

Title: Doing it Differently in Wales: information specialists supporting the development of evidence based public health policy and practice.

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Aim

This paper examines the role of information specialists in Wales, and the work that is done in supporting evidence based public health, taking as case studies specific resources produced by the Health Promotion Library.

Introduction

The paper traces the development of this role from the initial appointment of a specialist health promotion librarian in 1989 whose role was to set up a small departmental collection to the existing situation today, nearly 20 years later. In 2008, the Health Promotion Library, part of the Department for Public Health and Health Professions, Welsh Assembly Government, works internally in partnership with library professionals in the Assembly Library Service. Externally we work with library and knowledge management professionals in the National Public Health Service for Wales, as well as with information colleagues across academic, public and voluntary sector organisations. Jointly these services provide information and manage access to public health evidence for a wide variety of customers, including local public health teams, local health boards, health alliances, local government, academics and researchers, media, social services, the voluntary sector, health consumers, general public as well as national government. Jointly at the national all-Wales level we are supporting the development of 'A Healthy Future' the first overarching Public Health Strategic Framework for Wales as an evidence-based policy. Information specialists are key members of the Health Intelligence Group alongside data analysts, public health consultants, and social researchers.

In reviewing this progression over the last 20 years, the paper explores key factors in how this success has been achieved. The background provides contextual information about evidence based public health, though not a detailed history, key facts about Wales to inform the case studies and tools used by the Health Promotion Library in practice. The main focus of this paper is practical, looking at how you get evidence into practice and policy.

The methods we have used to evaluate this work are also included, as we have used customer and stakeholder feedback as a basis for continuous improvement of our evidence products. Current and future plans for extending this work are discussed, and the paper concludes by summarising the essential steps for achieving success.

The European Context for Evidence-Based Public Health

To ensure our work is developed successfully, information specialists need to look beyond our own organisations to understand the wider policy developments on which we should base our future services and products. The emergence of new infectious diseases on a global scale, such as SARS and Asian bird flu, as well as increasing concerns about bio-terrorism and climate change are increasing the need for

information exchange as an urgent priority. As Clarke notes ‘global collaboration, dissemination and knowledge transfer are increasingly important for making the best use of current research knowledge. The challenge is to integrate research across Europe to address policies for health’¹.

Recognising these trends, the European Commission has initiated the European wide study ‘Strengthening Public Health Research in Europe’ (SPHERE). The study aims to ‘assess the development and use of public health research in both public policy and local decision-making’². As information specialists working across Europe, we must be part of the process of this information and knowledge exchange, and the work we do at local and national levels must be seen in this European wide context.

The Structural and Policy Context of Wales

Demography

The population of Wales was approximately 2,965,900 according to 2006 estimates. Based on the 2001 census, 96% of the population was White British, and 2.1% non-white (mainly of Asian origin). Most non-white groups are concentrated in the three main cities of Wales, Cardiff, the capital, Newport and Swansea.

Administrative structure at a glance

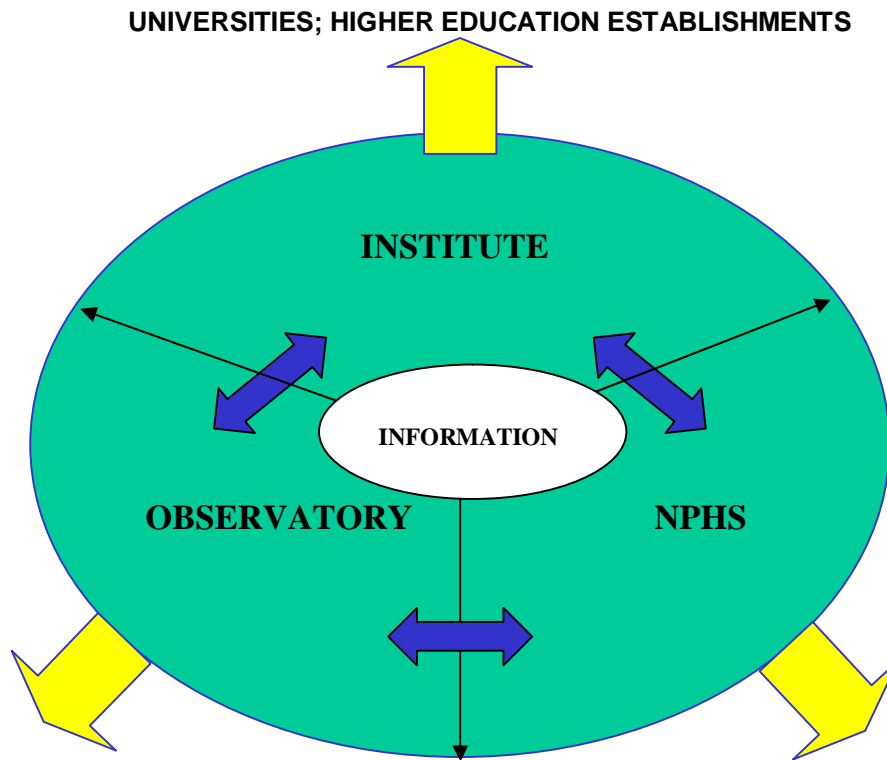
The Welsh Assembly Government is one of the devolved administrations in the United Kingdom. It provides financial support to, and works closely with the local authorities and the National Health Service in Wales to deliver services. There are 22 local authorities that range in population size from just over 50,000 in Merthyr Tdyfil a town in the South Wales valleys, to over 300,000 in the capital Cardiff. Currently we have 14 NHS Trusts, though it is planned that these will reduce to 9.

Public Health System

The Chief Medical Officer for Wales Dr Tony Jewell is responsible for public health in Wales. Dr Jewell is leading on a number of initiatives that will reshape the policies and the delivery of public health in Wales over the next few years. Key to these and with the Welsh Assembly Government Cabinet approval is the development of ‘A Healthy Future’ the public health strategic framework for Wales, as part of broader public service reform.

The delivery of public health will be done through a more unified system consisting of three elements – the National Public Health Service, a Wales Public Health Observatory and a National Institute of Public Health.

Key to our Chief Medical Officer’s vision for this unified public health system is information which as the diagram below shows is at the centre of these three elements.



**Public
Policy Makers
Media**

**Local Authorities
Local Health Boards
NHS Trusts**

In his paper on the development of a Unified Public Health System for Wales the CMO states that ‘the heart of the vision is that public health and population based sciences depend on high quality knowledge and information systems. This supports the surveillance and monitoring of health and its determinants as well as providing best evidence for what works and how to improve the service and clinical, social care quality. At the centre of a new unified all Wales public health system there will be a modern health information system...’³

This support from our Chief Medical Officer provides information specialists in Wales with the green light to be at the centre of delivering information to support evidenced-based public health. It is further reinforced by one of the roles identified for the public health observatory to ‘provide information in a way that is meaningful to the general public, the media and policymakers’.⁴ We will also have a role in the public health institute as this is to ‘be citizen-centred supporting the development of ways to promote public engagement across the public health field’.⁵

Health Libraries in Wales

There is a network of health libraries in Wales that work in partnership to deliver services to staff and students in Universities, as well as to clinicians in NHS Trusts, and those working in public health. There are:

- seven libraries in the Cardiff University Health Library Service
- 21 multi-disciplinary libraries based in the local NHS Trusts across Wales
- Library and Knowledge Management Service of the National Public Health Service Wales
- Royal College of Nursing Wales members Library
- NHS Direct Wales consumer information
- Health Promotion Library Welsh Assembly Government

All librarians are part of a membership organisation that organises study days, and allows us to exchange best practice, and lobby policy makers on key issues affecting information services.

At the Welsh Assembly Government, CyMAL is a Division that represents the interests of Museums, Archives and Libraries. Established in 2004 it provides policy advice to Ministers in the Assembly Cabinet, advice and financial support to museums, archives and libraries in all settings in Wales, develops and implements policies appropriate to Wales, and sponsors the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. 'Libraries for Life' is one of the key programmes being developed by CyMAL, bringing together libraries from all sectors. Health libraries are recognised as key players in this programme, having representation on the all Wales steering group as well as being involved in regional library partnerships.

Evidence-based public health: definitions and developments

A number of papers have been written about evidence-based public health, and all agree that this can be traced back to the mid nineteen nineties, building on previous work in developing evidence-based medicine. An initial definition proposed by Jenicek in 1997 was further expanded by Brownson in 1999, and then synthesised into a more workable and shorter definition by Kohatsu in 2004. Jenicek's definition provides a useful guide to the areas of evidence-based public health, that include the domains of health protection, disease prevention, health promotion and health maintenance and improvement. Jenicek also proposes that evidence-based refers to the best available evidence that is both credible and of the highest quality. For information specialists however, the definition as quoted in the paper by Rychetnik in 2008 is entirely relevant. Rychetnik states that 'evidence-based public health can be defined as a public health endeavour in which there is an informed, explicit, and judicious use of evidence that has been derived from any of a variety of science and social science research and evaluation methods'.⁶⁻⁹

In the Welsh Assembly Government, colleagues in the Office of the Chief Social Research Officer have defined evidence as 'any data, information, knowledge or understanding that helps to guide our decision and policy making'. They go on to provide the rationale for this evidence based approach. They state 'from identifying and understanding an issue or problem, developing effective responses to monitoring and evaluating our efforts and impact, the better quality evidence we have, the better

informed our decisions will be, and the more likely we will be to take effective action'.¹⁰

Challenges in providing public health evidence

Many of the challenges in meeting the information needs of the public health workforce are common to other groups working in health. Feedback from customer surveys we have carried out in the Health Promotion Library notes that lack of time, distance from services, despite increasing e-access, and too much information as major barriers in both accessing and using evidence regularly. It is good to find that these results are confirmed in the research papers on evidence-based public health, but research published by LaPelle in 2006 also identified some specific characteristics for the public health workforce that present further challenges. These include

- the diversity of the workforce itself, ranging from epidemiologists, public health consultants, nurses, social workers, community development workers, health promoters, and the list could go on
- a lack of awareness of what is available
- the multi-disciplinary nature of public health requiring practitioners and those supporting them to find information from many different disciplines.

In this paper, LaPelle also states that many public health information needs are unmet, reinforcing the need for us as information specialists to be more proactive about our role.¹¹ There is clearly plenty for us to do here!

What evidence does the public health workforce need?

To meet the challenges already identified we need to know what it is that our public health customers are looking for. In the Health Promotion Library in addition to our annual customer surveys, we have also evaluated our evidence-based products that will be described in more detail in the case studies. Although these are not a very large sample, they do provide some indication of what is needed. These include:

- Authoritative overviews of topics
- International and national research
- Key research papers as well as the most up-to-date
- Key documents and reports as well as research papers
- Grey literature
- Case studies
- Online access

In their research study of employees in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, LaPelle identifies very clearly what information and evidence public health workers need, and this reinforces the results from our very own small survey sample. This research also expands on the suggestions we received about online access. Respondents to the research were very clear in needing 'improved information access including single portal access with a good search engine'.¹²

Health Promotion Library Facts and Figures

The Health Promotion Library opened in 1989 as part of Health Promotion Wales, a Special Health Authority in the National Health Service. In 1999, the Library as part of Health Promotion Wales transferred to the Welsh Assembly Government, to the Office of the Chief Medical Officer. In 2007 this was renamed as the Department for Public Health and Health Professions, where the Library is a unit in the Public Health Strategy Division, working alongside social researchers, a health economist and web colleagues who deliver our departmental web site. Both library and web teams are managed by the Health Promotion Librarian. Reflecting the domains of public health as defined by the UK Faculty of Public Health; our department is organised into three policy divisions:

- Health Improvement (formerly Health Promotion)
- Public Health Protection
- Public Health Strategy

The Department also has the lead service heads in Wales for health professions, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, medicine, therapies, as well as a scientific division for the Welsh Assembly Government.

In transferring to this national department, the Health Promotion Library has been able to strengthen its role as a national library for public health in Wales, as well as delivering information services to colleagues across a wide range of public health policy and clinical areas. As the section below outlining the development of the Research Bulletins shows, being close to the business of the department has been critical to the development of evidenced based products closely linked to policy work and national campaigns.

Traditional information services including enquiries, training in accessing evidence based public health information, publications to keep customers up-to-date, marketing, are still available free of charge to anyone in Wales. Additionally we tailor these services in-house to meet the needs of departmental customers. An example of this would be the daily scanning of information sources; filtering these and emailing the details and links to colleagues based on our knowledge of their areas of work.

As information specialists involved in a wide range of partnerships across sectors, we are often able to make connections between areas of work, such as providing information to the public that policy makers working in discreet areas would not necessarily know about.

The dual focus of our work, being both inward and outward facing has enabled the service to retain its Charter Mark status for customer service excellence. Our customers decide how and when they want to access our services, having choice in doing so either remotely or in person. As an all-Wales service we make maximum use of technology to overcome difficulties of distance for our customers. Information can be requested via the email enquiry line, the telephone enquiry line as well as by post or visit. All print publications are available electronically, and are on our web pages for easy access and downloading. The Charter Mark status firmly positions our

service as being citizen-centred, and this is a key political driver for the Welsh Assembly Government.

Services delivered

- Respond to approximately 6,000 enquiries annually
- Publish six issues of the 'New Books Bulletin' as an alert to let customers know about the new material we have added to the library
- Publish four issues of public health information service newsletter to keep customers up-to-date with key developments in public health internationally, as well as in Wales
- Market the service by attending around twenty public health conferences, providing exhibitions and interactive displays, or taking introductory courses out to new users.
- Provide training as advertised in our annual training guide to individuals or to small groups including school students.

Equitable access to quality, up-to-date public health evidence

A key aim of our service is the provision of equitable access to quality, up-to-date public health information to support the development of evidence based policies, promote the use of the research evidence by public health practitioners, and empower a more informed general public. To achieve this we work with others to provide seamless services so that all customers can easily access reliable, quality and current public health information. Working with the health librarian for the Assembly Library Service we share knowledge of resources held, refer enquiries appropriately, and provide information about our current acquisitions to the topic based Current Awareness Bulletins which the health librarian produces to keep policy officials up-to-date with current evidence.

In the sections below are further examples of this partnership approach in a variety of settings to achieve this fundamental aim.

Engaging the public

We have further developed our partnership working in the last few years, to support the over-arching initiative 'Health Challenge Wales' launched in 2005 under the Welsh Assembly Government. This signposts members of the public to information to help them improve their own health, as well as working with organisations to look after the health of their staff and customers.¹³

Under the Health Challenge Wales umbrella we have been working to develop pilot health information stands in public libraries in deprived communities in Wales. Training of public library staff in accessing quality health information from consumer web sites, and the Welsh Assembly Government's health and statistical pages have supported this initiative. This training was developed in partnership with Health Challenge Wales's colleagues and information staff from NHS Direct Wales – the telephone advice and information service available 24 hours a day, every day.¹⁴

We have also been involved at the strategic level with the 'Books Prescription Wales' two-year pilot programme. This scheme aims to help people with mild to moderate mental health problems. All public libraries in Wales have a stock of more than thirty quality assured self-help resources, funded from the Welsh Assembly Government. These resources are 'prescribed' to patients by local general practitioners and their teams, and the patients then borrow these resources by visiting their local public library. As well as being part of the steering group, we have contributed to the evaluation of this scheme, as well as marketing it in our newsletter. As the possibility of extending this scheme to cover chronic conditions is being considered, we are providing information on the work of relevant partners in consumer health information, such as NHS Direct Wales to ensure that links are made and activity is not duplicated.¹⁵

We are also looking to further extend public access to quality public health information as part of the work we are doing with the South East Wales Regional Library Partnership. The possibility of using health topics as part of taster sessions to encourage use of public libraries is being explored. This will support not only the 2008 National Year of Reading initiative, but also increase health literacy skills among the public and build links with the 'Expert Patient Programme' a self-management course for people living with any long-term health condition.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

Products and services for public health professionals

Joint working over many years with the Library and Knowledge Management Service of the National Public Health Service in Wales has resulted in tangible benefits for the public health workforce in Wales. As part of an all-Wales project 'Access to Knowledge' a joint submission for electronic resources to support the public health workforce was made in 2006, resulting in key public health journals being made available full-text on the NHS Wales e-library.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

Our most recent collaboration is as part of the Health Intelligence Group established to support 'A Healthy Future: the Public Health Strategic Framework for Wales.' This framework is being developed through seven task and finish groups on key policy areas, including socio-economic factors, healthy eating, food and fitness, and mental health.²⁰

The Health Promotion Library is developing a policy-mapping tool for these groups, to ensure that all groups access quality, reliable and relevant evidence based on a common template. The aim of this is to provide easy access to key policies, strategies, reports and global evidence relevant to the topic area. Key data sources being searched include WHO, EU Portal, Department of Health and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, as well as the Welsh Assembly Government, the NPHS, and the Welsh Local Government Association. The work of our colleagues in the NPHS on collating information to support local health needs assessment for the development of the health, social care and wellbeing strategies is a vital piece in this evidence jigsaw.

To make maximum use of this policy-map, we are exploring with our web team how to host this information electronically, so that it can be easily accessed by all who need this, and that it can be readily updated.

Research Bulletins on Health Promotion Topics

The development of a series of research bulletins on health promotion topics originally happened as a very practical way of delivering current research to public health customers who could not easily visit the library service in person. The original bulletins produced in 1993, and 1994 provided evidence on:

- Healthy Sexuality – later broadened to include alcohol and drugs
- Healthy Living - nutrition, physical activity and mental health

These were quarterly compilations of selected abstracts of journal articles held in the Health Promotion Library, accompanied by details of recent material to the Library's stock. They were joint publications by the lead specialist in the health promotion area and the library team. They were simply a way for public health customers to keep up-to-date with recent literature. Before the age of the Internet these were not available on the web, and no full-text URL addresses were available. The abstracts were not graded for quality of evidence, and there was little attempt to properly scope what should be included, nor to look at the implications of this work for evidence based practice.

The transfer of staff from Health Promotion Wales to the Welsh Assembly Government in 1999 caused us to rethink how this topic based research bulletin series would be delivered in future, as roles and responsibilities were changing, and yet the demand for evidence from the public health workforce remained high. It was clear that the areas to be covered needed to be more focused, and that we needed to review not only the aims of the bulletins, but also to take a wider view of the way in which we determined the material to be included in the bulletins. Working with lead policy officials and the Head of the Health Promotion Division in the department we agreed these aims for the bulletins that are still those we use for the latest in the series:

- Inform and strengthen the evidence base for good practice
- Highlight research and policy developments
- Support and further professional knowledge

As well as agreeing more specific aims, we also realised that to be useful to the public health workforce in Wales, we needed to extend the range of articles abstracted in these bulletins. To do this we undertook MEDLINE literature searches for relevant articles published in English, and included these as well as articles from the library's own journals. We also provided customers with more information about the scope of the bulletins, and some detail about inclusion criteria.

These steps to produce a more formalised series of bulletins came together in 2003 when the first bulletin Mental Health was published jointly by the Library under contract with the Support Unit for Research Evidence Cardiff University.²¹ This mental health research bulletin was the first to be published where there were clear and transparent criteria for the selection of material. The criteria specifically stated that studies should 'focus on mental health promotion including the evidence base, policy and strategy, programmes and initiatives, good practice and evaluation.' A range of English-language knowledge databases were to be searched for material between 2000-2003, as well as hand-searching of the journals held in the Health

Promotion Library and not indexed in databases. It was also the first in the series to be more explicitly linked to the policy work of the health promotion division.

Based on the successful delivery of this Mental Health bulletin, it was agreed with the health promotion division that this was a workable way forward to continue to deliver the evidence based information public health policy makers and practitioners needed. A further specification was drawn up in 2004 for the delivery of three initial bulletins to support policy work areas in health promotion, with the potential of further extending this work to another three areas depending on delivery to quality standards and feedback from customers.

Based on this specification a contract was awarded to the Information Unit of the School of Health and Related Research (SchARR) University of Sheffield in 2004, and the health promotion library has worked in partnership with SchARR from 2004 to the end of the contractual period in March 2008.²²

During this period, building on the work undertaken with colleagues from the SURE Unit, the bulletins have been developed to support key public health policy priorities in the health promotion division, as well as providing the evidence to support national initiatives and campaigns. The process of determining the broad areas to be published annually is initially agreed with the Head of Health Improvement Division (HID). The health promotion librarian then produces a draft scope for each topic area that is agreed by the policy lead and the Head of HID, and this is then sent to the information unit in SchARR. Queries on scope are immediately clarified with the policy leads. An initial literature trawl identifies the possible articles for inclusion into the bulletin, and final decisions are taken by the policy lead working with the information specialists from SchARR and the health promotion librarian. Full details of this methodology, the searches undertaken, inclusion and exclusion criteria, quality assessment process are included in all introductions to each published bulletin. All evidence included is also graded using the developed by our SURE colleagues for the Health Evidence Bulletins. For the most recent bulletins we have also included in each abstract an 'Implications for Practice' section, to met the aim of helping practitioners use reliable and relevant evidence.²³

Evidence-based approaches: evaluation and feedback

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement the library service carries out qualitative and quantitative evaluation in a number of ways, so that we can develop services and products based directly on customer feedback. Annually we conduct a Customer Survey that has for several years given us detailed information about specific services, and the usefulness of these to our customers. Trend data from these surveys shows that well over sixty-five percent of customers used the Research Bulletins for example regularly or occasionally, and that over seventy-five percent of customers found these to be very useful or useful.

Having collected this very detailed quantitative information over many years, we decided to change this approach for the 2006 survey to better capture qualitative opinions. To achieve this we developed a more open-ended questionnaire asking customers to 'tell us what you like or dislike about our services.' From our experience when you ask such a question, be prepared for a huge response! On a more serious

note however, this information is really valuable to us in getting a snapshot of the main issues for our customers, and allowing us to develop new products or amend existing services based on these responses.

In addition to this annual process, we also get feedback from regular visitor surveys and through an enquiry response form that we use to monitor the quality of our enquiry service. In developing specific evidence-based products like the bulletin series we have tried a number of ways to get feedback from customers, with an evaluation from inserted into each issue, to ad hoc surveys by email. All training sessions are evaluated, and this includes the work that was done with the public libraries in supporting the Health Challenge Wales literature stands.²⁴

So what have we learnt and have we been successful in helping people use evidence more effectively?

Statistics from the customer surveys over more than ten years demonstrate consistent high levels of satisfaction with enquiry services and with evidence based products including the bulletin series. But statistics do not tell the whole story. Some customer comments are far more revealing!

General comments

‘Excellent service, long may it continue, vital for practitioners to work effectively.’ ‘I find this a valuable resource relating to my professional job.’ ‘Helped me find exactly the type of research I needed.’

Feedback from the research bulletins

‘Important for us to have authoritative overviews on topics which are not our core work; time saving and high quality are critical.’ ‘Bulletins and updates useful and informative.’ ‘Will be used by patient falls group to see if any learning can be transferred to our setting.’ ‘I am a member of a falls group and look for relevant data to support continued funding.’ ‘This is a must when we use the research to inform local decision making and recommendations.’ ‘To help inform local strategy development.’

Making improvements

‘As part of open government we would expect this as part of the service. It would be even better value for money if the circulation was wider.’ ‘If they were available online rather than in paper form they would be cheaper and more widely accessible.’ ‘How does this research bulletin fit with the effectiveness reviews being done by NPHS – this should be clarified.’

Evidence-based approaches: plans for future activity

So based on our experiences over the past twenty years, and with customer feedback that tells us that we are on the right track, as well as providing plenty of suggestions for developments, what are we planning for the future?

Doing it differently in Wales: Designed to inform: development of information and knowledge services for public health

This is a draft working document that is being jointly produced by the Health Promotion Library and the Library and Knowledge Management Service for the National Public Health Service Wales. Recognising that the strategic changes in the public health system in Wales needed a more co-ordinated approach for managing public health evidence, knowledge and information to support evidence-based public health policy and practice, we are working together to examine options as to how this would be delivered.

In taking forward this integrated and shared approach to information and knowledge services for public health, the key partners are building on a well-established foundation of joint working over many years. We believe that the time is now right to further improve services to our customers. We want to achieve equitable access for all who need it to public health evidence. We want to empower the public health community in Wales to make the best use of public health evidence, whether this is from international, national or local sources. By joining together we can make maximum use of information specialists' skills and expertise, use our resources more cost-effectively, and jointly deliver services and products available to all.

Conclusion

We have learnt, sometimes the hard way, many valuable lessons in developing services and products to support evidence-based public health over the last twenty years. In surviving the many changing circumstances that have happened in public health during this time, we have had to be open and flexible and able to adapt to the challenges these have presented. Critically, we have learnt to understand the organisations in which we have operated. Being close to the business is an essential element in planning information services. Of equal importance is the need to engage with customers, and to actively listen and as importantly act on what they are telling you. Working with others wherever this is possible is also crucial, and getting to know your partners allows you to learn from their experiences. Celebrate your successes as well as your failures. Both have contributions to make to continuous improvement. Remain committed. Keep clear goals, know what you want to achieve, and above all be enthusiastic about the work you are doing. It really does make a difference.

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