

Views of Hong Kong Institute of Planners on the Urban Renewal Strategy Consultation Paper

Consensus Building

The public consultation on the Urban Renewal Strategy (URS) is a highly important procedure in building consensus among the Government, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) and above all the community on the general principles to follow and approaches to be adopted by the URA. In an open society, the level of public consensus will to a very large extent determine the chance of success of a complicated and controversial endeavor such as large scale urban renewal.

People-centred Approach

The HKIP strongly supports that a “people-centred” approach should be adopted in urban renewal (para.3). A holistic understanding of “quality of life” should be taken. Hence to reduce the aim to just concerning the number of inadequately housed people is too narrow an interpretation.

Objectives

Under the concepts of “fair and reasonable compensation” and “proper rehousing” (para.4), particularly for the latter, the element of choice within reasonable limits must be included. Otherwise it will not be in line with a people-centred approach. Under para.5, securing the means to this end, i.e. to provide choice in rehousing, should also be a proper objective of urban renewal.

The objectives in para. 5 separately deal with new provisions and preservation of the old under individual items. While the HKIP supports these items, it also advocates that in each target area, the renewal plan should aim at organically integrating the characteristics, social networks and buildings worthy of preservation with new buildings and facilities.

Rehabilitation and Preservation

In para.14 and para.15, only those properties affected by URA land acquisition are to be covered in the maintenance costs reimbursement scheme. Is it the intention that the URA need not be involved in other rehabilitation matters? How will policy interface be carried out if other these are the responsibilities of others?

We agree that preservation should include retention of local characters as spelled out in para.16(b). But it does not appear in para.17 and para.18 that the URA will be equipped with the power and resource to achieve this.

Rehabilitation and preservation are two very important dimensions of urban renewal. The URA should take up leading and active roles. An area improvement-based strategy is needed rather than a property development-based approach. Government should seriously consider what and how policy and resource supports are to be provided to the URA to achieve desirable ends.

Community Planning

We support the setting up of district advisory committees and holding of public meetings on URA projects (para.26 and para.27).

We welcome the carrying out of social impact assessments for urban renewal projects. We suggest that the findings of the phase one SIA should be published for public information when the proposed project is announced in the Gazette.(S.30) In the case of Development Schemes, the phase one SIA report should mean the assessment referred to in Section 25 (3)(c) in the URA Ordinance. To facilitate the Town Planning Board to consider objections to Development Schemes under the Town Planning Ordinance, relevant findings of the detailed SIA should be make available for the Section 6(6) hearing procedure.

Other than residents, business operations and community organizations also form part of the social network, and therefore should be covered in the SIA.

The social service team to be set up (S.33) should have an independent and easily accessible office preferably with the project area.

Financial Arrangements

Despite that we have no objection to a prudent approach in the financial arrangements (S.34), we strongly feel that some form of direct injection of public funding should not be ruled out. In some circumstances, such as when it is found desirable to have the URA including a major public amenity or preservation element in one of its projects, or in the case of a non-viable but acutely needed project, it may be in the public interest to speed up the project by putting forward a direct grant to the URA.

Further Information

In order to facilitate consensus building within the community on urban renewal, at least some principles concerning the documents under S.37 should be released to the public for consultation. Furthermore, an open mechanism for regular review of the URS should be clearly set out because we believe consensus building is a continuous process.