

THE POLITICAL IMPACT

Collectively, the evidence indicated that a step change was required in both the quality of public space and the quality of the services that deliver and manage it. For its part, the New Labour government slowly, although increasingly, became aware of the importance of public space concerns to the general public, responding during its second and third terms with policy and legislation to improve both public spaces and their management.

The government's vision and strategic policy for public spaces were set out in the policy document *Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener* (ODPM 2002), in which a foreword by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, emphasised the importance of public space management:

The quality of our public spaces affects the quality of all our lives. It affects how we feel about where we live, where we work and where our children play. Successful, thriving and prosperous communities are characterised by streets, parks, and open spaces that are clean, safe, attractive – areas that people are proud of and want to spend their time. Tackling failure such as litter, graffiti, fly-tipping, abandoned cars, dog fouling, the loss of play areas or footpaths, for many people is the top public service priority.

(ODPM 2002: 5)

The document argued that the role of local authorities is crucial to delivering high quality external public spaces as they are ultimately responsible for managing the vast majority of public spaces within their areas. It also accepted that it is there that greatest room for improvement lay.

A national survey commissioned in support of the 'Streets of Shame' initiative found that the political importance of high-quality public spaces is just as significant for local authorities, even if – it seems – less appreciated. One in three people believed that there had been a decline in their local environment over the last three years, and over half of those polled said they would be willing to pay an extra £20 on their council tax to improve the appearance of their local area (CABE 2002). The survey reported in the remainder of this chapter suggests that most local authorities in England have some way to go if their management practice is to attract such support.

Research methodology

A methodology based around a survey and follow-up key stakeholder interviews and case studies was chosen in order to understand the relationships between different management processes, and as a means to examine innovative practice. The approach attempted to:

- understand the range of contributors and contributions (positive and negative);
- explore everyday policy and practice;
- identify and examine innovative practice;
- suggest how approaches to managing external public space can be refined in the future.

The national survey

A survey pro-forma was sent, along with a covering letter, by post, to the chief executives of 290 local authorities in England. The content of the survey can be summarised in terms of four key questions concerning local authorities' approach to public space and its management. The discussion in the next section follows this same structure, and covers:

- 1 Where responsibility for public space management is located within local authority structures
- 2 Whether the local authority has an integrated strategy for managing public space
- 3 What 'innovative' practice examples or initiatives are taking place within the local authority area
- 4 What local authority public space related policy and documentation exists to guide management processes.

The 290 local authorities were selected from the total 388 local authorities in England using the DTLR (2002a) 'List of Urban Areas in England', which excludes those authorities of a predominately rural nature. This was done to reflect what the Urban Task Force (1999: 26–7) had labelled the major challenge; to address liveability issues in urban areas. The response meant that about a quarter of the urban local authorities in England were analysed, reflecting also a range of local authority types and a regional spread.