

Viewpoints

THE EXERCISE OF POWER OR SIMPLE INCOMPETENCE?

Mar Molinero's interesting account of the closure of Aldermoor school¹ reminds me of an occasion many years ago when I was asked to audit the work of a large, well-known operational research group. A study had recommended the closure of several depots but the proposal put to the Board by the director with responsibility for OR was rejected when the marketing director pointed out, correctly, that the sales effect had been ignored.

The public sector location study by the LEA, and that in the private sector, were both carried out incompetently, but with opposite outcomes. The problem with the depot study was that an important factor had been omitted, with the result that a professional manager could identify the weakness. The difficulty with the school exercise was that amateur decision makers could not be expected to appreciate the technical shortcomings made by more expert people upon whom they had come to rely.

In the private sector, all the directors shared common objectives in relation to the depot study, but that was not the case with the proposed school closure. The objective of the parents was to keep open Aldermoor school whereas the County Council sought to make the best use of limited resources; reducing class sizes was unlikely to be a feasible option. Thus, it can be argued that the LEA study was doubly flawed, because the wider issues should have been examined. However, a characteristic of much poor OR is the reduction of a complex problem to a sequence of simpler ones, resulting in important interactions being ignored. That is a process with which politicians are very familiar; it is known as fighting battles one at a time.

If the official report on the closure of Aldermoor school can justifiably be regarded as a rationalization for an exercise of power, then it is necessary to ask whether community OR has any future. Personally, I would like to believe that the outcome was the result of substandard OR presented to unqualified managers, which raises a host of very different worries.

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Reference

1. C. MAR MOLINERO (1993) Aldermoor School: the operational researcher on the side of the community. *J. Opl Res. Soc.* 44, 237–245.

FROM THE ASHES OF DESPAIR. . .

The paper by Celio Mar Molinero¹ provided some fascinating insights into the effects of transferring traditional OR practice (both hard and soft) into a community setting characterized by coercion.

For readers who missed that paper, Mar Molinero reported on an OR practitioner's attempts to support an Action Group campaigning to save its local school from closure. A research document was prepared which provided clear evidence that the reasons for closure offered by the County Council were, quite simply, invalid. Despite having developed a strong rational argument, the group were still unable to prevent closure—indeed their report was totally ignored. Mar Molinero ended the paper on a depressing note:

The Community OR worker could help the Action Group realize that they were the victims of a political decision and that no reasonable arguments could have made the balance lean towards their side. They might have won the argument but they became bitterly aware of their hopelessness. This feeling of despair was, in the end, the contribution of the OR worker to the community. (p. 245)