

# H4 Consulting Brief

## Identity Policy

Although often not historically a big part of public policy making, consulting people with lived experience of a policy's implications is increasingly encouraged. In some settings, this pendulum has swung so far that involving people with lived experience in decision making is viewed as not only necessary, but sufficient to legitimise policy. Relying solely on the authenticity of lived experience to address crises of legitimacy may lead to identity policy.

For too long, policy development tended to be led by internal delivery experts with limited, if any, input from the people most affected by policy decisions. Engaging people with a broad range of experience, including lived experience, can improve policy design.

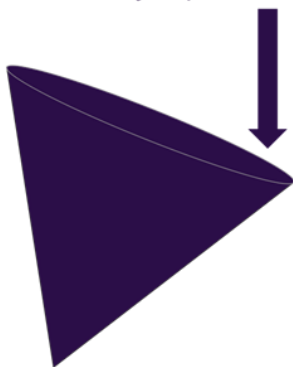
In a political climate where people are losing faith in governments and experts—what has been called a 'post-truth world'—authority has shifted from expertise to authenticity. Traditional policy makers are often perceived to lack legitimacy.

Resources for policy work have also diminished. With limited resources, identity policy is increasingly attractive because basing policy decisions on the direct experience of a few people is quicker and cheaper than rigorous, evidence-based policy making.

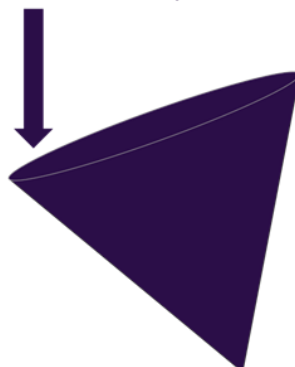
Engagement with, and insight from, people with lived experience is beneficial, but there are risks in tipping the balance too far. Robust evidence can be conflated with advice from small groups with lived experience. Decisions can be based on anecdotes rather than rigorously tested evidence. Lived experience is not a universal qualification for solving complex policy issues. Over-emphasising incomplete or incorrect information can lead to bad public policy.

Lived experience is diverse, but only a small subset of affected populations is involved in co-design. Small samples are risky. Important issues can be missed, or niche concerns weighted too heavily. Consulting people who use wheelchairs, for example, suggests vastly different disability policy considerations than consulting people with cognitive disabilities.

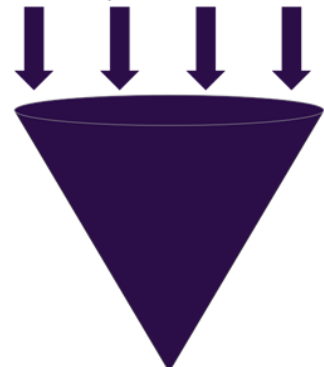
emphasis on a few  
delivery experts



emphasis on a few people  
with lived experience



input from diverse people with lived  
experience, experts, and stakeholders



Responsible policy making cannot rely too much on lived experience, any more than it should have relied too much on delivery expertise for too long. Insight from lived experience brings authenticity and sensitivity to policy making, but is only a subset of the work. Many different perspectives and contributions inform good policy. Policy makers must gather and weigh all the evidence to design balanced policy.

Insight from people with lived experience should be sought at the right time, to address the right parts of the problem. As a source of evidence and insight, lived experience should supplement and enrich other sources, but it cannot be a substitute for rigorous analysis of empirical evidence, service delivery expertise, and pragmatic prioritisation.

Social policy problems are often difficult. Simple solutions and processes are appealing, but usually ineffective. A combination of different skills and information is needed to truly address complex policy problems and their implications for people's lives.

Lived experience of individuals as a source of policy insight must be balanced with robust analysis of many sources of evidence. That includes evidence from experts with knowledge about what is effective, and from service providers with insight about what can be delivered efficiently and effectively.

Legitimate policy must balance many perspectives. Just as too much emphasis on delivery experts contributed to a legitimacy crisis, too much emphasis on lived experience risks an identity policy crisis.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: [info@h4consulting.com.au](mailto:info@h4consulting.com.au)  
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