

Heritage, democracy and public value

Ricardo Blaug, Louise Horner and Rohit Lekhi

The Work Foundation, in association with the Research Republic

The discussions in this session of the conference have focused on how to show what it is that is particularly valuable about heritage. Value for money is important, but the public bodies represented here at this meeting are clearly providing other kinds of value that cannot be so easily quantified by New Public Management, with its emphasis on technical efficiency and the public as ‘consumers’ who need to be ‘satisfied’. Public value must therefore somehow articulate the distinctive type of value produced by a public-oriented service – one that reconnects public bodies with the public they are there to serve.

The Work Foundation, in association with the Research Republic, has been researching how the public value concept might be applied in the current context of UK public service reform, and to address problems in existing approaches to public value. In this, our research has covered policing and local government as well as the arts, culture and heritage sectors.

‘Public value’ is a tricky concept. There are many meanings of ‘public’, and still more of ‘value’. The former can refer to public goods, to social capital, civil society or the public sphere. ‘Value’ is a term that is equally fraught. To some it means economic value – how much a product or service is worth relative to other things as indicated by its price. Value can also relate to preferences and satisfaction with a particular service at a specific point in time. Finally, values such as security and integrity derive from moral and ethical debate and will always be hotly contested. When it comes to thinking about the value of a historical site, all of these approaches to value have a bearing on decisions about what to conserve or to leave obsolete.

As Kelly *et al* (2002) have argued, public value must, in some important way, reflect what the public values. Living in a democracy, they suggest, this should come as no surprise to us. A public service, they show, has ends and values that are authorised by the public. By authorisation, we mean ‘agreed to’ or ‘owned by’. The purpose of a public service is thus to create public value, and to do so efficiently.

Heritage, of course, requires a careful balance between stewardship, or trusteeship, and an orientation to what the public wants. Services must respond and react to what the public wants, and to do so across the design, provision and evaluation of services. This is no more than to repeat the importance of localism, and the move away from centralised standardisation. This is not to say that standardisation does not have a role to play, for example in driving up minimum standards. Rather than continue with the age-old tug-o’-war between the forces of centralism and the forces of localism, the shift we are advocating here is about getting organisations to reconnect with their public – the public might be a global one, as with most World Heritage Sites, or it might be those living within walking distance of a royal park. Either way, understanding the public is the key, rather than simply

debating who should have the right to make decisions on the public's behalf.

In order to find out what the public values, service providers must interact and engage with the public. This engagement is a two-way exchange of knowledge, for providers and the public here educate each other. Not only do service providers seek to shape public preferences, for example providing expertise and knowledge about the history of the object or building that the public would otherwise not have been aware of, but they also learn from the public, from its opinions, interests, expertise and collective clout. In the language of public value, providers must interact with their 'authorisation environment' to find out what the public values. It is the public that must 'authorise' the value to be pursued.

This element features strongly in the Work Foundation's conception of public value. The public authorises what is seen as valuable. Again, it is worth remembering that the 'public' here really means many overlapping 'publics', a teeming mosaic of interests variously pursued by associations, institutions and the media – indeed, the complete 'authorisation environment'. Yet it is the public authorisation of goals and evaluative criteria that distinguishes public value from economic value, not simply the absence of a price mechanism.

To orient to what is valued by the public is hardly a new concern. At least since the 17th century, we have aspired to be democratic, to represent and respond to public preferences, even if we have struggled to do it well. Nor do the problems with democracy arise here for the first time. To respond to what the public wants is not, for example, merely to pander to the lowest common denominator or mob rule. When the 'public' mistakes a paediatrician for a paedophile, as occurred following the *News of the World's* campaign against the latter in 2002, we forcefully argue that there is, actually, a difference. In democratic theory, a distinction is drawn between a knee-jerk, ill-informed and unconsidered preference and a 'refined' preference (Fishkin 1992, following a first use of the phrase by James Madison in 1788 in 'The Federalist No. Ten', quoted in Hamilton *et al* 1961).

It is worth noting that there is nothing especially 'refined' about refined preferences. It is not a way of reasserting the refined, high-end tastes of the middle or upper classes. But it does require some thought to have taken place among the public. It means that something took place beyond a mere reactive jolt, that some consideration or discussion went into a decision that was made in the public's name and with its money. A preference is more influential if it is well informed, educated, negotiated, discussed, chewed-over and then given. The public might still hold the same views, but the fact that these were arrived at via a defensible process significantly increases the public's demand to be heard. To an economist, this is about addressing an asymmetry of information. But it is also more than this, for it gives a democratic justification for why the public needs to better understand what the public purse provides on its behalf.

A notion of refined preference can, of course, provide an 'easy out' for elite decision-makers seeking to exclude the public from involvement, for they can claim – as did Robespierre and Lenin – that their special knowledge makes them the keepers of the public good. Only when professionals seek to refine public preferences and are willing to have their own preferences refined, is the required balance achieved. In this way, heritage is, as Fiona Reynolds, Director-General of the National Trust, put it during a discussion session at this conference, collectively 'discovered'.

A service should be responsive to the public, yet also seek to refine public preferences. This implies:

public value = responsiveness to refined preferences.

Such a definition lends clarity to the Secretary of State's call for an articulation of the value of heritage and the importance of the policy 'conversation'. It acknowledges the role of specialised knowledge (stewardship) and the interests of the public (again,

this process of refinement also affects professionals!). Furthermore, refinement of preferences is a way of overcoming the often ill-conceived and even maligned notions of the public. It requires decision-makers to seek greater understanding of the public in whose interests they are supposed to act, and to furnish it with information, access and leadership to that end. In this way, decision-makers win legitimacy, trust and support.

We can then proceed to use public value to:

- show the value of a service – and how it reflects the needs and values of the diverse publics it serves
- clarify the core mission and cascade that mission throughout an organisation (using public value as a management tool)
- educate the public about what an organisation does
- get publicly authorised goals, evaluative standards and support for activities and initiatives. It is this that confers legitimacy, both to receive public funds, and to act as a steward of 'public' interest
- motivate organisations to orient to the public, to interact with their authorisation environments, to learn about them, to educate and respond to them
- argue for, and justify, the allocation of resources – using the rhetorical power of public value
- demonstrate, and measure, the creation of value in public service.

In seeking to quantify public value, we enter the world of performance indicators, the centralised specification of evaluative criteria and, too often, the loss of connection with the local public. There is little question that measurement can both create and destroy public value. Here, however, we must state the *kind of value* created by the heritage sector. This entails a quantification of the quality of interaction with the authorisation environment. To measure public value is to measure *responsiveness* to, and the *refinement* of, preferences.

This cannot be an absolute value, any more than the meaning of life can be finally found to be 42. Public value is not a standard unit, applicable everywhere. It cannot compare, for example, outputs across different contexts. This is because public value, in being responsive, is different in different locations. Nor can it assign a public value unit of value in place of economic value. It cannot, therefore, 'evaluate' a particular item of heritage. Rather, a Public Value Performance Indicator would measure an organisation's capacity to create *public value*. In other words, it would measure the capacity of an organisation to refine and respond to public preferences. This would make meaningful comparison possible between organisations of different size and located in different contexts. A small local museum may not be as big as a historic royal palace, but the former could have a greater capacity for, and much better methods of, creating public value.

In seeking to quantify public value and use it effectively, we cannot anticipate the outcome of the democratic interaction. We cannot impose values without interaction with the authorisation environment – the public, the media and politicians. We cannot jump to the end of the process and simply dictate what we consider to be the relevant values and goals. This is a democracy, and though somewhat noisy and impractical as a method of decision-making, it remains the best way to gain authorisation, legitimacy and the noisy excitement of innovation.

Elements of the Public Value Performance Indicator we propose would therefore include the quantification of responsiveness and of refinement. In each case, the number and quality of interactions would be recorded. Thus:

Quantifying institutional responsiveness

- Deliberative engagements
- Consultations
- User participation
- Consumer feedback, surveys, etc
- Policy adaptation
- Leadership (from below – engaging the public)

Quantifying refined preferences

- Educational initiatives
- Information dissemination
- Transparency
- User participation
- Ongoing evaluation
- Leadership (from the front – shaping preferences)

Measuring and valuing in this way will entail an illumination of what people in the heritage sector already do. Yet it would serve, among other things, to highlight the importance of educational initiatives, to favour certain models of leadership and to distinguish between consultation and deliberation.

In order to examine and rehearse the notion that public value is institutional responsiveness to refined preferences, it is worth considering two examples. In the first, we witness the recent, sudden and celebrity-driven interest in school dinners (Fig 12). This example shows how public preferences can rapidly shift, and how public value can be created by responding to that shift.

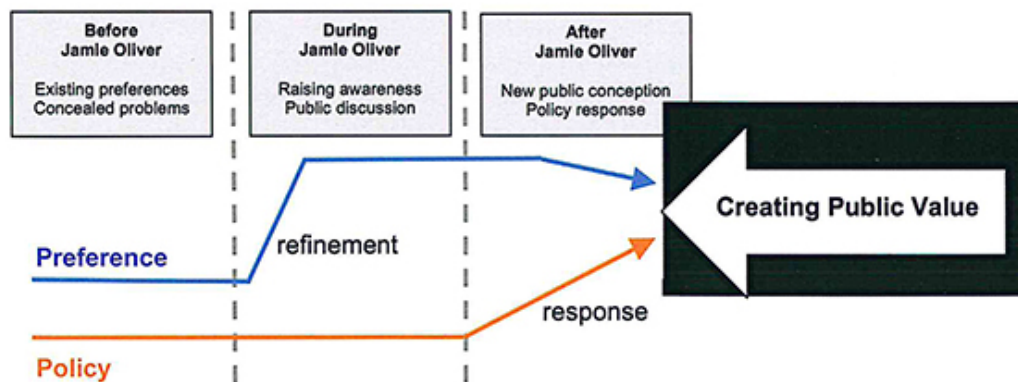


Fig 12 Responding to public preference. Example 1: the sudden celebrity-driven interest in school dinners leads to a change of government policy. © The Work Foundation

The second example concerns the way in which the National Health Service persisted with MMR vaccination despite public panic (Fig 13). In this case, and in contrast to the school-dinners situation, there was a studious lack of responsiveness on the part of government. Instead we saw professionals not pandering to ill-informed public preferences; seeking to refine and educate public preferences; allowing time for public debate before reacting; and defending actions with good reasons (here, better science).

This has clear similarities with heritage, where professionals are partly stewards. Professionals thus need to justify (legitimate) their right to say what is really valuable, and the right to question what the public says it wants.

Public value thus shows the distinctive value of heritage: that it creates public value. This clarification should enable organisations to argue more effectively for resources, on the grounds of their high capacity to create public value through valuing what the public thinks, wants and needs. Such an approach helps balance stewardship with a genuine attention to public interests, and it counsels responding to, yet also informing, the public.

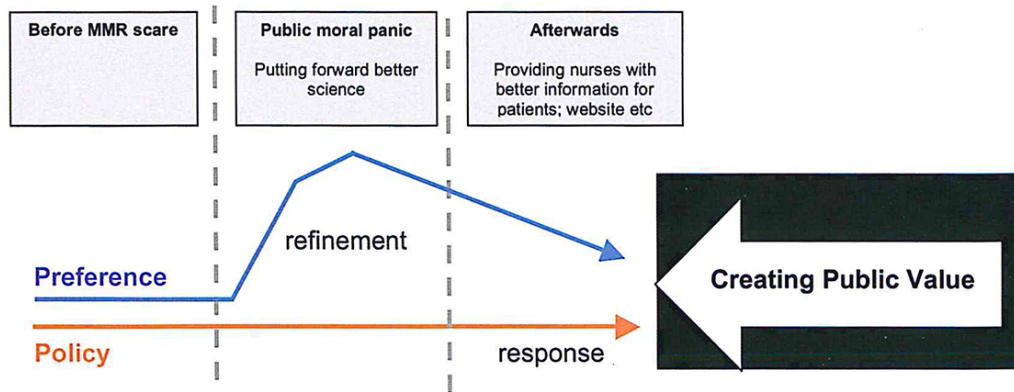


Fig 13 Responding to public preference. Example 2: the National Health Service persists with MMR vaccination despite initial public panic. © The Work Foundation

It articulates the relation between excellence and public involvement called for by Tessa Jowell, and makes this balance real at the organisational level. Public value is more than a measurement system for it also affords strategic guidance about what to do.

Adopting this approach, however, does not mean that tried and tested tools of performance measurement and economic value, including for example concepts such as 'willingness to pay', should be thrown away. Rather, the public value approach argues that public managers seeking to understand the value they create should ensure that these approaches take account of what the public thinks and ways in which those opinions need to be better informed.

What is distinctive about heritage, therefore, is its capacity to create public value. In turn, what is distinctive about public value is that it enables heritage to claim democratic legitimacy.