

Chapter 5

One country, multiple endemic public space management problems

Through a national survey of urban local authorities in England, this first chapter in Part Two explores the approaches of English local government to the management of external public space. It is the first of two linked chapters that explore current and developing practice in England from the perspective of what the public sector is actually doing to manage public space. As such, it focuses on what was referred to in Chapter 4 as the state-centred model of public space management, the model that is still dominant throughout the world today. The discussion begins by introducing the local government context within which public space is managed in England and briefly explores evidence for a decline in the quality of public space and the services charged with its management. Next the research methodology is discussed for this and the next chapter. The third and main part of the chapter reports on the outcomes from the national survey itself, whilst a fourth section links the findings to a related study to gauge the opinions of key user groups on the state of public space management in England.

The state of English public space, and its management

The empirical research upon which this book is based began in 2002 with a deliberately broad focus, examining the management of the full gamut of public space types encompassed in the typology in Chapter 3 (Table 3.1) and the definition in Chapter 1. In subsequent chapters the focus is narrowed to particular forms of public space from the typology; public open space (Chapters 7 and 8) and civic space (Chapters 9 and 10).

In England, responsibility for managing the wide range of spaces that fall under the adopted definition usually resides with local authorities. A national survey of local authority approaches and policy concerning the management of public space was therefore conducted in 2003, the aim being to establish a baseline of knowledge about what might be described as ‘normal’ practice across the county, whilst also seeking to uncover innovative practice that might point towards more effective public space management in the future. Chapter 6 goes on to examine in greater depth the views and experiences of twenty local authorities that exhibited such innovations.

Local government in England

Before discussing public space management specifically, it is first important to establish the broader context within which local government in England operated at the time of the survey. Since 1997 Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ administration had been active in implementing what has been collectively described as a Modernising Local Government agenda. Thus 1999 saw the first of a series of Local Government Acts that formed the legislative basis for these changes. In fact this drive for ‘modernisation’ was not an isolated programme, but instead sat as part of a much larger tide of change worldwide characterised as the ‘new public management’ (NPM)¹.

Central to this agenda has been the idea that public services should be managed in a rational fashion, drawing lessons from private sector performance management which itself has roots in management accounting. The legislative programme arose from an analysis of local government that was highly critical of both political and managerial decision making and that was itself part of a much broader programme of reform in the public sector.