



## INFORMATION NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS

THIS IS NOT A SPHERE in which I profess any special expertise and, faced with such a task, I immediately recognised the importance of presenting a representative rather than a purely individual view. I embarked upon some research—which seemed rather inappropriate—and like any misguided practitioner I quickly drew up the magic questionnaire, this time on leisure and recreation research, and sought the help of some 40 very capable and respectable professionals throughout Great Britain.

Friends in need are friends indeed, as I can claim a 75 per cent response rate with replies from eight Chief Officers, five Assistant Directors, seven Centre Managers and three administrators in the field, with the remaining eight including arts and entertainment managers, a commercial manager, a consultant and academics who I respect for their knowledge of the practitioner's world. Virtually all were members of ILAM, and 10 were also members of the Leisure Studies Association.

The high response rate reflects, I am sure, a willingness to contribute to the debate and the sound development of research work—it would be only fair to add that I think it also reflected some sympathy at my plight!

One said I was brave to take on the boffins—which is a kind way of saying I am foolhardy! Others were concerned that without an interpreter I would be lost among the long, confusing sentences and incomprehensible jargon.

I was certainly able to draw support from colleagues in that I seemed fairly representative of the group in my attitude to research. I was most apprehensive of the seminar title, but

when I saw it advertised as 'The Leisure Needs of Professionals' I felt confident I could talk for half an hour on the best golf courses and holiday retreats; but the reality is that I am concerned today with the information needs of leisure and recreation management with special emphasis on research, and how these needs can be met.

What information does the local government manager need? The answers are not simple; leisure and recreation is a complicated field, as the Yates Committee found.

### A Leisure and Amenity Manager's view

by Gerry Carver

1. He or she certainly needs internally generated management information including budgetary information and performance indices in respect of those operations for which he is responsible.
2. He needs to be abreast of the policies and work of his council and all its departments, especially if the council is to work corporately, and he needs to know how other councils are tackling the job.
3. Knowledge of local organisations, clubs and pressure groups as well as Parish and County Councils is important.

4. He must know and follow his local press and radio.
5. Familiarity with the major events and trends in the commercial sector as well in the public sector is a prerequisite.
6. He requires factual information on specific topics on a continuing basis.
7. He also needs to be able to reinforce, and even justify, operational developments and actions, firstly in his own mind and where necessary more outwardly by knowledge of key research information, or at least knowledge of its existence and availability across a wide spectrum of the leisure scene.
8. Additionally any local government Manager worth his salt needs to be informed not only of the always-changing status and role of local government in society, but the changes taking place in society itself.

So there is a vast range of information he needs. Levels of responsibility will of course greatly influence the priorities and the quantity needed in each sphere.

We must recognise that the information needs of the practitioner inevitably reflect his training and background, as does the ability to handle the material available. The manager has considerable pressures on his time and these are increasing rather than diminishing, so managing his time is vital, and the time available for background reading, let alone the pursuit of research papers, is severely limited.

The external sources of information are well covered in the report by Fred Coulter and John Hall, and the picture gained from colleagues, and I count



myself with them, tends to reinforce their findings that awareness of what exists is limited.

The report lays great emphasis on the assumption that this lack of awareness is a product of a low level of professional education and training. I found this an unfortunate and misleading description, since what was being said was that the educational qualifications of respondents measured against 'O' and 'A' and degree levels were low—although the statistics given raise the question 'low against what yardstick?' The assumption of the report is questioned by its own statistic that only seven per cent of respondents did not possess some type of professional qualification. The information gained from my own survey questions whether lack of awareness can be related purely to academic qualifications. What I do agree with, however, is that a more uniform and professional training system, which inculcates knowledge and awareness of the information network, will lead to an improvement. Whilst the significant increase at present in the academic qualifications of young entrants to the profession is mainly a reflection on the current employment situation, the trend will not be shortlived and will influence recreation management for quite some years to come.

Turning specifically to research, what does the leisure and amenity manager think of the present state of the game?

The two most common views expressed by my colleagues could perhaps be anticipated, at least by the practitioners.

The first is reflected by one as follows:

*'In this day and age the practising centre manager is out on the shop floor drumming up as much business as possible along with all the other reps, salesmen and commercial travellers. By the end of the day he is too knackered to think much about the research of those more accustomed to sitting behind a pen and desk.'*

This was one of the more extreme expressions of the view that force of circumstances pushes research way down the manager's priorities.

The strongest and most common view expressed, however, was that too much of the research is academic and theoretical, often pursued for personal or academic needs. The track record and standing of those expressing this latter view should caution researchers from dismissing this statement too quickly.

There is certainly a concerted call for more action research as opposed to academic and sociological work.

One Chief Officer said he felt very neutral about research, 'I am sure there must be something in it somewhere,' he said, 'but ...!' Another felt that only about a third of current work seemed relevant to the practitioner.

Alongside the comments about being too theoretical, a common view expressed is that where problems are identified and tackled by researchers it is not always done in a reasonable and beneficial time scale. A strong view emerged that there had been some real progress in recent years in the research

*'I keep six honest serving men, (that  
taught me all I know)  
Their names are What and Why and When  
and How and Where and Who'*

work presented by CRRAG and the Sports Council.

It may seem a little unusual coming from recreation managers, but there is praise indeed for the progress the Sports Council has made in the research sphere. This has been accompanied by their greater willingness to listen to and involve practising managers. One of the features highlighted is that the Sports Council often starts by analysing what is going on at present. It is this feature which is often missed by researchers, with insufficient attention being paid to existing good practices.

It may be as a consequence of the majority view that most research is too theoretical that many practitioners seem to feel that the role of researchers should be to overcome day-to-day problems, providing answers and not just new questions.

Many others take a wider view, seeing the researcher assisting and developing professional practice and outlining and projecting future trends, helping them to plan in the longer term.

At the other extreme one respondent wanted researchers to be *'the fifth column, provocative and anti-establishment, questioning political dogma and stirring up complacency, self-satisfied, leisure managers like me. Without conflict there can be no progress.'*

Positive views were voiced on the way in which research work was presented, the most common calls being for the use of simpler language, more seminars to explain findings, increased use of summary reports and more and/or better publication sources. Constant reference was made in the replies received to the role that ILAM might play in the future in the presentation of research work. Several mentioned the escalating cost of some of the better research papers. When it comes to influencing the role of researchers almost all wanted a much closer contact with them and a continuing discourse which would assist researchers in selecting subjects and defining parameters. My colleagues were almost unanimous in their view that the triangle of Sports Council, Leisure Studies Association, and ILAM should be instrumental in establishing better contacts and the forums for the overall development of research work and liaison.

When asked which spheres of public leisure and recreation they would recommend for research in the next five years, the practitioners offered a range of strategic subjects as well as some very practical suggestions. Some were topical and to be expected, with research covering the major changes in society—shorter working week, unemployment and early retirement being most mentioned. The interaction and liaison of the private, public and voluntary sectors

were seen as an important area for examination. So, too, was some valid assessment of how best to identify and satisfy needs based on neighbourhood programmes—an opportunity for case studies of good practice if ever there was one. Some substantial research on public sector marketing was listed, as were a host of specific topics including the pricing structure across the public leisure and recreation scene (including the logic of library and sports centre pricing), training and education for all levels of staff, the role of DLOs in respect of recreation departments, the impact of community facilities on tourism, working with community groups leisure and recreation as a preventative therapy and therefore a cost-effective adjunct to the National Health Service, dual-use and joint provision and, of course, new technology.

I can perhaps hear the researchers now—quoting at least three published works for each topic and muttering *'the blighters wouldn't read 'em if we did'*.

What does it prove? I would suggest that there is a demand for more management-related research and a sales potential for high-quality work which is keenly priced. This is reinforced by John Turner's experience on behalf of ARM of an almost insatiable demand for concise, well-presented written material.

What sort of blueprint might we conceive to make progress in the next five years? I can but offer a few ideas.

Firstly, the practitioner has to be a willing and active partner! From where I stand there is a great barrier to be overcome on the practitioner's side. He must be careful not to use the argument that all researchers have their heads in the clouds and he is too busy for anything that smells of research and tomorrow as a defence mechanism for his inability to articulate his research needs. Researchers must, however, recognise that the state of play in hundreds of councils up and down the country is that the well educated, experienced and highly motivated professional could take over one of these recreation departments tomorrow and have 15 years' work raising them to a high level of performance by today's standards—and time will not stand still!

Time and inclination is essential from the practitioner. He must discipline himself, chiselling away at his work programme to create at least a regular corner for some research-related reading. One Chief Officer reflected my own position (and that of many others, I am sure) when he said that he had many publications of a research nature ready to read, and he was full of good intentions, but sufficient time never came

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along to do justice to them or reduce the size of the pile significantly.

Secondly, a two-way process is necessary, with researchers feeding off practitioners and vice-versa. Having been involved with several of the successful ARM National Seminars it is interesting to note that very few researchers seem to take these opportunities to get closer to the field and the practitioner.

Thirdly, research has to be more penetrative in its dissemination. Research often highlights good examples much more often than bad. The indoor sports centre is a pretty well researched and exposed phenomenon now. Yet, despite all this attention, I know from the Sports Council Management Award that whilst many good examples came to the fore, there is a burning need for some of the key research information, and the examples of good practice to find their way to the Chief Officers and even Chief Executive Officers and members of authorities whose centres (and I choose my words carefully) have lost their way after the euphoria of the opening months. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that there is a wealth of information on the Sports Council's shelf from the last seven Management Awards which hasn't found its way to the mass of centre managers.

Avenues worth exploring to increase penetration may include:

1. Some of the vast number of one-day seminars now being promoted adopting themes which have been recently researched. This would not only give the researcher a live situation to make his point but the practitioner not only the chance to listen but also an ideal opportunity to read and discuss the research and see how it related to other works on the same subject. It is good to see ILAM and LSA promoting events like this.
2. A much better presentation of research work. Having had something to do with *ARM News* I was interested to read Tony Veal's description of that magazine as journalistic rather than academic—it was meant to be so and the formula proved very successful. It was based on the model journalist's approach of snappy headlines with its text following the ideal press release formula, with the key impact information in the first and second paragraphs and the detail in paragraphs of descending order so that abbreviation can be conveniently done from the tail.

That seems to me to be an ideal formula to get information which is academic rather than journalistic across to the recreation manager. This style would provide the opportunity for covering many more research works in précis form. It's a style that good researchers need not fear, and would be welcomed by managers.

3. Why not assist the recreation manager with a well-presented directory in booklet form? I've called it

*Signposts to Research and Information*; it would not date over three to five years and would introduce all levels of management to research and information sources, encourage greater interest and highlight key sources which would save the manager time.

4. Greater exposure in the recreation press of both LSA and research work is a must.

Fourthly, in the blueprint must be greater leadership from the Government and its agencies and the institutes, now fewer in number and greater in strength, to prove a blend of idealism allied to good theory and excellent practice.

And the last part of my blueprint, of course, has to cover the researchers themselves.

The researcher must get closer to the practitioner and the coal face. Better that the scholar's armour is battered a little than hanging rusting on the wall. The claim that researchers don't know what it is like at the sharp end may have some validity but is too sweeping. The researcher would have some justification for claiming that the manager's knowledge of the research field, even the better-known work, is generally poor.

The researchers need to ensure that they are not establishing a self-perpetuating and inward-looking business, organising seminars on their research work for the consumption of researchers, and so on. Their curiosity must be founded on the best of motives. There are two sorts of curiosity; one is from interest, which makes us desire to know that which may be useful to us, and the other from pride, which comes from the wish to know what others are ignorant of.

They must also look to spreading their wings into closer contact with specific authorities and localities. As was reinforced during the Sports Council Management Award, many centre management teams are sadly lacking in a detailed and statistical knowledge of the locality of their centre, let alone their district. I am sure there are many departments that would provide the researcher with his platform.

The researcher should therefore be providing a theoretical and academic background as well as practical research and demonstrating how this can lead to better decision-making and the adoption of better policies. A springboard for better management. So whilst the practitioner must recognise that leisure's

increasing impact on, and closer relationships with, planning, housing and economic development will ensure a need for leisure research which is outside the immediate interest and scope of many managers, the researcher must recognise the credibility gap he has to bridge by ensuring a fair balance of research, which is acknowledged as relevant and helpful by the recreation manager. It may appear that I am being a little pointed about researchers; perhaps you might expect me to be so, but it is certainly not a denigration of the considerable good work being done, rather a genuine attempt at being constructive.

If I were to emphasise one aspect it would be the need for a better and closer working relationship between researcher and practitioner, and the practitioner must realise he has to be an equal partner and that at present he is not. It is a joint responsibility! I suspect the improved relationship will in the long term hang on the development of a better education and training system and getting more researchers to the coal face and more practitioners into membership of LSA.

I have managed to speak for 20 minutes on the information needs of professionals without mentioning computers once. This has been deliberate and could be some sort of record. I am fortunate enough to work for a forward-looking Council and a departmental microcomputer is already an integral part of our management information system. I have, however, concentrated, as asked, on the practitioner's view of research. In conclusion, if I were to give managers and researchers a motto for their search for information it would, I think, be from Rudyard Kipling's 'The Elephant Child':

I keep six honest serving-men  
(that taught me all I know)  
Their names are What and Why and  
When and How and Where and  
Who.

I would not be doing justice to my colleagues if I did not end by highlighting the scope of responsibilities of practising managers and the very diverse nature of the information they require on a day-to-day basis, especially since the overwhelming view I received was that more research of a practical nature was required.

(A paper read at the LSA/ILAM Seminar at the Central London Polytechnic last September.)