

COMMUNITY O.R. UNIT REPORT

The early months of 1988 will see the opening of a new Community Operational Research Unit to be located at the Northern College near Barnsley. The Unit will be part-funded by the Operational Research Society. It represents the (possibly unexpected) fruition of nearly two decades of radical gingering within the O.R. profession. It follows, most directly, the election of Jonathan Rosenhead to the Presidency of the Operational Research Society. Jonathan stood, and was able to claim the mandate, for the extension of the clientele of operational research.

The Operational Research Society invited institutions interested in hosting the unit to present submissions. The response was perhaps surprising both in number and in the extent to which they represented the amount of thought that had already gone into the limited client base of operational research, and into how the limit might be transcended. The conclusion of the 'competition' was the selection of the proposal for the Unit to be located at the Northern College, jointly submitted by the College and the Department of Applied Statistics and Operational Research at the Sheffield City Polytechnic.

The Northern College offers quite unique opportunities for the Society's initiative. It is a residential adult education college which runs, in parallel and in close coordination, a programme of three two-year long courses and a programme of trade union and community short courses. It is the latter programme, through its extensive contact with community groups, that will be exploited for the development of community operational research.

Workshops for community groups and organisations form a major part of this latter short course programme. Individual centres or organisations in Leeds, Barnsley, Rotherham, Doncaster, Sheffield, Chesterfield and the surrounding areas come into the College for programmes on organisational development or to work on specific issues (for example, tenants organisations learn how to make the best contribution to housing reorganisation and decentralisation; mother and toddler groups are offered the opportunity to explore how their organisations fit into the network of pre-school provision in their areas and nationally; community associations consider how national and local government policies and budgets impinge on their activities). The Community O.R. initiative will allow this existing, largely pedagogic, relationship to be transformed into a concrete problem-solving one - with the process and the relationship developing over a period of time.

The Unit will have two full-time workers, located at the Northern College. They will be supported by staff from the College and by Operational Research specialists from the Department of Applied Statistics and Operational Research at the Polytechnic. The staff at the Polytechnic have a wide range of experience of conventional O.R. methods and have been to the forefront in the development of the newer 'softer' methodologies to which most of the interested practitioners are looking to provide the technical base of community O.R.

The Unit will be managed jointly by the academic institutions, the professional body and the community groups themselves. Its work will be steered by a directorate comprising Jim Bryant, from the Polytechnic, as assistant Director and Colin Thunhurst, now of the Nuffield Institute for Health Service Studies, University of Leeds, 71 - 75 Clarendon Road, Leeds LS2 9PL (0532 - 459034), as Director. Interested Radstatsers can find out more about the Unit by contacting Jim or Colin.