



5.2 Generic problems and pressures

- maintenance as an act of enhancement of public space, i.e. a positive attempt to improve standards rather than to simply uphold them;
- good design to be factored in as a fundamental prerequisite for quality public space;
- management regimes to be extended to private space if perceived to be part of the public realm;
- better monitoring of public space quality, linked to more effective use of regulatory powers to better control public space;
- relations between the public and private sectors to be mutually supportive, whether the private sector is operating as sponsors, contractors or partners in managing public space;
- the community to be viewed as an untapped resource and to be more actively engaged in public space management.

The stakeholder groups concluded that public space remained a low political priority at the local level, and that a process of education might be required in order to raise it up the agenda. For them, the barriers between the traditional ‘silo’-based professional disciplines needed to be overcome – both as part of the education process – and because key issues continue to fall between the gaps. Indeed, the groups argued that poor management skills dog public space services. Therefore, although stakeholders were remarkably consistent in identifying the important qualities of good public spaces – namely clean, safe, inclusive and robust space – they were also aware that the complex interactions remain poorly understood.

Conclusions

The evidence confirmed that in some places much is going on, even if, as yet, this practice was the exception rather than the norm. In this regard, it is hardly surprising that the public space literature and specifically the empirical evidence concerning public space quality in England reports a widespread deterioration, when local authority management practice seems so fragmented and partial, and lacking in vision about how to improve practice in the future. Indeed, the survey confirmed that the large majority of English local authorities did not have a dedicated and detailed strategy for the management of their public space, and instead, very broad ‘motherhood’-style corporate objectives or individual strategies for parts of the external public space agenda were more common.

Although the provision of management services for external public space varies between councils, it continued to be divided on the traditional model between parks/leisure, planning/highways and street maintenance services. Sometimes these were under a single directorate, often they were under two, and sometimes three or more. Usually, however, there was little coordination between individual services that continue to operate along sectoral professional lines. As can be expected, the focus of these different services was not public space in itself. Their main concerns remained the tasks themselves, of road sweeping, tree pruning, controlling traffic and parking, and so forth, whereas public space was merely the context in which these tasks were carried out. The emphasis reflects criticisms raised in the literature explored in Chapter 4.

Nevertheless, two top-down influences had been inspiring changes. First, the national best value inspection process which has been challenging a number of local authorities to plan for cross-cutting public space services through the preparation of integrated best value plans. Thus best value processes seemed to be the driving force behind the use of integrated strategies, where they exist, often tied to changes in organisational structure. Best value reviews were also encouraging a number of initiatives to ‘join-up’ street scene services through special working parties and projects, whilst best value performance plans were often critical in challenging existing processes and proposing changes to improve delivery.

Second, more fundamental cross-authority structural reviews were leading some authorities to bring public space management services together. Typically these resulted from the rethinking of the structure and management of local authorities in light of the Local Government Act 2000, although perversely often at the cost of separating public space policy from delivery services. Nevertheless a wide range of initiatives now exist in local authorities across England, covering 20 types of initiative: