

# LEARNING FROM DUTCH NEW TOWNS AND SUBURBS

Report of the Harlow  
Renaissance Study Tour

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March 2007

HARLOW RENAISSANCE Ltd







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## Report of the Harlow Renaissance Study Tour

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HARLOW RENAISSANCE Ltd



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# LEARNING FROM DUTCH NEW TOWNS AND SUBURBS

## Report of the Harlow Renaissance Study Tour

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As part of the work of developing the Business Plan for Harlow Renaissance a high level team visited a range of new developments in the Netherlands and met planners and members of the community. This short report sets out the aims and issues we wanted to explore, and the main findings as far as both the product and processes are concerned. A PowerPoint presentation with more images from the tour has been produced.

### Why we went

The study tour was inspired by the idea that a visit to places that had undergone major development could help the new Board of Harlow Renaissance share ideas and reach a common vision of what should and should not be done as Harlow starts to grow again. While all towns and countries are unique, there are similarities between New Towns in Britain and the Continent and also between East Anglia and the Netherlands, Harlow is already active in the European New Towns Platform and is hosting a conference in the town in July as part of the celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town's formation. Hence visiting some recent developments was seen as an effective way of learning first hand about different ways of tackling common issues.

### Aims and issues for Harlow

Another important goal was to allow the members of the Board to get to know each other, and to explore areas of common interest. An intensive visit to other places is one of the best ways of doing this.

On the coach to the The Hague, a number of issues for exploration were identified, including:

- Organising and funding infrastructure
- Integrating new and old developments and the people in them
- Reviewing the management of public spaces
- Transforming the town centre
- Raising aspirations and skill levels
- Identifying potentially transferable lessons

The new suburbs are a pleasure to walk and cycle around



Models in visitor centres are widely used to inspire and sell new suburbs





Colour is used to brighten up places and create distinctive neighbourhoods

## What we did

URBED was asked to organise the programme and set up the arrangements as they had previously run a study tour of major Dutch cities, including the new town of Almere, and had undertaken research into Dutch approaches to regeneration and to the development of new suburbs (see reports *Learning from Dutch Cities* and *Making Connections* [www.urbed.com](http://www.urbed.com)). The tour had to strike a balance between seeing as many different examples as possible, and enabling the group to work together on issues for Harlow. After considering a number of options, the programme involved:

- Leaving on Sunday evening to allow two days of visits, staying in Amsterdam as a base
- Providing a briefing pack of material on lessons from Dutch cities and new suburbs
- Using a coach to allow the group to visit a range of places and hold discussions en route
- Starting with a briefing session from Han Lorzing and his Director at the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research in The Hague on the planning of new housing in the Netherlands
- Visiting the new suburb of Ypenburg in the afternoon together with its town centre
- Visiting an extension of the New Town of Zoetermeer
- Drawing together the initial conclusions at a dinner where we also discussed ideas for the Harlow Business Plan
- Visiting Almere and the marketing centre for the town centre
- Walking around the new centre, and visiting its new theatre
- Meeting some members of one of the communities to discuss what it is like to live in a New Town
- Sharing ideas on what might be done to move things forward in Harlow.



The visit enabled the group to 'look and learn'

## What we learned

While each member of the group will have learned something different, and will have different likes and dislikes, a number of points emerged regarding both the processes and the outcomes which are worth sharing. We deal first with the differences we found in the processes before trying to assess some of the outcomes for both the new housing areas and the town centres.

### Differences in processes

In many ways the system used in the Netherlands is similar to the way planning has been going in the UK (and indeed Dutch planning has been an inspiration to the rest of Europe, through concepts such as the Compact City, Integrated Public Transport, Choice Based Lettings and Home Zones). Furthermore, as 80% of the funding for local government comes via the central government, there are similar concerns about how to package funding for major developments. However a number of points emerged from the presentations, some of which reinforced conclusions in *Learning from Dutch Cities*, which was included in the

briefing pack (which can be accessed through [www.urbed.com](http://www.urbed.com)).

**1. Commitment to planned growth** As one of the group remarked, the Dutch seem to be developing everywhere, and there is an astonishing amount of new building to be seen along the main roads and around the railway stations. Han Lorzing's presentation (and article for Built Environment, which had been circulated) made it clear that every ten years the Ministry responsible for development issues a report, which sets the course for development in the country as a whole. In 1995 what became known as Vinex committed the country to housing growth to respond to demands for larger homes, more home ownership, and a growing number of households. Over half that growth was concentrated in the Randstad, the main conurbation, which is known as 'the rim city with a green heart'.

### The Vinex Plan

The high living standards and levels of social equality in the Netherlands today stem in part from continuing investment in public infrastructure and new housing, as a result of a succession of national plans or reports. The Vinex Plan following the fourth report played a key role, and over the period 1995-2005 increased the housing stock by 7.5%. The plan was to build 455,000 new homes of which 285,000 are extensions of existing towns and cities. 90 new suburbs were built of which around 50 are in the Randstad area that lies between Utrecht, Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. The plan was quite simple. The government provided 4 billion Euros, of which 70-80% was for infrastructure, which was in place by the time a third of the housing was built. This amounts to around £7,000 per home, and so had to be more than matched by funds raised by the local authority.

**2. Contractual agreements between central and local government** The towns were asked to come up with plans for housing growth, expressed as ‘covenants’ and in response the government provided grants. The process was relatively simple, with few controls over what was to be built other than a requirement to provide 30% of social housing, and to concentrate housing where there was already infrastructure. A system of agreements was introduced, starting with the Big Cities. As in Britain, the bulk of taxation goes to central government, but with municipalities playing a much more proactive role in both planning and development, and with greater financial freedoms.

**3. Balancing infrastructure and development** In all the new developments, transport infrastructure is provided from the very start. Traffic has been rising rapidly in the Netherlands, and train travel has been increasing at 4% a year, so it was important to ensure the new developments were well connected. So as well as the major transport investments funded by the government and Provinces, such as the new light rail system connecting up the Randstad or the High Speed line from Amsterdam and Rotterdam to Paris, there has also been a huge programme of building light rail lines, as in Ypenburg, and Zoetermeer, or Busways, as in Almere, to make it possible for people to get to work and to the main shopping centres without having to use their cars.



Rapid transport links and new stations make the new suburbs attractive places to live

### Funding Infrastructure

The funding of infrastructure was achieved partly by government investment, but also by pooling land, and making a charge on developers when homes were completed. As a result Oosterheem, the final extension of the new town of Zoetermeer, was seen as a ‘cash cow’ for the municipality. In Zoetermeer the Municipality charged developers on average around 20% of the sales value, going up to 28% on more expensive homes. They borrowed the finance for infrastructure at low rates of interest through the Bank Nederlandse Gemeenten (BNG) which has been set up by and for local authorities and public sector institutions, such as housing, education and cultural bodies. The bank provides made to measure financial services ranging from loans to consultancy and participates in project through public private partnerships (PPP). BNG has been rated Triple A, and is the largest financial body in the Netherlands after the State, and also has a international role ([www.iclc.eu](http://www.iclc.eu)).



Reserved busways get people from the suburbs to the centre easily



Innovative architecture helps Almere to stand out



#### 4. Importance of land ownership

The relatively strong position of the municipalities seems to come from the trust in the planning system, (with less scope for appeals by landowners). It also stems from the local authority playing a key role in land assembly, often owning key sites, or enabling different ownerships to be pooled. Though the Vinex programme had led to private developers buying up sites in areas expected to grow, it was the municipalities that drew up the plans, and therefore set the values.

**5. Delineation of roles** While the developments are carried out by experienced housing developers or housing associations, or by commercial developers, the basic infrastructure has been provided by the local authority. A contract is drawn up which provides security and hence minimises risk, and getting the contract right was seen as critical. In the case of Almere new town, an internationally renowned masterplanner was appointed, following a competition, and he in turn was able to ensure that some world-class architects were involved in individual buildings (not always with good results!). A great stress was placed at Zoetermeer on getting the contracts for Public Private Partnerships right, as changes cost the municipality a lot, so that there are clauses to cover the main risks, including linking development to infrastructure. Getting the phasing right is critical, and we saw how in Almere a requirement to develop the cultural facilities early on, including an ice-rink and hotel, had failed because it was cut off from the rest of the scheme.



Leisure activities for all ages enliven Almere's new centre



The new theatre looks out to a new lake



Public art in the new theatre

### Almere New Town

The new town of Almere, a suburb of Amsterdam, which is now 30 years old, is particularly interesting as the town has gone through a number of phases and is now extending again, but always along the spine of the main railway line. A typical development in the north eastern district Almere Buiten would have 2,000 homes, with their own schools and local shops, and with distinct identities. The neighbourhoods are linked by a busway with a reserved lane, and the buses are very frequent. There are also redways, which are cycle lanes.

The current population of Almere is 182,000, and this is now planned to double, largely through a stress on people building their own homes, or in cooperative groups. The original town centre was designed for a population of 80-90,000, and provided 40k sqm. of retail to a relatively poor population, as people earning minimum wages relocated from Amsterdam. They have now added another 180k sqm. of shopping plus a superb new theatre overlooking a large lake, a new library, and 2,500 car parking spaces, which are under the new centre. The municipality financed the development of the basic town centre infrastructure by selling off land for office development elsewhere, and then sold sites to housing and commercial developers.



Well lit underground parking helps people to feel safe as well bringing them right into the shops



Multi level shopping can be fun



The model of Zoetermeer helped build confidence



Eco housing and new waterways help save resources and prevent flooding

**6. Team working** In all the places we visited there was a small multi-disciplinary team, the Projetbureau, which was responsible for the major schemes, and which was disbanded when the scheme was complete. This includes not just planners and property experts but also communications people. A great deal was invested in high quality communications such as models and films, in visitor centres which were used to sell the individual units, so that people could see how their home fitted into the grand plan.

**7. Good urban design** Though opinions on the architecture will vary, we saw neighbourhoods that are a pleasure to walk and cycle around (though they generally had little in the way of facilities apart from schools). The Dutch seem much more willing than us to adapt the physical landscape, with extensive reshaping of land to shield new housing from motorway noise, for example. They also make imaginative use of water to break up housing areas, promote biodiversity, and minimise run-off.

### Neighbourhood Branding

Though there is a strong sense of modern architecture, there has been a huge variety with different styles of building, and distinctive looking neighbourhoods. One comment is that 'serial monotony has been replaced by planned variety'. Thus in Almere Buiten there are nine parts each modelled after a different country, including an area known as the Rainbow Quarter, with carefully chosen colours, while in the Haverleij suburb of Den Bosch there are nine residential 'castles' plus a fortress all built around a golf course! Considerable use has been made of 'branding', and for example Brandevoort has a medieval feel. The town of Helmond, near Eindhoven, which had a poor image, has become more popular as a result of its extension.

### Housing Layout and Design

The municipalities are responsible for drawing up the development plans, which had to be compact and close to good public transport, with a proportion of 70% owner occupied and 30% rented. Implementation was then carried out by a range of development teams, and in Ypenburg, for example, 75 teams were asked to bid, and 15 were selected for a development of around 9,000 homes. There is a wide range of types of housing, from towers and terraces to individual homes. It is not easy to tell what the tenure is from the outside, though sometimes similar people are grouped together e.g. housing for the over 55s in Almere. The programme seems to have been popular, despite initial criticisms from architects, and there is a high level of stability with people largely moving within the same towns.

**8. Neighbourhood management** In the Netherlands a number of policies that relate to strategic neighbourhood management have been introduced and are helping to improve liveability and create a better public realm, especially in areas of high levels of immigration and loss of employment.

Two examples are the Opzoomeren programme and the 'Civic Wardens' initiative:

1. Opzoomeren was introduced in Hoogvliet, a satellite town for Rotterdam. It is about local government stimulating and subsidising local communities in each street, square and courtyard to organise joint clean up activities, plant flower beds, window boxes etc. with a view to enhancing their immediate living environment.
2. The Civic Wardens scheme is a national public initiative where welfare benefit is used to cover the costs of the wardens who receive training in communication and social interaction skills, as well as IT and first aid. Local district authorities manage the schemes.

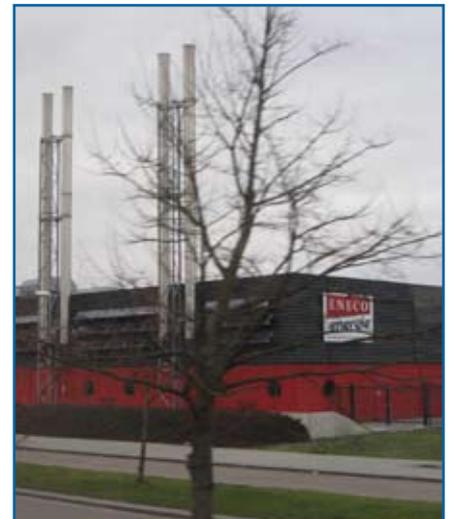
**Differences in outcomes**

Many of the issues facing the Dutch are the same as the ones we face, as several of the group remarked. There has been a popular preference among families for moving to homes with gardens, (though people without children, young and old, are happy to live in flats that are close to facilities). They too are concerned about the poor public behaviour of some young people (although this is nothing like the scale experienced in the UK), and the problems of integrating people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Congestion is also a common concern, even though to us it seemed much less of a problem. The climate is also a big issue, particularly given the low lying position of most of their towns.

**Neighbourhood Management Principles**

The early 1990s neighbourhood of Muziekwijk, close to Almere, demonstrated a number of neighbourhood management principles. Firstly there was a clear separation of older people from families to enable them to enjoy a quieter environment. Secondly, there was an active volunteer led tenant group. Thirdly, residents had been encouraged to participate right from the start, with a meeting place provided in the local school. Fourthly all new residents are issued with written packs which provide information (and rules) on such management tasks as rubbish disposal, as well as expectations of behaviour.

Lastly, there is a well defined 'super caretaker' role in place to facilitate care of the environment and to keep a 'watching eye' on residents' welfare. The neighbourhood is divided into five areas, each with a managing caretaker (employed by the Housing Corporation [Association equivalent]), and the role is very much 'on the ground' to spot problems and issues at the earliest opportunity. Each caretaker walks their own patch, gets to know all the residents, and is in a situation to take early action where problems arise by starting with an 'advisory' and 'pointing out' approach to the person responsible, and moving through a series of stronger warnings and, as a last resort, bringing in the police as an authority figure. It is interesting to note that there is an assigned neighbourhood policeman. This approach means that many issues can be solved in a non confrontational way early on.



Combined Heat and Power is common



Underground waste disposal systems save space



The new centre has transformed Almere

### Almere Town Centre Masterplan

The masterplan for the town centre at Almere, which was drawn up by the famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, was based on four key principles:

- Enabling cars to reach the centre easily by providing the car parking spaces underground, with a curving roof which gives a slight incline to the new shopping streets
- Creating a mixed use centre, like a medieval city, so that people are around in the evenings
- Designing the spaces organically, with curving streets to create continually changing vistas
- Using new materials i.e. other than bricks which are used for most of the houses.

However in a number of respects the Dutch have succeeded in doing what we have talked about. There are 90 new suburbs, all very different in style, but offering some possible lessons in terms of the broad priorities for growing places like Harlow.

**1. Environmental sustainability** The Dutch have built many more homes, and generally to a larger and better specification. We were told that in the new suburbs it is common to install Combined Heat and Power, wind turbines, and underground sucked and separated refuse disposal systems. In Oosterheem, the final extension of Zoetermeer, we saw some fine looking eco homes in a neighbourhood where the community had taken responsibility for looking after the public spaces, and where the drainage system created a very attractive looking neighbourhood. We were told that water is the biggest challenge for the future as Holland is so low lying.

**2. Design excellence** Though some of the new homes we saw seemed very clinical and soulless, there is no doubt that they have created new places with a distinct identity. The idea of 'branding' different neighbourhoods, as is com-

mon with manufactured goods, seems a powerful one. It has helped create a much broader market for new homes than in the UK as new homes offer a distinctly better product than many of the old apartments. They seem to be fitting larger homes into smaller plots, without cars dominating the layout. There is much more use of water and tree planting as a means of creating a distinctive environment, and a conspicuous use of large areas of colour to brighten places up.

**3. Social inclusion** Though in practice the areas of social housing were clustered away from the private housing, they did not stand out. The Netherlands has achieved a much more equal society; recent well-publicised research for UNICEF into child well-being in rich countries showed that the Netherlands provided the highest standard whereas the UK provided the worst. In part this could be because people have more time to spend with their children, due to less time spent commuting, and in part to the efforts put into community engagement through the schools and neighbourhood activities. We visited homes that were designed to enable people to grow older in them, and there are good

social support systems, with a high stress on voluntary work. Good public transport and low fares also help to pull communities together. However despite higher levels of economic growth and social equality, there are major spatial inequalities, both within major cities like The Hague, and between the older areas and the new suburbs. The new suburbs have attracted many of the white working and middle classes, leaving the main cities with a high concentration of immigrants.

**4. Wealth creation** Though the UK has a high level of consumer spending, there have been relatively low levels of private and public investment. The disparities between London and the rest of the UK have continued to widen, whereas Amsterdam and The Hague are seen as part of a wider polycentric conurbation. Almost everyone one meets in Holland seems to speak English and being closely in touch with what is going on in the rest of Europe does give them an economic strength. It was noticeable how much new employment is on the edge of towns and cities, while the centres are increasingly places for living and enjoying yourself. Though there has been a stress on service employment, and a loss of industrial jobs, there are still many major Dutch manufacturers, such as DAF (which took over Leyland Trucks).

**Making a step change**

Two of the places we visited were similar in size to what is proposed for North Harlow (10,000 homes), which brought home not only the scale of what is being planned, but also the huge pressures it will place on the planning system. We simply will not be able to deliver what is expected in the Growth Areas without radical changes in the way we all work together. Our discussions in Almere suggested that the Dutch have been able to attract and retain first class people in local authorities because of the leading role they

play in development. This has been backed up by the use of competitions to secure more innovative approaches to design than conventional house builders would employ. This could also be the result of a ‘can do’ philosophy, reinforced by a lack of micro-control. The group thought the people we met had been more adventurous, but also honest in acknowledging and learning from mistakes. They seemed to be better at taking a team approach, and having a positive attitude, and in maintaining spaces to higher standards.

In part this was through having plans which everyone bought into, and having a continuity of staffing. They use public private partnerships without abdicating a sense of public control and stewardship for the public realm, and the local authority is clearly taking the lead. This was greatly helped by putting in public investment up front, assisted by developer contributions on a clear and predictable formula. Given changing patterns of work it may be necessary to accept that most new areas will function as suburbs or dormitories.



Right: Local people set up a neighbourhood association in Almere

Below: Small project offices bring different interests together



However it was also clear that you could have an attractive looking plan and set of policies and still produce places that looked soulless with no natural areas to mingle, and possibly little sense of community. While we did not explore the pattern of educational provision, except to note that students tended to live at home and attend local universities and colleges in the big cities (taking advantage of free public transport), there is an issue of how to use colleges and health facilities as the basic catalysts for building self-confidence and a sense of community.

The group felt that ensuring there were some community facilities, such as a café, would help to avoid concerns that there was nowhere for people to meet, which seemed to be a deficiency in the places we visited. (However perhaps people were more willing to meet in each other's homes or catch the bus into town.)

One of the main reasons for the Dutch success in building so many new homes has been their investment in infrastructure early on in ways that build confidence that plans will be

implemented. Their transport system is streets ahead of ours, and this was evident from the contrasts between arriving at Stansted (or Heathrow) and Amsterdam Schiphol Airports, and what we saw of their light rail systems. It is also helped by their ability to combine advanced civil engineering with good urban design, so that new infrastructure is welcomed, not resisted. This could in part reflect the educational system as well as cultural traditions. It is made easier by their ability to work as teams and to provide the necessary leadership, with the local authorities playing the leading role. It was also suggested in a previous study tour that being a flat land makes new development less obtrusive (which is also an opportunity for places like Harlow in the East of England).

It would be wrong to suggest all is perfect, and issues for the Dutch include a number that we also face such as:

- Dealing with global warming, and a rise in sea levels (which is particularly acute when there are number of settlements that are some seven metres below sea level!)
- Coping with a desire for rural living, and the trends to racial polarisation, which could put people off living in cities
- Providing a balance between housing and employment to encourage people to work as locally as possible (a real challenge when you have such well-connected settlements).



Above: Double decker trains and well-used cycle ways cut car use

Left: Trams join up The Hague suburbs with the city centre

## Recommendations

Many in the group wanted to reflect before committing themselves. The following therefore is largely Nicholas Falk's personal view of what could be done to move things forward, and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. I have incorporated comments from Andrew Bramidge, John Gandy, Dearbhla Lawson, and Francesca King. Over dinner we generated a large number of ideas for Harlow, and four main recommendations or 'big ideas' emerged from our discussions:

**1. A comprehensive regeneration strategy** for how Harlow can become sustainable again is needed to ensure that physical development meets community needs, and enjoys broad support. This must avoid replicating what has already been done and should address:

- Clear and agreed aspirations so that the renaissance project team works well and uses all the powers available
- Identification of priority issues and concerns for different parts of the community
- Future sources of employment and enterprise and options for the local economic structure
- Demographic profile and trends, and the social mix needed to secure a balanced community at different levels
- Opportunities for change both through local developments e.g. the new college, and through linking the town to opportunities elsewhere e.g. Canary Wharf, Stansted Airport.

**2. A bold and imaginative integrated spatial plan** needs to be in place before developers are invited to participate. This should be inspired by the principles of architectural excellence and designing with nature that inspired Harlow in the first place, but brought up to date, with allowances for where new infrastructure is most likely

to be provided. It should also be bold enough to take difficult decisions, such as demolition, and to question some of the constraints. This includes:

- Making full use of water to create attractive leisure and residential developments while tackling environmental issues such as flooding
- Taming cars, and possibly applying the principles of under ground car parking that we saw in the new Almere town centre
- Showing how access can be improved and congestion reduced, including proposals for how best to upgrade public transport and transport interchanges
- Identifying some 'quick wins' such as using colour and art to create a sense that Harlow is on the move again, and will be the place to be. Similarly providing bicycle tracks and bike parking at the bus and train stations and shops to encourage a fitter and more environmentally sensitive lifestyle, starting with a cycle audit to work out the best routes to different destinations
- Promoting themed neighbourhoods or quarters to give new and regenerated areas their own identities, starting with ensuring plans for the town centre lead to high quality mixed use developments
- Using cultural and arts development to improve the town's image and profile (Almere's new theatre overlooking a new lake not only creates a focal point for the community, but also has raised the town's profile, and added a beautiful building in the heart of the town)
- Identifying areas where competitions would be appropriate, including opportunities for small builders and cooperative groups in places that would help put Harlow on the development map again.

### 3. An effective communications

**plan** that taps the ideas and energy of people young and old in playing their parts. This could include:

- A visioning event(s) using a round table approach to improve spatial links, and key areas of opportunity, such as the Station gateway and the River Stort
- Branding the different neighbourhoods with distinct styles and themes
- A Community Initiatives Fund for neighbourhood improvements, topped up by Section 106 contributions from new developments
- A marketing centre, perhaps in the Civic Centre, that combines information on what is happening with the chance to talk over a coffee or snack, and with a model and images of different developments
- The use of properly run developer architect competitions for certain sites to generate interest and creative thinking within realistic briefs.

4. **A housing strategy** that shows how different market segments can each pursue 'housing careers' (which is a Dutch concept) within Harlow, through being able to climb up housing ladders. This would include:

- Experimental or 'eco houses' to compliment the exciting scheme at Newhall that could help market the town as a place of innovation and generate continuing positive publicity
- Proposals for housing in the town centre, specifying the kinds of people to be housed in different possible locations that could form part of the development brief for the centre
- Principles or a charter for how social housing and intermediate housing are to be fitted into to different types of neighbourhood to provide developers and housing associations with clear briefs

- A method for funding appropriate methods of neighbourhood management so they feel well-maintained and secure.

## Conclusion

After the event everyone agreed that the study tour had been extremely valuable in raising aspirations, team building, and in providing fresh ideas on a number of key issues for Harlow. There will be value in building on the relationships that have been created, for example through the European New Towns Platform, which is holding a conference in Harlow, and through putting together Interreg and other bids to share experience. There would also be real added value to the rest of the Growth Areas to probe in more detail into the precise way contracts and financial agreements are drawn up, and to observe the way project groups work in practice. This would justify drawing up a research brief for some joint work, possibly involving a Dutch research partner.