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Twenty years after the Tony Martin case, the policing of isolated rural areas remains a challenge for police forces. A recent case study involving Cambridgeshire Constabulary highlights how police can work closely with a range of stakeholders in a widespread rural area and by using the concept of public value engage with the community. **Jim Beashel, Dr Steven Parker, Dr Natalie Benton, James Sutherland** and **Professor Jean Hartley** report.

Public value and rural policing

There is increasing interest in how public value – what public services contribute to society – can help us to understand how work by police and other stakeholders contributes to the common good. What does that mean in practice? This article looks at how to appraise the notion of public value in policing, illustrating this with a study of rural crime.

As John Coxhead noted in a recent discussion of rural crime (see *PP627*) rural communities often have a poor perception of rural policing, with only 27 per cent of respondents in the annual National Rural Crime Network survey stating the police are doing a good job.

The case study was of Cambridgeshire Constabulary's Rural Crime Action Team (RCAT). Public feelings about rural policing had escalated in 2016, provoked by strong public feeling against hare-coursing, in which dogs such as greyhounds and other sighthounds pursue hares across open fields. This can cause damage to crops, hedgerows and fencing and sees participants often illegally bet significant sums of money.

It made local people who work on, or use, the land feel unsafe, sometimes leading to them being verbally abused or physically assaulted if they attempted to intervene, and it was seen as a signal crime, which indicated that other

crimes might be being committed. Of particular concern was the theft of farm equipment and heritage crime, such as theft of church roofing materials.

The problems were numerous – 800 or so incidents a year of hare-coursing – and a sense that many more incidents were going unreported as confidence in the police eroded due to there being insufficient officers to cover the vast rural area and when officers did attend incidents, they often lacked knowledge of the issues and the impact they had on the community. This had worsened because of the disbanding of the previous RCAT in 2011 – logical in terms of competing priorities, but which had left a minority population feeling unsafe.

Public value helps to unpack this situation and shows that paying attention to rural crime is important when looked at through lens of public value, not simply the extra demand on policing.

This is invaluable in wide and isolated geographical areas where there is high demand but too few police officers who need to travel long distances to attend incidents.

Public value

Public value is a helpful concept in understanding the case study. The public value framework first came to promi-

nence in the 1990s in the work of a Harvard professor, Mark Moore, and was then developed further by a UK professor, John Benington. They recognised that the value created by public organisations cannot be captured solely by activities or outputs (eg, number of stop and searches/arrests) but needs to take into account the benefits for society by focusing on the added value created.

Benington crystallised public value as being “what the public values” (seen in citizen preferences and priorities) and “what adds value to the public sphere” (how a person, group or organisation may provide wider and longer term benefits to society).

While early work focused only on public service organisations, it was later recognised that others such as the voluntary sector and communities can also contribute to public value.

For policing this means that measures of added value need to go beyond the counting of activities and outputs, but also requires considering how public organisations contribute to the wider aims of society, contributing to a fair, just and peaceful world or enabling citizens to live confident, safe and fulfilling lives.

Policing and the rural community

The study looked at whether and how public value was created and how the diverse range of publics and their different priorities and values were managed in the complex and contested situation of hare-coursing.

This was at a time of service cuts and the termination of an earlier RCAT team, with increased mistrust in policing by the rural community, and there was even wild talk of vigilantism to tackle the hare-courers.

At that time the police leadership was concerned about reputational damage to the force and a potential loss of public value. This led, quite quickly, to the re-establishment of the RCAT in 2016. The research examined how the new RCAT came into being, working with the community and community leaders to address hare-coursing and other crimes and to assess what public value was created.

Findings – public value in rural policing

A police officer and an academic jointly interviewed a range of stakeholders, including the police and crime commissioner, chief constable, RCAT members, rural pressure groups, church and members of the rural community. Interviews were augmented by discussions with a traveller and two traveller support workers from another locality.

The study identified three main themes about how public

value informs rural policing. Although the focus was on the concerns about hare-coursing, the themes provide wider lessons about how the police practice within a public value framework by considering the wider value of their service and taking the public's views into consideration.

First, the findings identified several elements of how public value was created and enhanced.

The RCAT provided community reassurance and confidence by being a dedicated team providing a specialist service for rural communities. With their ability to listen and communicate they were able to reassure the community in their isolation and fear.

Furthermore, co-production between the RCAT and the community had created public value, as the rural community had positively worked with the police on some initiatives to prevent or catch hare courers. This included working on operations together with gamekeepers acting as spotters and updating officers on a shared radio system.

Overall, the RCAT team came to be perceived by the local community as a legitimate service because several police officers came from a rural background and understood rural culture, concerns and terminology.

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The RCAT was valuable, as it had diminished the earlier lack of confidence in the police, which had nearly led to vigilantism within the community.

With its ability to address hare-coursing and other crimes, the RCAT was seen as a police team that contributed to tackling wider rural crime.

Secondly, the research showed that public organisations can destroy or displace public value (not only create it). The interviews showed that public value had declined when the community experienced frustration at the withdrawal of the original RCAT service. At this time the police suffered from a loss of trust and support because the community had felt let down. The police became concerned about the possible likelihood of vigilantism and were aware that this could have serious consequences. Loss of a service may have more detrimental effects than simply the absence of that service.

As well as lost public value, the researchers identified displaced public value. The RCAT team had driven a lot of



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Adding value – property marking for specialist farm equipment and training with ‘the stinger’





Community reassurance – the Cambridgeshire Rural Crime Action Team at the launch event.

hare coursers out of the county – but possibly diverted hare coursing to neighbouring counties. This raises how value might potentially be extended through partnership working between neighbouring police forces.

Thirdly, from a simple majority public point of view, rural crime is not important, but paying attention to minority views can be essential.

Interviewees gave a balanced response, typified by a quote from a rural organisation: “You could never compare rural crime with child abuse, so people understand resources are needed there, but also that as they pay taxes they should have some support.”

The priority to invest in the RCAT was near unanimous among the rural community interviewed, although one participant questioned its efficacy as a priority when located within the wider context of international crime.

Public value conflicts and contentions, and service prioritisation issues, were also identified, balancing what the public indicates they value as important is sometimes different from what adds value to the public sphere.

This means that decisions will sometimes need to be made to invest resources in matters that the public does not think are priorities, but which are important for wider society. However, those decisions may lead to public value challenges later on.

This was stated by the chief constable as risks that the public needs protecting from, which may not be visible to them, but has to be balanced with responding to what the public raise.

Last of all, for conflicts and contentions, perhaps the most contentious issue for public value is whether travellers are part of the rural community and should be considered by the police as having their own voice and viewpoint.

What does this case tell us about public value?

The study reported on the complex situation in rural areas, where matters cannot be resolved simply through police resources alone.

Co-production was required between the police and the stakeholders to create public value, as seen in the positive joint working on some initiatives to prevent or catch hare coursers. Coproduction helped to police a large rural area within which different stakeholders had different views about the public value being created in the rural crime team initiative.

The Cambridgeshire study illustrates that public value cannot be measured solely in terms of performance activi-

ties and outputs from the police. In this case, reassurance, legitimacy and other value were created, and by doing so fear and isolation were reduced and the reputation of the police enhanced, with a willingness by the community to participate in helping to apprehend hare coursers through adding voluntary effort in co-production.

It seems a commitment to create public value is informed by strong practitioner values. A theme arising from the research was having respect and interest in the culture of the rural community, by being passionate about working in this setting and understanding rural life. The chief constable stated to the researchers that reforming the RCAT struck him as the right thing to do – even when considering other pressing issues the force faced.

Public value can be a site of conflict and contest. This means weighing up the public value of a service based on finite resources, community needs and the force’s needs. The decision by the force to reform the RCAT was not isolated from the Police and Crime Plan for Cambridgeshire with its interest on in all of the county’s citizens, whether urban or rural.

Public value is not static and is dynamic in how it is created or undermined. This is continually changing, not only for strategy, but also for season, time and distance – hare coursing is not an issue in summer, for example, because crops are too high.

In this case, public value was mainly assessed from the perspective of rural landowners and workers, but less so from the perspective of the travellers. Public value is about prevention and not just performance and although the RCAT was seen to prevent vigilante behaviour, it engaged in less preventative work with hare coursers and travellers.



Rural crime in Cambridgeshire

The key issue faced by rural officers in Cambridgeshire is hare coursing. Reports of hare coursing have risen steadily, reflecting both an increase in the problem and the confidence of the rural community that reporting will have a meaningful effect.

