Key user groups opinion

A further element of the research aimed to tease out a range of 'official' responses from organisations representing key stakeholder groups, in order to better define the problems and to identify additional innovative practice. Interviews with 18 key user groups followed using a structured interview schedule.

Government organisations:

1   Audit Commission
2   Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)
3   English Heritage
4   Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)
5   Local Government Association

Professional/industry organisations:

6   Association of Chief Police Officers
7   Association of Municipal Engineers
8   Association of Town Centre Managers
9   Institute of Civil Engineers
10 Institute of Highways and Transportation
11 Landscape Institute
12 Royal Town Planning Institute
13 British Retail Consortium

Campaigning delivery organisations:

14 ENCAMS (environmental campaigns)
15 Living Streets
16 Secured by Design
17 Groundwork (community-based consultants)
18 SITA (contractors)

Most interviews were undertaken person-to-person, with a small minority by telephone.

Innovative practice

From the responses to the national survey and stakeholder interviews, 20 local authorities were selected as case studies to further explore current public space management and emerging innovations in practice. The interview questions derived from issues arising from the national survey, and through an interrogation of the literature and government reports and policy documents.

The 20 local authorities were chosen by selecting survey returns that looked to address public space management in interesting or innovative ways, or suggested that the authority had an integrated strategy (or something close to one) for managing public space. Interviewee authorities were also chosen to represent different sizes of authority, different public space contexts and a regional spread. Interviews were conducted with 26 local authority officers, with different responsibilities for public space and levels of seniority from a range of local authority departments. This element of the research is discussed in the next chapter.

Managing public space in England: what is going on?

Local authority structures for managing public space

Because public space management occurs in different structures in different local authorities, the survey pro-forma and covering letter were addressed to the chief executive of each local authority, and were usually re-directed from there to the appropriate department. This was the first test for local authorities, as where the letters were re-directed reflected who the chief executive in each case perceived was primarily responsible for public space and its management in the authority. The fact that the initial letter and pro-forma and a subsequent reminder letter were frequently sent to different departments graphically demonstrated something of the confusion that the concept of public space creates in English local government, and the resulting fragmented management structure. More worryingly, it implied that in some cases the chief executives themselves were not too sure who was responsible for managing public space in their authority.

Nearly half the replies came from a local authority department that was responsible – amongst other functions – for a combination of generic public space functions, with at least two of the following in its title: planning, transportation, development, regeneration, and leisure. Typical department titles included: Environment and Development, Environment and Sustainability, Planning and Leisure, Regeneration and Development, Planning and Transportation, Technical and Amenity Services.

A quarter of the responses were from departments responsible for open, green, landscape, or countryside public space functions. This reflected the fact that when asked about external public space, and provided with the definition of public space established in Chapter 1, many local authorities still thought primarily in terms of green spaces, rather than urban spaces. This is especially the case in semi-rural areas or where responsibility for public space was split between the county tier (responsible for highways) and the district tier (responsible for other aspects of local streets).