

# Success stories provide home-grown lessons for urban renaissance

**Sarah Jarvis** of consultants URBED explains how the 24 Towns and Cities project, showcasing urban renaissance achievements and obstacles, reflects a new way of working between government and towns and cities

**A**t an Urban Summit that was fired up by the mayors of Milwaukee and Barcelona, one message was clear - it is no longer necessary to go overseas to be inspired by the potential of urban areas to meet the demands of 21st-century living.

Evidence for the start of a real sustainable urban renaissance was launched by regeneration minister Tony McNulty with the publication of *Towns & Cities: Partners in Urban Renaissance*. This family of five reports is the result of a year's work by the urban policy unit at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and consultants URBED in partnership with 24 towns and cities across England, and follows a commitment made in the Urban White Paper that government would work with towns and cities. The project has taken the pulse of urban renaissance in 24 very different places. It set out to find out how towns and cities are achieving a wider urban renaissance, to showcase successes, but also to identify obstacles that hinder faster delivery of renaissance. Perhaps as important as the recommendations in the reports themselves, however, is the new ways of working between Whitehall and towns and cities that were introduced through the project, including a "looking and listening" approach involving ministers and policy advisers travelling around the country, learning real lessons about the renaissance.

The commitment of the 24 partner local authorities has been essential for the success of the project. The ODPM and URBED team, and ministers, were impressed during their visits by achievements across the country - whether it was riding on trams in Croydon, Manchester and Sheffield, enjoying rediscovered waterfronts in Nottingham, Reading, Newcastle and Gateshead or walking through the new squares and public spaces in Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham. New apartment developments in all the major centres, and some of the smaller ones, prove that cities in England are becoming more like Barcelona and the rest of Europe - popular as places to live as well as work.

The story is not all positive, of course, and across the partners there are concerns about spreading the benefits of renaissance beyond the centres to all parts of



The Oracle Centre, Reading: highlighted in the Partners in Urban Renaissance project for its successful regeneration of a waterfront site

their towns and cities. Indeed a key part of the project, with MORI and property consultants King Sturge, was to work with adult and young citizens, and with private sector investors, to understand their perceptions and attitudes to the places where they live and invest.

The fifth of the reports, *Breaking Down the Barriers*, focuses on the obstacles to renaissance that were explored in workshops led by URBED and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, which brought out a number of common obstacles, and a need to address them in a new way. By focusing on a blockage to progress, each "Breaking Down the Barriers" event brought together key parties around an issue that had so far proved insoluble.

The reports are intended to be a practical and useful guide, with checklists for

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action that will be relevant to authorities across England. The overall project report provides a framework of steps towards a set of renaissance goals. The five steps begin with the fundamental need for a shared vision, followed by an agreement, or "concordat", between all the key agencies and public service providers. The next steps are to implement a phased strategy, to orchestrate the necessary investment and, crucially, to maintain the momentum that has been generated. Alongside these are eight goals or "products" - community engagement, creating pride of place, promoting harmonious communities, developing networks of enterprise, integrating transport, encouraging thriving centres, delivering quality services and supporting valued neighbourhoods.

The project report makes a number of recommendations. These include a need to relax controls and commit more financial freedoms on pathfinders, a renewed focus and priority to improving the public realm, a need to use all the arms of government through cross-cutting policy development, the need for further engagement by the RDAs, linking programmes and support through targeted areas, mobilising land owned by utilities and public agencies, and finally, making renaissance fun.

The themed session at the Urban Summit, where the report was launched, was an opportunity to test out these recommendations with an audience that included partners in the project but also delegates who were new to the work. It built directly on the partnership approach of the project by giving delegates the opportunity to feed back their priorities for renaissance to the ODPM by prioritising the recommendations and considering new ways that government and towns and cities can work together. The delegates identified freedoms for pathfinders and the importance of the public realm as their clear priorities.

As well as producing a practical guide for future action, and clearly showing that there is evidence both of the start of a renaissance in the major English towns and cities and of significant barriers, this project made one further achievement. Whitehall policy advisers have been out to see for themselves, and the lessons about new ways of working together must now be built on and taken forward.

**Sarah Jarvis** is a consultant at URBED and was project manager working with ODPM on the Partners in Urban Renaissance Project. The project was directed by Dr Nicholas Falk.