

## **Box 2: The blindness system**

The blindness system is the complex that includes:

- the set of persons with severe visual impairments;
- the set of agencies, groups, and institutions that serve and support them;
- the research and training that affects the provision of services;
- the laws, policies and programmes under which services are provided.

To call all of this a 'system' is not to imply that it has well-defined, consensual goals and co-ordinated programmes for achieving them. The institutions included in the blindness system tend, in fact, to behave in a fragmented and disorganised way. In this sense, it is a non-system. Nevertheless, all the components listed above are relevant to the experience of people with severe visual impairment in the United Kingdom.

Agencies specifically concerned with blind people exist at both national and local levels. They fall into two parallel systems, one public and the other private although the clarity of this distinction has been eroded in recent years as private agencies have sought and received more public funds. There are approximately 800 agencies for blind people. They differ with respect to the service they provide and the basis on which they are organised. Some specialise in particular functions, such as aid to blind people in economic need or residential schools for blind people. Others are consulting agencies or producers and distributors of materials for blind people. In addition to the providers of services, there are special 'subsystems' concerned with research, both medical and non-medical, and with skills training. All of this is the official blindness system which provides services specifically to blind people under the heading of blindness. There is, beyond that, a substantial unofficial system which provides benefits or services to blind people under headings other than blindness: for example, the systems involved with welfare, social security, and health. Finally, there is an informal blindness system which consists of services provided by no established agencies, but by families, friends and neighbours.

Adapted from Schon (1971)