeneration and culture.

2. The Select Committee Approach

- 2.1 In order to provide the context for submissions to the Select Committee and to promote debate, a scene setting paper was commissioned by the Assembly from the consultants SQW. The paper describes the national, regional and local policy context for urban renaissance, reviews policies and actions and identifies key issues for SEEDA and its partners.
- 2.2 Written submissions were invited from all sectors - including local authorities, economic partnerships, representative organisations, the private sector and others. Papers submitted are available on the Assembly website.
- 2.3 Seven organisations in addition to SEEDA themselves were present to participate in the Select Committee debate on 14 September 2004. The meeting was open to the public and took the form of presentations followed by questions and answers. Membership of the Committee, those invited to give presentations, and representation from SEEDA at the hearing are listed in the annex at the end of the report.
- 2.4 Following a presentation by SQW on key points from the context and issues paper, SEEDA were invited to give an opening presentation outlining their current activities. Those making presentations were then given the opportunity to present their views. SEEDA were able to respond to the issues raised after all the presentations were made.

3. Context for Urban Renaissance

- 3.1 The South East is one of the most successful UK regions, with the second highest Gross Value Added per head in the UK. But our region's wealth is not fully reflected in all our towns and cities. Many are still struggling to cope with the transition from the traditional industries. Urban centres such as Southampton, Brighton and Hove, Thanet, Hastings and the Medway Towns have the highest numbers of residents living within the most deprived wards. A smaller number of the most deprived wards form distinct urban concentrations in the western part of the region, including in the middle of affluence and high value jobs, within Reading, Slough, High Wycombe, Milton Keynes and Oxford.

- 3.2 The Urban Task Force and the White Paper that followed signalled a shift in thinking about urban issues, from top-down planning and special programmes to partnerships involving all stakeholders. An important role was identified for Regional Development Agencies in relation to achieving sustainable economic and social renewal in declining and expanding areas. For example, this was to be achieved through improving skills and training, enhancing design, addressing the issue of empty properties, brownfield land remediation, land assembly and bringing land back to the market.
- 3.3 The remit of the Committee was to examine the impact of SEEDA through the wide range of policies and programmes that promote attractive, enjoyable, liveable places in the region's towns and cities. This included components such as design and the urban environment, integrated regeneration, town centre development and the involvement of communities in the process of change. The context for judging the impact of SEEDA was the Regional Economic Strategy, specifically priority nine (achieving 'an urban renaissance by making towns and cities work') but also other broader priorities.

4. SEEDA's Commitment to Urban Renaissance

- 4.1 There was compelling evidence from regional stakeholders that SEEDA offers strong strategic leadership in the region, the ability to co-ordinate across boundaries, to demonstrate best practice through its own regeneration schemes, and to co-operate with partners to achieve the best results. There was also an acknowledgement that urban renaissance has been a consistent priority within SEEDA over a number of years, made so by the personal commitment of SEEDA's senior management. This commitment is reflected and clearly articulated in the Regional Economic Strategy and other strategic planning documents.
- 4.2 The effect of this commitment is that urban renaissance is a theme that permeates all of the activities of SEEDA's Development and Infrastructure Division and beyond: it is not just confined to the small team with a specific urban renaissance designation. The importance that SEEDA places on design quality is recognised at Board level, where Terry Mills is able to be an advocate for urban renaissance issues and also play an active and significant part in the region's Design Champions Club.
- 4.3 It was also clear that this regional emphasis was heard at a national level. SEEDA is recognised as a valued partner in Whitehall and is particularly influential in debates with central Government. This is not only vital in raising the importance of urban renaissance, it also provides an opportunity for discussion of the challenges facing the South East.

- 4.4 However SEEDA has fewer resources than many RDAs, and in relation to urban renaissance it has taken on a wider range of activities than some. If urban renaissance is to be fully supported within the Government's growth agenda for the region, which is not confined to the growth areas identified in the sustainable communities plan, it must ensure that effective resources are in place for regional and local partners, in particular SEEDA, to deliver it.
- 4.5 Recommendation 1: Given the Government's ambition for growth in the South East, both through the sustainable communities plan and across the region more generally, it is vital that SEEDA is properly resourced to exercise leadership, intervene in the development market, and contribute expertise to support urban renaissance.

5. Quality Design

- 5.1 Quality design was identified in many submissions as a key requirement of urban renaissance. The poor quality design of much of the urban realm has too often contributed to the economic and social problems of our towns and cities. Recent years have seen a greater awareness of the need for good urban design as well as building design. Urban renaissance relies upon the quality in design and the benefits to be gained from reinforcing local character and identity.
- 5.2 SEEDA should be commended for taking an early and informed initiative in promoting urban renaissance through urban design. It is well positioned to assist in this process, including through the use of master planning. The results of SEEDA initiatives are now well recognised. High profile examples include the St Mary's Island redevelopment, a joint venture housing scheme between SEEDA and Countryside Properties that forms part of the 350 acre Chatham Maritime regeneration project. The regeneration of the island has been achieved through careful planning and design excellence. By raising the profile of this, and other initiatives, SEEDA has created the opportunity to change perceptions of design and encourage commercially deliverable schemes.
- 5.3 Other initiatives include the creation of the architecture centres and the Design Champions Club. Regional stakeholders report a good level of use of the Design Panel by local authorities. Further efforts are required to extend take-up more widely, including to registered social landlords and private developers. There is reported to be limited progress, but we have been unable to obtain data to verify the exact extent of take-up. SEEDA's collaborative work with the Building Research Establishment on the Sustainability Checklist is commendable, as is the recent decision by SEEDA to fund a chair of urban renaissance at the University of Greenwich based in Medway.

6. Local Partnerships

- 6.1 With senior management placing a high priority on urban renaissance work, the conditions have been created for SEEDA to fulfil a leading role in major regeneration projects. This priority is vital, as the decision not to support the establishment of urban regeneration companies or corporations (which were considered inappropriate to the specific characteristics of the South East) means that most area regeneration and development of major sites is achieved through partnership arrangements.
- 6.2 Our consultations revealed a variety of generally very positive views on SEEDA and their commitment to partnership working. It was widely acknowledged that its experience and influence enables it to play an important facilitating role. For example, SEEDA is currently working in partnership with Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils in Oxford's West End. SEEDA has provided development funding for a significant component of local urban renaissance and, perhaps more significantly, high level staff support. SEEDA appears to have used its limited resources effectively, catalysing development and delivery through their experience and expertise.
- 6.3 Most importantly, SEEDA has also played an active role in the development to secure urban renaissance in the Thames Gateway and Ashford and the major growth areas of Milton Keynes.
- 6.4 A previous Select Committee into Culture and Regeneration suggested that SEEDA could work closer with the cultural agencies to achieve positive regeneration outcomes. The appointment of a joint post with the Arts Council England, South East is a good example of a collaborative, partnership approach in practice. At a practical level this has stimulated the development of the Arts Plus project, a new competitive award scheme to enhance the environment of the South East through the use of artists in project teams.

7. SEEDA's Role in Urban Renaissance

- 7.1 It is vital that SEEDA should identify where it can make the most effective interventions and establish its role in the complex framework of organisations involved in urban renaissance. It was suggested in the context and issues paper that the complex environment for urban renaissance requires a clearer exposition of the respective roles of SEEDA, the Assembly, English Partnerships, CABE, Government Office for the South East, local authorities and others in implementing the national and regional policy agenda.
- 7.2 There was a high level of support for this proposition in both written and oral evidence to the Committee. This was most pronounced in the growth debate emanating from the sustainable communities plan where both English Partnerships and SEEDA appear to have been pursuing a similar agenda. While

SEEDA and English Partnerships may well have agreed their respective roles, there is confusion beyond the two organisations (including in local authorities) about the parts they both play.

- 7.3 This rather complex pattern has led to confusion over how SEEDA prioritises particular projects and a variety of expectations about SEEDA's role in specific projects and the resources they are able to contribute.
- 7.4 There is also recognition that any partnership containing key regional players - SEEDA, the Assembly, GOSE and others - can give strong weight to an initiative. However complex partnerships usually benefit from a clear lead organisation. Such is the overlap in the urban design excellence field that there is a lack of clarity as to who is running the show. Therefore clarity and confirmation as to where each organisation can take the lead and where it can add value to the work of others would be most beneficial.
- 7.5 Recommendation 2: SEEDA, liaising with English Partnerships and others, should clearly articulate to the region its role, responsibilities, and 'offer' in respect of urban renaissance.

8. Addressing the Skills Gaps

- 8.1 The achievement of an urban renaissance depends upon a wide range of basic, vocational and creative skills. It is only through investment in developing workforce skills that the region will be able to rejuvenate our towns and cities (and deliver sustainable, planned growth). The implementation of the programme for growth articulated in the Sustainable Communities Plan in the South East makes this agenda particularly challenging.
- 8.2 SEEDA has sought to address the urban renaissance skills agenda through a variety of means, including through support for Architecture Centres and promotion of the regional Centre of Excellence. In addition it has taken advantage of its lead RDA role on construction to influence national Government policy. High hopes are expressed for the Regional Centre of Excellence (RCE), although slow progress on this initiative means that the impact on improving skills has been less than hoped. Specific progress in agreeing an identity for the RCE and agreeing a business plan has been slow in progressing, with a consultation process only just beginning. However SEEDA (together with GOSE and the Assembly as members of the steering group) has now ensured that progress will be swifter.
- 8.3 There is also a broader issue, perhaps beyond the remit of SEEDA but where they can play a leading role. There is a clear need for the skills needed to deliver high quality architecture and urban design in local government. Twenty years ago, local authorities had architects departments. Cutbacks and a culture that downgrades urban skills has left many local authorities without even enough

planners to manage the flow of planning applications. Fewer still have the architectural and design skills to push for high quality in emerging proposals, engage in discussions with developers and promote their own projects. The Committee found that this led to an over reliance on a small number of consultants, particularly to undertake the critically important master planning process.

- 8.4 Recommendation 3: SEEDA and the Assembly should open a supportive and co-operative dialogue with local authorities to address how they can both meet the increasing demands of high quality urban design (including, for example, guidance on master planning and quality design).

9. Monitoring and Evaluation of SEEDA's Activity

- 9.1 It has already been recognised that funding for urban renaissance activity cuts across the SEEDA budget. More specifically, the budget for urban renaissance for 2004/5 is just over £1 million, £640,000 for capital and £410,000 for revenue. The capital items cover the Creating Quality Places initiative, and a contingent sum for small-scale physical improvements in coastal towns. The revenue sum covers the running costs of the Regional Design Panel (£100,000 per annum) and the funding for the architecture centres in Kent and Solent, the Design Champions Club, and Education Programme.
- 9.2 There is certainly some evidence of effectiveness and efficiency, including the substantial amount of private sector investment in major projects supported by SEEDA such as Chatham Maritime and Shoreham Harbour, indications of increased private sector interest in locations such as Hastings for which SEEDA can claim some credit, and the cost savings achieved on preparing small sites for redevelopment through the Brownfield Land Assembly Trust. In addition, the various design initiatives that SEEDA has supported, such as the Design Panel, Inquiry by Design, and sponsorship of the Kent Architecture Centre, appear to be cost effective actions that in the long-term could have significant impacts extending beyond the particular projects which they have influenced to date.
- 9.3 Although an informal review of activities was undertaken in advance of the Urban Summit in October 2002, SEEDA has not undertaken any formal evaluations of its urban renaissance activities. There are also no indicators specifically relating to urban renaissance that could be used for monitoring purposes. We understand from consultations that SEEDA recognises that this is an issue, and that new appointments to the Urban Renaissance Team will in part improve the monitoring and review capacity - in particular, a post whose responsibilities will include best practice and communications.
- 9.4 Recommendation 4: SEEDA should develop and monitor measurable indicators of urban renaissance (e.g. outputs such as the take-up of environmental design

standards, number of local authorities using the Design Panel etc), and include these indicators in their next Corporate Plan.

10. Learning the Lessons

- 10.1 SEEDA has learnt much about acquiring and developing property, and the opportunities and difficulties in delivering urban renaissance, which is of interest to a much wider audience. And, as already recognised in this report, there is considerable expertise and valuable skills within SEEDA. It is clear that within the limited budgets available to SEEDA there is an exciting opportunity to add value through the effective dissemination of good practice from projects. SEEDA has a particular responsibility to disseminate lessons learned in the implementation of integrated regeneration projects which contribute to urban renaissance, many of which involve public private partnership, because of the importance to both public and private sectors of learning how to work effectively together to secure urban renaissance.
- 10.2 However, a number of stakeholders in the region suggested that there is too much effort put into public relations (i.e. through publications and brochures) for its successful urban renaissance projects than effective dissemination of experience and good practice (i.e. through practical toolkits). In addition, it was also suggested that SEEDA could be more self-critical in its approach to projects, being clear about where mistakes or errors were made and including them in the dissemination of experience.
- 10.3 Recommendation 5: To ensure the most successful aspects of schemes already in place are adopted more widely across the region, SEEDA should develop and disseminate good practice more effectively - for example, through guidance notes showing the practical detail of 'how to' or lessons learned.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 Even with limited resources, SEEDA has been able to deliver a number of substantial and innovative projects. It is clear that in projects such as Chatham Maritime SEEDA has used its leverage to catalyse partnership, introduce innovation and push the boundaries of urban renaissance activity. A number of partner organisations have commented that without the input of SEEDA their organisation would have been hard pressed to make any substantial progress.
- 11.2 While recognising the significant progress made in a short time by SEEDA, this report raises a number of issues which the Committee feel should be addressed. While SEEDA may play a central role, each will need to be achieved in partnership with other organisations. In a complex environment, there is a need for SEEDA to clearly articulate its distinctive role in urban renaissance. Where SEEDA has played a key role in urban renaissance activities it should move

towards publications for practitioners rather than a more general audience.

- 11.3 The skills issue is far reaching and involves joint action and resources from a variety of partners. This includes investment in a range of skills in construction and beyond. The Committee recognises that this is an issue best dealt with by the Regional Skills for Productivity Alliance. However there is a particular concern that the capacity of local authorities to address the challenging urban renaissance agenda should be addressed.
- 11.4 Finally, the issue of monitoring and evaluation of projects is again addressed in this report - a common concern across a range of select committee reports. While there is clear anecdotal evidence of 'success', it is much less clear to the Committee how SEEDA prioritises projects and then judges success. This issue should be addressed and a clear set of indicators included at the beginning of each new project.

12. Recommendations

- Recommendation 1: Given the Government's ambition for growth in the South East, both through the sustainable communities plan and across the region more generally, it is vital that SEEDA is properly resourced to exercise leadership, intervene in the development market, and contribute expertise to support urban renaissance.
- Recommendation 2: SEEDA, liaising with English Partnerships and others, should clearly articulate to the region its role, responsibilities, and 'offer' in respect of urban renaissance.
- Recommendation 3: SEEDA and the Assembly should open a supportive and co-operative dialogue with local authorities to address how they can both meet the increasing demands of high quality urban design (including, for example, guidance on master planning and quality design).
- Recommendation 4: SEEDA should develop and monitor measurable indicators of urban renaissance (e.g. outputs such as the take-up of environmental design standards, number of local authorities using the Design Panel etc), and include these indicators in their next Corporate Plan.
- Recommendation 5: To ensure the most successful aspects of schemes already in place are adopted more widely across the region, SEEDA should develop and disseminate good practice more effectively - for example, through guidance notes showing the practical detail of 'how to' or lessons learned.

Annex

1. Members of the Select Committee

Mr Ian Chisnall - Chair	South East England Faith Forum
Cllr Ronald Dibbs	Rushmoor Borough Council
Cllr Miss Moria Gibson	Surrey Heath Borough Council
Cllr Paul Watkins	Dover District Council
Cllr Douglas Murdoch	Crawley Borough Council
Cllr Cec Tallack	Milton Keynes Council
Cllr Jill Baston	Southampton City Council
Marilyn Scott	Woking Galleries

2. Written responses to the context and issues paper:

Arts Council England, South East	Kent & Medway Economic Board
Association of Town Centre Management	Mid Sussex District Council
Buckinghamshire County Council	National Housing Federation South East
Development Trusts Association	Portsmouth City Council
English Heritage	Royal Town Planning Institute
Gosport Borough Council	Runnymede Borough Council
Government Office for the South East	Southampton City Council
GOSE Public Health Group	West Sussex County Council
Guildford Borough Council	

3. Presentations to the Select Committee (17 September)

Richard Simmons	Representing the Assembly's Urban Renaissance Advisory Group
David Ashworth	English Partnership
Barry Shaw	Kent Architecture Centre
Clive Faine	Abbeygate Developments Ltd
Richard Russell	Arts Council England, South East
Martin Blackwell	Association of Town Centre Management