

The switch from government to governance was nevertheless decisive in encouraging an increased focus on the complex, crosscutting and seemingly intractable policy problems, of which recent trends in the management of public space were a part. It has meant a redefinition of how such services are funded and delivered, including a new emphasis on the potential of private and community stakeholders to play a role across each of the four process of public space management. Today, in different places, different management approaches are being adopted, each representing variations or combinations to different degrees of three key management models:

- the state-centred model, the traditional approach to public service delivery offering clear accountability in the public interest but often at greater cost, unresponsiveness and bureaucracy;
- the market-centred model, allowing a greater flow of resources from a wider constituency, and often greater efficiency and responsiveness, but at the cost of fragmentation and the potential for exclusion and commodification;
- the community-centred model, offering a greater sensitivity and commitment to local user needs, but with the danger of fragmentation and inequality in the provision of services.

Management on the ground: everyday practice

The choice involves an increasingly complex trade-off between different dimensions of service quality and control that also underpin many of the critiques of contemporary public space and its management. It is predicated on the idea of an enabling public sector, rather than an all-delivering one, and in places like the UK this has led to a multiplicity of delivery agencies, actors and organisations; although not necessarily to better services. In England, for example, the New Public Management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s led to a switch from state to market provision, although, the weight of evidence presented in Chapter 5 suggests, in pursuit of a cost-cutting agenda, rather than one of service improvement. The quality of public space was a prime casualty, a process that continued well into the second New Labour administration (post-2001) when the political significance of what had been seen until then as the rather prosaic concern for the quality of the local environment, began to dawn.

Surveying the state of public space management in England in the immediate aftermath of this realisation, the evidence suggested that although this area of public sector responsibility was in need of significant reform, the new emphasis from national government was beginning to inspire a burgeoning range of bottom-up initiatives from local government below. Elsewhere, services were fragmented, partial, and lacking any

real vision about how they might be improved in the future, indeed the range of stakeholder groups interviewed concluded that problems across coordination, investment, regulatory and maintenance dimensions of the public space management process were endemic. In such places, the concept of public space as a complex yet unified single entity was completely lacking, and instead, the focus remained on the delivery of discrete tasks, that may, but usually did not, add-up to an integrated management strategy.

Where evidence was found of more sophisticated practice, often this has been accompanied by a redefinition and redistribution of roles and responsibilities within the state sector, and between the state and the private and community sectors. Indeed, amongst many stakeholder groups, the limitations of the state-centred model were obvious, and greater use of market and community-centred models were seen as desirable. This, however, needs to be achieved on the basis of a mutually supportive three-way partnership, with an end to the ‘us’ and ‘them’ exploitative philosophy. Overwhelmingly, however, the balance of power, and therefore responsibility, for this area of policy still remains with local government, and moves away from state-centred provision have been tentative.

Management on the ground: innovative practice

The political realisation that the quality of public space represented a significant local political factor in England, led, from 2001 onwards, to an increasing range of policy pronouncements, reports, and initiatives designed to shake up the sector. The outcome was an endorsement of local government’s role as the central provider of public space services, whilst extending the rights of private interests to play a decisive role through the creation of business improvement districts (BIDs). Although the results of the national survey tended to endorse the introduction of BIDs (no doubt reflecting the poor performance of the public sector across large swathes of the country), the range of innovative local authorities explored in Chapter 6 tended to confirm the British government’s faith that local government could – given the right level of resourcing, support and know-how – substantially improve public space services.

This phase of the work largely confirmed the complex range of barriers to the better coordination, regulation, investment and everyday maintenance of public spaces, but also a willingness to work with community and private sector partners to overcome these. The former focused primarily on involvement rather than the devolution of power, and amounted to a community-oriented, rather than a community-centred view. The latter also shied clear of a full-scale transfer of power, and instead amounted to a pragmatic willingness to work with the private sector as and when market involvement was seen to deliver benefits. Both the community and