



GOVERNMENT OFFICE  
FOR THE SOUTH EAST



## Delivering Urban Renaissance in the South East

Report of Seminars -  
'Creating Living Places in the South East'

# 1. Introduction

Four seminars were jointly arranged and promoted by Government Office for the South East (GOSE) and the South East England Regional Assembly in the Summer and Autumn of 2001:

- 6 July - Guildford
- 26 July - Portsmouth
- 17 September - Medway
- 15 October - Reading

The seminars were attended in total by approximately 200 people, predominantly local authority members and officers, but with a leavening of Government agencies, voluntary groups and businesses.

The seminars were structured around three initial presentations by keynote speakers, followed by a workshop session with three or four groups exploring particular themes. The seminars particularly drew on the results of a recently published study (“Living Places”) on urban renaissance practice in the South East that had been specially commissioned by GOSE/DTLR from the well-known urban consultants, URBED.

Speakers included:

- Nicholas Falk, URBED
- Ken Dytor, Urban Catalyst
- Charlie Fulford, AMEC
- Mike Gwilliam, South East England Regional Assembly
- Colin Byrne, GOSE
- Sheila Holden, Brighton and Hove DC
- Richard Simmons, Medway BC
- Joyce Markham, Reading BC



*Chatham Maritime*

## 2. Overall Findings

In general, the seminars produced lively debate and discussion, especially in the workshop sessions.

Each workshop session was summarised in a brief plenary, and these comments, and those made in the general discussion and feedback forms, have been used to distil resulting issues and messages. These can be conveniently grouped into general and specific points. The general, more overall, findings are as follows:

### **Awareness**

Even amongst those who attended the seminars, who by self selection probably had a greater than average interest in the subject, there was a surprisingly low level of awareness of the urban renaissance agenda.

### **Relevance**

Many, particularly from the less urban authorities, seemed to believe that the urban renaissance theme only applied to the cities and large towns.

### **Regeneration equals Renaissance**

Urban renaissance and urban regeneration were frequently seen as the same thing, reinforcing the tendency to see the application of the renaissance in narrow terms. The notion that the renaissance message was relevant to places which did not need large scale physical regeneration seemed particularly hard for the participants to grasp.



*Ramsgate*

### **Leadership and Commitment**

The various speakers all emphasised that these were essential ingredients for success. Some issues would be controversial while others would take some years to resolve. Therefore, a sense of purpose and a willingness to persevere were essential.

### **A Shared Vision**

This was identified as being very important. It was important to avoid platitudes or wordy documents, but a well-articulated vision, drawn from local debate and discussion, could convey a clear sense of purpose and ambition which could, at its best, inspire and enthuse.

### **A Local Authority Lead**

Time and again the examples quoted in these seminars demonstrated the crucial role of local authorities in articulating a vision and showing leadership. Others could fulfil these roles, but often it was the local authority that was best placed.

### **Partnership**

Although considered an overused term, there was general agreement it was essential to go forward with a range of supporters. The local authority might show leadership, but it could only do so if it worked with others and built an effective coalition.

### **Success**

A number of interesting examples of such successes were revealed during the seminars, which needed to be much more widely known. It is likely that there are many more examples yet to be discovered by better communication and promotion.



*Reading  
Oracle Centre*

### **Small Successes and Simple Innovations**

Speakers pointed out that these are just as important as bigger projects, demonstrating results quickly and building confidence and momentum. Participants verified this from their own practical experience.

### **Attitudes**

Public, and sometimes local authority member, attitudes are an important issue, and could seriously inhibit delivery of the urban renaissance agenda, unless their concerns are constructively and vigorously addressed. The participation by members at these seminars was particularly helpful.

### **Help from Government**

The intention of the seminars was to focus on sharing practical experience at a local level. Nonetheless, a number of participants were clearly looking to central government to help them gear up to meet the urban renaissance challenge. A number felt that the Urban White Paper and other Government action to date have not provided sufficient support and practical encouragement and a number were unaware of other relevant literature and assistance, e.g. the specific study on urban renaissance in the South East, 'Living Places - Urban Renaissance in the South East'.

### 3. Specific Issues

These have been grouped to reflect both the topics covered in the workshops and the main issues that arose from the plenary discussions. The following provides a flavour of the range of views expressed.

#### Land Assembly

- Currently, there is widespread reluctance to use Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers due to problems with bureaucratic complexity, a lack of available skills and experience and inadequate compensation arrangements.
- A more active CPO process will need a better resource base, with more scope for local authorities to recycle receipts more flexibly.
- Local authorities need a new CPO power to acquire land and premises in order to carry out non-specific regeneration or renaissance programmes.
- CPO best practice and skills need to be shared better. The forthcoming DTLR manual on CPO should help.
- It is difficult to bring small sites forward for development, given their scale and ownership problems. An additional mechanism, such as the Brownfield Land Assembly Trust (BLAT) now proposed by SEEDA, could therefore be both useful and timely.

#### Design

- The role of elected members is crucial, but members can feel inadequately equipped to fulfil this role without training and support.
- There are significant skills shortages at the officer level in local authorities to deal with design issues.
- Local authorities have been repeatedly told by national government that design is not a high priority. Now that it is seen as a priority, it is difficult for them to find the resources for this new role.
- There is an urgent need for more training and dissemination of successful practice, to help members as much as officers.
- The strategic role and importance of urban design still needs to be promoted more widely, to the public as well as those more closely involved with the process.
- Higher densities remain of concern among both elected members and the public. Much more effort is needed to demonstrate that densities can be positively increased without “town cramming” and with benefit to the wider environment and quality of life.
- Car parking standards are an issue given the move towards higher densities.
- Good design briefs can greatly assist developers and build local consensus. Local authorities need to produce more such briefs, but need the resources and skills in order to do so.



Horsham  
Shelley Fountain

## **Affordable Housing**

- The provision of more affordable housing will be a crucial component of delivering the urban renaissance.
- This will require the identification and release of more sites, often small sites, that can be used for affordable housing.
- Examples of good practice exist and need to be much more effectively promoted, in order to build confidence and share experience.
- Provision of more housing needs to be undertaken in a wider urban design context and linked to mixed use patterns where possible.
- Government needs to give local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) more support and encouragement, particularly in setting out clear local affordable housing targets and then using them as a basis for negotiation and implementation.
- Local authorities are not always making full use of their powers to identify need, define affordability and set policy for the supply of affordable housing.
- Negotiations on individual sites must, however, reflect a good understanding of the economics of supply from the developer's perspective, which is often not the case at present.
- More public funds will be required in order to increase significantly the supply of affordable housing.
- Government should relax current rules on the use of capital receipts so that a higher proportion can be devoted to affordable housing supply and other linked urban renaissance improvements.
- The potential contribution of empty homes and flats above shops has not been properly realised and needs to be pursued more vigorously.
- The role of local urban space and amenities as an element of an increased supply of affordable, and other, housing must not be underestimated. This will require additional revenue support for maintenance.

## **Transport**

- More investment in local transport to improve choices will be essential if the quality of life in urban areas is to be made more attractive. Without this additional investment, the urban renaissance agenda will fail.
- Recent increased funding for local transport programmes is welcome therefore, but needs to be sustained and is currently too focused on capital expenditure, with far too little support for revenue items.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on incentives and improvements to the transport system, before introducing travel restrictions. In other words, carrots before sticks.
- Car parking standards, especially in residential developments, remain a very sensitive issue and should be subject to further review.

## Property Industry

- The property industry has been adapting to the changing policy base, and to the market opportunities created by urban renaissance policies reasonably well. The response, however, is patchy and some sectors of the industry have signally failed to respond.
- The industry finds policy uncertainty to be a key problem in relation to the planning system, not speed of decision.
- The industry invests relatively little in research and development and early public consultations on its development proposals. Such investment has, however, been shown to reap significant dividends and should become more widespread.

## Finance

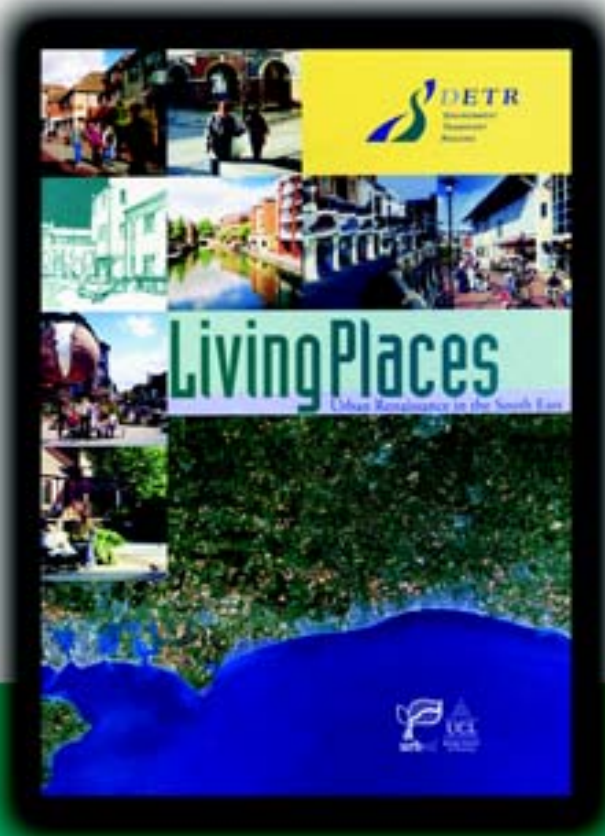
- The abolition of gap funding is causing problems, especially in the less prosperous parts of the region, where additional environmental and other costs can affect the viability of schemes. Current government measures to replace gap funding have not satisfactorily dealt with this problem.
- Some financial institutions are setting up specialist funds to assist urban development. These need to be more widely promoted and encouraged.
- There is an acute shortage of revenue funding to manage and maintain renewed or improved facilities in our towns and cities. Town Improvement Zones may help, but these are likely to have only limited application. Unless additional resources are found, there is a danger that capital investment will be undermined by subsequent revenue failures.



*Sandwich  
'20 mph zone'  
for safer residential streets.*



*Eastleigh  
The Point Arts Centre*



## Living Places - Urban Renaissance in the South East

Limited numbers are available from the South East England Regional Assembly at the reduced price of £10 each.

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