

06.11.09



DELIVERY HAS TO BE DRIVEN ON A LOCAL LEVEL BUT IF THE PROJECT IS TO ACHIEVE A SENSE OF COHERENCE ON ITS 70-YEAR JOURNEY, IT MUST HAVE A STRONG GOVERNMENT-BACKED ADVOCATE

AT LAST WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE

What a turn up. Even though the plans for a housing-led regeneration of London's estuary have been blown miles of course by the worst recession in 50 years, the mood at the annual Thames Gateway Forum was more upbeat than it has been for years. There were several reasons for this. For one thing, the housing market has stabilised, which will allow many sites to be de-mothballed. We're not talking of a stampede to build, but given that the market fell off a cliff, the fact that Mark Clare, Barratt's chief executive, says sites are being re-opened counts for a lot.

But there were several other factors that have helped to instil a renewed sense of purpose in what is still Europe's biggest regeneration project. That revived enthusiasm was conveyed by the speakers, the debates, the delegates and an accompanying publication from the Smith Institute entitled *The Thames Gateway – Where Next?* The overriding message was that the big guns, both political and commercial, are still up for it. The voice was coherent, and what it said was this:

■ London and the South-east are our economic engine rooms, and the Gateway is vital to their economic growth. We've moved on from John Prescott's 2000 vision of the Gateway as a place to put hundreds of thousands of new homes, which was driven by London's congestion and its overheating housing market. Now it has almost come full circle to Michael Heseltine and Sir Peter Hall's view that the scheme had to be about creating jobs and places as much as homes. Sir Terry Farrell and Sir Bob Kerslake's new, refreshed vision for the Gateway eloquently sets out what Farrell describes as a "master narrative" for the area and is intended to shape the funding and delivery strategy. It is sound and ambitious. Well done.*

■ At the heart of this philosophy is making the Gateway a place people want to live. It makes sense – and the £30m eco-park should be sacrosanct.

■ We've come a long way since the days of Heseltine the Regenerator: these days we have Canary Wharf, The DLR, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, and now the Olympics and Crossrail (the importance of which even the Tories must see). But it could take another 50 years before the area becomes a sylvan paradise of nature reserves where tourists flock, estuary towns prosper and green industries thrive.

■ There's enough key infrastructure to be getting on with; what is needed now is to organise funding around the areas that it serves.

■ We need to look at the plethora of partnerships and ask: do they provide value for money as part of the £9bn being spent between 2008 and 2011?

We've got a destination – but how we get there is all about the detail, and having the stamina to keep going with what will be a long, hard slog. Money is tight. There's plenty of land but a lot of it is contaminated. If we want the private sector to invest, it must be allowed to turn in a profit while the public sector hangs on to a share of the equity. We should sweeten the deal with TIFs (tax incremental finance) and keep section 106 agreements under control. A flexible approach appears to have paid dividends with Dubai Ports' plans for a container port in Essex, and the innovative approaches being pioneered by the Homes and Communities Agency have to be copied by those operating at the local level.

And what about leadership? Whereas delivery has to be driven on a local level with help from the leaders of London, Essex and Kent, if the project is to achieve a sense of coherence on its 70-year journey, it must have a strong government-backed advocate. Cameron take note: what we need is a keeper of the flame with the passion to nurture the Gateway. We need a Heseltine, a Prescott – or Farrell.

Denise Chevin, editor

* For more on what was said at the Forum, go to www.building.co.uk/tgf