

SEEDA and Urban Renaissance - A response to the Context and Issues paper by the South East England Regional Assembly Select Committee by the Kent and Medway Economic Board (KMEB)

This response has been compiled by the Executive of KMEB following a consultation with members of the Board. To find out more about the members of KMEB, please visit our website:- www.kmeb.org.uk.

The response below is in three sections. Firstly addressing the key questions which were circulated with the context and issues paper, secondly responses to a number (although not all) of the discussion points flagged in the context and issues paper and finally an number of general points that were raised by those consulted.

a. Key questions

What are the key priorities and challenges for achieving an urban renaissance in the region?

The priorities and challenges are thought to encompass:-

- Addressing the need for regenerating coastal towns.
- Creating a vibrant urban form in the growth areas
- Improving the quality of the environment and the quality of life in the high scoring deprivation indices areas of the region.

To address these challenges a coherent policy which identifies where investment priorities lie needs to be promoted. This would provide an agenda for investment to focus the resources of other agencies engaged in Urban Renaissance - such as English Partnerships, Housing Associations, CABE, Local Authorities etc. Secondly it would focus scarce resources to achieve a sustainable outcome with sufficient scale to influence private sector investment to engage in wealth creation.

What can be done to ensure that urban renaissance affects every street and every neighbourhood in the region?

Is this a realistic ambition? A policy framework referred to above would encompass a set of criteria - a benchmark - for the use of urban renaissance resources. For example, if the policy objective was to reduce disparities, benefits may be expected to cascade out into the surrounding area, sub-region and region as a whole.

What are the barriers to progress in improving the quality and standards of design of buildings and spaces in the region and what can be done to overcome them?

Ownership, multiple ownership and the need for land assembly are identified as key barriers. To overcome these issues, in previously undesirable locations, often requires significant public investment. It is also time consuming as due process has to be observed, and detailed masterplanning undertaken. The attraction of appropriate private sector developers / investment then needs to be secured. Often further public sector investment is required for site servicing, public realm, transport infrastructure and the problems of inadequate utility infrastructure or utility infrastructure which is not sufficiently durable to be "future proofed" to enable the development to proceed as envisaged is often a further investment need.

The co-ordination and management of all the interested parties in this process is a highly skilled and difficult task - dependent upon often scarce and experienced personnel. The process works best if there is some continuity of leadership and project management.

Focus, vision, a long term commitment, appropriate reward and recognition, and continuing professional development for project management staff are all likely to be key factors in overcoming the above.

How are organisations in the region working together with SEEDA to achieve an urban renaissance and are their programmes and actions co-ordinated?

The AIF partnerships offer a mechanism for bringing organisations together, but as the constituency of AIF partnerships is variable, and the breadth of subject matter covered diverse, it might bear examination to check if the AIFs have the correct or appropriate representation in all instances. In addition AIF partnerships do not exist throughout the region. In the sustainable communities growth areas, teams have been established to manage development which in most cases will involve Urban regeneration. SEEDA is clearly working closely and constructively with all these various formats, but there does not appear to be a consistent or coherent pattern across the region - this must represent a management challenge for the agency.

In addition this rather complex pattern has resulted in some confusion and variation of expectation about what SEEDA's role in respect of specific projects might be, and the extent of resources the RDA may bring to bear. The extent of resources SEEDA might choose to invest is no doubt ultimately a matter for the SEEDA board. But it has been suggested it may be helpful for SEEDA to establish with its policy framework for urban renaissance a set of guidelines that identify the project management pre-conditions required to secure their engagement. This would clarify the role or roles that the agency is empowered to undertake. It could also identify key stakeholders that need to be engaged with the project in order to progress it, and where responsibilities are expected to lie for the development of business cases, masterplanning, site assembly – and SEEDA's likely role in these tasks. Such a statement might help save time and streamline negotiations with prospective urban renaissance project partnerships.

b. Discussion Issues

Responses to selected discussion issues contained in the context and issues paper.

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?

SEEDA clearly has an important and key role in terms of the Sustainable Communities plan in assisting with site assembly, contribution to master planning and the close working relationship with English Partnerships. In addition they are actively encouraging and supporting the development of the growth area implementation teams.

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

The scale of need for resources for urban renaissance in the sub-region of Kent and Medway alone could far outstrip SEEDA's current resource allocation from central government. This is clearly no fault of the agency - we know that SEEDA receive less funding from central government than the other RDAs. They undoubtedly have a delicate task in managing all the demands that are upon them, and this has been further compounded by having to balance the demands of the growth area agenda with the needs arising from the RES priority areas.

The deprived wards in the South East are typically urban wards. 9 of the 10 are highest scoring wards are in the coastal town, and the priority area of East Kent figures prominently on that list of deprived locations where a focused effort on urban renaissance one would expect should be directed. Many of those highly scoring wards continue to be highly scoring despite the not inconsiderable efforts of a range of agencies including SEEDA. Setting aside the social indicators - there are a range of environmental indicators, including housing

standards that giving rise to these high scores and which directly relate to the topic of urban renaissance. Opportunities to capture value from investment yield in capital projects may in the medium to long term assist SEEDA in recycling its limited resources.

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

Not sure - so if this has been articulated by SEEDA, it could probably bear reiterating judging by this response.

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

The membership of the AIFs needs to be appropriate to develop and support a programme of urban renaissance if this is an emphasis SEEDA wish the AIFs to develop and deliver on. In addition resources could be made available via the AIFs to promote the development of necessary project management skills and continuing professional development.

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?

See the response above to the question of how organisations can effectively work together and the identified need for a coherent policy framework.

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

Sustained commitment to the implementation process, via continued engagement with the implementation process, support for project management and via seeking to compete for a bigger share of the national budget to devote to urban renaissance activity.

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?

If limited resources are an issue, an appropriate policy response would seem to be targeting those resources to areas of greatest need. The choice that will determine this approach is focused around either seeking to tackle regional disparities or being seen to support prosperity. Is this a matter for the SEEDA Board and the SE Plan?

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

By working with partners as appropriate to devise for consultation some clear proposals, which respond to the recommendations of the Egan review, and then lobbying ODPM amongst others, for the additional resources required to implement the proposals.

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?

No comment

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?

See response to question 7.

c. General observations

It was with some surprise that that it was noted that no reference was made in the context and issues paper to the impact of Turner Contemporary on the regeneration of the Thanet urban conurbation, nor of the private sectors philanthropic role and contribution on urban renaissance eg in Folkestone. The former needs SEEDA finance, and the latter may have lessons to apply to SEEDA's approach in terms of encouraging and supporting the role the private sector can take in urban renaissance.

Is there confusion between brownfield land development and urban regeneration? Much of brownfield land is former industrial land and not necessarily urban eg East Quarry or the Kent Coalfields. Redevelopment may create an extension to an existing urban area, or create a new one - but is this urban renaissance?

Design is considered key - redesign being commonly dependant on land assembly, SEEDA is positioned to help with this process, and follow-up with master-planning and securing high quality design eg St Mary's Island. SEEDA is thought to be on the right track with this, and for raising the profile of its activities might help change perceptions and encourage performance.

There is thought to be a fundamental question concerning the economic target of urban regeneration, ref to discussion question 7 above. It is considered SEEDA should have a view concerning the quality of urban environment and community function required to attract and support a competitive economy in the high cost South East which suffers the relative economic and environmental disadvantage of transport congestion. This is thought to require SEEDA to take a robust and complete holistic approach embracing physical, business, learning and cultural renaissance. For example, in East Kent Pfizer reportedly have had some difficulty in attracting staff because of concerns about the lack of spousal employment. The urban areas in East Kent could be responding to this market demand to generate appropriate employment of this second string workforce as part of their urban regeneration target/role.