SEMINAR REPORT
Presentations

Multi-agency seminar on client casework databases **– 'Lessons learnt and best practice for the future'**

King's College London, 17th July 2002
Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of their ICAR led project 'Making better use of existing information and data about refugees and people seeking asylum'

the INFORMATION CENTRE about asylum and refugees IN THE UK

Introduction and welcome – Kirsteen Tait, Director of ICAR

- **Background to the seminar and the ICAR led Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) Project ' Making better use of existing information and data and about refugees and asylum seekers'**

The seminar is part of a broader project funded by JRF to look at ways of ensuring that information and data collected by refugee and other agencies working with refugees and asylum seekers can be more readily available for use in advocacy and policy work and to review service provision. The project will also make recommendations as to how agencies could share this data and information so that they can substantially increase the evidence based from which they work.

Client casework databases are crucial to this process and the seminar is designed to bring together those currently engaged in this process so that lessons learnt can be shared.

ICAR was set up at King's College London in 2001 with the aim of promoting information-based public debate and information-based policy-making on the issues of refugees and asylum in the UK. It's 'Making better use' project is one of several that it is engaged in with the aim of pulling together the best available information and data about this client group.

- **Aims of seminar**
    - to share good practice and lessons learnt
    - to discuss the feasibility of joint working
    - to increase understanding within the sector of the value of systematically collected casework information and data

Seminar Agenda

- **Session 1 – 'Developing a client casework database - lessons learnt' 10 - 11.15 am**
Chaired by Felicity Heyworth – Information Manager, ICAR

  - **Presentations**
    i. Refugee Information On-line (RIO) development process – Rachel Thomasson and Sarah Heseltine, Refugee Council
    ii. Creating a bank of illustrative case studies – Les Burrows, Shelter

  - **Questions**

Coffee break 11.15am -11.30am

- **Session 2 - 'Joint working' 11.30am – 1pm**

Chaired by Lea Esterhuizen – Department of Social and Political Science Royal Holloway University of London, Social Research Consultant to ICAR

  - **Presentation**
    i. Developing a cross-agency database – Beth Green (The Children's Society) Children's Consortium on Refugees

  - **Discussion**

- **Session 3 – What Next? 1pm to 1.30pm**
Chaired by Beth Crosland – Development Officer, ICAR

Lunch 1.30pm - 2pm

Session 1 - Developing a client casework database – lessons learnt

Presentation –

- **Developing Refugee Information Online (RIO) - Rachel Thomasson (RT), Statistics and Information Manager and project manager of RIO development process and Sarah Heseltine, Head of Information at the Refugee Council**

Background

Data collection history

- Before NASS, Refugee Council (RC) did not have much of a history of data collection. It was not required by any funder, and it was quite unpopular with frontline staff.

Kosovan Programme

- This was a major turning point as the experience of profiling clients and recording service provision on a database helped RC to recognise the importance of client data and the power it has for influencing policy and developing services.

Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 and NASS contract

- The advent of the 1999 Act meant that RC had to improve its data collection. In early 2000, RC decided not to rush into creating a database for NASS needs only, instead a process of internal consultation with various teams began and a database was developed more slowly to respond to RC's needs as well as those of NASS.

Interim systems during consultation and planning

- During this interim period of 18 months, manual paper forms were used in conjunction with various Excel spreadsheets.

1.1 Developing RIO: setting up the project

Project Initiation Document (PID)

- A PID was written to set out the business case for creating the database.

- The document gave details of: the proposed budget, the scope of the project, what the project was hoping to deliver, the limitations of the environment, the criteria to be used in the evaluation of the outcomes and how to manage change should the policy environment necessitate it.

- RT engaged a project sponsor to make sure the project kept to schedule.

1.2 Developing RIO: the project cycle

Project management process

- Time and care was taken over writing a user specification detailing what RC wanted the database to do and identifying its main users.

- Initial searches on the internet were carried out to explore existing database technologies. Conversations also took place with other agencies to see what packages they had chosen to use. Research was carried out into different suppliers and the skills they could offer to RC.

- An invitation to tender was issued and ten software developers were interviewed. In September 2000, six months after the project had begun, a suitable supplier was found.

- The software developer wrote a technical specification based on RC's user specification. This took four months and eventually RC had to draw a line under the process as it is potentially never ending. An element that could have been looked into more was workflow in relation to the database – e.g. how clients walk through the casework process and how this could be reflected in the database design.

- RC opted for a bespoke system with the developers doing all the necessary coding.

- Testing phases and pilot trials followed, and then staff training and roll out.

- An evaluation of the process and the system is currently being undertaken, although the process of development is never entirely complete and the cycle of refinement continues.

- From concept to roll out the process took one and a half years. This time might have been reduced had the team been full time on the project and better resourced.

1.3 Developing RIO: the technology

- The database uses an SQL server so that for users it essentially looks like the internet. It runs on the RC network that has six sites linked to it. The database was built using Microsoft technology so that other developers could use it in the future. It has many drop down boxes and hyperlinks so that for those familiar with the internet it shouldn't prove too difficult to use.

2. RIO in action

Training and users

- Over half of RC staff use RIO, with over a hundred concurrent users and more than 250 people trained over five sites. So far 100,000 client services have been logged and RC will soon have a year's worth of data.

3. Data collected

- RIO contains client data, sector specific data and service details. The objective of the database was to meet the needs of the asylum support function at RC. The database can be used to generate NASS reports, log client case histories and book and cancel accommodation.

- RIO logs basic details such as date of birth, nationality, languages, ethnic group, religion, special needs and address and clients are linked together as families where applicable. Other basic details include stage of asylum application, HO reference numbers, status in relation to NASS and duration of the asylum application process.

- Details of any service provided are logged including day, time, who delivered the service, where, who referred them to RC, whether an interpreter was used, the type of interpreter that was used, the advice topics, case notes, expenses and support actions.

4. Key challenges faced during development

Data structure

- Decisions on how RC wanted the data to be structured proved challenging. In particular whether each individual client was to have their own record or whether clients were to be logged as cases (as in the Home Office system ACID). RC chose to structure RIO by client because if families are separated then the system is very inflexible. This does mean though that many extra records need to be created, even for newly born children.

- Another stumbling block was how clients' names should be structured as clients often have many names.

Data definitions and categories

- It was difficult to find comprehensive lists of religions, languages, etc. Changes to these definitions must also be possible as clients often present with new languages which need to be added.

- How to add new advice topics that replace old ones proved an issue, as this can impact on the data that is already stored.

Data integrity

- Data integrity issues have been raised with frontline staff to ensure that the information on the database is of good quality. Exercises are often done to verify data and many mandatory fields have been added to ensure that caseworkers enter key information.

Data protection

- RIO was developed in accordance with the Data Protection Act but the need to ensure that data remains confidential when many clients are coming in and out of service areas remains a concern.

Changing nature of interaction with clients

- RIO has changed the manner in which RC works, as caseworkers now all have computers on their desks. Caseworkers were challenged with the task of maintaining a compassionate, personal service whilst simultaneously handling data entry. Staff also required IT training. There has however been positive feedback from clients on the new system, many of whom say that it makes RC services seem more professional.

5. 1 Impact on the organisation: measurable improvements in our direct services

- RIO has had an impact on the quality of direct services. With previous systems, clients were asked for their details many times at different offices. Now clients can be tracked across offices. Services are more efficient as staff have client histories at their fingertips, are better-informed and able to offer a more sensitive and targeted service.

- Information recording now happens during the contact period rather than afterwards. NASS forms can be automatically generated through RIO – but unfortunately they still have to be printed out as NASS does not accept electronically submitted forms.

5.2 Impact on the organisation: greater efficiency in service management

- RC can now provide a marketing led service as services are developed according to evidence of need.

- The data from RIO can be used to inform strategic planning and budgeting processes. However, as RIO was introduced in the middle of the financial year, RC ended up with six months of data collected according to old systems and definitions and six months of new RIO data. Trying to make the two sets compatible was administratively very difficult. If possible, it is best to introduce a new information system at the beginning of a financial year.

- RIO can also act as a management tool, helping to monitor staff performance and workloads.

5.3 Impact on the organisation: data available to policy and advocacy teams

- Policy and advocacy teams do not have direct access to RIO but can ask RT for specific information when they need them and the data is now available to inform their work. The data in RIO was very useful for the voucher campaign and other campaigns on racial harassment.

- Potential areas for which data from RIO can be used for campaigning or influencing policy include length of time before a NASS decision and dispersal; length of stay in emergency accommodation (or in induction or reception centres); length of time waited for first decision and appeal.

- RC is now looking into how RIO can be used to collect case studies.

5.4 Impact on the organisation: benefits to fundraisers and funders

- EU and NASS reporting needs can be met easily.

- RIO demonstrates that RC is willing to invest in infrastructure.

- At any given point, fundraisers can go to RT and ask for ad hoc reports on activities of specific staff in specialist teams and obtain the data needed to support bids for new funding.

6. Challenges ahead

- Database development is not a finite process. There is a need for continual investment and development as services evolve. As the NASS system changes, RIO will undoubtedly have to adapt.

- Not all RC's casework is recorded on RIO, many other databases are still being used across the organisation and these could benefit from being integrated within one database.

- IT dependency means that if the system goes down, chaos reigns and a backlog of cases develops.

- The network is not designed for mobile working so for those that do outreach work, a backlog of information develops that involves a lot of administrative time to input.

- Volunteers do not normally use RIO so this restricts their activities.

Presentation –

- **Creating a bank of illustrative case studies - Les Burrows, Information Manager, Shelter**

Background – Shelter's information systems

- Les Burrows (LB) found his own previous experience as a caseworker and policy officer invaluable when he helped develop aspects of Shelter's information systems. He considers that frontline users should be brought into the database development process as early as possible.

- Shelter needed to develop a client database system that would meet the needs of caseworkers at Shelterline, the UK's free 24 hour housing advice line, as well as staff at their housing aid centres.

- The system operates on an Oracle platform and the screens look similar to that of RIO.

- The Shelter system is an example of a system that can work alongside other databases e.g. the UK Advice Finder database of organisations can be searched from within the client database to identify agencies for client referrals, the Royal Mail gazetteer system indicates where the caller is calling from and a legal database contains fact sheet information with legislation references. The system also incorporates a database of hostels and emergency accommodation across the country. In London and a few other areas, direct access hostels log their vacancies onto this system so that from the Shelter system, caseworkers can ascertain where vacancies are available and what the booking procedures are.

- Casework information and data can be directly inputted onto the screen at the time of contact with the client. For statistics and case study gathering purposes this is more efficient than the alternative system of having sheets filled out and then inputted by an administrative worker, although there are also casework considerations involved, and Shelter is keeping inputting procedures under review.

The development of Shelter's Casebank system

- The Shelter system records qualitative and quantitative information and data. Qualitative information is collected through a mechanism called – Casebank, the purpose of which is to ensure that information collected by frontline staff is utilised for campaigning and fundraising purposes.

Casebank – entering case studies

- If the person entering client data into the main database thinks that a case could illustrate a policy issue or would be useful in other ways for campaigning and fundraising work they can specify that it be added to a repository of case studies called Casebank. Casebank requires staff to write a short case study and guidance has been written on how to do this in order to aid caseworkers. The system enables up to one side of A4 to be submitted but half a page is the recommended length. The case study can be written in the system or in Word and then cut and pasted. The record is then saved and added to the Casebank system along with the initial position regarding client consent. Casebank is linked up to the quantitative database.

- The client consent details give an indication of the extent to which a client is interested in Shelter using their story. It indicates whether the client is willing to support fundraising or take part in Shelter events, is willing to talk anonymously to the media or is willing to have their name used. These indications are not binding, as specific consent from clients is always needed for non-anonymous use of material. Strict rules are applied re: anonymity.

Casebank – retrieving case studies

- Many departments were in need of Casebank as prior to having the system useful case studies were difficult to track down on demand. Fundraising, External Affairs and the Policy and Research Unit can access and search Casebank according to their needs.

- In response to a search, Casebank produces a list of relevant cases with a short description of each. Users can then choose to print out or view this information in summary or in detail. The data they retrieve is completely anonymised.

- Should a user want to use the case anonymously, they can do this immediately. However should they decide that they would like to use the case beyond anonymity, they first have to contact the caseworker who submitted the case, who controls any contact with the client. If they use the case, they have to feedback to the caseworker in Casebank itself on how they have used it.

- If a search returns no results the policy worker can post a request in Casebank itself detailing the number of case studies they need, when they need them by and what they want the case to cover. Once the request is posted on Casebank, whenever a caseworker uses the system they will be alerted to the fact that there is a new request and can view it.

- Casebank allows Shelter to speak to the public and government with the knowledge that the information they disseminate is based firmly on the practical experiences of frontline staff and their clients.

- One very positive result is that frontline housing aid staff and policy, external affairs and fundraising teams have a much better understanding of each other's work.

Challenges

- Staff turnover involves training of new staff, and it is essential to ensure that sufficient resources are set aside for this. Peer support is a key factor in ensuring that a system has continuity of use.

- Setting up procedures for ensuring that staff are fully committed to use of the system is essential to its success - but in Shelter's experience the more it is used the more committed people become.

Session 2 – Joint Working

Presentation-

- **Developing a cross-agency database – Beth Green (The Children's Society) Children's Consortium on Refugees**

Background

- The Refugee Children's Consortium (RCC) is made up of voluntary agencies working with refugees and/or with children. Although the agencies have different approaches and concerns, and focus on different aspects of the young refugee's experience, their common aim is to improve policy and practice relating to this group.

- The RCC was founded in 1999 when the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Bill was going through Parliament. The aim was to create a unified and strengthened lobbying group. It was a very successful venture, and the consortium was maintained.

The Monitoring Project

- The agencies decided in autumn 2001 that they needed to collect casework data in a more systematic fashion to strengthen their ability to produce reports and collate information for lobbying purposes. It was agreed to do this collectively so as to increase the evidence base.

- An external consultant looked into the feasibility of inter-agency cooperation at this level and concluded that it was possible.

- Each of the organisations of the consortium took the idea to their management and the Children's Society (TCS), Refugee Council (RC) and Save the Children (SC) chose to participate, with TCS taking the lead. A steering group was formed and Beth Green was hired for one day a week, based at TCS.

- Decisions were taken on what kinds of casework data to collect and a monitoring form for use by caseworkers in each of the three agencies was designed. Data and information was collected on: accommodation, age disputes, social services, legal and financial support, education, access to health care, racial harassment, and interpreter needs and experiences.

- Issues of confidentiality, consent and ownership of data were paramount. No personal or identifying information was recorded on the monitoring form to maintain anonymity, small samples were also not included, in case they made tracing possible. A very clear consent form for clients was devised. In terms of data ownership it was agreed that no data would be used without consent from all three participating agencies.

- 118 case studies were documented in Hull, Oxford, London, Croydon, and Newcastle.

- The report 'A case for Change: How refugee children in England are missing out, First findings from the Monitoring Project of the Refugee Children's Consortium was written by Judith Dennis RC and published by SC during Refugee Week 2002.

The main challenges:

- Amongst the biggest challenges was the fact that each agency works with young refugees in different ways and at different stages of the asylum process.

- IT was a big problem. Despite the involvement of an external consultant and the TCS IT team, time constraints meant that the IT development process was minimal. The original idea of collecting data onto an Excel spreadsheet and then importing it into a database had to be abandoned, as there was not enough time to develop it fully.

- Inevitably the monitoring form needed revision, it did not suit all caseworkers and many identified missing fields etc.

- The question of when to collect data on a particular client caused complications, as the report was not collecting longitudinal information, but rather a snap shot.

- Identifying appropriate cases for the report was challenging. The selection process was left to the discretion of the caseworker. The main criterion was that the case provided a good example of the impact of a particular system or policy on the young refugee. The steering group members were available to discuss and advise on case study suitability throughout.

- Hiring a coordinator for 1 day a week was unrealistic. Coordination tasks included liasing with the IT department and with all participating organisations, and training everyone involved.

- As data was collected from only a limited number of geographical locations the findings could be interpreted to imply that they were the only places where bad practice was occurring. Therefore care had to be taken when writing 'A Case for Change' to avoid this.

- Every decision had to be approved by each participating agency, which could be very time consuming and often required compromise.

Outcomes:

- The report helped each organisation internally to review its service provision.

- The collation of the findings of three agencies highlighted issues that might not have been so readily apparent if the agencies had been working alone.

- Understanding of joint-working within the consortium was increased. There is an interest in continuing and expanding the project to other agencies within the consortium.

Presentation –

- **'Joint Working' - Lea Esterhuizen – Department of Social and Political Science, Royal Holloway University of London, Social Research Consultant to ICAR**

LE gave a brief presentation to outline some of the issues that joint working entails:

- The first step is to establish on what level cooperation will take place. There are various options, from merely establishing contact and sharing ideas to the production of a shared information resource like the Refugee Children's Consortium Monitoring Project. Combining data on a common theme or for a common purpose and/or granting access to specific datasets are other options.

- Once the level of cooperation has been decided, five stages of working together can be identified.

    i. identifying potential partners who fit your criteria for working together;
    ii. formulating an agreement with the full participation and involvement of all the players. The agreement must outline minimum ethical standards on issues such as data protection, consent, anonymity and confidentiality. It must clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of each participating agency, and it must articulate the levels of access to both staff and resources, as well as the conditions in which such access will be granted
    iii. developing a standardised approach to data gathering. The development of a standardised approach is a methodological step. It is about designing a research instrument, and must consider such issues as the underlying philosophy of the work, what will be measured and how.
    iv. agreeing on how the collected data will be synthesised;

v. agreeing on how the collected data will be disseminated. The process of identifying the dissemination mechanisms for the product must include questions about the suitability of product types to the objectives of all involved, the frequency of product production, the audience and the format.

For more information please contact Beth Crosland, ICAR Development Officer and Project Manager beth.crosland@kcl.ac.uk tel: 020 7848 2731 fax: 020 7848 2748

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