

To sum up these two relationships, between the state and, first, the community and second, the private sector; the former might be seen as a community-oriented rather than community-centred approach, whilst the latter amounted to an acceptance of varied market involvement in a pragmatic manner, but with little stomach for a market-centred approach. In this sense, both the community and the market were seen as partners in, but not drivers of, public space management. This contrasted with how the public sector increasingly saw themselves, as the instigators and arbiters of a more controlled environment, in which the interests of the majority, rather than the activities of any particular minority groups, was the priority.

Overcoming the challenges

Key challenges facing local authorities in managing public space are clearly numerous and diverse. Some challenges are old, such as fragmented local authority organisational structures and outdated working practices that do not foster a holistic approach to public space; other challenges are newer, for example high-density, mixed-use public space contexts that are constantly evolving and changing. What is clear is that public space and public space management are concepts which local authorities have not fully grasped, and as such have suffered from a low political priority. However, some authorities are beginning to change their approach to public space management, and in a piece-meal manner, new approaches to managing public space have been emerging.

Indeed, a wide range of initiatives were in place within the 20 local authorities, many of which deal directly with the problems listed above. These included:

- initiatives that involve the restructuring of the way public spaces were managed, towards more focus on crosscutting approaches and joined-up action – these varied from changes in the local authority structures to temporary street scene working groups, liaison offices, creation of single points of contacts and area-based management teams;
- initiatives aimed at making existing resources go further, for example by changing and integrating procurement practices;
- the creation of forums to involve the community and voluntary sector in deciding on public space strategies and actions;
- initiatives involving partnerships with private sector organisations to fund and implement public spaces improvements;
- initiatives involving the participation of the community in implementing public spaces policies, including neighbourhood and street warden schemes;

- initiatives focusing on safety and crime reduction such as crime reduction partnerships and cleaner and safer environment campaigns.

Many reflect the eight types of management solutions advocated in the range of national research, reports and policy statements on public space. Although few authorities are actively engaged in more than a few of these initiatives, many of the approaches identified in the 20 authorities cut across the different categories.

They suggest in turn eight cross-cutting steps to better practice (Figure 6.1) that represent a somewhat idealised iterative process of public space management that should start and end by monitoring the context in order to devise a plan for action. In this regard, the problems and pressures might equally be viewed as opportunities: opportunities for a radical re-think of priorities and processes; and opportunities to move towards more sustainable models of urban management.

Redefining roles and responsibilities?

Overall, the picture that emerges is a complex one. It is not so much about the retreat of the state and consequent privatisation of public space, but instead reflects a limited transfer of powers and responsibilities for its management to a range of stakeholders, varying in degree from place to place and from one type of public space to another. Although there are instances of a corporate thrust towards control of some high-value public spaces whose quality more directly affects business performance, often this transfer of power also implies the involvement of residents and user groups in management processes through neighbourhood management initiatives. Moreover the finding that some authorities are more concerned to create a seamless public space network, rather than necessarily seamless ownership or management responsibility, was important as it emphasises that with the right public-interest management regime in place, safeguarded by appropriate agreements and/or powers, the actual ownership (and potential privatisation) of space may not matter.

As with similar changes in other spheres of public-sector provision, different stakeholders have assumed a variety of roles in policy design and implementation as a response to changing demands over public spaces that defy the capacities of existing governing arrangements. Through redefining roles and responsibilities in the provision of public space services, stakeholders are seeking a more effective way of producing collectively agreed policy outcomes (in this case, the long-term preservation of a degree of quality in public spaces), although here, as elsewhere, the definition of collectivity is a matter of debate.