

such, concerns in the public sector mirrored the range of issues identified by the key stakeholder groups discussed in Chapter 5.

INVESTMENT

When asked what the main challenge facing public space management was, the most common answer amongst the 20 authorities was insufficient financial resources. The lack of resources for staff was a key problem, particularly for enforcement activities, hands-on maintenance roles, and to coordinate activities. In Sandwell, for example, grounds staff have been reduced from 220 to 30 in 20 years, and despite increased mechanisation, the service is under extreme strain. In other places, the ongoing management costs associated with physical regeneration had been causing a strain and had not been factored into regeneration activities. Greenwich fell into this category, where much regeneration activity is delivering large areas of new development, but where severe resource constraints on the local authority are preventing it from managing the new public spaces to the standard it would like.

Even the relatively wealthy Corporation of London reported resourcing and staffing problems, and at the time of interview had only one dedicated fulltime enforcement officer for public space in the Square Mile. In relation to enforcement, local authority officers were often well aware of the lack of police support to help in regulation and enforcement activities. In this regard, enforcing fixed penalty notices seems particularly difficult for local authorities. Not only is it time-consuming and staff-intensive to issue notices, but authorities reported that it is difficult to successfully prosecute those who do not pay.

In an innovative move to improve efficiency and to overcome the lack of enforcement staff, Newcastle retrained traffic wardens to issue fixed penalty notices for litter, on top of their normal duties. However, only a small number of authorities argued that there was still scope to operate more efficiently within existing resource levels. Instead, most described doing the best they could with limited resources. This attitude was typified by a Great Yarmouth officer who described his job as ‘to decide how best to do things with the finances we have available’.

A number of suggestions were made to improve the resource problems. Local authorities were particularly keen to have greater financial flexibility when managing public space. Kensington and Chelsea, for example, argued that local authority parking reserves should not be ring-fenced for highways improvements, as stipulated by central government, but should be available for the local authority to spend anywhere in the public realm. Similarly, Southwark suggested that monies received under Section 106 planning agreements should be available for spending on projects not directly related to the specific development being considered for planning

permission. By contrast, Harlow argued that funds granted by government under the national spending formula for the management of public space should be ring-fenced to prevent them being used to fund other political priorities.

Many of the emerging good practice local authorities reported their concern with the numerous public sector funding streams which authorities rely upon for public space investment, including regeneration and lottery schemes, but also that each has a particular emphasis and are rarely joined up. Authorities faced a number of barriers to access this funding. First, the funding is often delivered in compartments covering particular types of public space or management processes, so that new investment, when it comes, may not match local priorities. Second, public space investment does not cover all aspects of public space management, for example, public conveniences are rated as a high priority by the public, but often fall outside of dedicated funding streams and so tend to be neglected. Third, competitive funding is costly to bid for, putting pressure on scarce local authority staff, and making it difficult for small authorities to access funds. Finally, many public funding streams are focused on capital spend, and tend to ignore longer-term public space management issues altogether.

Local authorities reported that this bias to capital investment over revenue expenditure was a major problem. Thus, although most regeneration projects that deliver new public spaces allow for some limited post-completion maintenance, funding quickly runs out. Projects funded through the National Lottery often do not cover revenue expenditure at all, and tend to assume maintenance procedures and resources that are not realistic for limited local authority budgets. Some interviewees suggested that these problems needed to be overcome through harder bargaining with sponsors, others that Section 106 resources should be used for maintenance.

It was clear, however, that the local authorities themselves also share the blame for under-investment. Many authorities, for example, were ready to admit that they had not developed a coherent strategy through which to frame public space investment. One local authority officer mentioned that development decisions taken at sub-committee level do not always fit with overall council strategies for public space. Others suggested that there is limited knowledge of the different public space funding sources and their requirements by local authority officers. This specific barrier dates from practice that until recently ensured that officers responsible for public space management acted as service providers only, and were not concerned with the more strategic processes of policy-making, resourcing, or making a case for their activities.

Most authorities reported that the changing macro-context within which they operate was negatively impacting on public space. For example, three-quarters of the interviewed local authorities named the