

# St Leonards-on-Sea Community Planning Weekend



Over 200 people from the local community participated in the St Leonards-on-Sea Community Planning Weekend on Friday 19 January and Saturday 21 January 2012 at The Magnet on London Road to help create a shared vision for the area.

At the event, local people participated in workshops, walkabouts and hands-on planning groups. Team members were on hand to explain what was happening throughout the weekend. Participants were able to share local knowledge and ideas and to consider issues such as improving the quality of local housing and streets, establishing a brand for the area and attracting more visitors and shoppers to the town centre.

Following the Community Planning Weekend, a team led by Local Space and John Thompson and Partners looked at the outcomes and reported back to the community at the Magnet, 1 Christ Church Courtyard, London Road on 9th February.

## BACKGROUND

Local Space is seeking to undertake major new housing led regeneration within Central St Leonards in an area known as the Seven Streets. This will involve purchasing empty and dilapidated properties and bringing them back into use, thereby supporting the growth of a more sustainable community within the area. In tandem with the renovation of properties, Local Space is seeking to create a vision to improve the whole Central St Leonards area based on the views of local residents and businesses. John Thomson & Partners (JTP) have been appointed to facilitate the community involvement and planning process which will inform the new approach to the area.

*“ We should shout about what our town centre has to offer and draw people in*

– Local resident





Through the various workshop sessions many opportunities to enhance the character and identity of St. Leonards were identified. These included:

- 1 St. Leonards Warrior Square railway station re-named as St. Leonards-on-Sea
  - 2 Improved connections from station platforms to Kings Road
  - 3 Mixed-use development opportunity to enhance the station forecourt, accommodating a café and public open space
  - 4 Potential for vacant basement spaces along Kings Road to become arts / cultural / performance venues
  - 5 United Reformed Church brought back into use as a multi-purpose community or events space
  - 6 Public realm enhancements, including shared surfaces and planting along Kings Road and London Road to the seafront
  - 7 Potential for outdoor street market along Norman Road
  - 8 Celebratory and festival events in Warrior Square Gardens, potential for a new bandstand
  - 9 Strengthened connection between Warrior Square Gardens and the seafront
  - 10 Enhancements to the promenade supported by improved public transport options, new pavilions, café seating, cultural activities, planting and lighting
  - 11 New gateway or landmark feature where London Road meets the Grand Parade
  - 12 Strengthened links to Gensing Gardens and St. Leonards Gardens
  - 13 Improved housing and streetscape in the 7 Streets
- St Leonards town centre
  - The Seven Streets Regeneration Area
  - The promenade
  - Active street frontages
  - ← Primary pedestrian movement
  - ← Secondary pedestrian movement
  - Public open spaces

# ST LEONARDS KEY THEMES

Following the Community Planning Weekend, Local Space and JTP looked over the outcomes and produced the following key themes as a summary of the views of the participants.

## IMAGE AND IDENTITY

St Leonards has a strong heritage and cultural identity but does not effectively promote itself as a destination and attract those visiting Hastings and the surrounding area. It was felt that St Leonards often attracts negative press coverage which does not truly reflect the diversity and creativity of the area. To remedy this, a number of solutions were discussed including adapting the entrance to St Leonards from the promenade to form a 'gateway' into the town, exploring alternative and sustainable transport options along the promenade to connect St Leonards with Hastings, introducing regular markets in the town centre and the changing of the station name to St Leonards -on-Sea.

*'I swapped my house in the summer with a French family. They thought Hastings was an exciting place for a family. We should build on the festivals we have here.'*

## COMMUNICATION

St. Leonards has committed and talented people. It emerged that a lot of people have businesses that they had started or events which they were planning, but these were being carried out in isolation without the knowledge of other related activities. It was agreed that improved communication and coordination is needed in order to share interests and publicise opportunities. Organising large projects and events was discussed as a way of bringing people together.

*"We have it all, we just need something that brings this altogether."*

## THE TOWN CENTRE

Retailers face challenges, but there are opportunities to increase diversity and quality in the well laid out town centre. The filling of empty commercial units through the introduction of 'pop-up' shops was discussed. Rather than trying to compete on the same terms as other shopping centres like Hastings, St. Leonards needs to promote its own distinctiveness. In some instances this is already the case, with art and antiques shops pulling people in. Improving parking and transport links between St Leonards and Hastings would benefit the town. It was agreed that improving the overall retail experience and increasing footfall are needed to create a more enticing town centre.

*'We need to attract more shops and businesses to the town centre.'*

## QUALITY OF RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Housing and street scene was a central issue throughout the weekend. While participants recognised that the architecture in St Leonards is very attractive, it was accepted that many homes are neglected and badly

*"This is where we find out what you think, instead of you finding out what we think."*

**Jeremy Birch**  
Leader Hastings Borough Council

managed. In addition, people complained about the quality of the street environment. Local Space's commitment to investing in and uplifting the standard of existing homes and the street scene was broadly approved of and welcomed by the community.

*"If somebody comes along who is committed to invest in the area by taking over whole properties and stabilising communities, we should support them."*

## GETTING AROUND

The movement within St. Leonards and links to the neighbouring towns was identified as key to the success of the town. Bus travel in the town was criticised - a lot of journeys requiring a change of bus and, with bad connections, a journey could take twice as long as necessary. In addition, people driving in St Leonards had concerns about the low number of parking spaces available in the town. Walking was often the only way to get around the town. Solutions included effective re-evaluation of the bus routes around the town, eco friendly and affordable public transport, the introduction of a bicycle network and a possible water transport connection.

*"Eco-friendly, affordable public transport reduces the number of cars in the town thereby eliminates the need for parking!"*

## BUILDING TRUST THROUGH CONTINUING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Participants said that there had been a number of previous initiatives which they felt had resulted in little change in the area. Despite this many people think the area is "on the up". The Community Planning Weekend was appreciated by those who attended and it was emphasised that the process should remain open and transparent so that local people are fully informed and involved with the proposals that emerge. It is important that there is ongoing communication and consultation, which could be achieved through setting up a regular newsletter and establishing a series of follow up events to discuss progress.

*"Animate and encourage local people to take positive steps and do things."*

## CONTINUING PROCESS

Over the following months there will be a series of follow-up events that will showcase how Local Space and the community are responding to the Planning Weekend, as well as providing a chance to discuss outcomes and new issues as they emerge.