

RENEWAL.NET

- Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation -

Background Report 6

Prepared for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
(Neighbourhood Renewal Unit)

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This report describes the development and take-up of the Renewal.net website, and presents results from surveys of users, our area fieldwork, interviews within the NRU and GOs, and analysis of web statistics. Key findings relate to trends and patterns in use, and the extent of changes and improvements made by Renewal.net users as a direct or indirect consequence of their use of the site. Recommendations relate to site marketing, development and linkages within and beyond the Skills and Knowledge programme.

This is one of six background research reports accompanying the main evaluation report, "Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation", all of which can be downloaded from www.neighbourhood.gov.uk. The six are:

- NRU and GO Strategies and Delivery (Background Report 1)
- Findings from the Field (Background Report 2)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (Background Report 3)
- Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills (Background Report 4)
- Regional Networks (Background Report 5)
- Renewal.net (Background Report 6)

The main report contains a brief description of the overall methodological model, the project bibliography and glossary.

We wish to thank all our interviewees and survey respondents for their time and helpful comments. The support of Bill Feinstein and Aklima Begum (responsible for Renewal.net project management in the NRU Skills and Knowledge Team) and Gemma Penn (project manager for the Skills and Knowledge Programme evaluation in the NRU Research and Development Division) was invaluable in guiding the research and in providing access to Renewal.net data and users.

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1 KEY FINDINGS

The *Renewal.net* website was developed to provide a systematic on-line guide to information available on what works in tackling the problems of deprived neighbourhoods. It was launched in October 2002 with substantial content featuring specially researched case studies, overviews, toolkits and related policy and research documents. Overall, it has made a significant contribution to improving access to researched evidence on 'what works' in neighbourhood renewal.

Take-up: findings from web statistics and user surveys

- There has been steady growth in use of *Renewal.net* to over 1,000 user sessions per working day. This more than doubled between March 2003 and March 2004. A straight line trend projects 37,000 sessions/ month by March 2005 and 48,000 by March 2006.
- The largest groups of users (self-classified in *Renewal.net*'s own user survey) are neighbourhood renewal workers (19%), local authority officers (17%) and researchers/ consultants (17%). Proportions for residents (4%) and for partnership members (6%) are lower than originally hoped.
- 29% of users visit the site once a week or more often; and 54%, at least once a month.
- Nearly half (48%) registered users reported greater use than a year before.
- 86% registered users find the site useful ('moderately useful' 22%; 'useful' 46%; 'very useful' 16%)
- Their main purposes in using the site have been to gain an overview of neighbourhood renewal (63%), learn from what has been tried before (59%), support research in neighbourhood renewal (54%) and find information on how to deal with a particular problem.
- *Renewal.net* has not worked as a forum for enquiry and discussion: use of this part of the site is low, with few postings in response to requests for information or comment.
- 'Time' is reckoned to be the biggest barrier to greater use (for 44% of registered users).

Take-up: findings from area fieldwork

- In our area fieldwork we found that only just over one third of our interviewees had used *Renewal.net*. Of the remainder, 45% were not aware of the site, and 22% had not had, or made time to access it. Take-up beyond people in core neighbourhood renewal and regeneration jobs was particularly low – these individuals were typically unaware of the site or had not realised that it was relevant to them.
- More broadly, only 27% of our fieldwork interviewees reckoned that they had made 'considerable' or 'extensive' use of evidence of what works elsewhere in the past year, 37% 'some', and 23% 'occasional' - leaving 21% who had not drawn on any at all. The most common purposes in using such evidence were in developing strategies or projects (51%), generating ideas or fresh thinking (34%), reviewing strategies or projects (27%), preparing plans or bids (17%) or solving a particular problem (15%).

Benefits

- In our survey of registered users, respondents identified a range of benefits, in order of significance: knowledge of 'what works' (62%), awareness of policy and research (54%), and new ideas and opportunities (52%). Just under a quarter found Renewal.net beneficial in providing validated evidence to make a case (eg, in reviewing strategies, developing projects or bidding)
- 35% of registered users were confident or very confident of finding on the site what they were looking for, and 47% hopeful – which suggests that there is still some confidence to build in what the site has to offer.
- Nearly three quarters (of respondents to Renewal.net's own user survey) considered that Renewal.net helps them take a more evidence-based approach to their work. There has been a growing trend in proportion considering that this is *strongly* the case (nearly a quarter by June 2004).
- Though we did not encounter large numbers of critical comments, there were concerns expressed in our surveys and amongst NRU and GO interviewees relating to the coverage, currency and other aspects of Renewal.net quality. To varying extents this reflected their (relative lack of) familiarity with the site though issues were raised which will affect levels of use and benefit (eg, in how readily users are able to find what they are looking for). There were also a few queries about the quality of the 'evidence' presented in Renewal.net – which in turn reflects the quality of the evidence base in neighbourhood renewal practice – where typically there has been limited priority to evaluation in the past.

Actions and results

- A very large proportion of registered users – 92% - had made some use of the information they gained from the site, with over 55% passing on information to others and 44% recommending to others that they access particular Renewal.net content. A relatively low proportion - 13% - have made contact with a case study to find out more.
- Just under 30% of these users reckoned that they could point to specific results from their use of Renewal.net, and 37% considered that it was too early to say. Of those who could identify results, two thirds cite better informed debate within their partnership and/ or organisation, and just under half have found a solution to a particular problem. Respondents were not able to quantify the results or benefits they had gained.
- Nearly three quarters of registered users were confident that their use of Renewal.net will help them produce better neighbourhood renewal outcomes. (For 13% this was 'very likely', for 60%, 'likely').
- In the absence of Renewal.net, almost half of registered users reckoned that they would have spent longer to find the same or poorer information. Only 8% felt that they would have totally failed to find the information they wanted while 22% reckoned they would have found the same information elsewhere.

Principal Recommendations

	Action by
1. Refresh strategy for the development and marketing of Renewal.net - including topic and updating priorities, regional pages, discussion forums, and use of Renewal.net as the <i>only</i> place to access selected materials and guidance	NRU
2. Develop a promotional plan to highlight what Renewal.net now has to offer and the benefits - including its relevance beyond people in core neighbourhood renewal jobs (eg, through sectoral networks/ information channels)	NRU
3. Make more of what Renewal.net can offer in meeting user needs (eg, for emerging practice/ innovations in key areas, as well as researched 'what works'). Include more examples of successful approaches to learning and mainstreaming and other aspects of strategic change management	NRU
4. Strengthen commitment of other parties (Other Government Departments - OGDs, GOs, RCEs) to Renewal.net development and use, identifying and following up scope for mutual benefit with other departments and agencies	NRU
5. Review the forward strategy for Renewal.net in relation to plans for the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC - the national centre for sustainable community skills), to maximise the value for ASC from Renewal.net and to ensure the benefits of the investment in Renewal.net are sustained	NRU/ ASC

2 Background to Renewal.net

2.1 Rationale for Renewal.net

The Renewal.net website has been developed to provide, on-line, “a systematic and comprehensive guide to the information available on what works in tackling the various problems of deprived neighbourhoods” as envisaged by the National Strategy Action Plan. The Learning Curve argued:

“Knowledge about what works is also patchy, often inconsistent and difficult to use. There is rarely any consensus about how to apply the results of research. We need a consistent approach to what works, why and in what circumstances. We also need to ensure that more people use this evidence in the design, development and implementation of neighbourhood renewal projects.”

It quoted Wolman and Page (2000), who in their survey of 289 regeneration partnerships found that 60% based their activities on evidence of what works ‘occasionally’ or ‘never’. An NRU survey in December 2001 discovered that 57% of respondents had trouble in finding evidence-based information, although 25% weren’t aware that evidence of what works in neighbourhood renewal was available.

The Learning Curve recommended action to:

- build the neighbourhood renewal knowledge base, plugging major gaps
- make it easier to get hold of knowledge (“Busy people need an easier way of getting hold of the knowledge they need, when they need it, in a form that is easy to understand.”)
- put knowledge into practice (“A key issue is whether any of this good practice and analysis is actually used by those involved in neighbourhood renewal.”)

It also drew out the relevance of building and using knowledge for different groups of actors in neighbourhood renewal. Prominent needs were reckoned to be:

amongst residents

- sharing experience of successes and pitfalls in neighbourhood renewal
- analysing local problems and opportunities; developing and implementing plans for action based on what they find
- drawing on wider sources of knowledge from outside the neighbourhood

amongst practitioners and professionals

- promoting ‘thinking outside the box’
- understanding what ‘evidence’ really means and making good use of it

amongst civil servants and other policy makers

- appreciating different ways of tackling neighbourhood decline, and why particular approaches have succeeded or failed
- drawing on and valuing diverse sources of knowledge, including resident and practitioner experience

2.2 Renewal.net development

The Project Initiation Document (May 2002) set out objectives for Renewal.net as:

- improving the accessibility and use of the existing evidence base
- improving the dissemination of evaluated evidence and working towards a standard 'template' for the dissemination of such information
- providing facilities for on-line networking and informal sharing of good practice
- encouraging higher use of validated evidence
- developing new, practical tools, guidance and information to support neighbourhood renewal activity
- promoting the use of face to face advice or 'technical assistance'
- acting as a 'one-stop shop' for information on neighbourhood renewal (across the five neighbourhood renewal themes)

Renewal.net was designed to meet the identified needs of its potential users. At the outset (late 2002), the NRU commissioned a survey by NOP to identify the needs and wishes of potential users. There were over 100 responses from neighbourhood renewal practitioners, civil servants, local authority officers, people from voluntary and community agencies and others. The survey results were fed directly into the initial design. NRU then convened a user test group which was broadly representative of potential users. The group met several times during the six month development phase and had a significant impact on the design of the site, its functionality and on the style and format of the site's content. Decisions were taken that the site should follow a very logical structure and function as a knowledge store, with opportunities for users to interact through discussion forums. Content was to be written to attract a wide range of potential users across neighbourhood renewal - practitioners and interested lay people alike - though not explicitly to satisfy experts in particular subjects. NRU staff and developers from PA Consulting took demonstration versions of Renewal.net to a large number of events throughout the development phase, seeking feedback from well over 1,000 people.

The site was launched in October 2002 with around 550 documents, of which 250 were created specifically for Renewal.net with the remainder imported from other sources¹. In the subsequent six months the number of documents grew to around 900, including a further 65 written specifically for the site. This represented a substantial achievement in building up the site content quickly and to a scale where its potential usefulness increased significantly. The intention from the outset has been to give users confidence in the quality of site content, by stressing credible evidence and sound arguments; a user-friendly, practical style; a consistent format; and relevance to neighbourhood renewal. With more content on the site, users are more likely to find material they are looking for, and, provided they find this helpful, are probably more likely to make subsequent use. By September 2004, there were over 2200 documents on Renewal.net, including 378 case studies. The central Renewal.net budget was £1m in its setup year (2002-03), and £500,000 in 2003-04 and 2004-05. In the latter years, about half is spent on researching

¹ PA Consulting Group have led the consortium which won the contract to develop and deliver Renewal.net. They have been responsible for website development and overall project management, with GFA Consulting responsible for creating and editing Renewal.net content - drawing on subject experts from relevant organisations - and Idox plc responsible for managing the content on the Renewal.net site.

and editing content. The staff cost in 2004-05 in steering the development of Renewal.net and managing the delivery contract is 0.7 person, split between two members of staff. This is much lower than in the development phase, and represents a 'care and maintenance' approach to managing the service. An NRU Project Board (including the contractors and users) oversaw the earlier development of Renewal.net.

The Renewal.net site is structured as a hierarchy allowing users to access thematic ('Level I') and topic ('Level II') Overviews, Solving the Problem ('Level III', focusing on 'what works' on specific types of intervention), Toolkits and Case Studies - all produced to standard templates and subject to quality control and editing by the GFA editor. There are overarching Neighbourhood Renewal and 'How To' sections, with other parts devoted to the themes of Education; Crime; Health; Housing and Environment; Worklessness; and Reviving Local Economies. A large proportion of Overviews were added to the site in its first phase. The site also contains relevant policy and research documents.

Examples of content added in autumn 2004 included:

- Overview: Empty Homes, Sport and Employment, Victims of Crime
- Solving the Problem: Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Job Brokerage, Pre and Post School Childcare, Stock Transfer
- Case studies: Newcastle BME Housing Research Project, Community Radio Training, The Point: Blyth Young People's Centre, Team North Huyton, Routes to Work (Allerdale), Good Relations (Oldham), Reducing Burglary (Marsh Farm, Luton), Tackling Racial Harassment in the NHS, NDC-funded Intermediate Labour Market Projects, RegenSchool²

Renewal.net has its own dedicated search engine, and regional pages for most regions³. There are Discussion Forums and the facility to register for an e-mail service alerting users to material added to the site. It also provides the location for the LSP Delivery Toolkit, designed to support all LSPs in "*producing credible plans, putting in place their means for delivery, and reviewing and improving existing strategies*". This Toolkit contains tips and case study examples drawn from research into neighbourhood renewal strategies.

Subsequent to the development phase, the content commissioned by GFA has largely concentrated on Overview, Solving the Problem and Toolkit documents. Case studies have been expected to be produced by NRU teams, GOs, research and evaluation projects, other government departments (OGDs) and neighbourhood renewal practitioners⁴ - at their instigation rather than fitting an overall, national set of subject priorities. The aim in 2004 has been to keep the number of documents written by the GFA team to around 600, with a similar number prepared by the other sources. GO

² The last two examples illustrate links with NRU research activity: the NDC paper is an output from the NDC programme evaluation and RegenSchool, an output from the Residents Consultancy evaluation.

³ By November 2004, these were for East, East Midlands, London, North East, South East and Yorkshire and the Humber. The page for the West Midlands is a link to the regenWM site (the regional centre of excellence). The site for the East is that of Community Renewal Network East, the regional regeneration network - providing an example of integrating two of the Skills and Knowledge programme tools.

⁴ Users are welcome to submit case studies to a standard template (available at www.renewal.net/SubmitContent.asp)

Skills and Knowledge teams in particular were asked to identify good examples of approaches 'what works', and NRU policy staff and several OGDs were invited to comment on future priorities.

Developments in the year to September 2004, partly in the light of user feedback, partly in keeping up to date with national policy initiatives, have included:

- a more user friendly front page
- news items that are relevant to neighbourhood renewal (with links to other Renewal.net content)
- incorporation of the website for the National Neighbourhood Management Network (supported by the NRU Neighbourhood Management and Wardens Team)
- a Sport, Physical Activity and Renewal toolkit, developed as a partnership between NRU Skills and Knowledge and policy staff with Department for Media Culture and Sport (DCMS)
- related research projects, such as Transformational Neighbourhoods (investigating the factors behind success in reversing the fortunes of particular deprived communities)
- a programme of repackaging the 'how to' content into a common Toolkit format (eg. on 'Build a Partnership' and 'Influence the Mainstream')

Strategy for Renewal.net has related to 'content creation', and there has been no overall marketing strategy focusing on the needs of different user groups and how best to reach them. Hard work has been devoted to opportunities to promote Renewal.net at conferences and other events, GOs have been encouraged to do what they can to promote use of the site, but there has not been any sustained promotional activity. We note that Renewal.net has attracted favourable publicity in the regeneration trade press and that it won Bronze in the Electronic Trading category in the 2004 Best Practice Management Awards sponsored by The Guardian and the MCA (Management Consultancies Association).

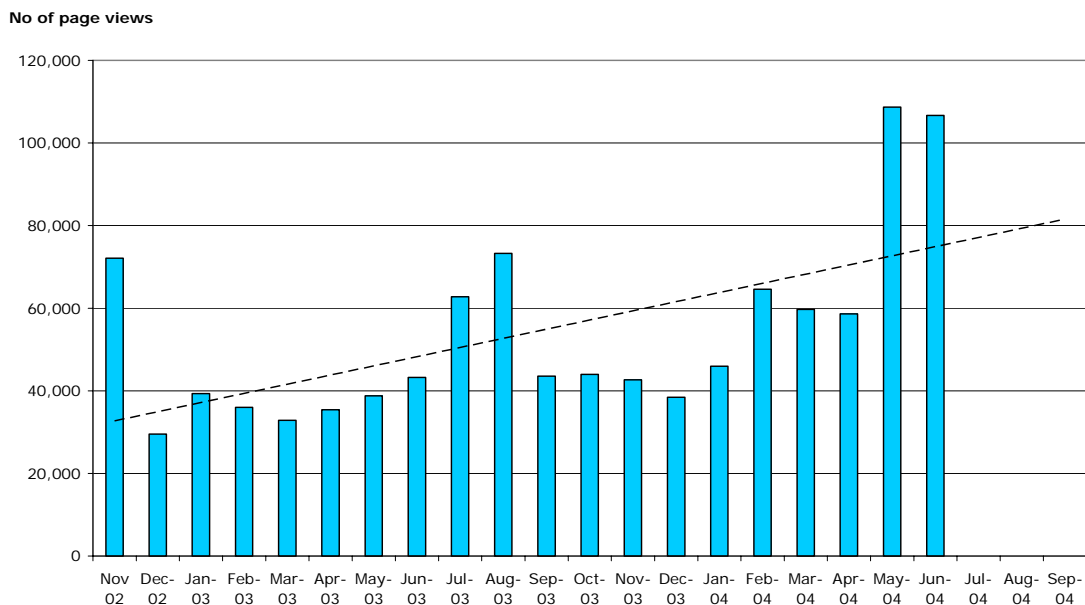
3 Intelligence from Renewal.net Website Statistics

3.1 Use trends and patterns

In reviewing trends in on-line use of Renewal.net we have had access to two sources of web statistics, through both a standard web statistics software package and an on-line database. The latter was produced as part of the specification for the Renewal.net system, with the site managers removing some of the typical weaknesses to be found in conventional web statistics and providing more reliable data on page visits, downloads, etc.

These statistics show a steady upward trend in use of Renewal.net, looking at page views (Figure 1)⁵ and sessions (Figure 2). Page views show three periods of heavier use (one following launch, the others in July-August 2003 and May-June 2004, in the latter case, reaching over 100,000 per month). Total page views from the launch in October 2002 to the end of June had reached 1,123,316. Over half (51%) had been accessed between October 2003 and June 2004.

Figure 1 Trend in page views



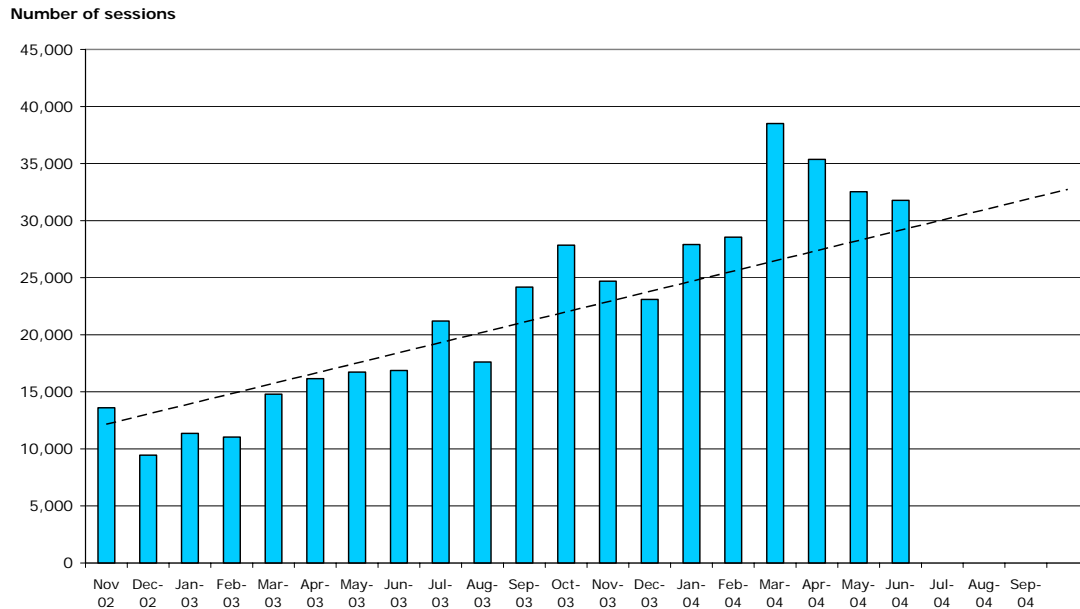
Source: Renewal.net Statistics and LiveStats

User sessions show a steadier pattern of growth. By the end of the 20 month period to June 2004, these had reached 451,499 (with over 60% of these taking place between October 2003 and June 2004). In contrast to page views, user sessions had peaked at 38,511 in March 2004. The June 2004 figure was just under 32,000 - still a daily average

⁵ Idox provided us with web statistics for the Regen.net website which, as The Planning Exchange, they developed for DETR in 1999. This has served some related functions (UK-wide) and provides interesting comparisons. With the notable exception of one month in 2002, affected by exceptional user interest in a highly charged on-line debate relating to an NDC in crisis, the level of use of Renewal.net has exceeded that of Regen.net. Regen.net is now independent and has been taken over Regeneration and Renewal magazine. Use of Renewal.net has been steadier and slightly higher than that of the NRU website, www.neighbourhood.gov.uk

of over 1,000. On a straight-line trend the predicted monthly level is around 33,000 by September 2004 and 37,000 by March 2005 (and if continued on the same trajectory would reach nearly 48,000 by March 2006)⁶. Assuming trend growth in user sessions to end March 2005, the cost per user session will have averaged £2.65 (which includes all research and site administration costs).

Figure 2 Trend in user sessions

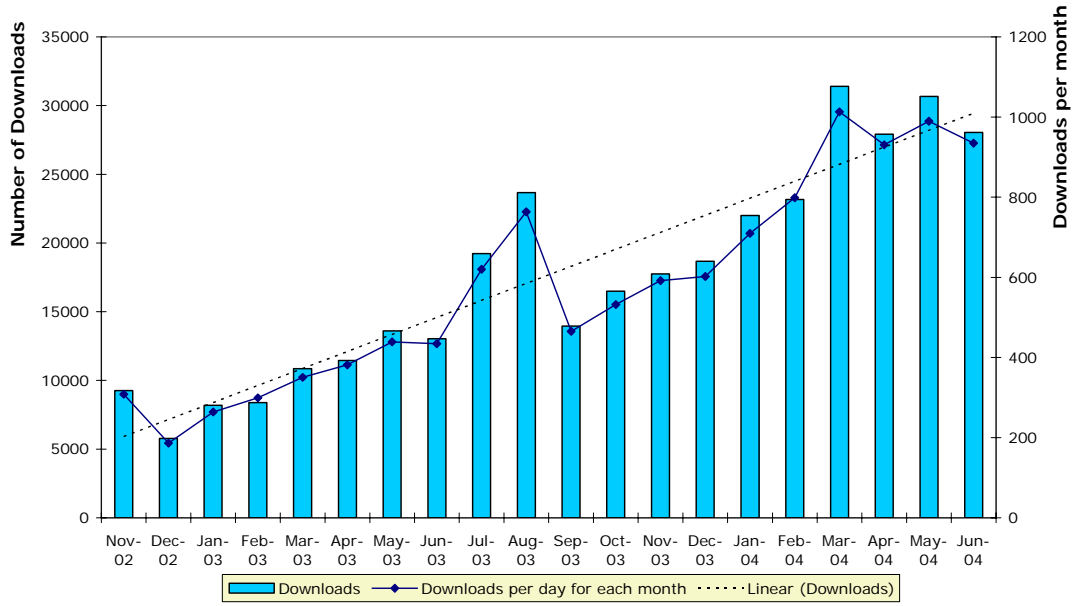


Source: Renewal.net Statistics and LiveStats

The graph for page views is largely mirrored in the data for document downloads (Figure 3), with recent months (March to June 2004) demonstrating the highest level of activity. Downloads per day peaked in March 2004 at over 1000. The trend line is steeper than that for user sessions; downloads are growing at a faster rate than user sessions which implies that users are finding more content which they expect to find useful.

⁶ This is a very similar rate of growth to the that of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit website, www.neighbourhood.gov.uk over the same period.

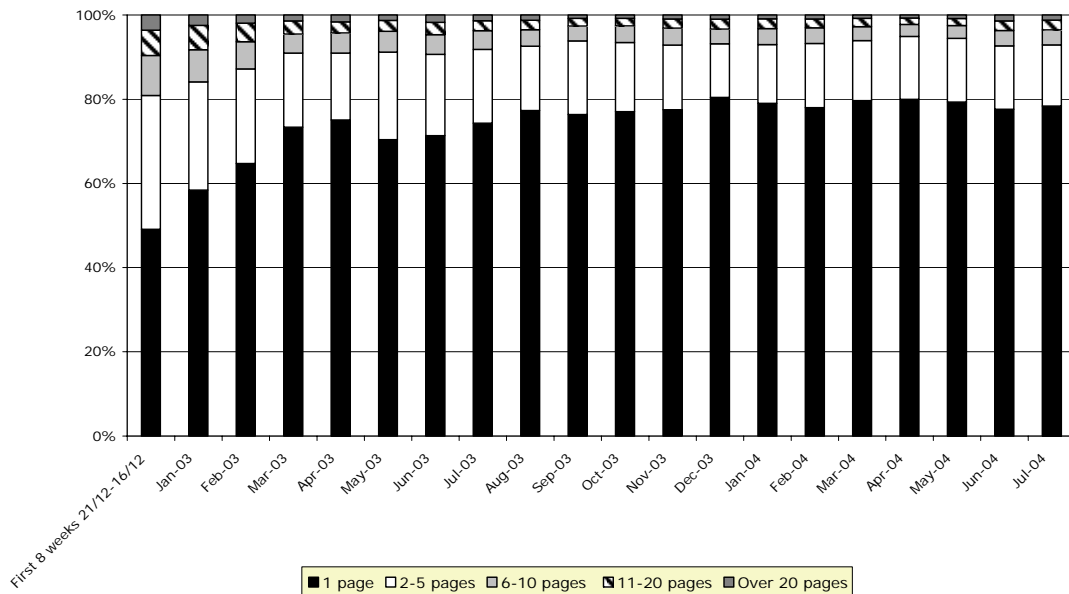
Figure 3 Document downloads - trend since launch



Source: Renewal.net statistics.

Looking at the number of pages viewed per session (Figure 4) there has been an increase in the proportion of single page views over time, longer sessions tended to reduce over the period and sessions over 20 pages had largely tailed off by November 2003. This suggests that users have been using the site less to browse and more to access specific content - which could mean that users remain relatively unaware of all that the site has to offer.

Figure 4 Number of pages viewed per session

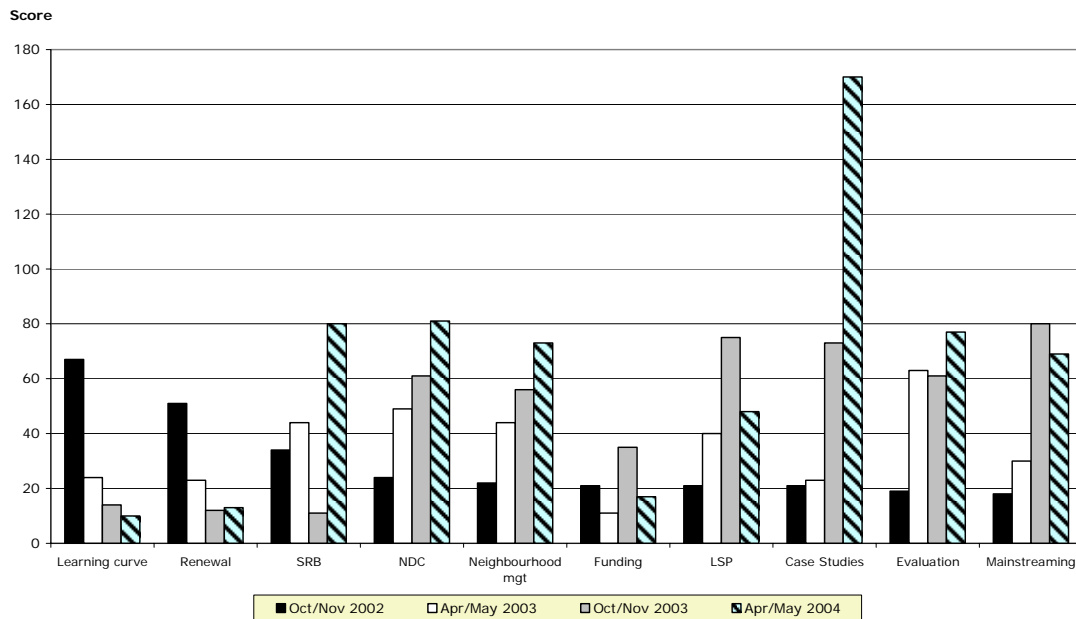


Source: Renewal.net Stats and LiveStats

3.2 What are users looking for?

To gain insight into user needs, we analysed the most popular key words used in site searches during four separate periods since the launch of Renewal.net⁷. Figure 5 shows how the top 10 keywords in October/ November 2002 have changed in popularity, compared with April/ May and October/ November 2003, and April/May 2004. Six of the terms experienced increased in frequency, with only three terms declining in use by April/May 2004.

Figure 5 Top ten key word searches



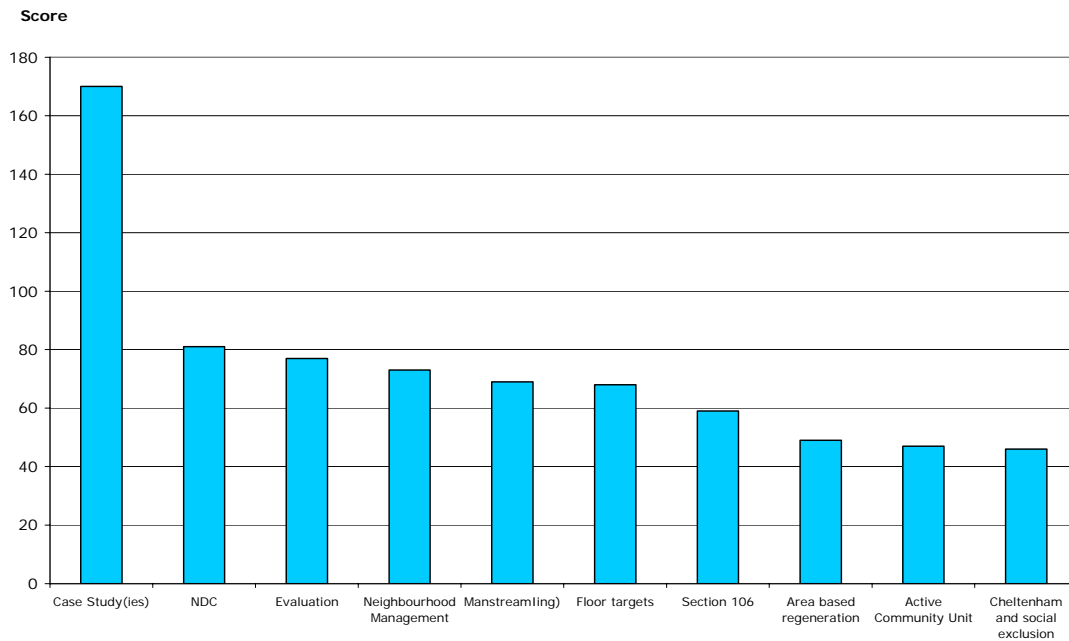
Source: Renewal.net Statistics

*NB October 2002 includes 21/10/02-

Figure 6 shows the most popular keywords for April/May 2004, which demonstrates the extent to which users are seeking case studies on the site, coupled with other search terms. 'NDC', 'evaluation', and 'mainstreaming' remain common key words. The five new words joining the top ten were 'floor targets', 'Section 106', 'area based regeneration', 'Active Community Unit' and (curiously) 'Cheltenham and social exclusion'. 'Bubbling under' were 'capacity building', 'partnerships', and 'Public Service Agreements'.

⁷ Acronyms are included in this analysis as well as the search term in full, where relevant.

Figure 6 Top 10 key words (April-May 2004)

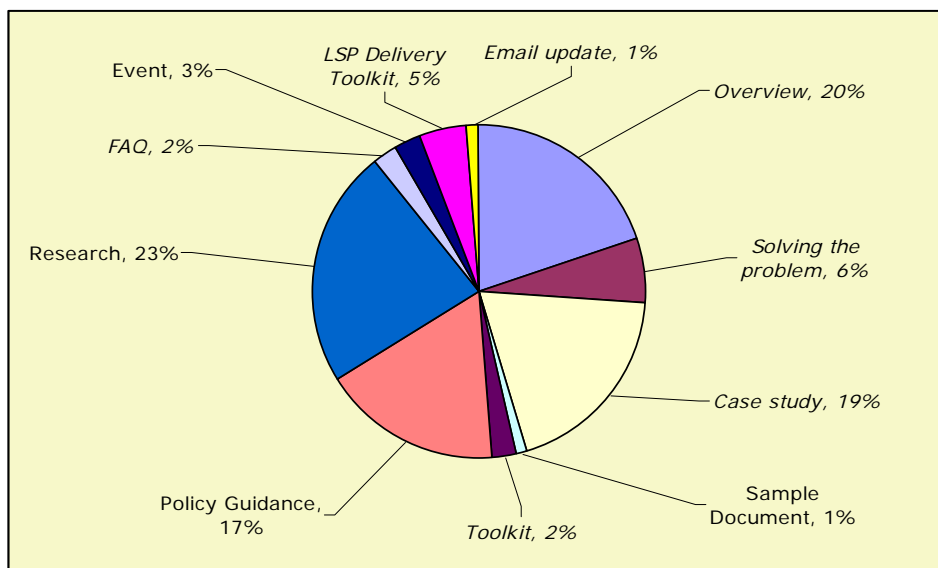


Source: Renewal.net statistics

3.3 Popular downloads

Figure 7 illustrates the breakdown of Renewal.net downloads by document type to July 2004. This shows that the most popular elements of the Renewal.net-specific content (items in *italics*) had been Overviews (20%) and Case Studies (19%), with the site also used significantly for accessing Research (23%) and Policy Guidance (17%) documents. The balance between Overviews and Case Studies has shifted increasingly towards Case Studies, as these have increased in number and users have been looking more for practical examples of ‘what works’.

Figure 7 Downloads by document type



Source: Renewal.net statistics, October 2002 - July 2004

Figures 8 and 9 show the ranks for the most popular downloads by Renewal.net theme and level. The first looks at the top 10 downloads up to July 2004, and shows that six of the top ten documents downloaded were at Level III with 'community development' and 'New Deal for Communities' the two most popular download themes overall.

Figure 8 Top 10 downloads of published documents

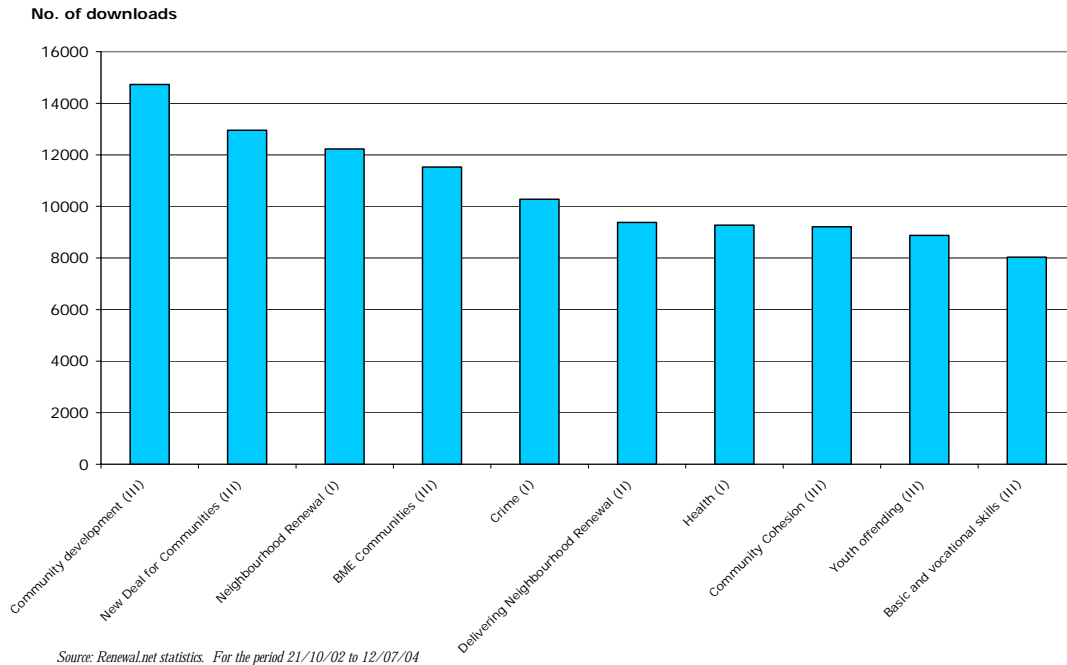
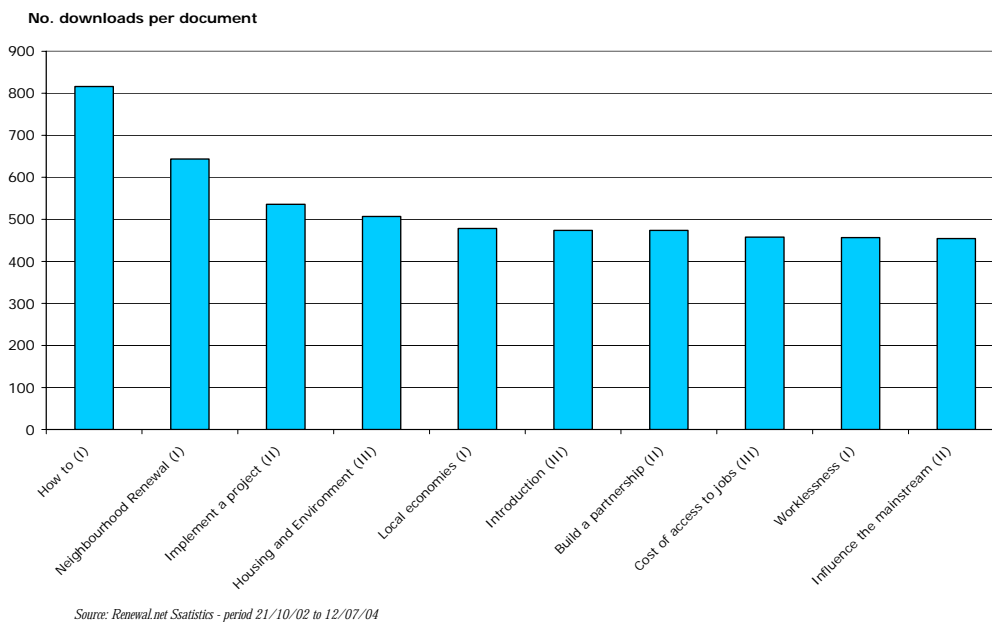


Figure 9 presents the most popular themes by website level. The Level I 'How to' documents emerged as the most popular downloaded theme with over 800 downloads per document compared to just under 650 for 'Neighbourhood Renewal' which came second.

Figure 9 Top 10 downloads per document by theme and website level



Between the launch in October 2002 and July 2004, the most popular overviews (Table 1) have been Community development and How to influence the mainstream; amongst case studies, Stansted Airport and Sheffield Rebuild; and amongst 'Solving the Problem' items: key worker housing and kerb crawling.

Table 1 Most popular downloads by category (October 2002 - July 2004)

Overviews		Case Studies		Solving the Problem	
Community development	3739	Stansted Airport Ltd	1202	Key worker housing	1520
How to influence the mainstream	3390	Sheffield Rebuild	849	Prostitution and kerb crawling: road management interventions	1241
Black and minority ethnic communities	3187	Runway to Work	840	Youth offending: mentoring interventions	978
Community cohesion	2854	Morning Noon and Night Ltd	682	Section 106 planning obligations	969
Neighbourhood renewal	2555	INclude Neighbourhood Regeneration Ltd	652	Interventions targeting people involved in prostitution	586

Source: Renewal.net statistics

Top ranked amongst the Toolkit content was 'Developing effective service level agreements' (1483), 'How to plan and manage an evaluation' (861) and 'Soft indicators: recognising progress' (813), followed by sections of the LSP Delivery Toolkit.

3.5 Use of discussion forums

Discussion forums were included in the Renewal.net site design to facilitate informal sharing of experience and knowledge amongst users. Forums were set up on each of the five neighbourhood renewal themes; on four 'How to' topics (Mainstreaming; Engaging business; Engaging hard-to-reach groups; Building partnerships); on five Delivering Neighbourhood Renewal groupings (NDC practitioners; NDC residents; LSPs; Neighbourhood Management; Learning and development for neighbourhood renewal); for four regions (East, London, North East, Yorkshire and Humber); plus a private forum for NRAs. By the end of August 2004, 123 topics had been created with 268 postings (145 responses following the 123 original queries or discussion points). The most used forums had been Housing and Environment (19 topics, 39 postings) and Building Partnerships (10 topics and 32 postings).

This level of use is low in comparison with many other sites, not least given the number of user sessions and of registered users. Use contrasts with much higher levels of posting to the Regen.net site, previously managed by the Planning Exchange under contract to DETR. While some of use of the Regen.net was marked by some less helpful activity (eg, debates within a failing NDC partnership; consultants promoting their services), there was significant use in seeking answers to practical questions (eg, "Has anybody undertaken an evaluation of community finance initiatives?" or "Can anybody recommend a good way of reaching small businesses when consulting on regeneration strategies?").

4 Finding Out about Users

4.1 PA continuous user survey

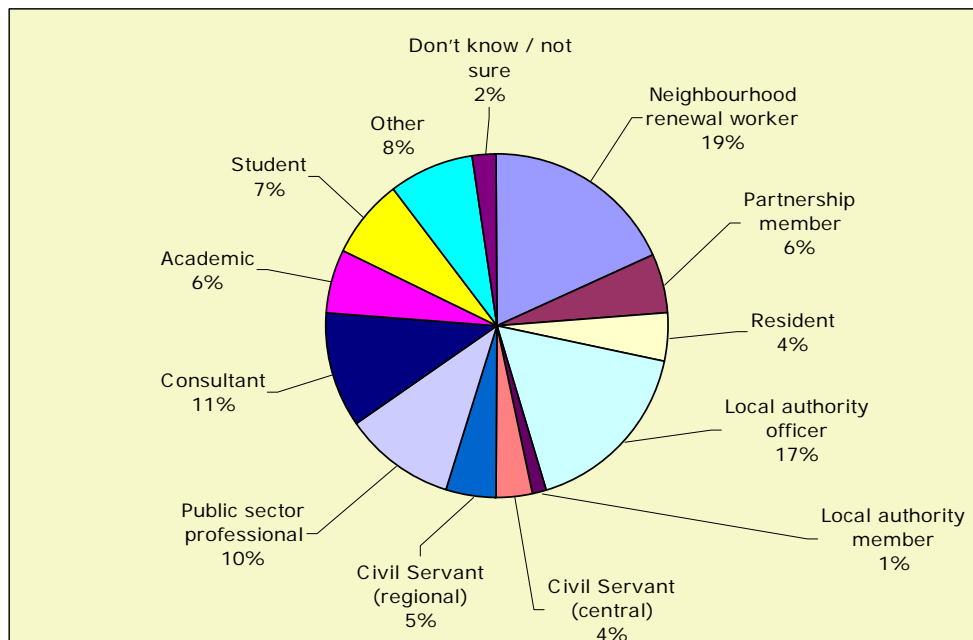
For the evaluation we had access to results from the online user survey which PA has run as part of the Renewal.net management contract. Through this, users have been prompted at random to complete the survey during specific periods lasting several weeks at a time. This survey has sought answers to details of Renewal.net users, their levels of satisfaction, how they are using the site, and their ideas for improvement.

We draw out below some of the characteristics of users, combining responses to three PA survey periods (April and September 2003; April 2004)⁸. There were 426 respondents, of whom 60% completed the questionnaires in full. We proceed later to describe the findings of our own survey of registered users, comparing and contrasting findings from the two research sources as appropriate.

4.2 Users and frequency of use

Figure 10 shows the breakdown of users by category. Neighbourhood renewal workers (19%) feature as the largest group of users, followed by local authority officers (17%). Proportions for residents (4%) and partnership members (6%), important target groups, are lower than the originators of Renewal.net had hoped.

Figure 10 Breakdown of Renewal.net users



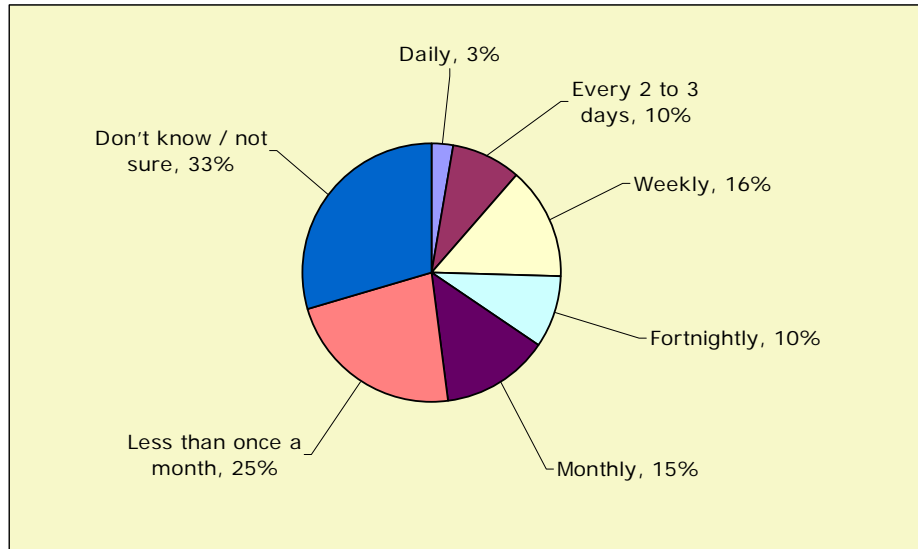
Source: Renewal.net online user surveys, April 2003, September 2003 and April 2004. N = 426 respondents

Nearly 30% of respondents reckoned that they visit the site either once every week or more often (Figure 11). The third who answered 'don't know/ not sure' tends to suggest

⁸ While there were some differences in results between the individual surveys, it was difficult to draw any significant conclusions regarding changes over time. We considered that aggregating results offered the best way of using this data.

numbers of users accessing the site for the first time (as suggested by some free-text comments). In response to the earlier PA survey findings, the Renewal.net managers acknowledged the need to take steps to encourage users to return to the site more often and introduced new features such as the e-mail alert service and news items.

Figure 11 Frequency of use

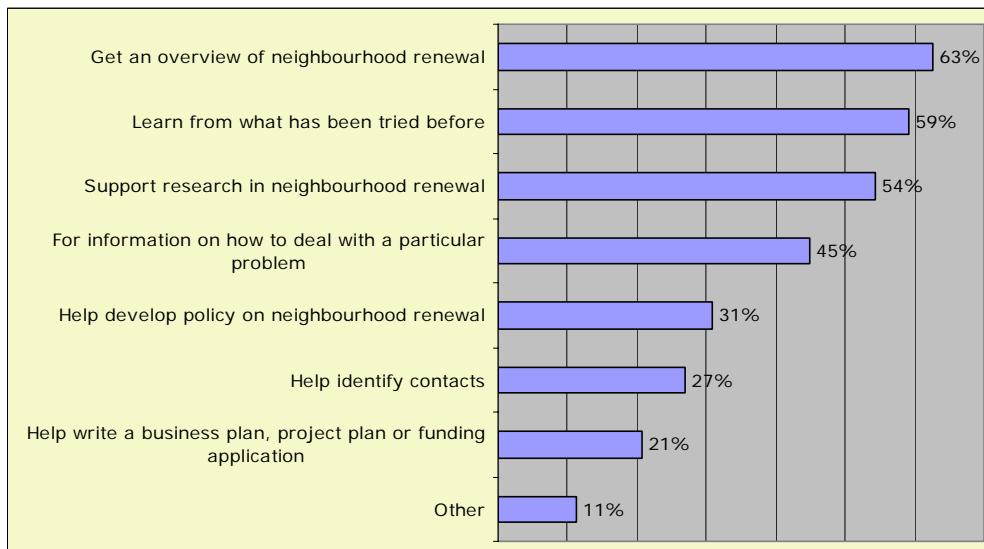


Source: Renewal.net online user surveys, April 2003, September 2003 and April 2004. N = 561 respondents

4.3 Purpose in using Renewal.net

Respondents have been asked to state the purposes to which they put information from Renewal.net (Figure 12). The most common response (63%) has been 'to get an overview of neighbourhood renewal', followed by 59% who use Renewal.net 'to learn from what has been tried before' and 54% to 'to support research in neighbourhood renewal'.

Figure 12 Purpose in using Renewal.net



Source: Renewal.net online user surveys, April 2003, September 2003 and April 2004. N = 420 respondents

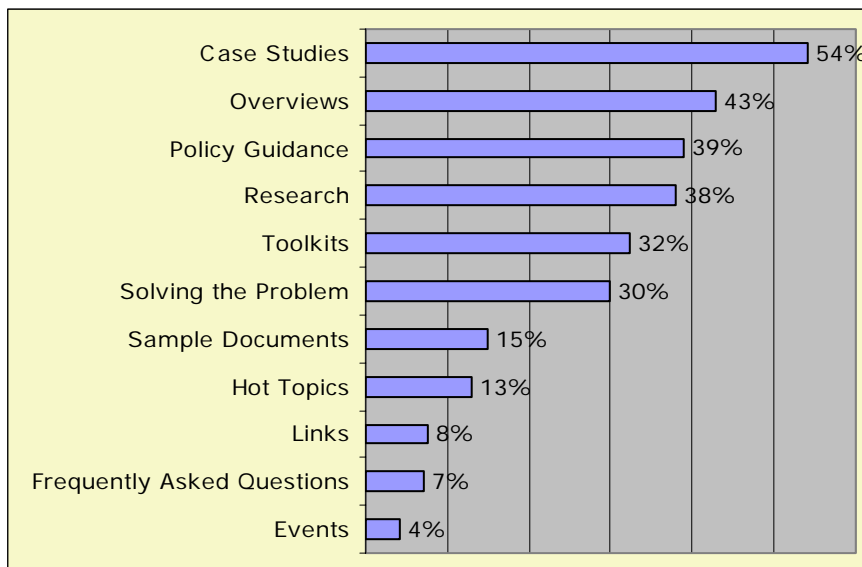
As a proxy in evaluating the effectiveness of Renewal.net in supporting evidence-based approaches, respondents have also been invited to state whether or not they agree with the statement, 'The information available on Renewal.net helps me take a more evidence-based approach to my work'. The majority of respondents either tend to agree (53%) or strongly agree (19%), with 20% in the 'don't know/ not sure' category. The proportion tending to agree has fluctuated slightly over the three surveys, while the proportion strongly agreeing has increased from 16% to 23%.

4.3 Usefulness

A large majority of respondents (86%) have either tended to agree or to agree strongly with the statement, 'The information available on Renewal.net is useful' - indicating a reasonably high level of user satisfaction with regards to content. A substantial proportion (36%) 'strongly agree'. Similar proportions found the documents written specially for Renewal.net to be useful or very useful.

In considering the different types of document on Renewal.net (Figure 13), respondents have valued the case studies in particular (54%), followed by Overviews (43%), policy guidance (39%) and research (38%) - the latter two reflecting the purpose of Renewal.net in providing a portal for access to relevant guidance and research as well as its own dedicated content.

Figure 13 Most useful types of document on Renewal.net



Source: Renewal.net online user surveys, April 2003, September 2003 and April 2004. N = 436 respondents

Respondents have felt that Renewal.net compares well with other websites, with 62% agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'Renewal.net is the best web site for finding information on what works, or doesn't work, in neighbourhood renewal'. (There was quite a high level of 'don't know/ not sure' responses - 28%; and 10% tended to disagree with the statement.)

4.4 Suggestions for improvement

Users were also asked for suggestions for ways of improving Renewal.net. Overall priorities expressed across the three surveys have been:

- 'more practical information on how to conduct renewal initiatives (eg, Toolkits)' (42%)
- 'more information on renewal projects throughout the country' (40%)
- 'more documents specifically written for Renewal.net' (37%)
- 'up-to-date news on what's going on in neighbourhood renewal throughout the country' (35%)

The proportion requesting more practical information has tended to fall over time (having been 47% in the first PA survey), while a growing proportion of respondents has requested more international material (up from 14% to 21%). Other proportions have tended to fluctuate. Small proportions have asked for better navigation and search facilities (8% and 6% respectively).

These needs were addressed in part by the NRU in developing the LSP Delivery Toolkit, new commissions, regional project databases (as sponsored by GONE and managed by Regeneration Exchange), and an 'In the news' page. User feedback was taken into account in redesigning the Renewal.net home page (launched in November 2003).

5 Renewal.net users: benefits and results

5.1 Survey of registered users

We sought further evidence on use and benefits of Renewal.net to users through other methods: a survey of registered users to find out more about how users take advantage of Renewal.net, the benefits they derive and results they obtain, and our fieldwork interviews (intended to provide a baseline on use). This section describes the results from the former, and Section 6 reports on the area fieldwork.

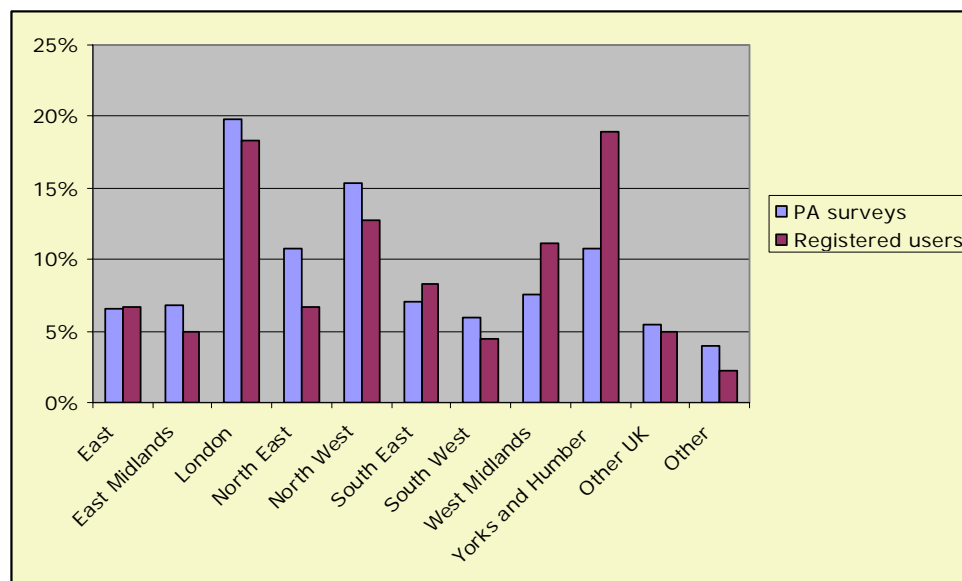
Users of Renewal.net can register on the site for access to the Discussion Forums and to receive periodic updates on specific Renewal.net content added to the site, according to the neighbourhood renewal theme (or themes) which most interest them.

The survey was undertaken on-line between 4th and 25th June 2004. The NRU invited (and reminded) registered users by e-mail to complete the survey. The response rate was 21.9% (180 out of 821 registered users).

5.2 Characteristics of respondents

The breakdown of respondents to the registered user survey is not greatly different to that for the PA surveys. The main differences relate to the higher proportions of local authority officers (23% compared to 17%) and of consultants (19% compared to 11%). There was also a notable proportion of community and voluntary sector representatives (12%). Their geographical distribution was again similar (Figure 14), the main exceptions being proportionately more users in Yorkshire and Humberside and fewer in the North East.

Figure 14 Geographical location of users



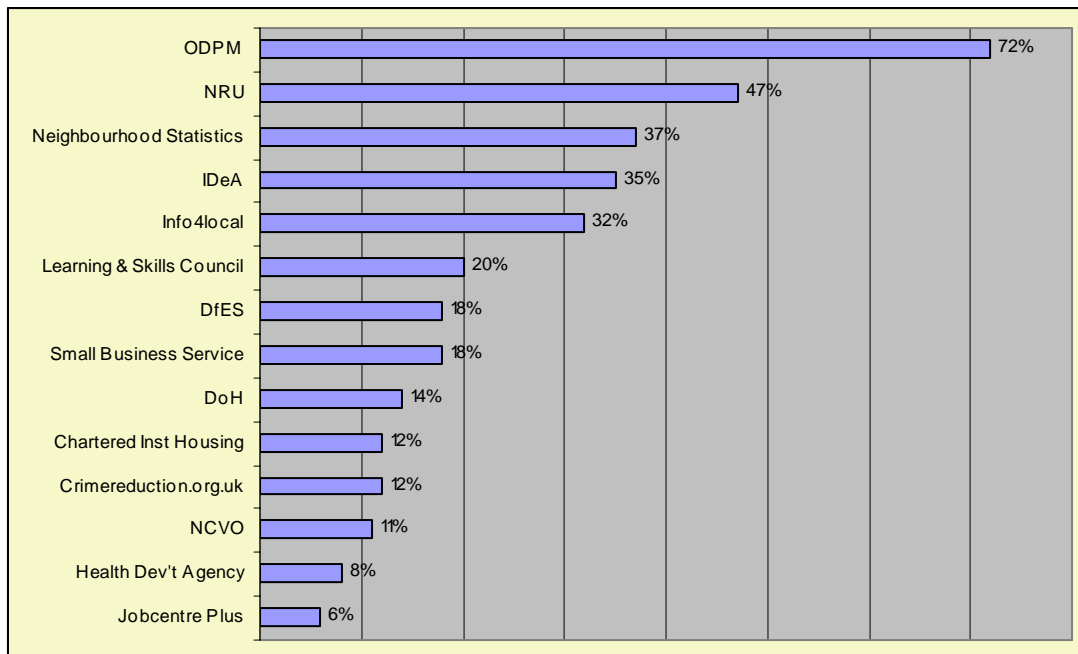
Source: Registered Users Survey and Fourth Online Users Survey

5.2 Patterns and purpose of use

The survey of registered users found that nearly half used Renewal.net for *both* hunting information for specific purposes *and* for interest and keeping up-to-date. Of the remainder, use was split fairly evenly between the two purposes. Just over a quarter (28%) of registered users visit the site on a weekly or more frequent basis (compared to 37% for the PA survey). Just under half (48%) are using the site more frequently than a year ago, and only 17% are using it less often. Nearly two thirds (63%) have Renewal.net as a 'favourite' or 'bookmark' on their browser (a proxy for how valuable users think they will find the site).

The most prominent site amongst others most often accessed by Renewal.net registered users (Figure 15) was that of ODPM website (72%), followed by NRU's own site (47%) and Neighbourhood Statistics (37%), IDeA, the improvement agency for local government (35%) and Info4local⁹ (32%).

Figure 15 Most frequently visited sites (other than Renewal.net)



Source: Registered User Survey - N = 180

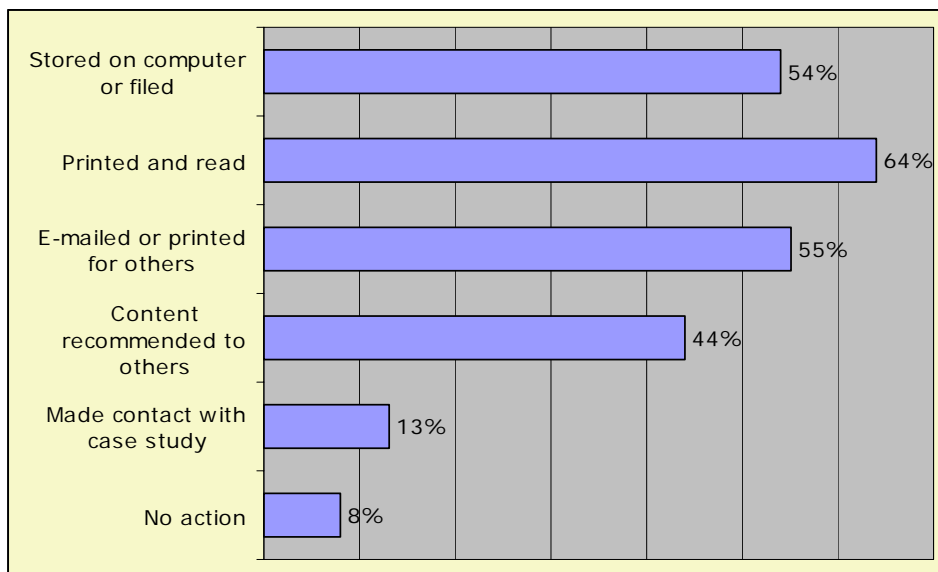
The most common purposes in using Renewal.net have been to 'learn from what had been tried before' (57%), gain an 'overview of neighbourhood renewal' (48%) and 'research purposes' (45%) - the same top three uses identified in the PA surveys (see Figure 12), though with 'learning from what has been tried before' top for registered users.

⁹ Info4local is designed as a portal for local authorities to gain easy access to central government publications and related material.

5.3 Actions, benefits and results

A very large proportion of the registered users (92%) had made some use of the information they had gained from the site (Figure 16). The most common practice (amongst nearly two-thirds) has been to have 'printed and read' Renewal.net documents, with 55% storing these for future use and a similar proportion passing it on to others. Some 44% have recommended to others that they access particular Renewal.net content. Comparatively few - 13% - have made contact with a case study featured in Renewal.net to find out more.

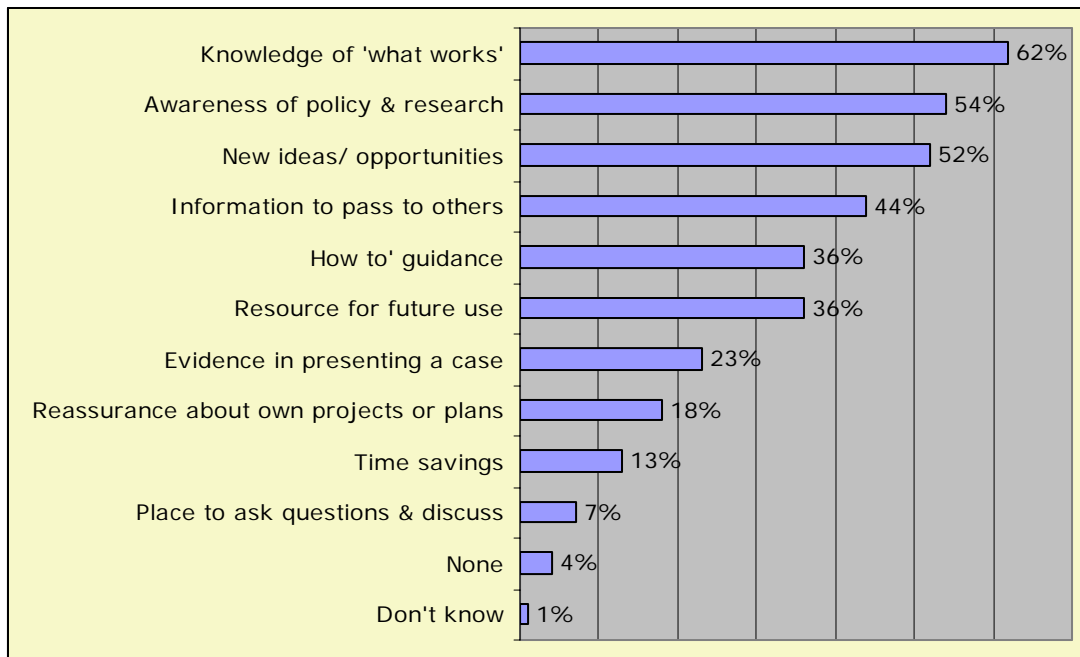
Figure 16 Actions taken by registered users



Source: Registered User Survey - N = 180

The main benefits (Figure 17) gained have been 'knowledge of what works' (62%), greater 'awareness of policy and research' (54%) and 'new ideas and opportunities' (52%). Middle ranking benefits included information to pass on to others (44%) and 'how to' guidance (36%). There were indications that users gain benefits associated with reassurance about their own projects or plans (18%) and see value in being able to draw on Renewal.net for specific purposes in future (a 'resource for future use, as and when needed' - 36%). Use of validated evidence in making a case - a purpose at the heart of Renewal.net's design in promoting evidence-based approaches - ranked lower, at 23%. Few (7%) saw Renewal.net as a valuable place for questions and discussion through the Discussion Forums.

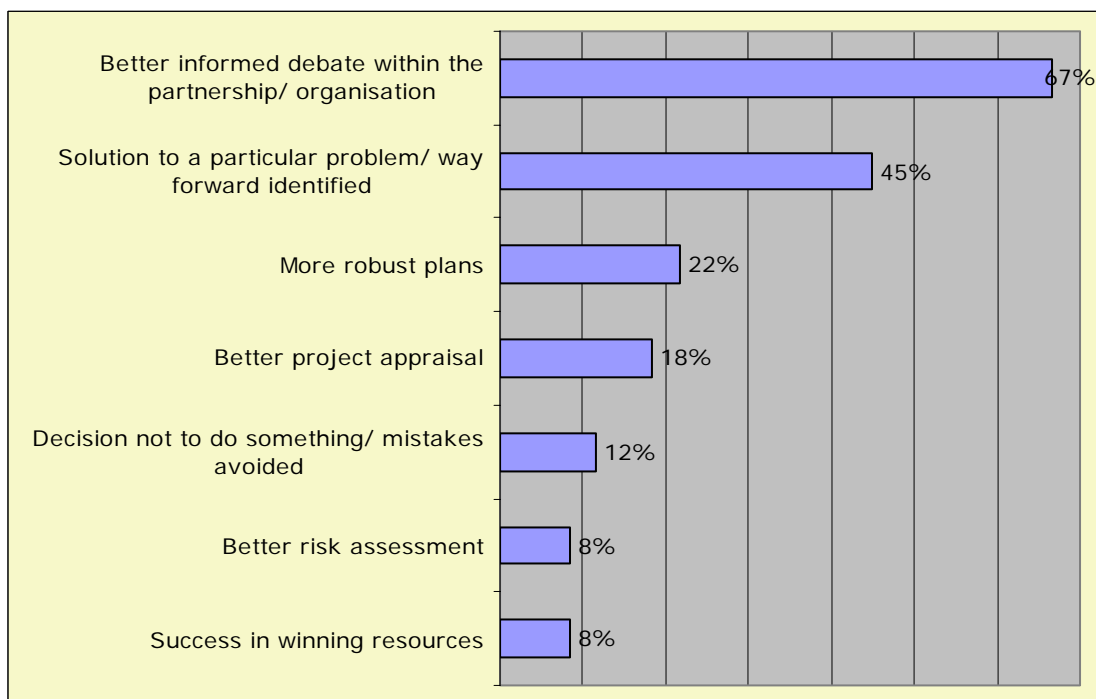
Figure 17 Benefits identified by registered users



Source: Registered User Survey - N = 180

Just under three out of 10 registered users (29%) reckoned that they could identify a specific result from their use of Renewal.net; while over two thirds (37%) felt that it was too early to say. Of the users reporting specific results (Figure 18), two thirds considered that their use of Renewal.net had contributed to a 'better informed debate within their organisation', with 45% stating that it had provided a solution or way forward on a particular problem or issue.

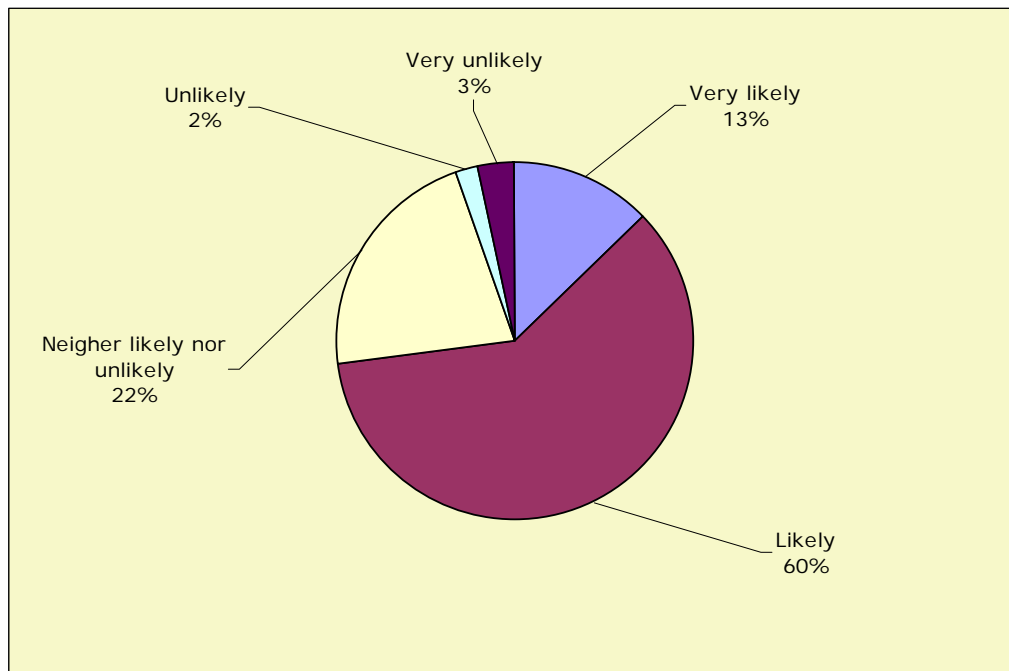
Figure 18 Results identified by those registered users able to do so



Source: Registered User Survey - N = 60

When asked a further, separate question, very few respondents (only 5% of the total number) could give examples of how their use of Renewal.net had helped them make progress against neighbourhood renewal floor targets. The examples given tended to relate to processes (such as gearing NRF commissioning to achievement of floor targets or constituting a neighbourhood partnership) rather than outcomes for local people. As large a proportion as 47% felt that that this question was not relevant to them. The majority (73%), however, felt it was likely that the benefits gained would help them produce better outcomes (Figure 19).

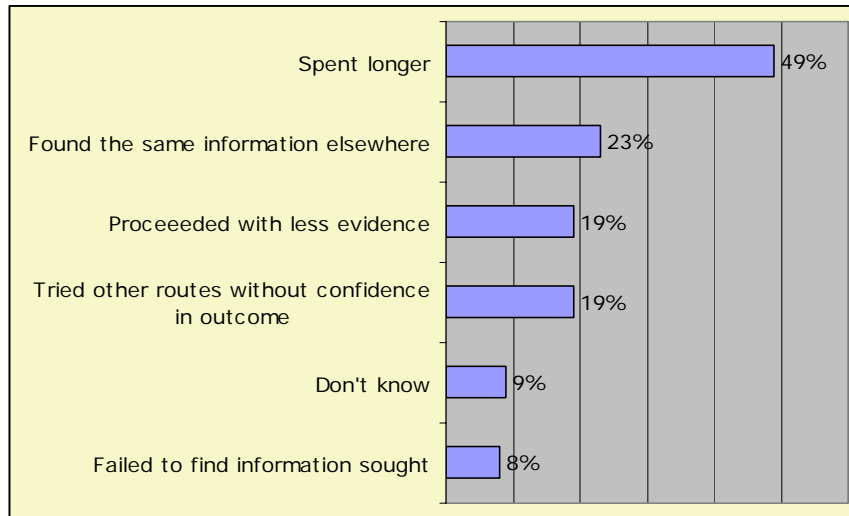
Figure 19 Likelihood that Renewal.net will help users produce better outcomes



Source: Registered User Survey - N = 147

5.4 Additionality and user satisfaction

The registered user survey also explored additionality by examining what users felt they would have done if Renewal.net had not been available. Almost half (49%) stated that they would have had to spend a longer time obtaining the same or poorer information, with less than a quarter (23%) believing they would have found the same information elsewhere. Only 8% thought that they would have failed entirely to find the information - though 19% were not very confident that they would have succeeded otherwise.

Figure 20 Actions in the absence of Renewal.net

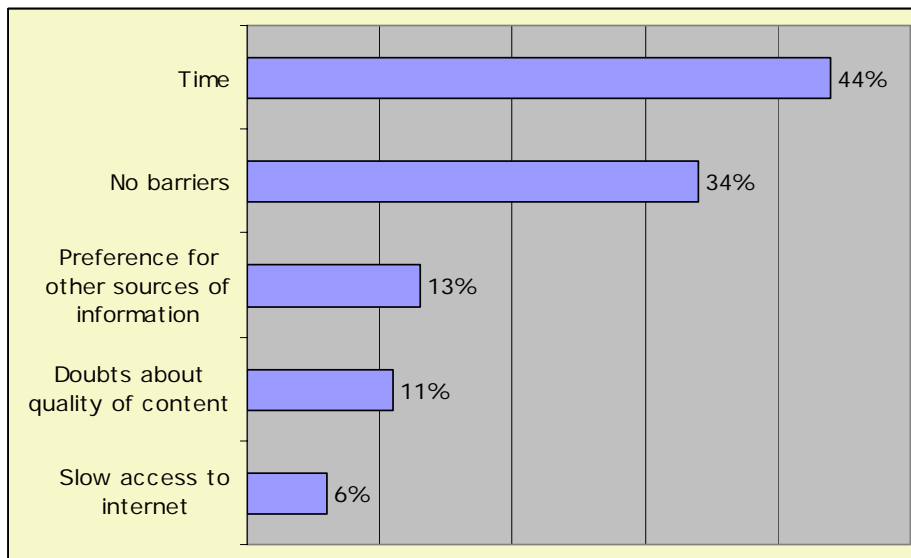
Source: Registered User Survey - N = 180

We also asked registered users for their views on the usefulness of the site. Our question ('On reflection, how useful have you found Renewal.net?') differed slightly from that used in the PA survey ('To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I find the information on renewal.net useful?'), but the result was similar, with 85% of registered users stating the site had been of some use. We note, however, that while the PA survey has found 36% 'strongly agreeing' with the statement, we found only 16% finding Renewal.net 'very useful'.

This finding corresponds with responses to a related question about the degree of confidence with which users expect to find what they want on Renewal.net. Only 6% were 'very confident' and 29% 'confident' - though nearly half, 49%, are 'hopeful'. Our question allowed for more uncertainty in replies that the question asked by PA (an invitation to agree or disagree with the statement, 'I can usually find useful information on the subject I am searching for'). Responses over the three PA surveys have been 18% 'strongly agreeing' and 57% 'agreeing'.

5.5 Improving Renewal.net

We also asked registered users about any barriers that have affected their use of the website (Figure 21). One third did identify no barriers at all - while more than two in five (44%) reckoned that 'time' was the biggest obstacle. Other 'barriers' cited included doubts about the depth of analysis and potential for wider replication of individual case studies; and having to download documents before being able to assess their value.

Figure 21 Barriers to use of Renewal.net

Source: Registered User Survey - N = 180

As in the PA survey, we asked respondents for their views on ways of improving the site. The most popular suggestions were ‘more practical how to/toolkits’ (48%), ‘more case studies on specific topics’ (41%), ‘more research documents (35%) and ‘more sample documents’ (34%). These findings are comparable to the PA surveys. We offered two additional options: ‘active discussion forums’ (wanted by 24%) and ‘more regular updating’ (19%). Respondents could also add their suggestions in response to an open text question, though this generated little in addition (primarily several more requests for e-mail alerts, calls for greater depth and validation of case studies, and more on “honourable failures”).

In answer to a separate question, we found that only 10% felt that they had experienced difficulties in finding their way around the site or in using the search facility. When prompted to elaborate, users had no concrete suggestions to make. However, the following quote captures the essence of a number of comments:

“The list of downloadable stuff in many areas is now so long it is really hard work to find what you need, and involves having to download far too much abortive and useless stuff.”

This poses a question for Renewal.net: how much more can the site do to make it easier for people to find what they need and quickly? This is a constant challenge; if people find the site too time and energy consuming, their use will drop off.

Finally, 17% respondents identified gaps in Renewal.net coverage. These included requests for “more” on topics such as how to mainstream and community engagement, planning and neighbourhood renewal, initiatives involving the privately rented housing sector, “examples of actual activity to address floor targets”. There were also calls for more content which synthesises: eg, the findings of NRU programme research, critical success factors common to particular approaches, and of what has worked to change a whole area. One suggested the production of “*top ten list of interventions on key issues that are most likely to work given the balance of evidence*”.

6 Use By Neighbourhood Renewal Practitioners and Partnerships

6.1 Further sources of evidence on Renewal.net

Our approach to the overall Skills and Knowledge programme evaluation has provided us with two other sources of evidence to inform our conclusions on Renewal.net. These were:

- our area case study fieldwork, where we repeated questions from our survey of registered users of Renewal.net (along with questions on use of evidence)
- our survey of partnerships on their use of NRAs (which included questions on use of Renewal.net associated with NRA assignments)

We report on these below, followed by related information findings from our survey of NRAs and interviews with GOs.

6.2 From the area fieldwork: awareness and use amongst practitioners

Use of Renewal.net

In our area case study interviews - 221 interviews across nine LSP areas - we found that only just over one third of our interviewees (34%) had made use of Renewal.net. Of the remaining two-thirds, 45% were not aware of the site, and 22% had not had, or not made time to access it. Few were constrained by slow, or no, access to the internet (6%), and 8% expressed a preference for other sources of information and evidence (sometimes a marked inclination to use personal contacts above all else). Comments made by some interviewees suggested underlying reluctance to use the Internet, perhaps because of lack of confidence and search skills. For context, we also asked related questions on use of evidence, and found that one on five of our interviewees had not used evidence on what works (or doesn't work) elsewhere in the previous year, and a similar proportion had made 'considerable' or 'extensive' use of this. The largest group (37%) had made 'some' use of evidence over the period.

In targeting our interviewees in the area case studies, we sought a range of partnership managers and representatives from the LSP, thematic and neighbourhood partnerships, across different sectors, agencies and communities of interest (see our Background Report 1, 'Findings from the Field'). The population surveyed had some characteristics in common with respondents to the Renewal.net user surveys (eg, in proportions of local authority interviewees - 22%; councillors, 4%) and higher proportions of community and voluntary sector representatives/ activists (24%) and public agency managers (25% compared to 10% 'public sector professionals' in the PA surveys). We assume that an underlying difference is that the fieldwork interviews involved relatively fewer junior staff with project and programme responsibilities and fewer staff with research responsibilities who might be more likely to use Renewal.net. There was a tendency amongst more senior local authority and public agency managers interviewed to expect their staff to use Renewal.net - though generally they were not aware of the extent to which this was the case. We noted also in our analysis of the area case studies that we encountered many people involved in thematic partnerships who did not consider that 'neighbourhood

renewal' was something in which they were engaged. Hence, it could be expected that they would not see Renewal.net as relevant to them either; in preference they would look to information sources within their own 'field', be it community safety, education or whatever.

Patterns and purposes of use

Where area case study interviewees *were* users of Renewal.net, we found that they were less active users than those in the user surveys, with only 4% using Renewal.net weekly compared to 29% in the registered user survey. The further contrast was in proportions using the site less than once a month: 48% compared to 25% (and a much lower percentage of 'don't knows': 13% compared to 33%). The fieldwork interviewees were more likely to use Renewal.net primarily in hunting for information with specific purposes in mind (55% compared to 28% of registered users). Only 38% have bookmarked the site as a favourite, compared to 63% of the registered users. We detected in some responses that users thought that Renewal.net was a "very good thing" - if a bit worthy - and that they felt a little guilty that they did not make more use of the site.

The main purposes where they have found Renewal.net useful have been in providing overviews of neighbourhood renewal topics, learning from what has been tried before, and in tackling a particular problem. We also found that of our categories of roles in neighbourhood renewal, partnership managers and support officers, local authority managers, community development workers were the most likely to use Renewal.net. Organisations and partnerships most likely to use Renewal.net were NDCs and CENs, followed by LSPs, corporate functions in local authorities and voluntary organisations.

Benefits and results

The main benefits that they have gained relate primarily to enhanced knowledge (personal - 30%; team: 19%), improved awareness of policy developments (21%), ease of access to information needed (16%), valuable information to pass on to others (16%) and lessons from experience elsewhere (14%). Only 7% had followed up through contact with Renewal.net case studies. Satisfaction rates were lower than amongst those recorded in our registered user and the PA surveys: two thirds of our interviewees found Renewal.net moderately to very useful (compared to 80+% in the other surveys).

Few interviewees identified specific results from their use of Renewal.net. As with the registered users, the most frequently cited 'result' was better informed debate within their partnership or organisation, followed by success in bidding or securing resources as a consequence of better proposals and in solving a particular problem or problems. As with the registered users, most thought that they would have taken longer to find the same or poorer information had they not had access to the site. Time was regarded as by far the biggest barrier to greater use of the site (by 42% of these users). Under 4% lacked Internet access or felt that slow access was an obstacle¹⁰.

¹⁰ We note that there are continuing concerns about 'digital exclusion' (see, for example, Loader and Keeble's (2004) review for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation), about the extent to which disadvantaged people are not taking full advantage of information and communications technologies. They note, however, that research has shown that activists tend to be better connected, part of 'the information rich' rather than 'the information poor'. We note also that

Improving Renewal.net

Interviewees made a range of suggestions for improvements to Renewal.net - which often reflected their lack of familiarity with existing site features and content - for example, there were several requests for an e-mail alert service. One or two interviewees had higher ambitions for Renewal.net, eg, wanting to see it develop as an expert system for tackling neighbourhood renewal issues. Several made a point of mentioning that the more there is on it (especially case studies) the more useful the site becomes. Counterposed to this view, were a few who expressed frustration in their efforts to find what they were looking for, within long lists of pages generated when using the search facility. A few wanted to see more active and up-to-date discussion forums.

More than a quarter of these interviewees had suggestions to make regarding gaps to fill on Renewal.net. These included requests for more on race equality and diversity, content relevant to managing and developing LSPs, setting up and developing networks, and “*case studies demonstrating where mainstreaming is coming in in a significant way*”.

6.3 Use by partnerships in association with NRA assignments

As part of our survey of neighbourhood renewal partnerships on their use of NRAs¹¹, we asked questions about use of Renewal.net during and subsequent to NRA assignments. This generated a number of more general comments on Renewal.net which we discuss below.

Just over a third (9 out of 26) partnerships recorded that they or the NRA had used Renewal.net in the course of the assignments. (There were 10 ‘don’t know’ and 4 cases of where it had not been accessed.) No other sources of information or advice registered significantly in these interviews (other than the NRAs themselves...). Uses included preparing for training event and preparation for PMF sessions, and researching what other NDCs had been doing on specific governance issues. The following quotes (all from different NDCs) provide a flavour of the uses and value which the partnerships have placed on Renewal.net, and also illuminate some of their views on the use of evidence:

- learning from what works in project development and appraisal

“We are getting new ideas, testing our ideas, confirming that we are doing it right or wrong. When we are writing up and assessing or appraising projects, saying to partners who are putting in proposals, ‘What about thinking about this or that?’ We use it quite extensively.”

“As an organisation we use Renewal.net on a regular basis anyway. All my theme managers have got independent access to Renewal.net

there are hidden costs of Internet use: it is a common complaint within the voluntary and community sector that Internet-based dissemination places additional costs on them (notably line rental and the cost of printing downloaded material), which limit their onward dissemination of web content.

¹¹ See our Background Report 3 on Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers for further details of this research - which also includes findings from a survey of NRAs (mentioned in 6.4 below)

and one of my theme managers sits on the Project Board for Renewal.net as well. We have access to it and use it in the day-to-day development of our work.”

- generating ideas

“What it provides is an array of ideas of the sort of things you can do and what’s worked in other areas. It helps you think things through locally. You can’t go to Renewal.net and say ‘Ah, we’ll do that’ but rather it shows the whole range of possible interventions.”

- keeping up to date

“We check Renewal.net every week just to see what’s on there and what’s updated as a matter of course, as well as the other websites such as those around the magazines such as New Start, Regen and Renewal. Just because you need to keep your eye on what’s happening in other parts of the country, especially stuff that’s coming directly out of the NRU.”

“I get my theme managers to use it and follow up on things on a regular basis.”

One or two comments reflected time constraints and concerns about how to apply what you might find on Renewal.net, for example:

“In terms of usage of Renewal.net, maybe we don’t use it as much as we’d like to. It is pressure of time. People like to get on with things. One of the things we find is that we are constantly being told, ‘Don’t re-invent the wheel. Look at what’s been done and what works elsewhere, look at that’. That’s all fine but there is a flip side to it which is innovation and creativity, and one of the things I am trying to get my team to do is look at best practices, but what works somewhere else does not necessarily work here... It is a question of striking that balance, of not re-inventing the wheel but don’t give up coming up with unique solutions to unique problems.”

There were a few critical comments too, from users and non-users, reflecting doubts about the volume or value of information on the site, a failure to find something specific, or unfamiliarity with the use of the search facility on the site.

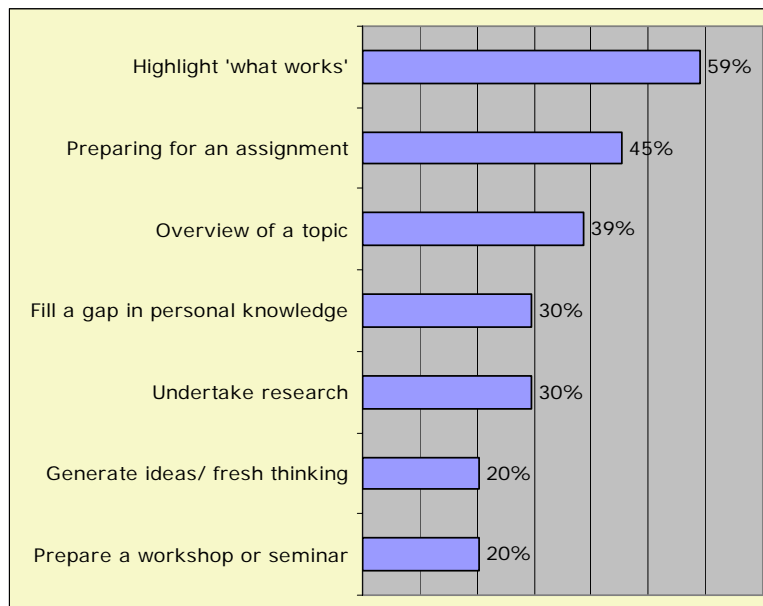
“We look at it to try and give us some guidance, but we are not that confident about the rigour of it in terms of its quality of approach and the classic thing is if you put in ‘mainstream’ you get 450 references in different forms of ‘mainstream’ and you don’t know which ones work and which don’t.”

Word of mouth can also influence use, whether or not this is based on fact. For example, one interviewee commented that *“I’ve heard people don’t use it because the information isn’t complete and that evaluations are not included.”* - whereas Renewal.net does hold relevant evaluations and the specially written content draws on relevant evaluations wherever possible.

6.4 Use by NRAs

We also took advantage of our NRA survey to ask questions directly of them as to their use of Renewal.net. Nearly three quarters had made use of the site, and 86% stated that they had recommended the use of Renewal.net on their assignments. The most prominent purposes in their use of the site (Figure 22) have been highlight what works (59% of those using the site), preparing to specific assignments (45%) and gaining an overview of a topic (39%).

Figure 22 NRA purposes in using Renewal.net



Source: NRA telephone and on-line survey - N = 69

We also found some interest in making use of the NRA Discussion Forum, which has scarcely been used by NRAs. Three in 10 NRAs stated that they were not aware of the forum. However, more than half responding said they would be encouraged to access it if they knew other NRAs were using it.

6.5 Feedback from GOs and NRU teams

Questions about Renewal.net featured in our interviews with Government Office (GO) and NRU programme and policy staff. We sought to explore their experience - what’s worked and what hasn’t and lessons learnt - in relation to development, implementation and promotion of the various Skills and Knowledge tools. We also covered their views on barriers to take-up and on how well the tools meet perceived needs, and their ideas for service improvement.

GO staff and Renewal.net

GO staff have shown mixed attitudes towards Renewal.net, with some GOs and individual staff very supportive and other GOs not, largely preferring to go their own way with regional partners on work to promote good practice and the use of evidence. All GOs were expected in 2003-04 to produce 10-15 case studies for Renewal.net, which some approached as an in-house exercise and most contracted out the exercise (including by using NRAs). At one end of the spectrum, GONE have developed a regional projects database and sourced large numbers of case studies (most recently on mainstreaming). GONE commissioned Regeneration Exchange and Teesside University to research how NRF is being used, producing two case studies from each LSP area, and are also managing a project looking at good practice in raising educational attainment across the country. At the other end of the spectrum, GOWM and GONW have preferred to work with their RCEs on a different approach outwith the Renewal.net format.

Some concerns were expressed about “*insufficient validation*” of Renewal.net case studies and about the need to ensure that what is published is genuinely good practice, not self-promotion. ‘Validation’ has relied on research by trusted, experienced researchers and a consistent editorial approach undertaken by GFA Consulting, who are experienced in ‘what works’ research in regeneration and renewal. We consider that the editorial policy of Renewal.net has been appropriate, given (a) the additional costs of extensive validation arrangements; (b) weaknesses in evidence available in the regeneration field - which limits how robust validation can be; and (c) the value in case studies in encouraging people to pursue better approaches which fit their own circumstances - rather than importing other people’s designs in their entirety.

Some GOs have made some efforts to encourage partnerships and projects to provide Renewal.net content, but have found it difficult to encourage people to come forward with potential case studies for inclusion. A concern has been that the organisations featured might be overwhelmed by Renewal.net users making contact with them - which is relatively unlikely given what we have found on the propensity for Renewal.net users to follow up case studies directly.

We found that GO staff (with both Skills and Knowledge and programme responsibilities) had limited awareness of take-up and use of Renewal.net within their regions, though most had gained the impression that it was being used and was making a contribution. Some felt that it was not being used as much as it could be, and attributed this in part to constraints on people’s access to the internet, and to people not returning after being disappointed on early visits when they did not find something of value (“*not sufficiently user-friendly at the outset though people say it’s improved*”).

Five GOs have devoted time to developing regional pages on Renewal.net (and the regional pages for a sixth have been developed by the regeneration network, Community Renewal Network East). Typically these pages provide summary regional and sub-regional information, links, forthcoming events, and discussion boards. Very few messages have been posted on these discussion boards, and there is little on the regional pages to encourage regular visitors to this part of Renewal.net¹².

¹² Most Renewal.net regional pages provide background data on their regions, relevant web links, and a region-specific route to finding out about forthcoming events and engaging in Renewal.net discussion.

We gained the impression that many GO staff had not been won over by Renewal.net, encountering a range of critical comments about writing and editing styles, site navigation and search facility, and a concern that *“the case studies are out of date as soon as they put up”*. Others took contrasting views, complimenting the site’s ease of use and noting their success in finding what they had been seeking. We found some high aspirations for what Renewal.net should be able to provide (eg, *“I want to see breakthrough examples of mainstreaming”*). Others felt that they did not have time to use Renewal.net or that it was not that relevant:

“I’ve no time to search things out... I get whatever I need as quickly as possible.”

“It’s nice to have - but there’s too much work to do. How relevant is it to us in the GO anyway? Is it not more for people doing delivery?”

Overall, we found limited enthusiasm in most GOs for Renewal.net: it was not being seen as a Skills and Knowledge flagship - thereby lessening the potential role of GO staff in promoting its use and value.

Several GO interviewees did, however, comment on the need to invest some smarter efforts in marketing Renewal.net, and the benefits of evidence-based approaches more generally: *“we really need to create a need for this [evidence-based approaches]”*. GOs and Regional Networks have created a variety of opportunities for demonstrating Renewal.net and giving it further publicity. GOWM used case studies in their Tuesday Set of seminars (eg, on the Worklessness theme) and are recruiting a secondee with a ‘good practice’ remit, including sourcing case studies. GONW have promoted the site with partnerships, eg, on governance issues for LSPs: *“there are good bits about how partnership works”*; and for CENs highlighting, for example, content on diversity. GONW reckoned that use of Renewal.net depends in part on the partnership: *“the best ones use it more. NRAs use it quite a lot”*.

A few GOs have continued to feel that there is an associated induction need, to provide potential users with opportunities to explore how best to use the site and find what’s there that is particularly relevant to their needs. Some have provided opportunities at events they have run (typically in conjunction with NRU Skills and Knowledge staff). We note also that use of Renewal.net has been built into courses on the Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme¹³, stressed as an important source of evidence. It has been used in course planning, and participants have been provided with relevant Renewal.net content in their course packs.

A few GO interviewees remarked that more use could be made of Renewal.net internally, in their own training activities and efforts to promote use of evidence:

“We use it irregularly, mainly to promote to the partnerships”

“To what extent do Neighbourhood Renewal team members understand use of evidence?”

¹³ See our Background Research Report 4 on the Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme

“We could put our own house in order: eg, if we were running a Project Cycle Management workshop, where does the search for evidence come in?”

NRU research, policy and programme staff and Renewal.net

In our interviews with NRU staff, we found them supportive of Renewal.net, especially in Research and Development, where there has been close alignment of interests in promoting evidence-based approaches and making more effective use of NRU research to support policy and practice. R&D have sought to ensure that there are outputs from research projects for publication on Renewal.net (eg, case studies from the evaluation of Residents Consultancies and from the Changing Practices project on influencing employer business strategies). They have also produced guidance for researchers on producing policy recommendations, again for posting on Renewal.net.

Several policy staff have promoted Renewal.net to colleagues in other government departments and explored ways of linking NRU and OGD interests in promoting good practice and use of evidence. The Skills and Knowledge Team are seeking to work with policy leads and OGDs to review the content of Renewal.net in each of the neighbourhood renewal themes, to ensure that documents are valid and up-to-date and needs for future coverage are identified. Limited progress has been made on this; some discussions have taken place in relation to health and crime, and as yet strong links have not been made with related interests within ODPM¹⁴ itself, despite efforts by the Skills and Knowledge Team.

Most policy staff have been keen to put their weight behind Renewal.net, seeing it as a means to supporting their own role. One commented, for example,

“I’m always frustrated by how slow the collection of good practice is, especially when there is not enough from Government Offices. I need it to feed back and challenge policy in the department I deal with.”

This policy lead has been working with an NRA to identify examples of service improvement resulting from good use of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. Health, employment, economic regeneration and transport are policy areas where there is notable interest in working with OGDs on Renewal.net content, and Home Office interest in drug issues has led to fresh thinking on how best to present such cross-cutting material on the site.

One or two policy staff have had discussions with OGDs about standards of evidence required, resulting in agreement to differ, for example, over requirements in health and neighbourhood renewal - the former field dominated by standards expected in clinical practice, reflecting the evidence base built up over considerable time through scientific research, use of random trials, etc. A related issue is that most other departments have

¹⁴ The Skills and Knowledge Team have produced a paper setting out the relevance of the Skills and Knowledge Programme tools elsewhere in ODPM, and the Egan Review of Skills for Sustainable Communities highlights Renewal.net as a relevant model in taking forward plans for a ‘virtual’ dimension to the national centre on sustainable community skills (the Academy for Sustainable Communities). There are issues within ODPM about perceptions on how neighbourhood renewal relates to other policy areas: is it cross-cutting or a separate, distinct field in its own right?

their own sites which promote good practice and information sharing, which affects their attitudes towards collaboration on Renewal.net.

Several NRU staff felt that it was important to make more case study material available that could not yet be viewed authoritatively as good practice. They remarked on needs to write up lessons of failures and bad practice, and to publicise promising, innovative approaches (eg, in how LSPs have been tackling mainstreaming).

One or two staff who are comparatively new to the NRU have made a point of using Renewal.net to assist their own induction into neighbourhood renewal work. Some staff said how they liked the look and feel of Renewal.net, while one or two were critical of case study content, eg, of the quality of evidence of outcomes and how lessons might be applied in particular circumstances. They tended to acknowledge, however, difficulties in obtaining robust evidence. Several wanted Renewal.net to offer more in relation to floor target action planning (FTAP) - something that Renewal.net had not been designed originally to support, as FTAP was only introduced in late 2003/ early 2004.

- though at the time of the interviews this had only recently been this was a need which emerged very quickly when this requirement was introduced for the 26 LSPs concerned.

Policy and programme staff tend not to be very aware of how much Renewal.net is being used within their particular domains. There is an assumption that use in other departments and by their agencies is not high. There has been a tendency in NRU programme teams to have a particular view of needs in their area, and pursue their own initiatives. This led, for example, to the separate development of a website for the National Neighbourhood Management Network - which was subsequently incorporated in Renewal.net.

7 Renewal.net: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Addressing Renewal.net objectives

Renewal.net has been developed as an online knowledge management system, with goals of building the knowledge base of neighbourhood renewal, plugging major gaps; making it easier to get hold of knowledge; and applying this knowledge in evidence-based practice. The NRU has made substantial progress in relation to Renewal.net objectives, and its development, on time and to budget has been a notable NRU achievement, not least because of the scale of specially written content (case studies, overviews, etc). This was particularly important to establishing the credibility of the site in its early days. We consider that the rationale for Renewal.net has been justified, in that there were significant gaps in information about 'what works' in neighbourhood renewal, and that an on-line solution was an appropriate response.

On specific Renewal.net objectives, we conclude:

1) Improving the accessibility and use of the existing evidence base

Renewal.net has made a significant contribution in improving access to researched evidence through its structured approach and commissioning of 440 new documents¹⁵ (including 378 case studies), amongst a total of over 2,200 documents on the site. This has made a marked contribution to building the neighbourhood renewal knowledge base, as intended in The Learning Curve, bringing together in one place much newly researched content. With more material on the site, users are more likely to find what they are looking for, and, provided they find this helpful and up-to-date, are more likely to make subsequent use. The quantity of case studies and overviews has grown to more than four times the content uploaded at launch, with case studies more recently flowing from GO and NRU research sources. In this, the NRU R&D Division have been very supportive, seeing Renewal.net as a key instrument for disseminating research findings and improved use of evidence.

Site statistics have shown that use has grown steadily, and in June 2004 was running at **over 1,000 user sessions a day**. This level more than doubled between March 2003 and March 2004. Renewal.net was widely promoted around the time of its launch, and is well-positioned in comparison with other government websites¹⁶. There is a need to promote evidence of the nature of the growing use of Renewal.net, as this will help encourage use and counter some of the critical opinions of Renewal.net's value, eg, within GOs. More opportunities need to be created to publicise new content added to the site, eg, through linked articles in the regeneration press.

Satisfaction amongst users has been reasonably high, with the PA online surveys showing 86% respondents either tending to agree or to agree strongly with the statement,

¹⁵ Figure as at June 2004

¹⁶ Google, the leading search engine, ranks websites to provide a proxy of site quality. It interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. It looks at more than the volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyses the page that casts the vote. Rankings show Renewal.net on a par (6/10) with the websites for NRU, ODPM and IDeA Knowledge, above Regen.net (5/10), but below NIACE (7/10).

'The information available on Renewal.net is useful'. Our own survey did not find as high a level finding the site 'very useful': only 16% of registered users and 26% of our area fieldwork interviewees, compared to 36% in the PA surveys. We encountered some criticisms, around 'too much' and 'too little' information, about site navigation, and 'missing' information. Despite such comments sometimes displaying unfamiliarity with the site, it is essential to listen to such feedback, as effective responses (in publicity, site improvements, etc) can make a difference in increasing use of the website. It is also important to encourage people to revisit the site, as new content is being added continually. The e-mail alert service is appreciated by those who use it - but we found many cases of people who thought it would be a good idea to introduce such a feature...

Responses to our fieldwork interviews suggested that there was a significant gap in awareness of Renewal.net, most marked amongst organisations concerned with individual neighbourhood renewal themes (ie, health, crime reduction, etc). We found that 45% of our interviewees were unaware of Renewal.net, and 22% were aware, but had not used the site personally. There are perceptual obstacles to use of Renewal.net which need to be addressed. In particular, many interviewees with thematic responsibilities have their own thematic information sources, and if they were aware of Renewal.net they did not expect it to be relevant to them. We also had examples of LSP staff who did not expect there to be much on the site relevant to their particular tasks in running their partnership. We gathered some views that Renewal.net has been seen as something more worthy than appealing, influenced by promotional messages that 'Renewal.net is good for you and you should be using it in adopting an evidence-based approach'.

We found that **'time' has been by far the biggest barrier to greater use of Renewal.net**, cited by over 40% of registered users and our fieldwork interviewees. The Learning Curve was right to stress that, *"Busy people need an easier way of getting hold of the knowledge they need, when they need it, in a form that is easy to understand"*. There is a need to ensure that Renewal.net constantly addresses this point, though the present design of the site means that most users will want to download and print Renewal.net content for later reading.

The job in developing Renewal.net is by no means done, in that user needs continue to move on, and stronger evidence should be emerging from local neighbourhood renewal strategies and interventions as they become established. There is a continuing need to *anticipate* what user needs will be in future and plan content strategy accordingly. This is likely to require central setting of priorities for content - with an emphasis on quality in meeting anticipated needs (such as content which supports performance improvement priorities), rather than a scatter gun approach.

2) Improving dissemination of evaluated evidence and working towards a standard 'template' for the dissemination of such information

The intention from the outset has been to give users confidence in the quality of site content, by stressing credible evidence and sound arguments; a user-friendly, practical style; a consistent format; and relevance to neighbourhood renewal. Standard templates have been introduced and consistent guidance provided to contributors which stress evidence requirements. Steps have been taken to brief GO staff and other researchers (eg, those working on the Writing Renewal project in Yorkshire and Humber). The GFA editor has played a crucial role in seeking to ensure the consistent quality of individual

case studies and overviews. Many of these have needed substantial editing and in some cases the original has not been close enough to required standards. We note that there have also been difficulties in researching adequate evidence of output and impact - especially the latter. Many projects have not assessed their outcomes, or it is too early to have much of this evidence. There have also been challenges in drawing out lessons, sometimes because case study managers themselves have not been accustomed to reflective practice and have found it difficult to comment on this. User feedback - albeit with a few exceptions - suggests that **the site has been reasonably successful in establishing a mark of quality for commissioned Renewal.net content.**

Opportunities continue to be taken to disseminate research outputs through Renewal.net, an activity worth promoting further - including relevant research outputs from other ODPM and other departments' research programmes.

3) Providing facilities for on-line networking and informal sharing of good practice

Renewal.net has provided discussion forums, but these have been used relatively little. It is difficult to see their use growing, unless there are time-consuming efforts to seed and grow discussion threads. We did find respondents and interviewees who said they would use the forums, if they could be confident that others would too.

4) Encouraging higher use of validated evidence

Renewal.net shows continuing growth in use. Our survey of registered users found that nearly half reported greater use than a year ago (with only 17% reporting a decline). **Results from the PA user surveys have shown that nearly three quarters consider that Renewal.net helps them take a more evidence-based approach to their work, with the numbers strongly agreeing with this growing from 16% to 23% in a year.** There is still room for progress in terms of people's confidence in the site: just over a third of registered users are confident or very confident of finding on the site what they are looking for, and half are hopeful. The content of Renewal.net case studies could also help further, in drawing out practical examples of how evidence has been used to improve interventions and their impact.

5) Developing new, practical tools, guidance and information to support neighbourhood renewal activity

Needs for practical tools have been addressed directly through commissions on 'How to' content on Renewal.net and innovations on the site such as the 'In the news' page. Renewal.net is the location for the LSP Delivery and Sports Toolkits, and a revised common format has been developed for Toolkit and 'How to' content, in response to continuing expressions of interest on the part of users. We note **continuing underlying needs for more on how to facilitate or manage change in a partnership setting** (expressed, for example, by NRAs and LSP managers), **and notably, frequent references to needs for more knowledge of success in, and how to implement mainstreaming.** From our awareness of related developments, we also suggest that time is devoted to finding out more about how other organisations have approached knowledge sharing, looking at, eg, the NHS Modernisation Agency on public service improvement and the Small Business Service on sharing and developing knowledge within the delivery chain.

We doubt that the regional pages have added much to Renewal.net to date, given that these are populated with information (eg, events and links) which are not rated as priorities by users. That said, it may be helpful to have a regional dimension for those who prefer to access information regionally rather than nationally. Further thought is needed as to how to make the most of these pages (including how they relate to the websites of GOs, Regional Centres of Excellence and Regional Observatories).

6) Promoting the use of face-to-face advice or 'technical assistance'

The site does not currently promote the use of NRAs, but could feature case studies where NRAs have made significant interventions.

7) Acting as a 'one-stop shop' for information on neighbourhood renewal

User feedback confirms the worth of trying to do this, though Renewal.net has *not* been designed as an internet portal for everything to do with neighbourhood renewal. It has, however, hosted not only the specially commissioned content, but also key policy documents and research - a feature which is valued by users. The 'In the news' feature responded to their requests and has strengthened what the site has to offer - though users may prefer other services (such as New Start and Info4local which use 'push' technology - sending information out to subscribers).

7.2 Benefits and results from use of Renewal.net

As we stressed above, Renewal.net has helped to build significantly the neighbourhood renewal knowledge base, and it has made it easier to get hold of knowledge - at least for those inclined to use the Internet. Over half have e-mailed or printed and passed content on to others. The main uses are to learn from what works and to gain overviews of neighbourhood renewal subject matter. Most users value the quality of the site content (especially the case studies), with some users (though not a large proportion) expressing reservations about being able to find readily what they want.

The main benefits identified by registered users were: 62% improved knowledge of 'what works', 54% awareness of policy and research, and 52% new ideas and opportunities. Comparatively few (13%) registered users had made contact with case studies.

Our research has shown **less evidence, however, of putting the knowledge into practice** - a need recognised in The Learning Curve: "*A key issue is whether any of this good practice and analysis is actually used by those involved in neighbourhood renewal*". Nearly three in ten (29%) reckoned that they could identify a specific result from their use of Renewal.net; while over two thirds (37%) felt that it was too early to say. Of the users reporting specific results, two thirds considered that their use of Renewal.net had contributed to a 'better informed debate within their organisation', with 45% stating that it had provided a solution or way forward on a particular problem or issue. Just under a quarter found Renewal.net beneficial in providing validated evidence to make a case (eg, in reviewing strategies, developing projects or bidding). Only 5% could give examples of how their use of Renewal.net had helped them make progress against neighbourhood renewal floor targets. That said, nearly three quarters of registered users were confident that their use of Renewal.net will help them produce better neighbourhood renewal outcomes.

There is **reasonable evidence of additionality**: almost half (49%) stated that they would have had to spend a longer time obtaining the same or poorer information, with less than a quarter (23%) believing they would have found the same information elsewhere. Only 8% thought that they would have failed entirely to find the information - though 19% were not very confident that they would have succeeded otherwise.

Our fieldwork suggests that there are higher levels of use amongst community representatives and activists than might have been supposed from responses to the PA surveys. This means that Renewal.net is helping to meet one of the needs identified in the Learning Curve for *residents*, in helping them draw on wider sources of knowledge from outside the neighbourhood, though it is not serving directly to facilitate their sharing of experience. The Learning Curve also saw Renewal.net as promoting 'thinking outside the box' amongst *practitioners and professionals*: from the research it is difficult to say how much this has been happening. However, we suggest that Renewal.net will have helped users gain better understanding of links across neighbourhood renewal themes - provided that they have been open to looking for these. Renewal.net was also expected to promote greater understanding of what 'evidence' really means and better use of it, and there is some anecdotal evidence from our fieldwork of success in this direction. There was also a contribution expected of Renewal.net amongst *civil servants and other policy makers* in building their appreciation of different ways of tackling neighbourhood decline, and why particular approaches have succeeded or failed. Our interviews within GOs and the NRU provides some evidence of this, though such internal use of Renewal.net does not seem great. There was recognition, however, that there is now a greater body of knowledge to tap into than has been available previously in the regeneration/ neighbourhood renewal field.

The evidence of impact leads us to quote the World Bank (2003) who concluded, in an evaluation of its knowledge management initiative that while Bank knowledge has become faster and easier to access,

"Improved access does not, however, guarantee that the shared knowledge will be adopted, adapted and applied. For that to happen, knowledge sharing has to be embedded in work processes."

They noted that the experience of leading knowledge management organisations suggest that this embedding has tended to take at least three to five years. The evaluation concluded that the Bank had to do more to support task teams in their use of knowledge resources, build demand and capacity on the part of client organisations, and develop a keener focus on results of its knowledge management activities: all messages that relate overall to the Skills and Knowledge Programme. There are associated needs to work on capacity to address:

- difficulty in interpreting and applying some evidence
- shortage of time and skilled staff
- partnerships inadequately prepared for outcomes-based strategies and evaluation
- inadequate attention given to systems needed if evidence-based strategies are to be applied as a matter of course.

7.3 Recommendations and suggestions for improvement

- Refresh the strategy for the development and marketing of Renewal.net - including:
 - ◆ considering how to maximise the likelihood that users *apply* what they find on Renewal.net
 - ◆ setting topic and updating priorities, including further, user-friendly ways of synthesising and packaging existing content to draw out key findings, learning, etc (potentially in formats for easily digestible learning and onward dissemination)
 - ◆ reviewing ways of making use of Renewal.net more compelling (including more use of Renewal.net as the only place to access selected materials and guidance)
 - ◆ finding effective ways of providing information which meets user needs but which cannot yet be validated as effective practice (ie, for emerging practice/innovations in thematic areas and in approaches to learning, performance management, mainstreaming and strategic change more generally)
 - ◆ developing a promotional plan to highlight what Renewal.net now has to offer and the benefits - including, importantly, its relevance beyond people in core neighbourhood renewal jobs (eg, through sectoral networks/information channels - where OGDs and their agencies have a key role)
 - ◆ determining what effort should be devoted, if any, to promoting greater use of the discussion forums
 - ◆ strengthening the regional pages, relating these effectively to the websites of GOs, Regional Centres of Excellence and Regional Observatories
- Review the forward strategy for Renewal.net in relation to plans for the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC - the new national centre for sustainable community skills), to maximise the value for ASC from Renewal.net and ensure the benefits of the investment in Renewal.net are sustained
- Seek to learn from related sectors (eg, health on public service improvement; private sector on customer-led service improvement; SBS on sharing knowledge within the delivery chain)
- Strengthen the commitment of stakeholders in Renewal.net (other teams within NRU, OGDs, GOs, RCEs) to site development, publicity and use. Identify and follow up scope for mutual benefit with other departments and agencies. Build on the experience of developing the Sports Toolkit with DCMS in involving OGDs and other interests.
- Build on this evaluation and the regular PA on-line surveys to gain further evidence of benefits and, wherever possible, *results* of the use of Renewal.net