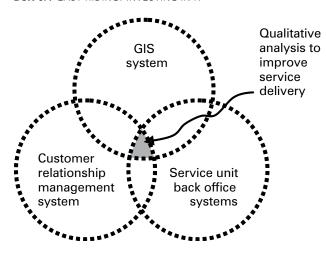**BOX 6.4** EAST RIDING: INVESTING IN IT

IT system: three linked elements

East Riding has invested in integrated IT systems that have allowed the authority to coordinate resources more efficiency. The system consists of three linked elements – GIS, 'back office' databases and IT systems, and the 'front office' customer relationship management system.

The front office system is used to log enquiries coming through to the customer service team, by phone, email, fax, video kiosk or in person. As the system is linked to the service unit's back office IT systems, it can provide a link to the associated GIS map showing street lamps, maintenance schedules etc., and describe the information required to deal with a problem. The system therefore enables customer service staff to submit maintenance orders directly, and the council is currently working to ensure that the customer service team is able to check if the work has been carried out, thus closing the complaint 'loop'.

A valuable feature is the electronic notice system. As customer service staff have found they are too busy to check emails notifying them of urgent news, a bulletin line is used, continually scrolling across the bottom of computer screens with any urgent information (i.e. winter maintenance delays, critical incidents, etc.). Operators are then quickly aware of relevant news to pass on to callers.

The IT system has been developed incrementally, spreading the investment burden. The IT department is a corporate unit, separate from the larger Operational Services Department (responsible for delivering public space services). Its corporate status eases the process of securing resources as they are funded, in part, through a 'tax' on departmental budgets.

The integrated system also allows for quantitative analysis of thematic information i.e. roads, street lighting, open spaces, 'hot spot' sites for complaints. Qualitative analysis has resulted in improvements in service delivery outcomes, for example by improving refuse collection routes to minimise customer complaints. The use of the IT-based information system is also increasingly building up a corporate memory that can be shared, and is changing the culture of staff members who, previously, defensively protected their own knowledge.

Greenwich, for example, had a graffiti strategy that supplies young people with cleaning materials to help clear up problem areas in local social housing estates, schools, and youth clubs. The authority is also inviting community organisations to contribute to monitoring of graffiti and training in its removal through the 'Adopt a Building' project (Box 6.5). Newcastle has implemented an Environmental Ward Stewardship Scheme that allows communities and other stakeholders to directly influence public space investment, while also acting as an 'umbrella framework' for the city's public space investment. Thus all public space improvements suggested by residents and supported by the council are logged into a database for each of the 26 city wards. Environmental ward stewards then coordinate internal and external funding to resource the schemes.

A minority of authorities went further, encouraging direct public involvement with specific types of public space such as housing estates or parks, and even devolving aspects of management to particular groups, including friends schemes for parks. Newcastle, for example, has also developed an 'Adopt a Plot' scheme, where local individuals or groups can manage any piece of council owned land as long as they can demonstrate they can manage it to a higher standard than the council themselves. Elsewhere, a community-oriented rather than community-driven approach was more common.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The 20 local authorities differed in their experience of private-sector involvement in public space management, depending on the general ethos of the individual councils and their particular local contexts. However, most authorities had some experience of working with the private sector.

The private sector as major landowner/leaseholder were involved in public space primarily through the ownership of space to which the public are allowed access. These public/private spaces in the 20 authorities were either managed by the owner, or by the local authority through arrangement, sometimes through the granting of commuted sums for the task. It was noted that typically the private sector have greater resources to spend on managing their public spaces, often achieving higher standards. The interviewed authorities accepted and were grateful for this, often benchmarking their own public space services against these standards in an effort to make the case for more resources to create a seamless transition from council owned and managed spaces to privately owned spaces. The Corporation of London's attempts to create such a seamless public realm have already been discussed. In Bristol, the harbour manager liaises with local landowners to secure public access to all riverside areas, whether through negotiations to transfer the land directly to the local authority, and/or through providing a commuted sum to maintain the space.