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If calling ask for

Our reference

Your reference

John Kilford

30 July 2004

Dear Ms. Barnes

South East England Regional Assembly – Select Committee
on Urban Renaissance

In your e-mail of 28th June, you ask for comments on the context and issues paper prepared for SEERA by SQW.

The comments of West Sussex County Council are set out below.

Key Questions

1. *What are the key priorities and challenges for achieving urban renaissance in the region?*

The key challenge is to achieve whole-hearted acceptance of the need for urban renaissance from the entirety of the region's residents and businesses, for it is only then that a holistic approach (which is essential) might be achieved. It is also essential to spend time building a consensus locally on what needs to be done and to ensure the actions are taken locally.

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

As above, whole-hearted acceptance and consensus are needed. The only way of achieving this is through a concerted campaign, including publicity, focussing especially on opinion-formers (and the media). We must eschew mediocrity.

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

There are no clear (unambiguous), agreed criteria as to what is quality. It has been seen many times that, for example, buildings which are liked by

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

the public in general can be severely criticised by “experts” in regard to aesthetics, materials, etc. Debate, discussion and open-mindedness are needed to even begin to overcome this. One way in which this might be advanced is by involving more local people, more of the time, in design decision making - perhaps in the lead up to planning authority development control meetings. This will promote more 'ownership' of the resultant buildings, irrespective of whether they are good or bad, so that the community can collectively 'learn' how things might be improved rather than simply pass the blame onto the planning authorities. Compromise and common denominators are called for, but not the lowest common denominator.

4. *How are organisations in the region working together with SEEDA to achieve an urban renaissance and are their programmes and actions coordinated?*

SEEDA is working locally with other organisations at Shoreham, Bognor Regis and in a number of the market towns. There are some signs of co-ordination, but is SEEDA really the best organisation to take the lead? Its priorities are mixed and relate mainly to the economy: environmental quality, sustainability, and the other elements associated with urban renaissance do not always sit comfortably with economic drivers. It is not always clear from SEEDA's contribution what their main objectives are. The term 'urban renaissance' does not enter the discussions but interventions in the market do. It is not clear locally how SEEDA's programmes and actions are co-ordinated.

Discussion Issues

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?*

As with “Key Question 4” above, the role of SEEDA is not only unclear, but there has to be a big question mark as to whether SEEDA is the appropriate body to cover adequately the contexts here-mentioned.

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?*

Without question, they are spread too thinly. With the significant exception of Ropetackle (at Shoreham) and the Market Towns initiative, SEEDA's contributions have had only sporadic beneficial effect so far (eg Shoreham Harbour and Bognor Regis), but other partners have also not had the beneficial effect either.

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

Not only is this not clear from the way in which SEEDA has been addressing the issue, but as already indicated, there must be doubts as to whether SEEDA is the appropriate organisation to take the lead in all aspects of urban renaissance.

It is well-placed to assemble sites for redevelopment, and to assist with funding – but of necessity these will be limited in number even if they are high-profile “problem” sites. As explained in answer to “Key Question 1”, a holistic approach with whole-hearted (and almost universal) support throughout the region is needed: SEEDA is not well-placed to drive this agenda. In particular, it will always be bound to be weak in this field for as long as it concentrates on the three principal growth areas and by default gives relatively little attention to the remaining vast majority of the south-east region.

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

AIFs have the potential to be a principal delivery mechanism for urban renaissance, but SEEDA’s current small allocation of resources and the required processes to be used prevent this. Urban renaissance issues should be considered more when AIF decisions are being made, but a supplementary decision process and additional sources of funds are necessary if urban renaissance is to achieve its own deserved level of priority.

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?*

This could be best achieved, as set out in the response to the previous “discussion issue”, by clearly explaining that, for example, a purpose of AIF is to deliver urban renaissance and that significant funds will be made available. Other delivery mechanisms might or might not be part of SEEDA, but these will need their own substantial source of funds for disbursement.

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

I’m not sure that this is down to SEEDA alone, but is a responsibility of a local partnership. The world rarely changes rapidly in response to a broad-brush conceptualisation (master planning) – and this is even more the case when dealing with existing areas of development (those most in need of a renaissance) rather than green fields. Master plans and the master planning process can help in a number (but a limited number) of locations: we must therefore ensure that they are not seen as the only way forward and that other processes are identified and are given equal or greater prominence.

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?*

Urban renaissance must be seen as fully applicable to (not just relevant to) all areas. Even the most affluent, successful and good-looking parts of the south-east have “pockets” now where renaissance would be beneficial

and, in the future (possibly in the near future) will be candidates for renaissance related improvement. SEEDA may focus its funds in deprived areas but it needs to participate fully in putting the message across that renaissance of high quality should apply to all urban areas.

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

The response to "too little, too slowly" has to be: "much more, and more quickly". SEEDA needs to work closely with the Learning and Skills Council to ensure a fully co-ordinated approach.

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?*


I believe that the implicit suggestion that the theme doesn't permeate throughout all of SEEDA is correct, especially based on the experience locally in West Sussex. However, as previously explained, the problem arises as a result of SEEDA's principal remit, such that urban renaissance will always be subordinate. Surely, there is a strong call for a separate body to take on this specific agenda at regional level, with SEEDA actively supporting such a body.

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?*

Based on the experience in West Sussex, SEEDA has been most successful only where it has engaged in site-assembly and subsequent redevelopment of problem brownfield sites. It is without doubt that these are the most efficient and cost effective actions for SEEDA – BUT, it leaves a great yawning gap of other urban renaissance activities which someone else needs to promote. This "someone else" probably needs to be set up, as I doubt that there is any existing body which can solely do this and has the appropriate remit to take this whole agenda forward and to deliver it on the ground.

I hope that these comments are of some help.

Yours sincerely,



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