

A hypothesis suggested by the research findings is that these collaborative arrangements of multiple stakeholders seem to be emerging particularly strongly in this field because the management of public space is in many regards a new area of policy. The absence of a previous codification of roles and responsibilities with a focus on public space quality, of an established policy culture with clear expectations in terms of responsibilities and power, and of clearly defined and widely accepted routines, is likely to have made it easier for local stakeholders to be more receptive to collaborative forms of policy making and delivery. There is certainly evidence of similar processes in the field of environmental policy and new areas of social policy in the UK and elsewhere (see Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Andersen and van Kempen 2001).

The restructuring of public space management reveals an ongoing process of refocusing separate public services and their respective policies around the locus of their delivery – the public spaces. As already mentioned, if this was true in the past for many parks and green areas, it was certainly not the case for the majority of public spaces. Although this is still a process in its early stages, it already suggests the emergence of a better-defined field of policy, concerned with public space quality, focusing on the processes of management and maintenance, encompassing national policy and local initiatives, and with its own practices, programmes, policy actors and stakeholders.

Borrowing from Marsh's (1998) concept of policy networks, this suggests that restructuring seems to be leading to the definition and consolidation of new networks focusing on public space management issues. Emerging multi-sector public space governance mechanisms, such as town centre management companies, area management partnerships, BIDs and neighbourhood management schemes are the most structured ways of formally arranging roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in a policy field in the process of definition and consolidation.

Finally, although most of the processes described in this chapter are still tentative, there are clear signs that they are already changing the shape of public space management practices. The more defined policy focus on public spaces in their own right revealed in many national and local initiatives, together with the formation of explicit coalitions of interests around public spaces have increased the profile of public space issues within local governance institutions and have, therefore, put public space

services in a better position to compete for policy attention and resources. This increase in profile for public spaces seems to have gone hand-in-hand with a better collective understanding of their roles in achieving a wide range of policy objectives. The recent emphasis on public space quality and its long-term management in the prominent urban regeneration interventions of large English local authorities such as Manchester and Birmingham seems to confirm that.

At the same time, the collaborative arrangements that have emerged for the implementation and long-term management of public space, even if still localised and incipient, are already signalling a weakening of conceptions of management based on narrow, functional views of such spaces. As users, dwellers and others get a say in what happens to the streets and squares they use, it becomes increasingly less possible to see and treat these public spaces as mono-functional containers of facilities, infrastructure or movement corridors.

Therefore, the interplay of national initiatives and local responses and actions, based on a broader understanding of public spaces and cross-sector policy making and delivery, is shaping a public space management policy field that has the potential to be more effective, more responsive to context and thus more relevant to promoting 'liveability' in urban areas. A better understanding of this new policy field and its governance is required to fully understand these new arrangements, their potential and their limitations.

It is yet to be seen whether the increasing interest at the national level will be sustained enough to move practice decisively on from the top-down, or alternatively whether – in time – the bottom-up innovations being introduced by the sorts of local authorities discussed in this chapter will spread and become more widely adopted. Presently, the evidence in England suggests that the top-down initiatives from national government have been important in beginning to inspire a burgeoning range of local initiatives below. Equally, a number of local authorities are beginning to establish a corresponding bottom-up agenda that seems to offer potential for better public space management in the future. Unfortunately, as the national survey demonstrated, the vast majority of local authorities still have a long way to go. The next chapters in this book will show that many of the problems experienced in England, as well as some of the burgeoning solutions, are universal.