H4 Consulting Brief

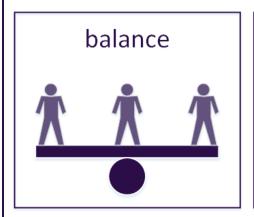# Managing the Authorising Environment

Publicly funded organisations and initiatives derive legitimacy and support from complex authorising environments that include politicians, experts, citizens, commentators, and lobbyists. As the needs and priorities of the public shift over time, the authorising environment and publicly funded organisations should shift as well. This is a delicate balancing act, in which publicly funded organisations must be active, rather than passive, participants.

Publicly funded organisations aim to create public value by responding to, and sometimes anticipating, the needs of the communities they serve. This is the basis for the authority to collect and spend public funds. Because priorities can, and do, shift over time, these organisations must continually test and confirm the legitimacy of their authority to act.
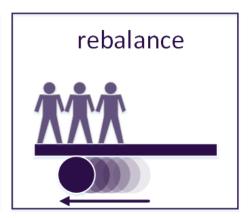
For new initiatives and spending to be legitimate, and for existing programs to stay relevant, authorising environments must be persuaded that an action is warranted and will be effective. This involves both elected officials and a wider community of interested stakeholders. Once authorised, publicly funded organisations can apply resources to implementation, knowing that future adjustments are inevitable.

The authorising environment is not a monolith that can be addressed in a single conversation. Authorising environments include many different participants and interests that are not always easy to find, or engage. Likewise, there can be different and cross-cutting authorising environments for a single publicly funded organisation or initiative.

Incorrectly defining the authorising environment can ignore potential supporters or detractors, and risks undermining the legitimacy of an organisation or action. Defining the authorising environment too narrowly or widely can leave organisations with unbalanced, or unclear, priorities. Managing the authorising environment requires regularly assessing the key actors, and their relative interest and influence.

Maintaining the balance between an authorising environment and an organisation needs more than just regular direction from elected representatives. Publicly funded organisations also have a role in shaping and defining public priorities through analysis, expertise, and information sharing. Creating space for otherwise ill-defined publics to form and express their interests is a crucial aspect of policy development that is often overlooked or dismissed, particularly when a minority opinion is being advocated strongly.

By building and maintaining dialogue with large and complex authorising environments, publicly funded organisations form rich networks and become active partners in defining public needs, and designing solutions to meet those needs.

Deliberately applying stakeholder analysis and management techniques to manage the authorising environment is sometimes judged to be manipulative, or inappropriate. This view unduly discounts the substantial public value enabled by achieving balance between the wants and needs of the public, and the goods and services provided with public funding.

Maximising public value requires more than diligent implementation of political policy directions and campaign promises. Publicly funded organisations are not separate from their authorising environments, or the publics they serve. Without active participation from publicly funded organisations, we risk losing our balance between the authority to act, and the actions that create public value.