

# The social value of public spaces



Public spaces play a vital role in the social and economic life of communities. New kinds of public spaces and meeting places are now being created in towns and cities, which can be an important social resource.

In this summary of research projects undertaken in England and Wales, Ken Worpole and Katharine Knox explore how people use both traditional and new public spaces, and how these places function, often successfully, sometimes not. The summary provides clear evidence of the importance of public space in successful regeneration policies, and for creating sustainable communities.



## Key findings

- Public spaces (including high streets, street markets, shopping precincts, community centres, parks, playgrounds, and neighbourhood spaces in residential areas) play a vital role in the social life of communities. They act as a ‘self-organising public service’, a shared resource in which experiences and value are created (Mean and Tims, 2005). These social advantages may not be obvious to outsiders or public policy-makers.
- Public spaces offer many benefits: the ‘feel-good’ buzz from being part of a busy street scene; the therapeutic benefits of quiet time spent on a park bench; places where people can display their culture and identities and learn awareness of diversity and difference; opportunities for children and young people to meet, play or simply ‘hang out’. All have important benefits and help to create local attachments, which are at the heart of a sense of community.
- The success of a particular public space is not solely in the hands of the architect, urban designer or town planner; it relies also on people adopting, using and managing the space – people make places, more than places make people.
- The use of public spaces varies according to the time of day and day of the week, and is affected by what is on offer in a particular place at a particular time. In one town centre studied there was a clear rhythm to the day, with older people shopping in the central market early on, children and young people out at the end of the school day, and young adults dominating the town centre at night.
- Some groups may be self-segregating in their use of different public spaces at different times, with social norms affecting how and whether people engage with others. Public spaces are a particular and distinct resource for young people looking to socialise with others. However, groups of young people are sometimes perceived as having antisocial intentions, which in many cases is simply not true.
- Retailing and commercial leisure activities dominate town centres, and though public space can act as a ‘social glue’ the research found that in some places ‘the society that is being held together is a stratified one, in which some groups are routinely privileged over others’ (Holland et al, 2006). So, for instance, young and older people are discouraged from frequenting shopping areas by lack of seating or (for groups of younger people) by being ‘moved on’.



- The research challenges several current government policy assumptions concerning public space. The ‘urban renaissance’ agenda appears too concerned with matters of urban design, as well as being distinctly metropolitan in character. The majority of public spaces that people use are local spaces they visit regularly, often quite banal in design, or untidy in their activities or functions (such as street markets and car boot sales), but which nevertheless retain important social functions.
- The research questions whether the government’s emphasis on crime and safety in public spaces is depriving them of their historic role as a place where differences of lifestyles and behaviour are tolerated and co-exist. What is considered ‘antisocial behaviour’ may vary from street to street, from one public situation to the next, or from one person to the next.
- It is also important for policy-makers and practitioners to recognise that so-called marginal or problem groups, such as young people, or street sex workers, are also a part of the community. Definitions of ‘community’ that exclude particular groups are of questionable legitimacy in the long term.
- Regeneration strategies or policing approaches intended to ‘design out crime’ can end up ‘designing out’ people. Approaches that strip public spaces of all features vulnerable to vandalism or misuse actively discourage local distinctiveness and public amenity.

## Introduction: Challenging conceptions of public spaces

The concept of what 'public spaces' are changes over time. The public spaces examined in the research projects cited here include areas traditionally deemed as public open spaces, such as high streets, street markets, parks, playgrounds and allotments. The projects also explored places that are widely used by the public but may be privately owned, including shopping precincts and arts centres, and other fora where members of the public might convene, such as car boot sales.

Some studies also looked at the use of less typical places, termed 'quasi-public spaces' or 'micro-spaces', such as station forecourts, and stairwells or street corners of housing estates. Many of these spaces have been characterised as 'everyday spaces' (Mean and Tims, 2005), a term that conveys something of their casual, daily, functional use.

In this sense, the public spaces surveyed went beyond the definition of 'public space' currently prevailing in urban design policies based on the urban renaissance agenda. These often tend to concentrate on town centres and metropolitan spaces, where retailing and tourism needs and interests (and inter-city competitiveness) are considered to be the more important strategic goals. As one study noted, 'Discussions on regeneration in central and local government as well as the media are typically dominated by architectural and design prescriptions about what constitutes good-quality public space' (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006).

The public spaces discussed here encompass those neighbourhood spaces that are less clearly in the regeneration policy spotlight but are important to the government's cleaner, safer, greener agenda as in the Communities and Local Government's reports, *Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener* (2002) and *Living Places: Caring for Quality* (2004).

When added together, the individual interviews, street surveys, focus groups and observation exercises conducted through the JRF's Public Spaces Programme's research represent one of the largest reviews of the use of everyday public spaces undertaken.

## Key findings

### *Public space is not shrinking, but expanding*

Contrary to conventional assumptions, public space in neighbourhoods, towns and cities is not in decline but is instead expanding. Concerns have been expressed that open and uncontrolled public spaces, sites of 'unpredictable encounter', have been increasingly privatised and made subject to controls and surveillance. While this was evident in some of the studies, this programme suggests there is a need to reframe debates more broadly in light of how people use different places.

There has been a tendency to confine notions of public space to traditional outdoor spaces that are in public ownership, but opportunities for association and exchange are not so limited. Gatherings at the school gate, activities in community facilities, shopping malls, cafés and car boot sales are all arenas where people meet and create places of exchange. To members of the public, it is not the ownership of places or their appearance that makes them 'public', but their shared use for a diverse range of activities by a range of different people. If considered in this way, almost any place regardless of its ownership or appearance offers potential as public space.

### *The rhythms of use of public space*

There are distinct rhythms and patterns to the use of public spaces, by time of day, day of week and even season. In Aylesbury a team worked with co-researchers from the local community to observe a whole range of spaces, from the town centre to residential areas, over the course of a year.

The study found that town centre public spaces had particular rhythms of use connected to business, retailing and the working day. Older people were more in evidence in the mornings when markets were operating, while





adults would frequent the town centre at lunchtime; in the evening the town centre was dominated by young adults eating and drinking. Patterns of use differed considerably on market days and non-market days. Particular areas would be busier at certain times, for example school pupils would be seen in the park at the end of the school day.

Protection from the weather had a significant effect on the vibrancy of the street scene. For example, Aylesbury attempted to promote a continental-style 'café culture' with outdoor seating in one of the town's squares, but this was regularly empty of people. Indoor shopping malls maintained a steady clientele compared to outdoor shopping streets. Elsewhere, covered markets also often benefited from being sheltered. Not surprisingly, the parks and other outdoor spaces were used for different purposes in winter and summer, and by different groups. Public festivals or organised entertainments were popular and helped to animate public space, but so were locally organised or more spontaneous events such as sporting activities in the park or trips by local walking groups around town.

The research found little evidence of conflict in public spaces, although there was often some contest for space. How and whether people engaged with others was affected by social norms. Many people avoided conflict by staying away from areas renowned for late-night

drinking, so that the inclusive day-time spaces became exclusive by night. But in general observation showed that individuals and groups tended to accommodate the presence of others as they tried to sustain their own preferences and need for personal space.

Self-segregation, whereby people tended to sit apart from people they did not know, or occupied different parts of a place, was a key way in which people managed co-existence in public areas. Provided public spaces are as inclusive as possible, this self-segregation can be seen as contributing to rather than challenging community development.

#### *Public spaces play a vital role in the social life of communities*

The social value of public space is wide ranging and lies in the contribution it makes to 'people's attachment to their locality and opportunities for mixing with others, and in people's memory of places' (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006). Places can provide opportunities for social interaction, social mixing and social inclusion, and can facilitate the development of community ties.

People interviewed in Newham said that their regular visits to the street market provided a 'feel-good' factor due to the buzz of activity, though they also appreciated 'places of retreat, such as parks, a cemetery, or footpaths



that are close to water...[which] provided opportunities for reflection, or the chance to escape from domestic pressures' (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006).

For parents with young children, 'the presence of local facilities was acknowledged...as a central aspect in allegiances to neighbourhood'. In Swindon, some people used local facilities on an almost daily basis because, in the words of one interviewee, 'I like to sit and watch people' (Mean and Tims, 2005).

Street markets were particularly important social hubs. As well as providing opportunities for meeting friends, people enjoyed the banter with familiar street traders. 'You get to know the stall holders as well and they know you... and you often meet up with people you haven't seen for a while,' said a female shopper at Ludlow market (Watson with Studdert, 2006). Surveys of shoppers in Coventry, Sheffield and Tooting, found that up to 95 per cent of those interviewed endorsed the statement that, 'I usually bump into people I know when out in the shopping area' (Jones et al., 2007).

Some places were especially important for particular groups within the community. Markets, for example, were found to be important places for older people: 'The single most striking finding about who uses markets as social spaces is how crucial they are in the daily life of older

people – more than for any other group' (Watson with Studdert, 2006). The banter of street traders could be important for those with more limited networks. As one trader noted:

'You do notice more on a Tuesday when it is more older people. You know they tend to have a good look round, want to have a chat with you. And you do see the same faces; more or less the same times each day, each week.'  
(Watson with Studdert, 2006).

Local high streets in areas outside town centres (examined in Tooting, Coventry and Sheffield) were generally found to be inclusive places, serving a wide range of their communities in surrounding residential areas, with many people coming on foot to buy goods and access facilities as well as meet friends. Despite these achievements, it was clear that in debates about sustainable communities, 'the traditional mixed-use high street has been overlooked and undervalued by both the major custodians of key parts of the street – the traffic engineer and the town planner' (Jones et al., 2007).

Neighbourhood spaces were important places for people to come together, but their significance varied. In Newham, some individuals suffering racial harassment preferred the anonymity afforded by busy high street

and market areas. For children, however, the enjoyment of free time in local public spaces was highlighted in a study examining young people's perceptions of social difference. In public space they could make friends and learn some of the rules of communal life and play. Children still played traditional street games as well as engaging in den-building on waste ground, despite a common belief that children no longer play like this: 'Our findings challenge this assumption and show that open public space is particularly important in enhancing communal street play' (Sutton et al., forthcoming).

*Public spaces facilitate the exchange of ideas, friendships, goods and skills*

Cities and neighbourhoods could not survive without spaces in which all kinds of personal, cultural and economic exchanges occur:

At their best, public spaces act like a self-organising public service; just as hospitals and schools provide a shared resource to improve people's quality of life, public spaces form a shared spatial resource from which experiences and value are created in ways that are not possible in our private lives alone. (Mean et al., 2005)

The exchange of goods and services – such as food and household goods – are still important determinants of what creates vibrant public spaces. But transactions can also take a social form, for example through education and play or sharing ideas. In allotments people trade produce, and they also share tips on how to grow their vegetables. The public realm also provides a forum for people of different backgrounds to mingle and develop awareness of others who are different from themselves.

According to one Pakistani woman interviewed in Newham about Queens Market,

'People tolerate each other when they are in the market. You might bump into each other....It doesn't matter. You move on. In that sense you get to know people....We meet different cultures. I might be buying vegetables that I don't know how to cook, and the lady from another part of India will tell me how to cook it.' (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006)

Markets are a place where people from diverse backgrounds meet and exchange ideas in a way which might not occur elsewhere:

'Next to the Bengalis selling biscuits is a Jewish guy selling curtains. They would never have met a Jewish bloke...those Bengali guys, it's most unlikely that they'd find themselves in a colleague situation where they can ask questions, they can joke with him.... I can't see another space where that could possibly happen. You could set up a society to bring Jews and Muslims together: he wouldn't turn up and they wouldn't turn up, because these sorts of outfits attract special people.' (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006)

Public spaces can also operate as places of exchange for services and goods regarded as undesirable, such as sex and drugs. Street sex work has been carried out in many towns for decades and, though it is in decline, its effects can be moderated by effective community liaison and mediation as well as local clean-up programmes. The cutting down of trees and bushes, taking out of street furniture in misused public spaces punishes everybody; more considered approaches may prove more effective. The closure of public toilets in local high streets has also been a detrimental side effect of attempts to combat antisocial behaviour.

Antisocial behaviour can lead to zoning policies with exclusionary impacts. At least one town centre studied



was now designated an 'alcohol-free zone' where drinking in the street was a criminal offence. Given the evidence that for most of the time and for most people, public space is a universal resource, and largely self-regulating, this might be regarded as a worrying trend.

*People make places: the 'co-production' of public space*

In contrast to the idea that public space can be solely defined in spatial terms, as a particular set of configurations of urban design and construction, all of the research cited in this summary suggests that public space is 'co-produced'. That is to say, it only comes into being when it is activated by the presence of people according to dynamic and changing patterns and timetables. This can lead to the association of particular places with particular people or activities, including the 'ethnic labelling of public spaces' as particular ethnic communities become associated with certain markets or shopping streets – with both positive and negative results (Dines and Cattell et al., 2006).

Among the more successful social spaces examined were places that encouraged people to play a role in the evolution of activities and to help shape these places. In Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, used by over 150 community groups over the course of a year, people are

encouraged to get involved and develop their own ideas for activities. The concourse has a chameleon life, used as a part-time office by home workers tapping into the free wi-fi service, by young mums as a toddlers group, by community groups as a meeting space, as well as a place for couples to have a post-film debrief or young people to meet.

Car boot sales were another example of the 'co-production' of spaces between site owners and users; here people can directly affect and define what is on offer and the dynamic can change from one week to the next, with people able to change roles from trader to consumer to explore what is on offer.

*Not everybody is equal in public spaces*

Some people are not always welcomed in public spaces – some uses no longer fulfil traditional normative expectations of what is considered to be appropriate behaviour, and some groups can be privileged over others. For example, local parks may often be used by young people for hanging out, or by groups of street drinkers. In the absence of other facilities or spaces for these groups, this might be regarded as legitimate, as long as no harm is caused to others.



## What are the main features of successful social spaces?

The study of a wide variety of public spaces in Cardiff, Preston and Swindon (Mean and Tims 2005) suggested the following 'rules of engagement' were important in creating shared social spaces:

- access and availability – good physical access, welcoming spaces and extended opening hours;
- invitations by peers and others – embedded in social networks to encourage use;
- exchange-based relationships – moving beyond consumerism to participation in the exchange of goods and services;
- choreography of spaces by discreet good management while also leaving room for self-organisation;
- moving beyond mono-cultures – encouraging diverse groups and activities to share common spaces; and
- avoiding over-regulation of design and space, as security and well-being are more likely to grow out of active use.

The study of markets (Watson with Studdert, 2006) found that in addition to accessibility, the essential attributes of successful markets (criteria which could also apply to other public spaces) included:

- having features that attracted visitors to the site;
- an active and engaged community of traders to provide goods for sale and contribute to the social scene;
- opportunities to linger through the provision of cafés and food vans or 'comfort zones'.

Regulation may seek to define appropriate behaviour but people often fail to abide by official rules. A notice-board outside a park insisting on no skateboarding, no cycling and no ball games except in designated areas was found to be ineffectual, and these activities often did not appear to disrupt public life. Observers of public space increasingly suggest a need for unregulated public spaces that can serve as 'slack spaces' or 'loose spaces', and provide a necessary and useful social function.

In a study of community responses to street sex work in five English and Scottish cities, it was clear that attitudes to their presence on the streets varied from organised opposition, to tolerance or acceptance (Pitcher et al., 2006). Where street sex work was displaced from its

normal operating area in one city – where it had been historically tolerated – as the result of a regeneration scheme, the vulnerability of the women sex workers increased, whilst tensions were aroused among residents for whom the issue became more visible. These more marginalised groups are often overlooked in public space strategies.

The needs and interests of children and young people can also be overlooked, and their presence regarded as intrusive or harmful. In one town centre where a new fountain had been installed, local traders, who regarded it primarily as an attraction to shoppers, resented the fact that children used it as a play facility.

The commercial function of many public spaces can have negative consequences; places of exchange often favour those with spending power, with the result that some people are excluded. In shopping malls, which might be better termed 'quasi-public space', it was suggested that 'commercial operators employ a policy of target marketing and seeking out premium users, thus excluding people who are deemed lower-value users' (Mean and Tims, 2005). Thus some shopping malls restrict the amount of public seating provided (often used by elderly people), or move groups of young people on or out of the mall, as both groups lack spending power and the presence of groups of young people in particular is seen as a deterrent to other users.

Elderly people are frequently marginalised in public space, either for economic reasons or because they fear becoming the victim of crime. The Aylesbury study noted that,

*Older people are actively discouraged from fully using public spaces, especially after dark, by inadequate facilities and transport, security concerns, and a general lack of interesting activities or venues around public places geared for their preferences. Their involvement with an extended or '24 hour' economy will require positive initiatives by both local authorities and local businesses.*  
(Holland et al., 2007)

### *Fear of crime in public spaces may be exaggerated*

While fear of crime can be an issue, contrary to the thrust of some government policies and programmes, there was little evidence that this deterred many people from using public space. Indeed, such fears were often contested in discussions with different people across the studies. However, a number of studies reported that certain local



areas or places had gained poor reputations for safety, and that it was difficult for such areas to reclaim a good reputation once branded.

This 'reputation effect' was exacerbated by the limited experience and mobility of people outside their own neighbourhoods, so while decrying some areas as being unsafe, they had never actually visited them.

*Different people have different stocks of knowledge, time and money, which together help shape their ability to access different spaces and places. We found that young people in particular had a restricted mobility and knowledge of their cities and tended to frequent spaces near their home and school or the city centre at weekends. While this pattern is probably to be expected, their lack of experience of other neighbourhoods tended to generate fear... These perceptions seemed to hold for many people into adulthood, with adults in each of the three case studies citing various neighbourhoods as 'no-go areas'.*  
(Mean and Tims 2005)

By contrast, familiarity with an area could help people to overcome their concerns. A by-product of the research in Aylesbury was that some of the local community researchers changed their views of particular areas that they had seen as a 'no-go zone' prior to visiting them for the project.

#### *Good design and management are important*

The approach taken to design and management of a public space can help or hinder in facilitating people's use of it. Poor signposting inadvertently suggests that there is little of interest in and around town centres other than shopping, and many interesting local features and historic assets often go unnoticed and unvisited. Effective lighting programmes can create a stronger sense of security at dusk or in the evening, particularly for more vulnerable groups and those without cars.

In studies of three local high streets outside city centres, residents and visitors expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range and type of local shops, businesses and other facilities provided, and enjoyed the opportunity to observe street life and meet friends. However, these advantages were offset by a series of negative features, in particular the dominance of road traffic in the design of the streets, the poor appearance and condition of the streets and adjoining facades, and the lack of greenery,

seating and public toilets (Jones et al., 2007). These elements need more consideration.

In Aylesbury it was observed that 'People are drawn to, and tend to stay longer in, public spaces that offer interest and stimulation and/or a degree of comfort. Survey and observation data show that people appreciate and look for special events and activities in public spaces, both locally and in the town centre.' (Holland et al., 2007).

On the other hand, beautifully designed public spaces in the wrong location, with poor connections to retailing, transport and public amenities, can remain unused and empty. Callaghan Square in Cardiff is a newly designed public space with fountains, marble benches and sloping stone floors (and heavy fines for skateboarders). Yet at certain times it struggled to attract and retain people, and was empty and 'soulless'.

Similarly, a new housing development in Aylesbury faced problems emanating from its design and management. The site was designed to include a new town square, but this was subsequently taken over by car parking, and the village bandstand quickly became a meeting point for local young people, much to the annoyance of some residents. Pastiche housing developments that mimic village features, whilst at the same time allowing cars to dominate public space, do little to stimulate community. The gap between design intentions and social outcomes can be very large indeed.

The Aylesbury study (Holland et al., 2007) suggested that the most important elements for 'designing in inclusion' in new public spaces are to:

- include all age groups and social groups in ideas for the design, drawing on public consultation and involvement;
- encourage a strong sense of 'local distinctiveness';
- look at evolving a range of spaces with different security regimes, including 'light touch' regulation.

#### *Multiple ownership and divided responsibilities make the effective management of public spaces difficult*

A study of high streets (Jones et al., 2007) found that not only was ownership of buildings and facilities widely spread, but so too were responsibilities for management, maintenance, security and overall care. Streets have to be maintained: they need to be swept, cables laid, waste removed, graffiti cleaned, pavements repaired, vandalised bus stops and phone boxes mended, trees and shrubs pruned and watered, street and traffic lights looked after,



the safety of citizens secured, car-parking regulated, building regulations monitored, air quality and safety matters checked, and all too often by different agencies operating to different timetables. The indoor shopping mall has far fewer of these difficulties.

The coordination required to address these issues is often missing, though town centre managers can play an important role. The strategic management of public streets and spaces needs to be given greater priority, especially if neighbourhoods and shopping streets are to retain their distinctive character, which so often derives from the multiplicity of owners and long-term historical evolution.

*Regeneration should be about long-term liveability and creating sustainable communities*

In several areas studied, regeneration schemes affecting the public realm were subject to considerable local controversy. A scheme involving the demolition of a much-loved, if somewhat ugly, covered street market in Newham brought to the fore some major issues as to whose interests regeneration programmes are meant to serve. For some people in Newham, regeneration seemed to be principally about beautification, with an element of social engineering intended to attract more affluent, mobile home-buyers, rather than consolidating existing

community facilities, networks and local economies. There were concerns that the social value of the market space had not been recognised in regeneration plans.

While the creation of new public space is often a feature of regeneration schemes, design alone cannot produce places that become liked and well used. Sustainable communities need well-designed everyday spaces and places that are well managed, well serviced, safe and activated by different forms of economic, cultural and social exchange.

Likewise, regeneration schemes that 'solve' antisocial problems by displacing them to other areas may in the long term do more harm than good. The long-term stability of communities requires regeneration processes that seek to create mixed neighbourhoods of different age and social groups, and with a basic social infrastructure of schools, medical services, shops, transport connections and community facilities. Public spaces play an important role here both as sites of connection and as places in their own right that serve an important role in the community.

## Pointers for future policy

### *New public spaces*

There is a widening range of public or quasi-public spaces where people create opportunities for social and economic exchange. These new social hubs includes places not traditionally regarded as public space, such as street markets, car boot sales and community centres, all of which need consideration in local public space strategies.

### *The 'general power of well-being'*

Future regeneration schemes and proposals for public space should be based on a better understanding of people's use of existing spaces and places, particularly street markets and traditional high streets. These may appear banal or untidy to outsiders, but they often have their own customary forms of value and local meaning that can easily be destroyed. Local authority 'power of well-being' provides a starting point for developing strategies for public spaces that bring the economic, social and cultural aspects of daily life together.

### *People-based regeneration*

Regeneration strategies that override or fail to take into account local attachments to existing spaces and places may undermine local communities in the longer term. Likewise, strategies that seek to solve antisocial behaviour

by displacing it elsewhere may exacerbate local tensions. And proposals for regeneration that relocate popular markets or social amenities on the outskirts of town centres, with poor transport links, should be questioned.

### *Inclusive design*

This research also found instances where the gap between the intentions of the designer and the social outcome of a design was far too wide. Attempts to recreate highly stylised village-type estates with bandstands, village squares, cobblestones, and houses opening directly on to the pavement, may do little to address the social needs of inhabitants, and may cause more problems than they solve. Similarly, an over-emphasis on creating public spaces that look good but fail to provide adequate attractions, amenities, or connections to existing economic and social networks, may lead to the creation of sterile places that people do not use.

### *Multi-disciplinary management*

The variety of agencies whose activities affect public spaces poses particular challenges for their management. There are lessons to be learnt from the multi-disciplinary approaches pioneered by town centre managers. Better coordination is needed to address the multiple concerns of achieving design, effective management



and maintenance and social cohesion and inclusion. Heavy-handed regulation of particular places needs to be reconsidered if they are to become more inclusive.

### *Playful spaces*

Many children and young people enjoy less local mobility today, and may know little about attractions and features outside their own neighbourhood. Encouraging people to extend their knowledge and familiarity with their locality through facilitating creative activities in public spaces and developing pedestrian-friendly urban routes could create a wider sense of attachment and discovery.

Children still need opportunities for outdoor play in neighbourhood spaces – not just fixed equipment playgrounds – in order to participate in communal games, which in turn create a sense of belonging and attachment to local places.

### *Self-regulation and respect*

Evidence suggests that successful public spaces should build on the large degree of self-regulation of public behaviour that already exists. Approaches that actively encourage local distinctiveness and public amenity and facilitate social activity in public spaces, as opposed to stripping public spaces of all features vulnerable to vandalism or misuse, are more likely to result in cleaner, safer, greener public spaces.

### *The impact of local legislation and commercial pressures*

Districts devoted almost exclusively to night-time entertainment offer little to anybody other than young people, or anything other than drinking. Public space use at night remains highly problematic.

Commercial pressures or local legislation can create areas where certain behaviours are possible and allowed, but others are not. In the long term this may undermine the self-regulation of use and behaviour that occurs in public spaces. 'Slack' spaces are needed (or should be acknowledged where they already exist) where minor infringements of local by-laws, such as skateboarding, den-building, informal ball games, hanging out and drinking, are regulated with a 'light touch'.

These lessons could and should be heeded by the Academy for Sustainable Communities in its programmes for considering how public spaces can contribute to sustainable communities.



## References and further information

This paper draws on research projects commissioned under the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Public Spaces Programme, as well as other relevant research.

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## About the authors

Ken Worpole is a writer and environmentalist ([www.worpole.net](http://www.worpole.net)). Katharine Knox is a Principal Research Manager – Housing and Neighbourhoods at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## Photographs

The photographs in this summary were taken by Paul Box and Kippa Matthews.

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