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‘Helping people with literally everything under the sun’: Exploring the work and information behaviours of constituency caseworkers

Charlotte Jackson, Emma Nicol, and Ian Ruthven

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Abstract

Introduction. This study explores the work conducted by constituency caseworkers in Scotland with a focus on their information behaviours. Caseworkers act as information intermediaries, finding and sharing information with constituents on behalf of elected political representatives. As yet, they have not received much examination in information science.

Method. 20 constituency caseworkers across Scotland were interviewed. In semi-structured interviews, participants discussed their role and responsibilities, revealing a variety of different information behaviours.

Analysis. Interviews were transcribed then subjected to thematic analysis, identifying and categorizing recurring phenomena.

Results. Findings showcase caseworkers’ role as information intermediaries with a wide range of information behaviours. These include information elicitation, information tailoring, and information signposting. Networking was also found to be crucial to the role to keep informed and find critical information for clients.

Conclusion. Gaining a deeper understanding of unexplored information intermediaries contributes to the information behaviour field as well as providing practical implications for governments to motivate greater support for caseworkers, who are given little training for their critical role.

Introduction

While the roles and responsibilities of politicians have moved to the forefront of the public's mind in recent years, staff behind the scenes and the information work they undertake has garnered little attention. In the UK, constituency caseworkers act as a point of contact for the public with their elected representatives. Acting as information intermediaries, caseworkers advocate for, signpost, and seek information for constituents who may be unable to find information for themselves (Womack, 2002).

This paper introduces the information work and behaviours of constituency caseworkers who work for Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), examining their job role and responsibilities, discussing distinctive information behaviours such as information elicitation (Ashikuzzaman, 2024; Cassell, 2023; Ross, 2003) and information tailoring (Colineau & Paris, 2009; Smets et al., 2024; Tara, 2015). Casework can cover a staggering range of topics, from homelessness to refuse collections, requiring caseworkers to have excellent information seeking and sharing abilities.

Information intermediaries are defined as those who act as information agents, undertaking information work on behalf of others (Buchanan & Jardine, 2020; Nicol et al., 2022). Often associated with archivists, librarians and teachers (Vitak et al., 2018), the human role of the information intermediary has been expanded to encompass other professionals, for example, family nurses, chaplains, and social workers, who assist in the collection and distribution of crucial information (Abrahamson & Fisher, 2007; Buchanan et al., 2019; Robson et al., 2024).

Although examination of information intermediaries is gaining traction, and they are regarded as a 'a vital component in information behaviour' (Case & Given, 2016, p. 362), the focus on intermediaries within information science has chiefly been on those whom they serve, examining concepts such as information poverty (Chatman, 1996), information marginalisation (Gibson & Martin III, 2019) and information needs (Buchanan & Jardine, 2020; Hasler, 2014) among those populations. This study adds to the literature by focusing on an unexplored category of information intermediary, in a study of how they meet their clients' ('constituents') information needs.

In the UK, elected representatives such as Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are individual employers in sole command of staffing their offices, with roles such as parliamentary researchers, policy assistants, social media creators, and constituency caseworkers (IPSA, 2023; UK Parliament, 2023). Roles and responsibilities often overlap, but constituency casework specifically refers to the issues (cases) that members of the public (constituents) bring to their elected MP or MSP (representing a specific geographical area or 'constituency') (McKee, 2023; UK Parliament, 2023). The current work focuses on caseworkers in Scotland supporting MSPs.

Casework is the day-to-day support available to constituents, who can contact their MSP for assistance, for information, conflict resolution, or advocacy. While constituents can and do contact MSPs for other matters, e.g., policy queries, casework is defined as that which requires problem-solving and active engagement from staff at the behest of individual constituents (Gill, 2020; Koop, 2012; McKenna, 2022).

Crucially, casework is not a legal requirement of the MSP role and is rarely overseen by any higher authority. Occasionally, a constituent's individual problem will prove to be part of a broader issue, such as a medical scandal (e.g., Derbyshire, 2017), and might be referenced by the MSP in a parliamentary speech or taken to social media or journalists, sometimes to enhance the public image of the politician or, more often, to further the case. Casework is however largely hidden from public view.

Most casework is treated as discrete work tasks distinct from the MSP's legislative duties and tends to be performed by staff acting as sole operators of cases, with various levels of oversight by the

MSP (Gill, 2020; McKenna, 2022). A key characteristic of casework is unpredictability, with cases ranging from the mundane to the horrific (Gill, 2020; Nicol et al., 2022). Cases can cover multiple issues, entailing highly detailed information tasks reflecting the complex information needs of constituents (Gill, 2020). MSPs are sought out to assist with such matters for a number of reasons, including the public perception of MSPs as independent arbitrators, a belief that an MSP has influence that could resolve cases, or, indeed, as a last resort when other channels have failed (Blidook & Koop, 2024; Gill, 2020).

The constituency caseworker role is not unique to the UK, with similar roles in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and Canada (Blidook & Koop, 2024; McKee, 2023). Globally, staff of elected representatives operate in the shadows, their jobs ill-defined and often misunderstood by the public and even by the politicians who employ them (Tiernan, 2007). There is a lack of formal mandates for members in regard to casework (which is rarely even stated on official government sources) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025; New Zealand Parliament, 2025; Oireachtas, 2025; Privy Council Office, 2015) and gaps in knowledge regarding the role performed and the information sought, shared and collected.

Constituency caseworkers have attracted little scholarship, with existing literature limited to parliamentary-funded studies and newspaper articles on the psychological stresses of the role (Chappell, 2020; Courea & Halliday, 2024; Cox, 2018; Halliday, 2024; Weinberg et al., 2024; White, 2019). There are however a few studies exploring constituency casework. Hofstetter examined constituent and MP interactions including casework and signposting (Hofstetter & Alexander, 2021; Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). Gill's study on MSPs and casework included constituency caseworkers as participants, though they were not at the forefront of the research (Gill, 2020). Nicol et al. explored the changing information work of support staff, including constituency caseworkers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nicol et al., 2022).

Research questions

There is little research into constituency caseworkers, neither regarding their remit nor their information behaviours, despite their important role as information intermediaries. To shed more light on their work, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. What information work do constituency caseworkers engage in?

RQ2. How do constituency caseworkers act as information intermediaries?

RQ3. What information behaviours do constituency caseworkers engage in when acting as information intermediaries?

Methodology

An interview study (n=20) was conducted to provide novel insights into the work and information behaviours of Scottish constituency caseworkers. The study received ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde.

Questions covered five categories, deliberately broad to allow participants the range to speak about what they found to be important aspects of the role:

1. Demographics – Age, sex, schooling, time in role.
2. Experience – Description of role, motivations, challenges,
3. Training – What was provided, what was missing.
4. Networks – Connections and contacts made or available to them
5. Other – anything else to discuss

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their combination of flexibility and structure, allowing the conversation leeway, while also permitting questions to be guided and interviews to be conducted quickly if necessary (Luo & Wildemuth, 2009). As caseworkers were either giving up free time or participating during working hours, careful consideration was given to interview length. Piloting with colleagues resulted in questions that could be covered in 30 mins.

Participants were offered in-person or online interviews to fit work schedules. Two opted for in-person. While scheduled for 30-60 minutes, interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 2h 26 minutes, averaging 1h 10 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded resulting in 23 hours of data.

Participant selection and profile

Caseworkers were recruited by first sending emails to the 128 publicly available MSP email addresses (Miles et al., 2020; Pickard, 2018). Some MSPs then forwarded the email to the private email addresses of caseworkers, of which 25 responded. Three responders declined, and two dropped out before interview. Interviews took place March to April 2025.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised by the lead author to find codes, with themes developed and refined iteratively by discussion among all authors (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This involved finding commonalities in the data by following a six-phase process, beginning with familiarisation with the data, achieved via transcription and multiple readings of the data. Transcription of audio recordings was performed manually, allowing immersion with the data which formed a deeper, richer understanding of the information (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Intelligent verbatim transcription was applied, with stutters, filler words and false starts removed to make transcripts more readable and digestible while maintaining nuances of participants' responses, which is ideal for identifying recurring themes and concepts (Point & Baruch, 2023). Participants were offered the option of reading transcripts to confirm their original statements and, if necessary, suggest redactions (Carlson, 2010).

The next phases involved identifying initial codes and illustrative quotations, then placing them into overarching themes. Several codes and themes were merged, separated, or discarded as time passed to be more cohesive before contextualising the themes within current literature (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Hamad, 2023). This data analysis was sequential but also recursive, as at many points it was necessary to go back a phase with a new perspective and re-build, examining the codes in relation to the research questions to ensure relevance (Miles et al., 2020).

Findings

This section details study findings, exploring the work of caseworkers, focusing on information tasks, as well as their information behaviours.

Themes are discussed using illustrative quotes, though quotes can reveal several different aspects of information work taking place simultaneously and have thus been sorted as logically as possible.

Casework characteristics

This section addresses RQ1, conceptualizing the role of a constituency caseworker, exploring its parameters, and types of information work they engaged in.

Variation

Participants were asked to give a brief description of their work. All believed the role to be vastly different to written descriptions such as job advertisements, with a wider range of duties and responsibilities 'do you want the job description or the reality?' (P1).

Participants found cases too varied to properly describe, though housing, the National Health Service (NHS) and education concerns dominated day-to-day tasks. All argued that 'anything and

everything' (P16) could feasibly land on their desk, with Table 1 demonstrating the range, from the commonplace to the heart-breaking.

Health	Legal	Transport	Housing	Financial	Environmental
ADHD and schooling	Child sexual abuse	Ferry delays	Land ownership	Council tax overpayment	Council roadworks disrupting the growth of plants
Adult caring responsibilities	Domestic abuse	Anti-pavement parking	Homelessness	Decreasing child maintenance payment	Garden centre recycling scheme
Suicide	Help with arrest warrants	Bus schedules, shelters and gates	Overcrowding	Food parcels	Food recycling scheme
Medical scandals	Help prison inmates	Community centre parking	School catchment areas	HMRC (tax) concerns	Abandoned boats in harbour
Cancer misdiagnosis	Shop facial recognition software	Disabled parking spaces	Wheelchair access to third floor flat	Rent concerns	Overgrown Japanese knotweed
Hospital at home services	Solicitors' offices closing	Driving license revoked	Black mould	Community funds	Rubbish dumps
NHS waiting times	Leaving the Taliban	Train refunds	Waiting lists	Heating bills	Sewage in garden
Hospital trips with plus 1	Paedophile ring	Private taxi for narcolepsy	Ground floor access after operation	Windfarm land payments	SEPA water monitoring

Table 1: A list of individual cases that participants spoke about in interview. Many examples given cross over categories (such as health and housing) but have been placed to showcase range of daily cases.

This variability was seen as a positive aspect of the role, with multiple participants citing it as a factor in their remaining in the role, enjoying the chance to learn and adapt to the constant workflow:

It's a different job every single day. I never know what's going to phone, write, email, walk in. I can guess... our bread-and-butter work. But the other stuff, you cannot guess, and that's quite interesting. (P4)

You never know what is going to be on the end of the phone. You know, from the weird to the unbelievable to... the so sad. (P14)

It's helping people, but it's helping people with literally everything under the sun. (P7)

Multiple participants expanded on this theme of variability, noting that constituency offices and caseworkers themselves could differ hugely, and that casework would accordingly be conducted in very different ways (P2, P3, P13, P15). Time taken on cases was also highly variable: some lasting minutes, others many weeks, or even years.

...last week I had nothing in my for-action tab. And now I've got ...13. In total, I have how many non-closed cases? 28... all of a sudden you get like five in a day. And they vary obviously in intensity. (P15)

Participants noted that constituents did not always fully comprehend the assortment of issues they were facing, often involving many interconnected problems, which meant having to interact with multiple external services and sources of information *'when you're dealing with a case and somebody will tell you, X is a problem. And then you have a chat with them, and you go, yes, but A and B is also a problem and F'* (P9). Interview analysis revealed that the three most frequent categories of case brought to caseworkers were housing, healthcare, and education. Figure 1 illustrates some of the potential overlaps that could be present within cases, with the concept of 'waiting times' a common issue across the board, and issues such as black mould causing concern with not just housing, but also with health, as highlighted by recent tragic cases (Brown & Booth, 2022).

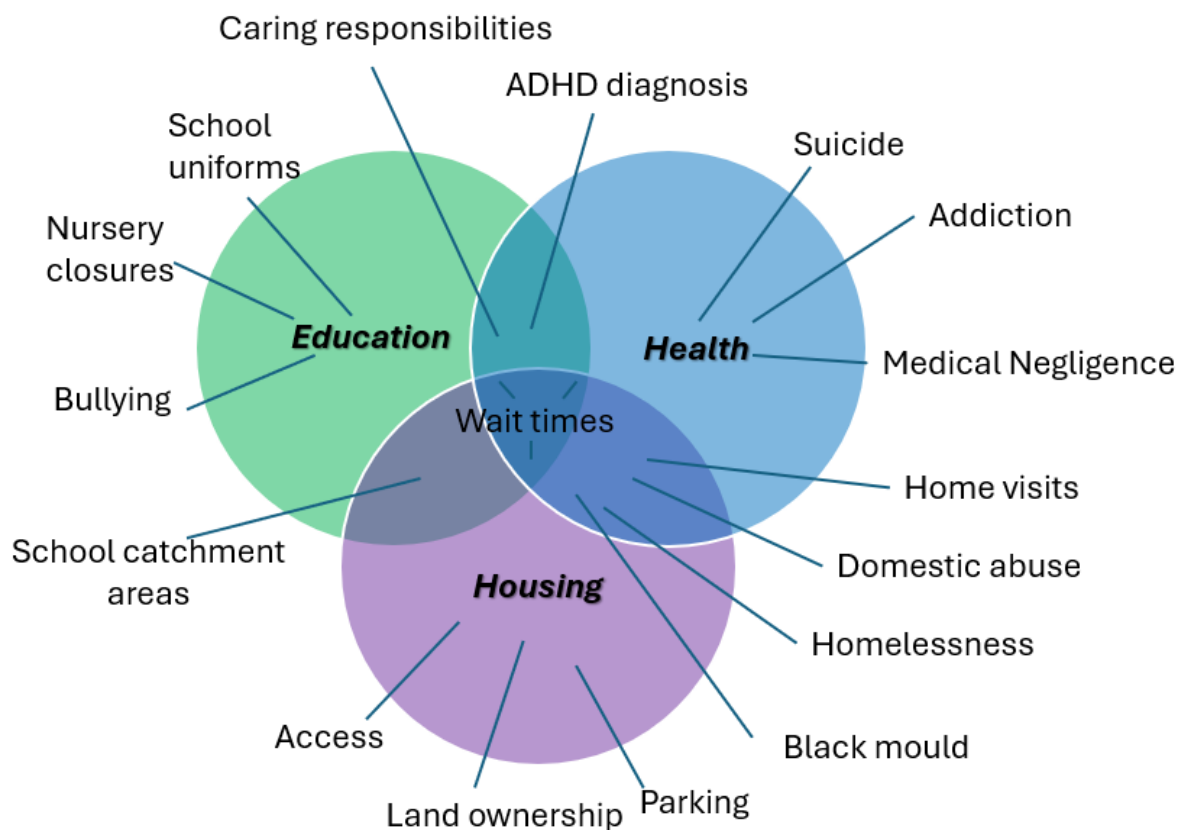


Figure 1 Venn Diagram showcasing three major types of casework, demonstrating how problems often intersect.

Political aspects

Participants were divided over the extent to which personal politics influenced their work, from the hiring process to the job itself. Three stressed that they were not political at all in their personal lives (P2, P7, and P20) and did not believe that active engagement in politics was required to perform their role, while two had been employed following periods of political activism (P3, P9). Two argued that their political beliefs had to align with those of their MSP when conducting

casework *'I don't think I could write an email that I didn't believe'* (P18), though three others said that while they were not supporters of the party with which their MSP was affiliated, they were supportive of the MSP in themselves. A minority (6) had a degree qualification in politics (P2, P6, P11, P12, P17, P18), though none believed it had prepared them for the role's realities.

Participants were clear that casework was removed from politics when advocating for constituents, [Participant and colleagues are] *'very careful to say... we are not asking for special treatment'* (P3), *'we always remain neutral'* (P18). However, they conceded that in working for a political representative, any of their work could become political, be it *'to win hearts and minds'* (P1) And by being responsive or doing tasks well, they may maintain or enhance the MSP's popularity and assist their re-election: *'how well I do my job can directly influence electoral outcomes'* (P15). Additionally, casework could be used by MSPs to increase awareness of big or divisive issues and cases could be raised among other elected representatives, including in parliamentary debates (P13), demonstrating how casework can have far reaching effects and consequences.

Training and lack thereof

The scarcity of casework-specific training identified in the literature was confirmed by participants' responses. While professions such as social work or nursing have strict training protocols and qualifications, there is no accredited training for caseworkers – *'for us it's on a wing and a prayer'* (P16).

Participants discussed some available training, but this was often parliament centric, in setting (having to travel long distances to the parliament in Edinburgh to take part) or in content, e.g., fire evacuation training in the context of the parliament building, rather than constituency offices (P2). When asked if there was specific training, P3 responded: *'No. Has anyone said yes to that!?' P4, P10, P17, and P19 all called commencing their role a 'baptism of fire', with no official handover procedures:*

one of my questions in the interview was, what kind of training do you provide? And it was a blank look on their face like, what do you mean? And I was so confused... [they said to me] you're more than welcome to organize it. (P7)

Thus, the onus was on caseworkers to learn the role and skills of casework *'on the job'*. A majority of participants concluded that experiences outside the role had been essential training, notably, experience in customer service roles. Some noted their luck in having supportive, experienced colleagues who could train them, while being acutely aware this was not a universal experience:

...you might find that you come into a new office, and you've not done casework before, and that caseworker who was in there before has left...without giving any instruction. Panic stations! (P16)

Training improved post-Covid, with greater availability of online resources. This included a caseworker forum, regularly hosting training delivered by caseworkers and other organisations, both by internal organizations, such as the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), or external providers. While sometimes useful, participants expressed frustration with these services, citing lack of visibility, *'I didn't know that SPICe existed for a year, nobody told me. I got no information'* (P16), *'resources that are there, that you don't **know** are there'* (P2).

Communication

This section focuses on RQ2, exploring how caseworkers' act as information intermediaries.

Networks

Participants found building networks to be necessary to constituency casework for gaining relevant, critical information for constituents and for the MSPs for who employ caseworkers.

Again, participants struggled to detail how they forged and maintained networks, but all were clear that connections were crucial. *'You need to create good connections in the community to be a good caseworker'* (P1).

Building and maintaining networks and resources was mentioned by all, though the manner varied. Some preferred to rely on parliamentary resources such as telephone hotlines or parliamentary groups (e.g., SPICe or other cross-party groups) which could be contacted for advice and assistance. Additionally, each constituency office has software, called 'Caseworker', accessible by all staff. This is used to log cases, with old and current cases and general contact lists visible. However, most participants found these resources to be too general or out of date and needed to supplement them with their own personally sourced knowledge bases.

Caseworker networks such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups were mentioned by several participants and though only used occasionally, they appreciated this option (P2, P6, P8, P11). Similarly, individual or groups of caseworkers could be contacted using parliamentary email. This was again seen as a rarity (P2, P3, P4, P14).

Arranging meetings with public service providers, businesses, or community groups were common ways to build up networks and to follow up on cases (P2, P7, P8). Some had contacts pre-dating their caseworker employment that they used in office, such as local authority, charity, or business contacts, as well as using associations via their political party membership. Others created their own *'online black book'* (P10), noting useful contacts when seeking information. Contacts formed the fundamental blocks of information work, as while a caseworker might not know much about a topic, they knew who to go to for an answer:

.... initially, I found it very, very stressful because I was like, I'm 17. What the hell do I know about tax? But now the way I see it is more, I don't need to know about tax. I need to know who knows about tax. (P15)

Honestly, it's talking to other people and it's getting it wrong sometimes. So, like phoning the wrong number...eventually someone will direct you to the person to help you. (P17)

When questioned further on the formation and maintenance of networks, many referred to their *'experience'* in the role as how they knew what to do and who to contact: *'You tend to just learn who the best people...are.... that's an experience thing'* (P1). Maintaining strong relationships and staying professional and polite under pressure was also key to networks: *'we don't want to go too strong and just break that chain of communication at all, because absolutely we might need them tomorrow to bend over backwards for us'* (P19).

Trust building

Another essential practice for effective casework was building trust with clients and sources. Part of this was about empathy, with 19/20 participants noting its crucial role: *'you need empathy and compassion before anything else'* (P17). Trust allowed for greater information sharing, which facilitated accurate and efficient information seeking: *'...it also allows you to build a better rapport...to display a bit of empathy'* (P10).

Participants stressed the fundamental role of active listening in building trust and how it aided information work by helping them to fully understand a constituent's needs:

...first thing is trying to get the information. And that actually can be very difficult.... Sometimes somebody's situation is very complicated. And for them just to suddenly... tell you everything that's been going on for...however many years, ... it takes quite some time. (P14)

Active listening also played a role in understanding constituents' perceptions of task success. Constituents could be as varied as the casework, if not even more so, thus checking in and listening to needs rather than assuming the direction or degree of effort expected was necessary:

I'll ask: ...What does success look like for you now? How would you like us to step in? I don't tend to do anything without having quite clear instruction, because everyone's different. (P13)

Keeping clients informed and actively listening meant that they would be more open to changes of direction if a caseworker felt that doing so would be the best way to close the case, even if the client had originally desired a singular direction: *'I think most people are quite agreeable to you changing tack'* P19.

Building trust with sources was also crucial. Being upfront about the information needed and its priority, *'We never say [to sources] it's urgent, if it isn't'* (P4), enabled caseworkers to engage with sources *'off the record'* (P4) or *'under the radar'* (P4) and to obtain information that might not normally be revealed, as sources could trust caseworkers' sincerity, confidentiality, and discretion:

We built very good relationships where we can go under the radar on stuff where you have very straight conversations and just say, really, what's going on here? And where you may get other piece of information... they trust us. (P4)

Setting expectations

Another part of building trust with constituents centred on managing expectations. Participants noted that many constituents had unrealistic expectations or a false understanding of what MSPs and/or caseworkers were capable of: *'We don't have like superpowers, and we can't force other services to do certain things'* (P7). Participants noted that many constituents perceived the MSP as the one who would do the casework, believing that the MSP had far-reaching powers to solve cases: *'no-one understands who we are or what we do...Like the expectation people have is that [MSP] is doing it all, and I'm like: Yeah. I like to see him try!'* (P2). Thus, the first step in any constituent interaction was to set expectations of what could realistically be achieved:

The frustrating thing is that people think that we can wave a wand and have things happen for them. And I'm always at pains to tell people I cannot compel anybody to do anything, but I can and will fight your case. (P3)

Information engagement

This section explores RQ3, examining prevalent information behaviours revealed by participants.

Information elicitation

Participants described extremely high levels of engagement with information and discussed numerous approaches to information work. Using information elicitation to establish a rich picture of constituents' information needs was common, with caseworkers often needing to draw out additional information that clients did not realise was connected to the case: *'something that for them was a throwaway comment, but you can kind of latch on to it'* (P3).

This approach enabled caseworkers to guide constituents towards the correct information, as what a constituent might name as the problem, might not be the full picture of their need and was *'not necessarily just what single issue they've come to you with'* (P3). Participants noted that constituents often fixated on facets of the main issue, overshared, or provided *'fluff'* not useful to the case, which they recognised as the constituent's attempt to control an overwhelming situation.

By talking further and digging deeper into clients' stories, caseworkers could find additional problems and uncover the *'whole rammy [mess] of stuff underneath'* (P9), build a clearer overview and *'then trying to put all those various pieces together to see if you can resolve it'* (P11).

Information tailoring

Participants discussed information tailoring, wherein they made information more digestible for constituents and contacts. Caseworkers tailored information from and to constituents to ensure clear, effective communication. An important information practice involved *'deconstructing what comes in'* (P8), to make information requests from constituents more factual or more streamlined and, importantly, less aggressive, *'remove some of the petrol'* (P4).

Participants further noted the need to tailor information requests to be polite and inquisitive, as demanding or aggressive tactics could destroy existing or nascent relationships with information sources, who were often service providers. Such tailoring also occurred when providing information to constituents, to guarantee that information was *'as relatable and understandable to them as possible'* (P8) while simultaneously ensuring constituents felt *'heard without being patronizing'* (P15).

Information tailoring was often needed due to literacy issues. Caseworkers recognised the role of literacy in the difficulties constituents experienced in expressing needs:

I never failed to be astonished at how poor people can be at articulating clearly the problem and the need. And therefore, go for months without help because they have been unable to do that. And I that is a responsible duty for a caseworker, to take it and [help]. (P9)

Information signposting

Signposting constituents to other services was a key information behaviour described. Caseworkers would also signpost in cases where they thought specialist expertise was needed e.g., connecting abuse survivors with refuges (P14). They stressed it was neither lack of ability nor reluctance that stopped them helping directly, but that signposting was a necessity of the role, as otherwise caseworkers could be overwhelmed with information requests: *'If there was nobody else around [to signpost a constituent to], I would do what I could'* (P4). For example, they might signpost a constituent to specific service provision if the case related to their representative's statutory responsibility in the Scottish parliament, while for cases within the remit of the UK parliament they would signpost constituents to the local MP's office. Participants made it clear that signposting was done to maximise efficiency, as well as to expand the constituent's support network: *'signpost... to dedicated organisations that can give them much more detailed professional and key experience in that field'* (P8).

Discussion

RQ1 addressed the role of constituency caseworkers and the types of work undertaken. A large variation in the type of information work, from addressing mundane, neighbourhood concerns, to potentially life-threatening situations was revealed. As well as requiring keen information-seeking skills, constituency casework, as described by participants, is knowledge-intensive, requiring an understanding of a variety of overlapping yet distinct sectors such as health, education, and housing (see Figure 1). That such varied, complex, and unpredictable information work is undertaken by individuals with no formal training nor established professional infrastructure to draw on is striking. Whereas information intermediaries such as family nurses (Buchanan et al., 2019) or librarians (Vitak et al., 2018) may have standard information practices learned from their professional training, alongside routine access to dedicated knowledge bases and formal professional networks, constituency caseworkers enjoy little such formal guidance or support. The types of challenges described by caseworkers, of navigating new, complex information environments, locating resources and establishing sources in the absence of written procedures and guidelines have also been recognised by Willson and Given in their studies of new academics (Willson & Given, 2020). Authors such as Gill (2020) and McKenna (2022) have pointed to potential political ramifications, such as threats to a politician's re-election resulting from casework done

poorly or not at all. This aspect of constituency casework, which multiple participants acknowledged, particularly distinguishes it from other types of information work.

RQ2 examined how caseworkers act as information intermediaries for constituents with complex information needs. Interviews revealed the sophisticated interactions needed to build networks and, crucially, to gain trust and build rapport with constituents and sources. Other authors (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2019; Robson et al., 2024) have noted the important role of trust in clients' acceptance of information, combatting factors such as information overload, low literacy and misinformation, all of which were cited by participants in this study as challenges when engaging with constituents. Participants were careful not to damage relationships with entities or individuals who may be the only ones able to help with future cases, echoing Duncombe & Heeks (2002), Sabelli (2012), and Schilderman (2002) regarding the need for information workers to act as bridges between clients and sources. Additionally, caseworkers recognised the need to set expectations with constituents but found this challenging due to false perceptions of the power of elected representatives. While professionals such as doctors and lawyers are supported by frameworks and knowledge bases (Bikin, 2003; Meyer, 2003; Roper, 2010) to set expectations with patients and clients, there are no such frameworks for constituency caseworkers.

RQ3 explored the information behaviours of constituency caseworkers when acting as information intermediaries, shedding light on how they elicit information from clients, tailor information to specific needs, or signpost to specialists. Findings showed that constituents often have complex information needs, prefaced by information uncertainty or dissatisfaction e.g., (Taylor, 1968; Wilson, 2018). This uncertainty is often accompanied by anxiety, frustration, and discomfort, affecting articulation of problems (Heinstrom, 2010; Kuhlthau, 1991; Nahl & Bilal, 2007; Wilson, 2018). Therefore, caseworkers require methods such as active listening to elicit the full picture from constituents, whilst being sensitive to their clients' personal context, particularly in cases that may be potentially traumatic to discuss (e.g., domestic abuse) (Kimbly et al., 2023). Caseworkers also play a key role in the breaking down of information, so that clients not only possess the correct and relevant information but can also comprehend and apply it as in Buchanan et al. (2019).

As information intermediaries, constituency caseworkers go much further than simply seeking and sharing information from pre-ascribed resources; not simply acting as mediators they actively engage with the information to tailor it to unique client needs, supporting both Tara and Colineau and Paris' findings that for information provision to be effective and improve client understanding it has to be tailored (Colineau & Paris, 2009, Tara, 2015). Factual and relevant information is essential for both clients and sources; as information needs and literacy levels vary, the information tailoring enables information to be more readily understood and acted upon (Smets et al., 2024). Constituents' emotional needs often actively affect information work, with information tailoring also being used to contain or de-escalate potentially heated or intense interactions.

Building trust and having empathy for constituents were components stressed repeatedly by participants, who found that without these, constituents would be less likely to divulge all pertinent information. As cases could vary widely, from the mundanity of overgrown grass and underfilled potholes, to suicidal crises, caseworkers need efficient strategies such as active listening and information tailoring to respond to each case (Gill, 2020). Akin to the medical field, the information gathered for constituents may need to be made digestible dependent on information literacy levels, be made to be sensitive to client's unique emotional states and needs, or need to be escalated and/or signposted to the relevant bodies (e.g. charities or food banks) for more specialised assistance (Smets et al., 2024).

Much like Willson and Given's study of early-stage academics, caseworkers found themselves facing 'baptisms of fire', relying upon life experience to guide them in the beginning stages of the

job (Willson & Given, 2020). Once established in the role, the forming of networks and cultivation of select useful resources was necessary to survival in the fast-paced workplace, with both prior experiences in other roles (such as hospitality or healthcare), combined with experience as a caseworker, being a concrete factor that participants were able to pinpoint as crucial to surviving the emotionally taxing work. This experience helped to build stability and belonging, increasing caseworkers' confidence and ability to assist clients with their information requirements (Willson & Given, 2020). Conversely, and unlike other intermediaries such as academics (Robson et al., 2024; Willson & Given, 2020) or chaplains (Robson et al., 2024), participants (from newbies to those with decades in the role) struggled to fully articulate other information behaviours and practices, and even when pushed still used the word 'experience' to explain the motivations behind their responses to clients.

Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

This study investigated the information work of constituency caseworkers of elected politicians in Scotland. While previous studies have focused on political representatives (Auel & Umit, 2018; Counts, 2017; Gill, 2020; Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2018a), political (Koop, 2012) or psychological aspects of casework (Kelly, 2024; White, 2019), this is among the first to focus on the casework of politicians and those undertaking it on their behalf. The study reveals the varied and highly complex information work and behaviours of a group of information intermediaries undertaking such tasks in the service of often highly vulnerable constituents, despite little training or formal guidance. The potential political ramifications of caseworkers failing in their information work is unique to this group and has yet to be given attention in information science.

While the research approach adopted was successful in eliciting rich data regarding the caseworker role and elements of their information behaviours, there were limits to the interview method for capturing nuances of the behaviour. Though participants recognised the high complexity of the information tasks they undertook, they nonetheless struggled to articulate their approaches to seeking information, the steps involved, and how they achieved resolutions. The generalisability of the findings is also limited by the sample size, possible sampling bias, and non-involvement of those who have left the role.

Future work could expand on this study to capture the information behaviours that participants struggled to articulate. This could be achieved via established ethnographic approaches for information science research such as observations or information horizon interviews (Savolainen, 2007; Sonnenwald, 2005), with the caveat that constituency caseworkers operate in often highly sensitive informational and political contexts where securing access might be difficult. How participants' information behaviour changes over time might also be examined further, e.g., via a longitudinal study on caseworker transition from newcomer to experienced intermediary.

This research contributes to the limited body of knowledge on information intermediaries operating outside classic information professional roles and contributes to theoretical understandings of people who deal with complex information tasks on behalf of others. New insights into how information work is conducted when training and guidance is not explicitly provided is explored, with a focus on how individuals form and keep their information networks. The research has implications for policy and standards to better support constituency caseworkers and the communities they serve.

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About the authors

Charlotte Jackson is a PhD student in the Computer and Information Sciences department at the University of Strathclyde, focusing on the information behaviours of constituency caseworkers and information resilience. Charlotte has a master's in information management and Preservation from the University of Glasgow. Charlotte.jackson@strath.ac.uk.

Emma Nicol is a Lecturer in Information Behaviour at the University of Strathclyde. Her experience of empirical investigations of information behaviour (IB) and human computer interaction (HCI) encompasses studies in many human contexts and occupational domains. Emma.nicol@strath.ac.uk

Ian Ruthven is Professor of Information Seeking and Retrieval at the University of Strathclyde. His research is focused on the human experience of interacting with information, particularly on how people find information. He has published many papers looking at how information needs arise in people's everyday lives and documenting these needs and how they are resolved. ian.ruthven@strath.ac.uk

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