Since everyone has contact with the street scene in some way or other, public expectations about the state of streets are high. The public wants streets to be clean, safe, attractive, and accessible. Local authorities have key roles to play...

- raising awareness of the impact of the street scene, both as a significant asset and as a major contributor to peoples' quality of life
- working with residential and business communities, utilities and other stakeholders to increase engagement and encourage ownership of issues
- co-ordinating the services that affect the design, maintenance and management of the street scene

This report identifies four key areas for action:

1. Not all authorities are engaging users sufficiently...
   - consultation with users needs to be strengthened, especially with hard to reach groups
   - authorities need to ensure ease of movement on the streets
   - access to the council, to make enquiries or report problems, should be improved
   - information on street scene services should be up-to-date and available in appropriate formats and languages
   - the public should be given a greater role in reporting problems and improving services

2. Street scene services could be better co-ordinated...
   - the co-ordination of services reflects both what users want and the need for increased service efficiency
   - co-ordination between street scene services needs to be reflected at fundamental service design level, and not just in the binding together of separate service areas for a best value review
   - effective joint working between different agencies and single points of contact for the user have led to tangible benefits for authorities and users

3. The quality of street scene services is very variable...
   - rigorous challenge from the authority is essential to improving service quality
   - authorities that have embraced change have made improvements
   - staff are a key resource and need new technologies and sound working practices to ensure that they are skilled and motivated

4. There are serious deficiencies in the effective use of competition...
   - authorities need to undertake rigorous analysis of alternative methods of service delivery, including partnerships and outsourcing
   - the market of potential suppliers needs careful exploration, especially where more flexible or integrated contracts are required

Inspection findings across a range of street scene services have identified a number of examples of good practice, some of which are detailed in this paper. All authorities need to examine their own circumstances as part of best value reviews, to see how they can best work towards bringing quality integrated services to the public.
DEFINITION OF STREET SCENE

1. This report defines street scene services as all the work a Council does to care for its streets, including maintenance and management functions. This includes waste management and cleansing services, highway services, car parking services, grounds maintenance and integrated services.

WHY STREET SCENE IS AN IMPORTANT AREA

2. There are very few services that affect all of the population. However, everyone has regular contact with the street scene in some way or other, and numerous public surveys demonstrate that the state of the streets is high on the public’s list of priorities for local authorities to address. Streets provide the environment for much of our community life. Clean, safe, accessible and attractive streets are fundamental elements of an environment that is pleasant to live in.

3. Although numerous people have rights to use streets in various ways, authorities must take overall responsibility for stewardship of the street scene. The street scene comprises a wide range of features, not all of which are under the control of local authorities (EXHIBIT 1). Inspection findings confirm that these features are usually managed as narrowly defined, specialist elements. Instead of managing and reconciling different components and conflicting interests, a piecemeal approach can often reinforce them. By keeping services in separate boxes, and failing to work in co-ordination with external bodies, effort is duplicated and the opportunity to respond coherently to a community’s aspirations for its shared environment is missed.

THE CURRENT PICTURE

4. People want streets that are pleasant, attractive and free from danger, pollution and noise. They also want streets that function well, that do not contain litter and that are not being repeatedly dug up. They want diversity, with streets for everyone’s needs. The current state of the streets falls short of these needs and expectations.

5. Performance indicator information shows a mixed picture of street scene services1. Street cleanliness has not shown any marked improvement over recent years. The number of public conveniences has fallen, although a higher proportion of conveniences now have disabled and baby changing facilities. The number of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people has increased recently and slight improvements have been made to street lighting.

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1 Audit Commission, Report on Local Authority Performance Indicators for 1999/00 on Environmental Services, 2000
EXHIBIT 1 Features of the street

The street scene comprises a wide range of features.

Source: Audit Commission
6. Over 120 reports relating to the street scene had been published at time of this analysis. Across the sample, the scoping of street scene reviews varied widely. Recently, a few authorities have responded to encouragement to carry out reviews with a much broader scope. Examples of more integrated approaches ranged from combining a couple of services to grouping many services under a broader theme. No single review had covered all the design, management and maintenance issues affecting the street scene, but nonetheless it is encouraging that authorities are now starting to undertake joined up reviews.

7. Inspectors judged the majority of street scene services to be fair (56 per cent) or good (40 per cent) (EXHIBIT 2). No authorities received excellent judgements, and just 4 per cent were rated as poor. Fifty-seven per cent were judged ‘likely to improve’ or ‘will improve’.

**EXHIBIT 2 Inspection results for street scene services**

The majority of services were judged as fair or good.

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<th>EXCELLENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service
HOW TO IMPROVE

8. Four key areas for improvement were identified by inspectors:
   • focusing on the user;
   • co-ordinating services;
   • managing quality; and
   • embracing competition.

FOCUSING ON THE USER

9. User consultation can help authorities to challenge why a service is provided, identify community priorities, inform difficult or controversial decisions by the authority and identify areas of conflict. Authorities need to find ways to tap into existing groups and networks, and make use of existing advice and information on engaging hard-to-reach groups.

10. Authorities need to ensure ease of movement on the street. A 1995 survey for the National Consumer Council noted that uneven pavements topped the list of residents’ concerns (BOX A, overleaf). At present easy movement on the street varies, although progress is being made by some authorities with installing disabled facilities, for example. National accessibility schemes have helped, but much work still needs to be done.

11. Easy access to the council is important for citizens who are trying to find information on services and report problems. Councils need to consider whether they are providing appropriate access in terms of telephone helplines, the location of council buildings, and opening hours, for example.

12. The information provided by an authority about its services has a marked effect on user perceptions. Authorities have the right to choose the level of service that they provide, but the public has a right to see information about those services, and about how the authority’s performance compares to others, in appropriate formats and languages.

13. A range of education and enforcement initiatives have proved successful in involving communities in local environment improvements. Citizens have responsibilities too, and the responsibility for improving services does not rest with the authority alone. An increasing number of authorities have introduced national initiatives to involve residential and business communities in street improvements. Successful locally delivered initiatives include the introduction of lay monitoring officers, anti-graffiti partnerships and roadside care schemes, where local groups help to clean up the roadside.
BOX A The top ten consumer concerns about walking on the streets

- Cracked or uneven pavements (44 per cent of respondents)
- Dog mess (43 per cent)
- Too much traffic, busy roads (30 per cent)
- Vehicles parked on pavements (27 per cent)
- Bicycles ridden on pavements (20 per cent)
- No pedestrian crossings (19 per cent)
- Pavements dug up (17 per cent)
- Uncleared snow/ice/leaves (15 per cent)
- Litter and rubbish (11 per cent)
- Narrow pavements (11 per cent)


CO-ORDINATING SERVICE DELIVERY

14. Joining up street scene services better reflects the user view of the street as an integrated unit. It can also increase efficiency and effectiveness in a number of ways. Authorities need to analyse which of their street scene services would benefit from better co-ordination, as no single model meets all needs.

15. The public perception of streets is adversely affected by poor co-ordination of street design, management and maintenance. Co-ordination across different departments within an authority can work at a number of levels, from senior levels only through to multi-level, multidisciplinary operational teams.

16. Joined-up working with other agencies improves co-ordination of activities, helps to achieve shared goals and reduces disruptions for users. Although the state of the streets may be an authority priority, this is not always the case for the statutory undertakers and private landowners in the area. Hence, careful negotiation by the authority is needed to identify common ground and agree a mutually acceptable way forward with the other organisations that are involved in the street scene.

17. A single point of contact with the authority is seen as desirable by users and can help to reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility for authorities. A single point of contact could take the form of one telephone helpline number for users to report all street-related problems and to gain street-related information. Or it might be a single person, such as a street warden, with responsibility for patrolling a particular area and reporting issues back to the authority.
MANAGING QUALITY

18. **Performance management** continues to be an area where authorities face difficulties. Robust performance information, underpinned by good data collection systems, is critical to ensure that authorities have an accurate picture of their performance.

19. Service teams have become quickly demotivated by inefficient **working practices**, including outdated information and communication technology (ICT), skill shortages and poor internal communication. Authorities need to ensure that there is sufficient investment in training and development, and ICT, and thus work towards maximising efficiency.

20. An authority’s attitude to organisational change is key to improving services. A **willingness to embrace change**, alongside innovation and accountability, are essential ingredients for success.

21. Staff are an authority’s most valuable **resource**, and they must be equipped with the necessary tools to excel at their jobs. As well as training, staff need to grasp council and service objectives, and their role in achieving these, and they need to understand how to gather and interpret performance information. Members also need appropriate training and support.

22. The breadth of street scene services means that they can effectively contribute to a wide range of council and community priorities. However, while a service may be addressing one priority, this is sometimes at the expense of another. When faced with **conflicting priorities**, authorities must be prepared to take tough decisions over which policies to prioritise.

EMBRACING COMPETITION

23. The majority of street scene inspections showed serious failures in addressing competition. Key areas that authorities must address include:

- putting in place a strong procurement strategy;
- developing or buying-in specialist procurement skills;
- consulting companies in the market, preferably through personal contact;
- undertaking rigorous options appraisals, including the use of partnerships; and
- exploring the benefits of re-packaging service contracts in consultation with potential suppliers.
CONCLUSION

24. Street scene is a complex service area that is hard to deliver well. Good performance and continued improvement call for:

• a clear focus on users and outcomes;
• the increased involvement of the community;
• increased co-ordination of services;
• strong leadership to manage change and drive improvement;
• sustained and robust performance management; and
• more rigorous application of competition.

Authorities that are facing severe difficulty, such as financial pressures or skills shortages, will need to take action on some areas sooner than others, getting the basics right before building up the service to relate better to users, the rest of the authority and external organisations.

25. There is no instant solution to enable authorities to deliver a three-star service, but wide-ranging best value reviews will help to identify ways to improve. Authorities should consider the four areas of good practice identified in this briefing and apply them to their own local circumstances.

If you want to know more: the full report, AC Knowledge – Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research: Street Scene looks at all these issues in more detail and includes background information, case studies and specific guidance.

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