

# H4 Consulting Brief

## Sedimentary Policy

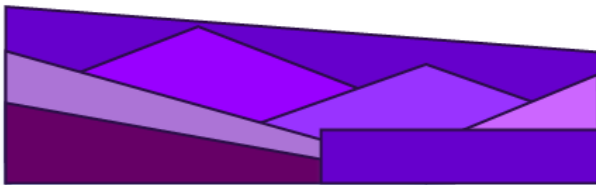
Policy seldom starts from scratch. Most policy work builds on decades, or even centuries, of accumulated policy that may complement or conflict with newer layers. This complex environment of sedimentary policy can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to reform. Understanding policy as sedimentary can help publicly funded organisations to recognise when they might need to dig down further to find a solid base for change.

Sedimentary policy is a natural consequence of gradual adaptation of policy goals and frameworks to reflect changing needs, expectations, and priorities. Even the most significant reforms are subject to compromises, exceptions, and carve-outs that accommodate existing or competing policies. Nuanced and incremental policy change, in which past decisions are not rashly overturned by incoming governments, contribute to secure and stable societies and institutions. Sedimentary policy is thus a natural consequence of prudent and pragmatic governance.

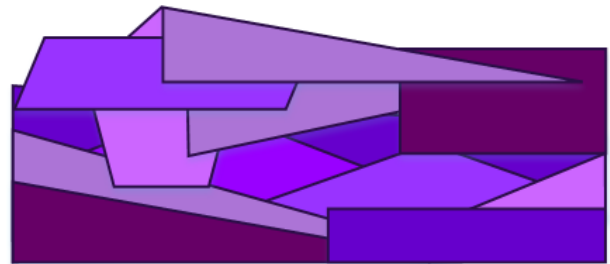
Sedimentary policy can also be a source of unnecessary complexity and frustration for citizens and policy makers. Bizarre policy interactions, gaps, anachronisms, and reinforcement of entrenched interests can frustrate people who want a fresh start.

The more layers in the sedimentary policy environment, the more difficult it is to strip back and simplify. Policy makers tend to tinker around the edges, adding more layers, rather than doing the heavy excavation required for major reform. Additional layers of policy and targeted programs seek to overcome inequities and perverse outcomes for some stakeholders or circumstances, but seldom resolve major structural problems.

Where there are many layers of calcified sedimentary policy, additional layers are unlikely to address big new problems. The scope of new initiatives is too constrained by past interventions, and too many resources are consumed negotiating exemptions and conditions. It also becomes harder to assess the interactions between different policy frameworks.



policy builds up over time...



becoming more complex as layers are added

Sometimes the tangled mess of interconnected policy creates its own unforeseen problems. Policies to address mental health, public safety, court processing, policing, and prison populations, for example, may interact in unexpected ways that introduce new problems. If policy makers respond to those new problems with additional layers of policy, then that response can trigger even more unforeseen problems.

Each additional layer increases the complexity of the policy environment. This creates its own challenges, with whole industries, such as tax advisers and migration lawyers, forming to maintain, interpret, and apply complex policies. These industries gradually become entrenched beneficiaries of complexity, who have a vested interest in resisting major reform to strip back and simplify sedimentary policy.

In most areas of public policy, significant and lasting reform requires that layers of historical policy be mapped and understood. In many cases, better results could be achieved by stripping back old layers and replacing them with new, cleaner policy. In the real world, opportunities for such drastic change are rare. Policy evolves over time in stable systems, and therefore most public policy is sedimentary. But publicly funded organisations should be alert to, and ready to act on, rare opportunities that arise for transformational change to simplify complex sedimentary policy through substantive reform.

Understanding the history behind, and working within the confines of, existing policy is safe and familiar, but we should recognise and seize opportunities to dig deeper and find a solid base for meaningful change.

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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