

Information and power

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A personal experience

For several years we have been working on multivariate analysis of large data sets, and we have acquired expertise in the use of database management software. We have become familiar with the 1981 Population Census, which we have used extensively for the analysis of education problems. We have made an effort to use methods which produce pictorial representations, such as multidimensional scaling. This has the advantage of making complex statistical analyses accessible to the non-specialist (Qing, Mar Molinero, 1988).

These skills and techniques appeared to be ideally suited to the analysis of local government problems. As part of the normal work of a university department, we supervise undergraduate and postgraduate projects in both the public and private sectors and we have established a network of contacts. Recently we approached a contact in a local authority—a full-time researcher whose job is to provide background information on issues of current interest—and offered our technical expertise. This offer was welcomed. No payment was to be involved, as we were only interested in testing some new ideas in practice. Besides, any payment would have required a proposal, a debate and a vote in a meeting of the Council. A proposal supported by the ruling group might have been objected to by the opposition. This would have politicized the research and that was the last thing we wanted. The local authority did not have anything like an OR department, but they were aware of the problems that such expertise could solve.

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From the very beginning we were made aware of the delicate relationship that exists between professional officers and elected councillors. Officers are outside the world of local politics but their co-operation is necessary for the success of any initiative. Councillors would not like any study to produce anything that could be politically embarrassing or that could be of use to the opposition in the event of the party in

control of the Council losing an election. We were dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of both sides since, as the Commission for the Future Practice of OR (1986) puts it, we had to conduct our investigations "from a base without power or right of access to issues".

There were several areas that warranted investigation, the most pressing being housing. The interest in housing derived naturally from the scale of activity and from the changes that had been taking place. The Council owned several thousand properties. Following new legislation on the right to buy, many tenants had purchased their dwellings. Income from council house sales could not easily be used to build new houses given existing restrictions on local authority finances, but a growing problem of homelessness meant that demand for new properties was always present. There was pressure from the Audit Commission (1986) to run maintenance more effectively. We never intended to give an answer to all the dilemmas faced by the local authority, but there was clearly a need for OR and our contact, the researcher, introduced us to the Director of Housing, to whom we offered our services. Since our contribution was technical, we would work with the Director, an officer, while keeping the Chair of the Housing Committee, a politician, informed of our work.

A meeting was arranged with the Director of Housing, the Chair of the Housing Committee and several officers. This served two purposes: to introduce us to the management problems of the Housing Department; and to agree on a programme of work. The Department was very efficient at day-to-day management, but its management information system was not designed to answer questions of a strategic type, and the scope for answering tactical questions was also very limited. Our objective was to be to create a management information system to assist in decision-taking.

Management information

The Housing Department maintained a tenants database on a mainframe computer. Some of the information in the database related to the property: its location, the type of property, the year in which it was acquired, the repairs that had been undertaken, the rent to be paid, etc. The database also contained information about the tenant, which was obtained from a questionnaire completed when the property was rented. As time went by, some of this personal information became increasingly out-of-date. For example, a family with a child might have rented a property: this child would therefore have been recorded as living there, but details concerning children born subsequently would not have been entered. Finally, the database contained other management information, such as housing benefits claimed by the tenant and arrears of rent, if any.

Council housing is, at least in principle, a service offered to disadvantaged groups within the community. But how disadvantaged are council house tenants? How does the situation change between the different estates? The database kept in the Housing Department was of no use when trying to answer these questions. Such questions, however, are important, and both officers and politicians were interested in knowing the answers. We offered to produce a social profile of the different council estates, in much the same way in which one of us had once produced social profiles of school catchment areas (Mar Molinero, 1988). This was a piece of analysis that could be carried out independently of the local authority, using the 1981 Population Census as a source of data. Such a beginning entailed the advantage that we could become familiar with the complexities of council housing and establish a rapport with officers and politicians.

Although we needed little information from the Housing Department to proceed with our work, we made an effort to involve them from the very beginning. We had several meetings with the Director and Deputy Director of Housing to agree on the social indicators to be used, to decide on the level of data aggregation and to obtain geographical information. As the social classification of council estates went on, we made an attempt to familiarise ourselves with the database of the Housing Department. We observed that only two people had appropriate knowledge to communicate with the database - the Technical Manager and the member of staff in charge of day-to-day enquiries and updating. This we identified as an important potential problem, since if either of them were to leave their job the system would have been placed under severe stress, and we informally advised both the Director of Housing and the Chair of the Housing Committee to train more staff in this important task. No formal recommendation was made, as we did not see ourselves in the role of business consultants.

We produced a report which listed, for each council estate, the value of about 50 indicators, and presented this information in a graphical form. The report contained much information of relevance to policy-making. For example, knowledge of the estates where the permanently sick concentrate, as recorded in the Census, can guide in the provision of facilities for the handicapped. We used this information to show how the introduction of the Community Charge would affect the average council house tenant as compared with the average owner occupier. The 1981 Census was out of date by the time our report was produced, but this should not have been a cause for concern, since the availability of an extensive set of data for each council estate at the time of the Census gave the opportunity to assess change in the areas where more recent data could be found.

Negotiating access to information

The moment finally arrived when any further analysis on our part would require accessing the housing database. Our initial discussions with officers and politicians had left no doubt that this would eventually have to be done. This time, rather than attend another meeting to discuss possible courses for action, we wrote to both the

Director of Housing and the Chair of the Housing Committee with a list of possible areas for investigation. We proposed to analyse council house sales in the light of the social classification of council estates. This would have made it possible to assess the extent to which sales had taken place in the better-off estates. It would also have made it possible to say something about future council house sales. We also proposed to use the Electoral Register and other data sources in order to evaluate change in the council-house population. Another possible area was the financial one; we suggested producing an income-versus-expenditure profile for each housing neighbourhood - these could be relevant when examining issues relating to changes in the amount of rent charged. Another suggestion was a study of the relationship between repairs and disadvantage: is it true, as is often suggested, that the most vociferous tenants, the ones who cost the council most money per property, are not necessarily the ones in the houses most in need of repair? There were also other ideas which were floated, and which would have produced enough work to keep a researcher employed for a long time.

*"The atmosphere changed when the
Director of Housing took early retirement"*

However, while we were working on the social classification of estates, a number of changes had been taking place in the Housing Department. The Director of Housing took early retirement. A Deputy Director was nominated Acting Director. We considered it to be important to be seen as independent, impartial outsiders and we made no attempt to find out what was going on behind closed doors. We suspect that there was a considerable amount of in-fighting, and that the view of the Director of Housing did not prevail. Certainly, the atmosphere changed after his resignation. The Acting Director called us to a meeting where we were given a lecture on the *Data Protection Act*. The information that we wanted was sensitive, and proper guarantees would be required. We were reasonably familiar with the issue of confidentiality and we said that we would give reasonable guarantees. We were then asked to sign a document containing a clause which required our employers, the University, to indemnify the Council against any claims for loss or damages in respect of the use or publication, whether authorized or otherwise of any information taken from data owned by the Council. This was clearly an unacceptable condition. Imagine, for example, that the study had shown that the Council was very efficient at running its housing stock and was making surpluses: it would have been possible for the grant to the Council to have been decreased to reduce public expenditure. In such a case the Council could have sought compensation from the University for the loss in grant. And we were doing the study for free!

We contacted the Chair of the Housing Committee, who agreed that the assurances required were unreasonable. At a new meeting with the Acting Director of Housing, we asked him to negotiate a satisfactory contract with the administration of the University. This took a long time but, eventually, an agreement was struck which was satisfactory to both parties. Serious work could now begin. A new meeting was arranged with the Chair of the Housing Committee, the Acting Director of Housing, and other officers. We suspect that the intervention of the Chair of the Housing Committee was resented by the officers. When, at the meeting, we suggested a programme of work which involved accessing the database, we were told that the Council was very short of staff with database skills. We suggested that the relevant data could be put into a file for analysis at the University, much as we had done with the Census data. They decided to think about it. Several weeks later the Chair of the Housing Committee thanked us for our work and informed us that the Council had decided not to continue with the research. The reason given was that transferring the data to a file was a very delicate operation, the computer could break down, and the Council could not take the risk of operating without a computer. He was no expert on computers and had to rely on the opinion of his officers.

What went wrong?

The work that we did on social indicators in council estates was good and was used later to inform policy in the area of economic development. We appeared to have gained technical credibility, as one of us was invited to advise the Council on other issues. We had proceeded with great care, trying not to be identified with any particular group. We had proposed a substantial programme of work which would have benefited both the Housing Department and the Council. Eventually, our work was blocked and had to be abandoned. Where did we go wrong?

The political reasons can only be suspected. Better management information would have given politicians more control in the decision-making process and this might have been resented by officers. Any findings would have been available to all political groups on the Council, not only to the group in control. The opposition might have taken advantage of the opportunity to make political capital.

The issue of confidentiality is an important one, but we suspect that it was only an excuse. Unfortunately, it changed our relationship with the Council. We began by reporting to the officers but, having gained the support of the Chair of the Housing Committee over confidentiality, we might have been seen by the officers as being on the side of the politicians.

No payment was sought for the work we did. Perhaps, as it did not commit any resources, the Council did not feel committed to producing results either, and did not value the hard work that we had done. As far as we were concerned, this was only one of several projects in which we were involved. We were under pressure on

various fronts, and did not have spare time to do the all-important corridor work. Questions were asked at the University about our non-charging for the research; councils are not so short of money that they cannot pay for work which is of benefit to them, we were told.

We suspect that our experience is not untypical of OR in government, not even of OR in large organizations. Conflict between groups or individuals, technical complexity, attempts to limit access to information and a changing environment are common features of OR work. The mathematical model is, perhaps, the least important part needed to bring a project a successful conclusion.

For the interested reader

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"STATISTICIANS have always had a close, if controversial, relationship with the corridors of power."

Quoted from the beginning of the comment column in the *New Scientist*, 4th. August, 1990.