Chapter 6

One country, twenty innovative public space management authorities

In this, the second of two linked chapters exploring public space management policy and practice in English local authorities, detailed interviews with 20 local authorities provide a means to comment on the key challenges and opportunities facing public space managers. The chapter begins with a discussion of the national agenda to set the context. Discussion moves on in a second part of the chapter to examine the innovative practice. In turn this deals with local authority aspirations for public space, management structures and the coordination of public space management processes, stakeholder involvement in these processes, and the key challenges and solutions that the featured local authorities are engaging with. Conclusions recognise that although public space management remains a fragmented area of local government activity in England, a number of authorities are beginning to establish a bottom-up agenda that maps a way forward.

A burgeoning national agenda

Chapter 5 has already sought to describe and analyse the 'normal' approaches to public space management in England through a national survey of local authorities. The analysis concluded that it is hardly surprising that the literature and national surveys report a widespread deterioration in the quality of public space when the services responsible for its management remain fragmented, uncoordinated, and without a clear vision of how the situation can be remedied. By focusing on the 20 innovative local authorities identified through the national survey and associated key stakeholder interviews, it was hoped that clues would be revealed about how the management of public spaces could be improved in the future.

The research on which this chapter is based came at a time of growing national interest in issues of public space and its management, driven largely by an increasing national political awareness of the potentially decisive impact of such factors in voters' minds. Persuasive surveys from MORI (2002), for example, revealed that while people still think the 'traditional' measures of quality of life (i.e. jobs, education and health) make a good place to live, it is issues of 'liveability' (the day-to-day issues that affect people's quality of life at the local level) that they most want improved. Low levels of crime and road and pavement repairs score particularly highly in these surveys, as do activities for teenagers, reflecting the otherwise negative environmental impact of bored teenagers roaming the streets.

A poll for CABE (2002), for example, focusing specifically on what might improve the appearance of people's local environments identified general cleanliness, traffic management, roads/pavement/lighting maintenance, and the availability of local amenities as the four top concerns. 85 per cent of people asked believed that the quality of public space impacts on the quality of their lives and that the quality of the built environment directly impacts on the way they feel.

A policy concern

As a policy issue, much of the growing concern for public space management stems back to the impact of the Urban Task Force. Constituted to review the ills of urban areas in the light of increasing housing pressures, their influential report also put urban management issues on the national political consciousness. It argued, 'There is a shared sense of dissatisfaction and pessimism about the state of our towns and cities', and 'a widely held view that our towns and cities are run-down