

well-being of their communities) and local strategic partnerships (LSPs), designed to bring the public and private stakeholders together to plan the future for their areas (DTLR 2001). In part this was to be achieved through the production of community strategies as the vision and coordinating framework for investment and public sector services. The over-riding emphasis became one of public–private partnership in the delivery of services, replacing the earlier regime that could be characterised as a gradual private takeover.

The government proposed to manage the whole reform process through a national framework of standards and accountability, by setting out the comprehensive ‘best value’ performance framework, accompanied by a substantial package of deregulation. The framework comprised:

- defined priorities and performance standards – the latter encapsulated in the national best value performance indicators;
- regular performance assessments – most notably the national best value reviews, with inspections undertaken of local authorities by the Audit Commission;
- coordinated incentives – rewards and tools which address the assessment of results, including publicised performance information; freedoms, powers and flexibility over resources; action to tackle failing councils; and national/local agreements over service standards.

The White Paper proposed to accompany the increase in responsibility and accountability with removal of restrictions on planning, spending and decision-making within high-performing local government departments, with a view to encouraging more innovation and improved quality. However, by tying the freedoms to performance, a system of ‘carrots and sticks’ was effectively created. It built on the foundations of the 1999 Local Government Act which outlined that ‘from April 2000, the duty of Best Value will require local authorities to make continuous improvements in the way they exercise their function, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness’.

For local authorities, a particular bonus of the new system was the removal of the former requirement to tender for, and if necessary contract out, their services under the auspices of the much derided compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). In its time, CCT undoubtedly drove down the costs of providing public services, but very often this was achieved at the expense of service and delivery standards. The public space remit provided a case in point, leading in the process to a decimation of local government capacity and capabilities in this area of responsibility.

The public space/management context

For this and other reasons, the recent story of public space management in England has not been a happy one. Some of the most graphic examples of a general failure to manage public space were captured by the joint CABE/BBC Radio 4 initiative ‘Streets of Shame’ which called for nominations for the UK’s best and worst streets. Following thousands of nominations, the five best and five worst streets of 2002 were chosen (Boxes 5.1 and 5.2). The results and the comments from nominees were instructive and revealed that what was identified as good and bad by nominees usually represented two sides of the same coin (Figure 5.1).

They also confirmed that much of the perception that users form about space, and whether that perception is positive or negative, relates to how space is managed and maintained, rather than to its original design. Therefore, although all the qualities in Figure 5.1 (except the first) relate in some way or other to the original design and layout of the streets, all (except perhaps the last) correspond more strongly to the way streets are cared for following their original construction.

A comprehensive and objective assessment of the state of public space in England is not yet available, although a range of evidence gathered shortly after the start of the second Tony Blair administration, when the Prime Minister himself was backing action on this front (see Chapter 1), suggested that the challenge faced by public space managers was substantial.

First, on the quality of public space:

- Polling company MORI’s ongoing work tracking the perceptions of around 100 local authorities revealed a falling satisfaction with the street scene as a whole and with street cleaning in particular. They argue, ‘[i]n longitudinal survey after survey, the trends are negative’; a trend that contrasts strongly with rising satisfaction in the ‘big ticket’ services that have benefited from targeted funds and strong inspection regimes (MORI 2002). The work has revealed that highways and pavements is the worst-rated local government service.
- Results from the first ‘Local Environmental Quality Survey of England’ undertaken by the environmental charity ENCAMS (2002) across 11,000 sites and 12 ‘land-use’ classes revealed that 50 per cent of the local environmental elements surveyed were registered as unsatisfactory. These included litter, detritus, weed control, staining, highways, pavement obstructions, street furniture condition and landscaping (Table 5.1). Although there has been some improvement since, the improvement is often from a very low ebb.
- A self-assessment by 85 per cent of UK local authorities of their green spaces undertaken for the Urban Parks Forum (2001)