INFORMATION NEEDS IN LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENTS: A SECOND REPORT ON PROJECT INISS

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This paper describes the second phase of Project INISS which involved structured interviews with 151 members of staff of four social services departments. The planning, design and execution of the interviews are described and results are analysed under three headings: the context of information needs, organization communication, and information need/information-seeking behaviour. The implications of the work for the informa- tion profession are explored.

In an earlier article **[1]** we described the origins and purpose of Project INISS, which was set up with funds from the British Library R&D Department to investigate information needs and services in local authority social services departments. We also outlined the results of the first phase of the investigation which involved observation of twenty-two staff, from director to social worker, at work in a total of five social services departments in England.

The intention of the observation phase of Project INISS was to find out how social services staff sought and obtained the information they needed to do their work and what use they made of it. Underlying this programme was our belief that it is useless to consider information services in isolation from the organizational settings in which they are provided, the purposes for which the organiza- tions are established and the everyday constraints upon staff seeking to fulfil these goals.

In this paper we will report upon the interview phase of the project which grew directly out of the observation programme and which was conceived as a means of verifying the conclusions reported in the previous article, and to test hypotheses about information behaviour and its relation to other personal and organizational characteristics. We will also report on the general conclusions of our work in so far as they relate to the information profession.

The interview phase can be considered in three stages: planning, execution and data analysis. The planning stage involved several sub-stages:

- interview schedule design
- interviewer training, and
- design and selection of the sample.

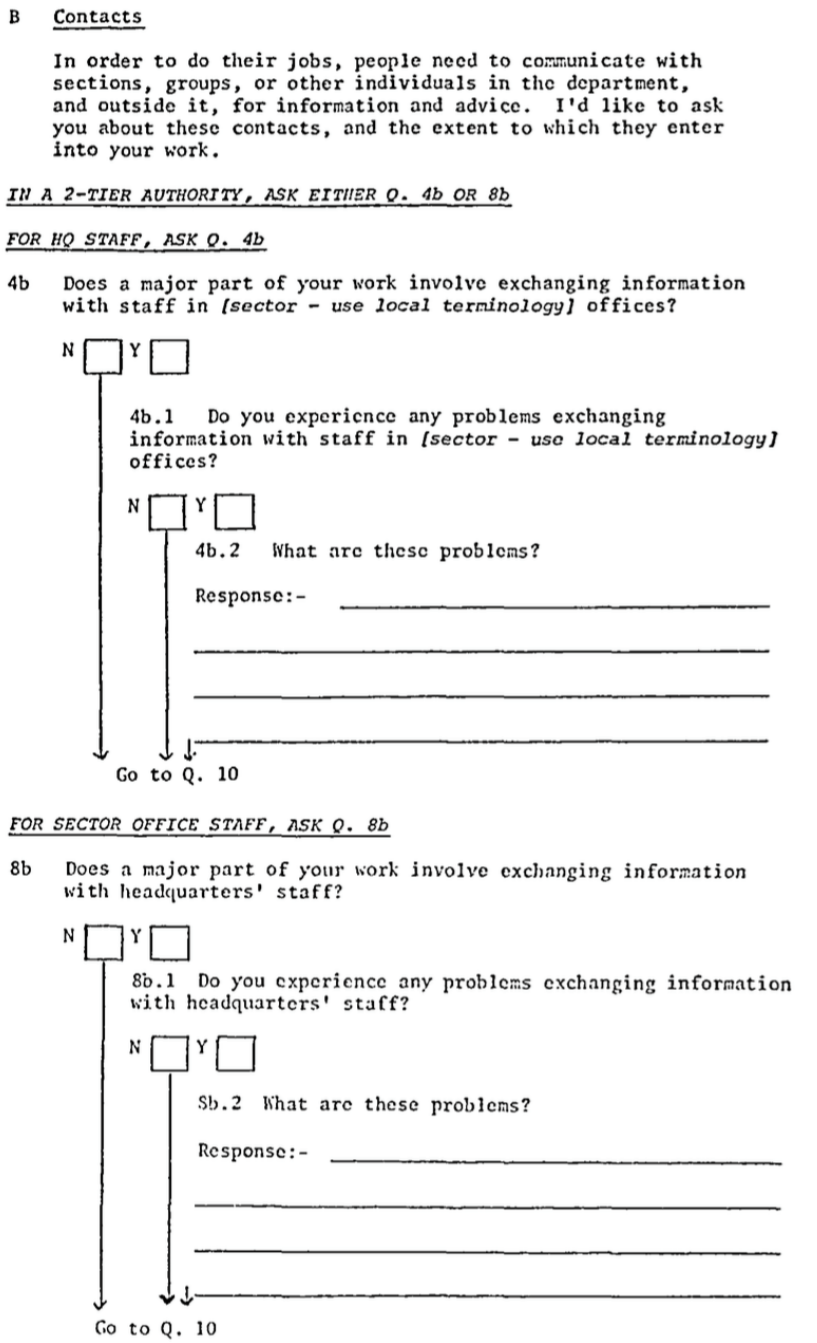
The design of the interview schedule was based, in very large part, upon the findings of the observation phase. Questions were designed to elicit further information on issues which the observation results had suggested were of importance. The themes upon which questions were asked were:

1 - work and work role of the respondent
2 - contacts within the department and outside it
3 - information needs
4 - use of formal, organizational information stores
5 - personal information stores

6 - organizational climate, and

7 - experience and training.

Very great care was taken in the design of the schedule, which was pilot- tested through role-playing and sample interviews. In all, the interview schedule evolved through five different forms during the design stage before the final version was produced: Fig. 1 shows a page from the final version, while Fig. 2 shows the response card used for a question on types of information needed.



B Contacts

In order to do their jobs, people need to communicate with sections, groups, or other individuals in the department, and outside it, for information and advice. I'd like to ask you about these contacts, and the extent to which they enter into your work.

IN A 2-TIER AUTHORITY, ASK EITHER Q. 4b OR 8b

FOR HQ STAFF, ASK Q. 4b

4b Does a major part of your work involve exchanging information with staff in *[sector - use local terminology]* offices?

N ☐ Y ☐

4b.1 Do you experience any problems exchanging information with staff in *[sector - use local terminology]* offices?

N ☐ Y ☐

4b.2 What are these problems?

Response:- _____

_____

_____

_____

Go to Q. 10

FOR SECTOR OFFICE STAFF, ASK Q. 8b

8b Does a major part of your work involve exchanging information with headquarters' staff?

N ☐ Y ☐

8b.1 Do you experience any problems exchanging information with headquarters' staff?

N ☐ Y ☐

8b.2 What are these problems?

Response:- _____

_____

_____

_____

Go to Q. 10

FIG. I

An unusual feature of the interview schedule was the use of 'scenarios' (an example is given as Fig. 3) which presented 'ideal type' descriptions of the work roles and information behaviour of categories of staff. These descriptions were derived from the observational narratives.

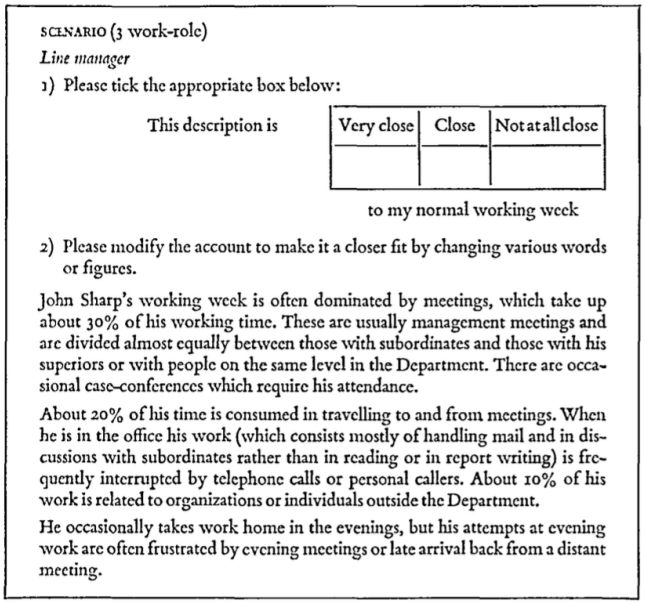
	Frequency of Need				
	Not at all	*Less than once a month*	*Monthly*	*Weekly*	*Daily*
Code / Information Type	1	2	3	4	5
1. Legal, e.g. Act of Parliament, DHSS circular	1	2	3	4	5
2. Procedural, e.g. departmental procedure note/ manual	1	2	3	4	5
3. Names, addresses, telephone numbers, i.e. 'directory information'	1	2	3	4	5
4. Training, e.g. courses, information syllabuses, course materials	1	2	3	4	5
5. Central Government statistical information, e.g. DHSS statistics	1	2	3	4	5
6. Internal statistical information	1	2	3	4	5
7. Records relating to clients, foster parents, adopters	1	2	3	4	
8. Internal personnel and/or financial records, e.g. staff lists, budgets	1	2	3	4	5
9. News of developments in social work, including internal changes, whether written or oral	1	2	3	4	5
10. Research in social work	1	2	3	4	5
11. Evaluations of experience or ideas in social work	1	2	3	4	5
12. Other—please specify	1	2	3	4	5
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					

FIG. 2

We were fortunate as a research team in that, coincidentally, the British Library R&D Department decided to organize an interviewer-training workshop **[2]** before the interviews were to be conducted. The training was carried out by two experienced trainers and covered (in the course of an intensive weekend) all stages of difficulty in interviewing from the simple, unproblematical question and answer to more complex sequences involving requests for clarification, probing, refusals, incomplete answers and the difficult respondent'. All members of the team felt that they had benefited from the training, particularly in handling occasional difficult respondents.

Interviewing was restricted to four of the five departments in which observation had been carried out. This was done for two reasons:

- our observation work and the resulting reports to these departments had established our credibility as research workers and, consequently, obtaining approval to carry out interviews was almost a formality;
- time, money, and the total lack of a suitable sampling frame militated against the idea of a national sample.



SCENARIO (3 work-role)

Line manager

1) Please tick the appropriate box below:

This description is	Very close	Close	Not at all close

to my normal working week

2) Please modify the account to make it a closer fit by changing various words or figures.

John Sharp's working week is often dominated by meetings, which take up about 30% of his working time. These are usually management meetings and are divided almost equally between those with subordinates and those with his superiors or with people on the same level in the Department. There are occasional case-conferences which require his attendance.

About 20% of his time is consumed in travelling to and from meetings. When he is in the office his work (which consists mostly of handling mail and in discussions with subordinates rather than in reading or in report writing) is frequently interrupted by telephone calls or personal callers. About 10% of his work is related to organizations or individuals outside the Department.

He occasionally takes work home in the evenings, but his attempts at evening work are often frustrated by evening meetings or late arrival back from a distant meeting.

FIG. 3

Having made this decision, and acting on the advice of the University's Statis- tical Advisory Service, a stratified, random sample of staff was drawn from the staff lists of each department. Stratification was two-stage: by department and by work-role, and selection was performed using random number tables. An exception to the work-role stratum was made when it was found that to include all administrative staff would considerably increase the sample size, and as our chief interest was in social workers and their managers only eight people in this category were interviewed. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the sample over work roles.

TABLE 1. *Interviews—samples and responses*

Staff category	*Total staff in category*	*Sample size*	*Total interviewed*	*% response*
Directorate	23	6	6	100
Specialists	124	24	22	92
Line-managers	33	11	11	100
Social workers	493	110	104	94
Administrative	—	8	8	100
Totals:	673*	159	151	95·0

* Excluding administrative staff.

The sample sizes for each work-role category enabled us to make comparisons among work roles across departments within reasonable limits of sampling error but did not allow us to compare one *department* with another.

The four departments within which interviews were carried out consisted of two shire counties, one London borough and one metropolitan district. The interviewing was carried out between June and September 1977 and interviews were set up by telephone from Sheffield following the circulation of a memorandum from a key figure in the top management of each department. The

total number of completed interviews was 151, as shown in Table 1: the 5% non-response was the result of the following:

1—refusal to be interviewed
1—no longer in the Department
2—on extended sick leave
4—not available for interview

Since the interviews were spread over a wide geographical area the interviewing process was very time consuming, requiring several days residence in two authorities and sometimes involving long trainjourneys. On fourteen occasions the subjects were not available for interview at the agreed time because of unforeseen problems (e.g., emergencies involving clients) but in all but one case alternative arrangements were made.

A very high level of co-operation was given by all respondents (even one who used the interview to dramatize his feelings of hostility towards his department in a rather extreme manner) and very little reluctance towards being interviewed was expressed. Where reservations were expressed on the grounds of pressures of work it was rather notable that reluctance at this stage was usually followed by a *longer* than average interview. The interview times ranged from twenty-five to 108 minutes with a median of forty-eight minutes.

All questions were coded for computer analysis using SPSS **[3]** and additional variables were added to identify departments and work roles. The organizational climate responses were also recoded to identify the factors previously determined by analysis ofLitwin and Stringer's standard climate questionnaire. **[4]** In total, 216 variables were coded for analysis. Coding was carried out by the research staff who had performed the interviewing and check runs were carried out on the coded data to ensure reliability and accuracy of coding.

Given the very complex volume of the data it will be clear that a complete account of the results of this phase of our work cannot be given here; interested readers can refer to the final report. **[5]** The approach here will be to select certain findings and to present them under the following headings: the context of in formation needs, organizational communication, and information need and information-seeking behaviour.

The context of information needs

One of our basic assumptions is that information needs must be placed in the context of the ordinary working life of the subjects under investigation. The observational phase of the work provided a detailed qualitative analysis of the nature of this work and the interviews concentrated upon three aspects only:

- the specialist knowledge possessed by the interview subjects;
- the extent to which this knowledge was exchanged with others; and
- the effect of organizational climate on information transfer.

Respondents were asked if they possessed specialized knowledge relating to their job: 81%

claimed to have such knowledge. A follow-up question asked which areas this knowledge covered with the result shown in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2. *Areas of specialized knowledge*

Category	Social workers No.	%	All other grades No.	%	Total No.	%
Client service needs	64	62	33	70	97	64
Service delivery	17	16	22	48	39	26
Departmental procedures	9	9	14	30	23	15
External organizations	25	24	10	21	35	23
Other areas	29	28	13	28	42	28

N.B.—categories are not mutually exclusive.

The only significant relationship found was that shown in the table: social workers differed from all other grades in their identification of areas of expertise. From the table it can be seen that the source of this difference lies in the categories 'service delivery' and 'departmental procedures'. The low rating of the latter must be viewed by organizational management as particularly disturbing since it is according to such procedures that social workers are expected to perform theirjobs. Given also that oral communication with colleagues is the chief means of obtaining information on procedures, we are left with the strong suspicion that procedures may not be followed.

Some relationship between claims to specialized knowledge and other variables was found. The relationships were the expected ones:

- 64% of respondents with five years or less experience in social services claimed to have no specialized knowledge, compared with only 4% of those with eleven years or more experience;
- 27% of respondents who received their training after 1972 (the year in which a new single qualification in social work was introduced) claimed no specialized knowledge, compared with only 2% who received their training prior to 1972.

The observational study had shown that oral information transfer is the dominant mode in these departments and that much of it is related to seeking advice or information on work-related issues. The result of a question on how frequently people were asked for information or advice on their areas of specialization is shown in Table 3 below:

TABLE 3. *Frequency with which information is sought by others*

Category	Social workers No.	%	All other staff No.	%	Total No.	%
Not asked	6	6	1	2	7	5
Monthly or less frequently	15	14	7	15	22	15
Weekly or more frequently	35	34	9	19	44	29
Daily or more frequently	21	20	21	45	42	28
No specialist knowledge	23	22	5	11	28	18
Not classifiable	4	4	4	8	8	5
Totals:	104	100	47	100	151	100

The data in this table confirm the significance of oral communication: it will be seen that social workers are consulted less frequently than others, which is not surprising when it is seen that a higher proportion of them than of other grades claimed to have no specialist knowledge.

It has been suggested by other studies in different settings that there is a sig- nificant relationship between organizational climate and information flow. **[6, 7]** An attempt was made to discover how

far this applied in the departments being studied by using a selection of items from the Litwin and Stringer **[4]** questionnaire, chosen by reference to factor analytic studies of this questionnaire by Muchinsky **[8]** and Sims & Lafollette. **[9]** A total of twelve statements was selected from the original questionnaire, the selection being based upon how heavily they scored on three factors with an *a priori* relationship to information flow: attitudes towards management, attitudes towards others in the departments, and structures and procedures in the department.

The only significant relationship revealed by analysis was that attitudes to- wards management were least favourable at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy—a well-recognized phenomenon in social services generally. No significant relationships between information need variables and organization climate were found which could not be explained by differences in need at different hierarchical levels.

Organizational communication

In general, the results of the observational phase were confirmed by the inter- views: meetings were a more significant part of the working week for those higher in the hierarchy than those at the lower end, and the vast majority of all respondents (84·8%) classified meetings as 'useful' or 'very useful' for picking up information relevant to theirjobs. However, ambivalence remained:

> *Often in a meeting youthink it's useless, but the knowledge you realize you would have missed if you hadn't been there is very significant. (Social worker.)*

and meetings of different types may receive different assessments:

> *General team meetings are a waste of time, management meetings and staff meetings make for smoother running of the job, the working party on alternative ways of running the duty system is useful. [Social worker.)*

Nearly all (96%) of the respondents reported having contact with organizations or individuals outside the department within the month preceding the inter- views. The frequency of such contact is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4. *Frequency of contact with external agencies and individuals (all figures expressed as percentages)*

	Directorate	*Specialist*	*Line Manager*	*Social worker*	*Admin.*	*All*
Never	—	4	18	2	12	4
Monthly or less frequently	17	18	27	8	25	12
At least once a week	50	46	45	41	12	41
Daily or more frequently	17	27	9	47	50	40
Not classifiable	17	4	—	2	—	3

Notable here is the very high frequency of contact by social workers and administrative staff: the latter had contact chiefly with other departments of the local authority, the former had contact with other departments, the DHSS, voluntary agencies, the police, general practitioners, schools and numerous other bodies.

In fact contact by agency and by work-role proved to be statistically significant: social workers and line managers were more likely to have contact with legal bodies (e.g., courts) than were specialists

and directorate-level staff. They were also more likely to have contact with local offices of central government departments. Directorate-level staff had more contact with professional associations, Members of Parliament, and councillors.

As the observation data had shown limited communication between the differ- ent organizational levels, questions were asked to discover if a major part of the respondent's job involved exchanging information with staff at other levels, cither up or down the hierarchy. The results are shown in Table 5:

TABLE 5. *Difficulties experienced in organizational communication*

	A *'A major part of work'*	*B* *Difficulties reported*	*C* *B as % of A*
Contact with one level down	17	11	65
Contact with two levels down	4	4	100
Contact with one level up	43	31	76
Contact with two levels up	9	6	67

These findings are clearly of significance when one considers how much information is supposed to flow along organizational channels. Difficulties could be categorized as:

- limitations in the communications channels, e.g. delays in internal postal systems, telephone switchboard problems, communication lines too extended;
- difficulties in contacting people, e.g. by telephone, contacting the *right* person;
- procedural delays, e.g. The time-consuming necessity to confirm in writing decisions already taken over the telephone before anything will happen. (Social worker);
- difficulties in managing or reacting to the information flow, e.g. identify- ing priorities, conflicting directives; and
- differing perceptions, e.g. *Areas don't always understand what we're asking them for.* (Research officer.) *They accept our information but not our interpretation of what we require.* (Social worker.)

The implications of these difficulties need to be considered carefully by anyone developing information services in departments such as these.

Information-seeking behaviour and information needs

One of the hypotheses derived from the observational data was that information need would vary with work role. To test this respondents were asked how often they felt a need for information of different kinds. The types of information listed on the response sheet were those identified through observation and are shown in Fig. 2 above.

Table 6 shows the percentage of respondents perceiving different levels of need for the different categories of information: an opportunity was provided for respondents to add information types not previously identified. The types added in this way were:

medical information (e.g. on the side-effects of prescribed drugs) - 19·2% of respondents
resources of local voluntary organizations - 11·9%

any other types - 25·2%

TABLE 6. *Frequency of perceived need for information by information types*

Information type	*Frequency of need* *Never needed*	*Less than monthly*	*Monthly*	*Weekly*	*Daily*	*Experiencing difficulty (%)*
Legal information	2	21	29	33	15	25
Procedural information	4	21	17	35	23	27
Directory information	1	6	1	12	80	13
Training information	6	48	32	11	3	21
Central government statistics	28	50	15	5	2	11
Internal statistical information	11	50	27	9	3	13
Client records	12	9	6	20	53	21
Personnel/financial records	20	33	24	15	8	11
News of developments in social work	2	10	29	48	11	25
Research	9	40	35	12	4	17
Evaluation of ideas	9	28	36	18	9	21

Cross tabulation of these data by work-role revealed the following statistically significant relationships (using the Chi squared test). These were:

- fieldworkers experienced a more frequent need of 'client records' and 'legal information' than did management;
- specialists and line managers experienced a more frequent need for 'training information' than other respondents;
- directorate-level staff had the most frequent need for 'internal statistical' information; and
- managers needed 'personnel and financial' information more frequently than fieldworkers.

None of these relationships is particularly surprising and clearly they confirm the hypothesis mentioned above. They do show, however, that tabulations like Table 6 must be interpreted with care otherwise information categories of rele- vance to specific groups, but not to all, could be ignored by an information service.

A general question was asked about the amount of information received with the result shown

TABLE 7. *Amount of information received*

	No. and % of respondents *No.*	*%*
Too little	38	25
About right	61	40
Too much	26	17
Complex reply	25	17
Refusal	1	1
Total:	151	100

below: The complex reply was generally of the form—'Too little of relevance, too much of no importance,' expressed in terms such as:

Too little of the right sort, too much of the wrong sort, or

Too much random, not enough that matters. . .

The distribution of responses across work roles was not significant but it is of interest that only 18% of line managers and 38% of social workers felt that they received about the right amount of information. When the more complex responses were analysed for these two categories of staff it emerged that line managers who did not receive the right amount of information (73%) usually reported receiving too much; social workers, on the other hand were more likely to report getting too little (43%). It should, however, be noted that significant qualifying remarks of the type already reported were made in these cases.

The proportion of respondents who experienced difficulty in obtaining in- formation of specified types is shown in the final column of Table 6. Overall, *66%* of respondents reported difficulty with one or more types in terms such as:

> Procedural information: *I usually have to ask two or three people and may not get it even then.*
> Legal information: *Information on landlord/tenant relationships is almost impossible to get—even lawyers don't seem to know.*
> Training: *Information on courses is received too late.*
> Evaluation of ideas: *Apart from journals, information is not made public in a way which I can easily get hold of.*

Of the 'official' stores of information available to respondents, including departmental libraries, the most used were client record systems and team diaries and case indexes, while personal diaries, notebooks and address books were more generally used sources of information than anything else.

Only a very narrow range ofjournals was available in the departments investigated and, in general, few were seen by respondents:

TABLE 8. *Numbers of journals seen by respondents*

No. of journals seen	*No. and % of respondents*	
	No.	*%*
0	16	11
1	8	5
2	23	15
3	21	14
4	30	20
5	22	14
6–10	27	18
11+	2	1
Refusal	2	1

The journals regularly seen were those listed in Table 9.

TABLE 9. *Journals seen by respondents*

Journal title	*Respondents seeing journal* No.	%
Community Care*	110	73
Social Work Today†	94	62
New Society	65	43
Social Services*	57	31
Social Worker and Residential News*	28	19
Department house journal/information bulletin	28	19
Nalgo News†	16	11
Health and Social Services Journal*	13	9
Residential Social Work*	12	8
British Journal of Social Work	10	7
Social Work Service*	6	4
Clearing house for Local Authority Social Services Research	5	3

* Free, limited circulation.
† Membership periodicals.

The limited range ofjournals mentioned and their virtual exclusive concern with news and opinion contrasts rather curiously with the claim by 25% of respondents that they experienced difficulty in getting 'news of developments in social work'.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, the conclusions reported in our earlier paper **[10]** are supported by the interview data and will not be repeated here other than in the context of proposals for information service in social service departments. At the outset we must state that a model of information service based upon those provided in support of scientific research is, in our opinion, inadequate. The reasons for this are several:

1. Social services departments, like other departments of local government (and, probably, like other bureaucracies), are organizations with complex struc tures. This is the result partly of the range of functions performed and the associated structure of work roles; partly of the need for an organizational division between those who manage the bureaucracy and those who carry out its service functions; and partly of the necessary geographical dispersion of service points. This very complexity of organizational structure argues for information services to mirror that complexity: in other words that services need to take into account functional differences between sections and the problems of geographical distribution of offices.

2. The principal characteristic according to which information service may be structured is the work role of the potential recipient. We have already noted the significance of this characteristic to the kinds of information that are seen to be of relevance. T o illustrate this we can extend Allen's analysis of the different roles of information in science and in technology. **[11]** Allen points out that there is an inherent compatibility of information inputs and outputs in science and an inherent incompatibility in technology. Information is processed in science to produce more information, usually transmitted by scientific papers, but in technology the primary products of information processing*arephysical* products and documentation is a by-product. In social services departments there is a similar incompatibility which varies with work-role: thus, information pro cessing by directorate-level results in decision-making, policy-formulation, negotiation, resource allocation and similar managerial functions with documentation of various kinds, largely intended for internal consumption, as a by-product of these activities. The same analysis could be performed for the other broad categories of work-roles used earlier in this paper. Such an analysis would

show that information serves qualitatively different purposes at different levels and results in documentary by-products which, generally, do not enter the 'mainstream' of published information. Given this fact, specialization of information services according to those work-roles where common needs can be discerned in sufficient numbers to make service provision possible, is clearly desirable.

3. The analysis of work-roles and the identification of documentation as a (largely internally disseminated) by-product of other activities point to another aspect of information service deserving attention: namely, the inseparability of information service from organizational communication practices. Where such separation takes place it is our belief that both the information system and the communication system will suffer. A corollary of this is that information provision is not primarily a matter of technique or improvements in the technology of information transfer. It is more a question of integration of one set of processes with another and consequent organizational changes and alterations in human behaviour.

The full elaboration of these points is beyond the scope of a paper of this kind but we can conclude with some ideas on how information services may be developed for social services departments. These proposals are summarized according to the category of staff most likely to be directly affected.

Directorate

Senior management staff need to keep informed on a range of themes of current importance which may change frequently. Most management information services assume that they need aggregated information on the performance of the department provided at infrequent intervals. Our experience suggests that a service aimed at specific individuals and emphasizing new developments and trends should be more productive. **[12]** Senior managers might also welcome literature searches being mounted on their behalf in narrower project areas which they specify and current awareness services covering broader areas of interest aimed at senior staff as a group. Information staff in a few departments visited provided limited current awareness services for senior staff but these were not usually very systematic.

Advisors

The headquarters-based professional advisors appear to be natural targets for a range of selective dissemination of information services. These services might be provided from the public libraries department or from an internal information section.

Specialist staff

Research, planning, training and advisory staff all perform 'information gate-keeper' roles to some extent for other staff in the department. A properly staffed and organized research library should be developed to reinforce their effectiveness and a range of other information support services could be provided for them. Services such as these are not standard practice in departments but tend to occur when departments employ information officers. Our experience in departments suggests that information officers who are not given specific guidelines appear to gravitate

naturally towards providing services to readily accessible middle- management staff such as headquarters specialists.

Line managers

Area directors and other line managers sometimes feel swamped by routine written material passed to them for procedural rather than substantive reasons. This could be eased by implementing good practice at headquarters. Head- quarters staff should be encouraged to make due allowance for delays (usually a minimum of forty-eight hours) in sending out documents to other offices and getting the reply back. They should identify particular documents supplied for information only, for potential distribution to named categories of subordinates (sending sufficient copies for that purpose) or for other reasons envisaged with the line manager in mind. They should identify the date and source of the document supplied and, for committee papers, should indicate prominently the specific meeting at which the paper is to be considered. Information staff could perform a role in encouraging implementation of these measures at headquarters level.

Much of the work of line managers revolves around personnel management issues. Paradoxically, the amount of time taken up in this way makes it unlikely that they can keep up with trends in personnel management. Summaries of significant findings and developments should be prepared for these staff, concen- trating on issues which can be directly applied in or adapted for social services management.

Social workers

A difficulty which occurs with all new staff joining a department but is most evident with incoming social workers, is that it takes time to find out who does what and to make efficient use of the informal network ofcontacts. One approach would be to give this network recognition and develop a directory of official and unofficial 'experts' in the department and beyond.

One claim frequently made about social workers is that they will not read published material on social work. Our evaluation of the *Social Work Information Bulletin,* a journal-article, current awareness service produced for three social services departments in the Midlands, suggests that this view is simplistic. **[13]** A factor which may influence the limited use ofsocial work literature is its inaccessi- bility to field-based social services staff. Locally provided book collections might result in greater use, if the necessary resources were forthcoming.

Social work journals arrive in many area offices in a haphazard way, depending on who belongs to BASW, whether someone has been around long enough to get on a mailing list, or on the vagaries of distribution from headquarters. Rationalizing the existing system for obtaining and circulating journals should not present insuperable problems anywhere and the results could be beneficial, at least in reducing the sense of isolation experienced in many area offices.

Staff often expressed dissatisfaction with departmental records systems, libraries and procedure manuals. An alternative approach would be to compile workable collections of written and published information at area office level.

All levels ofstaff

Social services staff generally are sometimes unsure about how to get information they need and do not always appear to make the best use of it when they get it. Training courses in information handling could be developed to improve skills in this area and would have to take account of the dearth of local information resources which often forms the background against which people work.

Social services staff tend to relate the likely importance of published information to the source from which it was received. Such comments as, *He is one of the sources for new thinking in this authority. I will take it home and look at it,* were freely volunteered. Information staff within some social services departments have tried to establish the separate identity of their sections but these efforts may be counter- productive. Instead we would like to see existing staff with high credibility acting as channels for information products, to improve the reception of these products.

Although departments rely heavily on internal meetings for communication, information is often passed on and decisions made without any adequate record being kept of what took place. More attention to adequate committee servicing should prove valuable in improving decision-making. In some cases it seems likely that results could be obtained more efficiently if background papers were available to meeting participants, summarizing general developments on a topic and the department s state of involvement. Training courses in committee handling and meeting participation are also surprisingly infrequent, given the extent of staff time invested in meetings.

Social services departments rely heavily on the correct application of pro- cedures and staff frequently need to contact other local organizations and indi- viduals, but departments often fail to provide this information efficiently. Adequate procedure manuals and local directories are needed to decrease the amount of time spent throughout departments in seeking out basic information whenever the occasion arises, and to reduce the flow ofinconsistent and conflicting information. The basic problems to be overcome in preparing these types of publication are well known to information practitioners. Virtually all the procedure manuals encountered during the project were written without making the imaginativejump needed to present material from the point of view of the user. Only the best manuals managed to avoid quasi-legal language and ultra- defensive statements covering every possible eventuality, but even these fell short of the necessary straightforward account of 'what to do in which order and why'.

Official reports such as the Seebohm report **[14]** which led to the reorganization of local authority social services failed to mention the case for effective information systems in departments, even when proposing the introduction of research and training sections which need such systems to support them. The result is that those who work in this area are poorly serviced and communication in general is assumed to be something that happens rather than something that is designed. Possibly the authors of publications such as these did have proper information support systems which blinded them to the fact that such systems are rare in social services departments.

A number of the ideas outlined here have been taken up in the current stage of Project INISS, this time funded by the DHSS. Specific innovations are being adopted for trial in one or more departments to see whether they work in practice and what problems have to be overcome in making them work. The results of these field tests will be made generally known to other

practitioners in the hope that successful innovations will be widely adopted in social services departments.

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