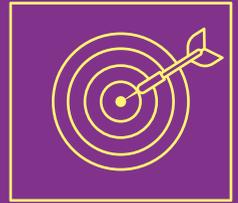
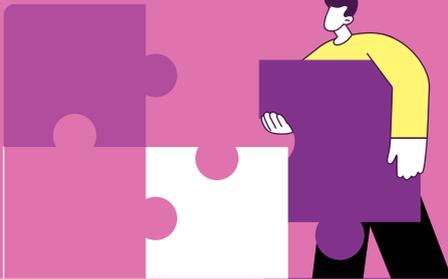


GOVERNANCE EXPLAINER

Making Whole-of-Government Work



Collaboration



Making Whole-of-Government Work

The "Whole-of-Government" approach (WOG) is a concept that emphasises collaboration and integration across various government departments, agencies, and levels to achieve coherent and coordinated policymaking and service delivery. Instead of working in silos, WOG focuses on breaking down bureaucratic barriers to address complex, cross-cutting issues effectively.

What is WOG

The concept of WOG is not new. Christopher Hood, a public administration scholar, called WOG a new label for coordination and argued that WOG as a concept goes as far back as wartime Japan and Germany.¹ Through WOG, governments seek to foster collaboration and integration across government departments, agencies, and stakeholders to address complex,

multifaceted challenges that cannot be effectively solved by a single entity. The goal is to ensure that the government can pool resources, align strategies, and achieve unified goals for issues requiring cross-government action.²

The WOG approach rose to greater prominence under the term "joined-up government" which was a cornerstone of public administration reform during UK prime minister Tony Blair's New

¹ Christopher Hood, "The idea of joined-up government: A historical perspective," *Joined-up government* (2005): 19-42.

² Lene Ekhaugen, "Whole-of-government coordination for complex operations: Symbolic politics or coordination failure?", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 5 (2022): 668-691.

Labour government (1997–2007).³ The New Labour government sought to move away from the traditional “siloe” structure of governance, where departments operated independently, often leading to inefficiencies and fragmented outcomes. Instead, the emphasis was on cross-departmental collaboration and policy integration to address complex, multifaceted issues such as social exclusion, public health and terrorism more cohesively. With many governments facing similar pressures as the New Labour government did, the idea of WOG has gained currency across the anglophone world.⁴ While this article focuses on WOG within individual tiers of government, WOG may also refer to cooperation between national and local government.

Why WOG is Necessary

This shift towards WOG has been a response to both external and internal factors. In the UK, alongside growing awareness of wicked problems such as climate change and international terrorism,⁵ the New Labour government tried to raise public service efficiency and

attain economies of scale as a part of its crusade for depoliticised “corporate-style” effectiveness.⁶ WOG can help ensure a more unified and strategic approach to problem-solving in government, and yield greater benefits than the sum of its parts.

Improved Policy Coherence

WOG fosters better alignment of policies across government departments and agencies, ensuring that strategies and actions are not contradictory or redundant. Many challenges, such as climate change, public health, and economic inequality, span multiple policy domains, requiring a unified vision and integrated solutions. For example, addressing urban pollution requires coordination between environmental agencies, transportation departments and public health authorities. By breaking down silos, WOG ensures policies complement each other, resulting in more effective and consistent outcomes.

Better Service Delivery

A WOG approach seeks to improve service delivery by ensuring departments work collaboratively to create a more integrated and user-friendly experience. For instance,

³ Naomi Aoki, Melvin Tay, and Stuti Rawat, “Whole-of-government and joined-up government: A systematic literature review”, *Public Administration* 102, no. 2 (2024): 733-752.

⁴ John Halligan, Fiona Buick, and Janine O’flynn, “Experiments with joined-up, horizontal and whole-of-government in Anglophone countries”, in *International Handbook on Civil Service Systems* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011).

⁵ Tom Christensen and Per Lægread, “The whole-of-government approach to public sector reform”, *Public administration review* 67, no. 6 (2007): 1059-1066.

⁶ Tony Cutler and Barbara Waine, “Managerialism reformed? New labour and public sector management”, *Social Policy & Administration* 34, no. 3 (2000).

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a coordinated approach to social welfare programmes could bring together housing, healthcare and employment services to provide individuals with holistic support. This eliminates duplication, reduces bureaucratic hurdles, and improves the experience for end-users, ensuring their needs are met comprehensively.

Efficient Resource Use

By sharing resources and expertise across departments, WOG helps governments maximise the use of limited financial, human, and technical resources. Instead of duplicating efforts, agencies can pool their budgets, share infrastructure, and leverage collective expertise to achieve common goals. For instance, in disaster management, shared data systems and joint procurement of emergency supplies can reduce costs while improving the speed and effectiveness of the response.

This efficiency is especially critical in times of fiscal constraint or resource scarcity.

Effective Response to Complex Issues

Modern challenges like pandemics, cybersecurity threats, or climate change are often too complex for any single agency to handle alone. These wicked problems require cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration, which WOG provides. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, WOG enables the integration of knowledge, skills and perspectives to develop, and more importantly, implement innovative and comprehensive solutions. For example, tackling a pandemic involves collaboration among health authorities, transport regulators, border control and communication agencies to manage public health measures, supply chains, and citizen engagement effectively.

But WOG is Difficult

While the WOG approach offers significant benefits, its implementation comes with several challenges that can hinder its effectiveness. These difficulties stem from the complexities of coordinating across departments, overcoming institutional barriers, and managing the inherent demands of integrated governance.

Different Goals, Priorities and Systems

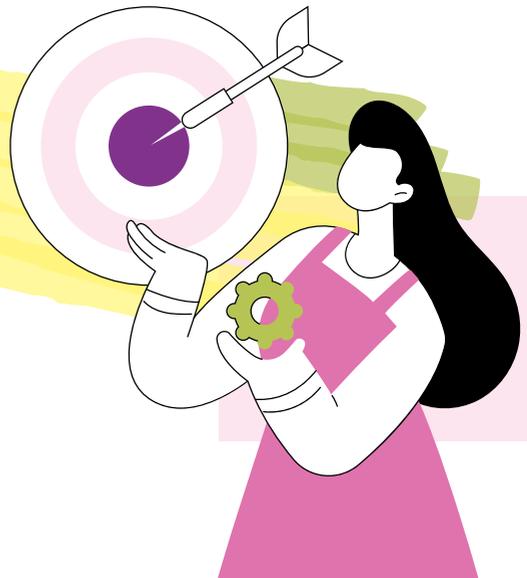
One of the primary difficulties is coordinating efforts across multiple government departments and agencies, each with its own objectives, priorities and processes. Differences in organisational cultures, operating systems, and communication practices can lead to delays, inefficiencies, or misalignment. For instance, a lack of standardised land acquisition processes between local

and national agencies can unnecessarily stall infrastructure projects. Successful coordination requires robust frameworks, clear communication, and mechanisms to align goals and resources.

Accountability and Responsibility

In a WOG framework, shared responsibilities often blur the lines of accountability, making it difficult to determine which entity is responsible for specific outcomes. Without clear accountability structures, stakeholders may pass blame or avoid taking ownership for outcomes. For individual government agencies, measuring the success of WOG initiatives can also be challenging, as outcomes often depend on collective, rather than individual efforts. For instance, evaluating progress on reducing homelessness might require integrating data and inputs from housing, social welfare, and health departments, which complicate the assessment process.

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Resource Constraints

Implementing a WOG approach often requires significant time, funding and human resources. Limited budgets, staff shortages or competing priorities can hinder collaborative efforts. For example, smaller agencies with fewer resources may struggle to contribute equally to joint initiatives, leading to uneven participation or resentment among stakeholders. Resource constraints can also limit the ability to invest in shared infrastructure, such as data systems or inter-agency training programmes, which are critical for effective collaboration.

Resistance to Change

Institutions and individuals often resist changes to established systems and processes, especially when it involves relinquishing control or adapting to new ways of working. Bureaucratic inertia and concerns about losing autonomy or influence can create barriers to WOG implementation. The success of WOG initiatives often depends on strong leadership to drive collaboration, build trust, and manage competing interests. Without committed and skilled leaders to champion the approach, initiatives can falter or revert to siloed practices.



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WOG in Singapore

The Singapore government has embraced WOG as a key governance strategy to ensure policy coherence, efficient resource use, and integrated service delivery. For instance, a 2010 report on the state of WOG collaboration in the Singapore public service identified six domains for WOG initiatives:⁷

⁷ Kharina Zainal, "Reviewing Whole-of-Government Collaboration in the Singapore Public Service", *Ethos* 09, June 2011, <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-09/reviewing-whole-of-government-collaboration-in-the-singapore-public-service/#notes>

Singapore's six domains for WOG initiatives

Domain	Description
Strategic medium- and long-term issues	Where no single government agency has sufficient knowledge or control to spearhead action (such as climate change)
One-off events of national significance	Such as the response to Covid-19
Programmes sponsored by one lead agency or ministry	Lead agency or ministry offers additional resources to encourage the participation of diverse agencies (such as the establishment of Centres of Excellence)
Self-driven inter-organisational or peer initiatives	Bilateral efforts to address shared challenges, share resources or realise mutual benefits (such as the Singapore Sports School sponsored by the Education Ministry and then Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports)
Joint technology platforms	Create economies of scale and enable interoperability (such as Singapore Customs' TradeNet website)
Human resources and networking platforms	Encourage interaction between civil servants from various agencies and departments (such as public service milestone development programmes or policy forums)

The Singapore government has institutionalised mechanisms that enable and entrench WOG across the public service. One example is joint budgeting introduced as part of the Ministry of Finance's Budget 4.0 initiative in the early

2020s.⁸ It encourages ministries to share resources and be collectively accountable for policy outcomes, improving cost-effectiveness and governance. Joint budgeting can take different forms such as a lead agency model where central funding

⁸ Kwa Chin Lum and Kyle Goh, "Budget 4.0: Optimising for Better Outcomes", Ethos 25, April 2023, <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-25/budget4point0-optimising-for-better-outcomes/>

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is consolidated under a single lead agency which would drive and coordinate activities (such as the Coastal and Flood Protection Fund set up under national water agency, PUB). Another model is pooled budgeting which allows multiple agencies working on cross-cutting priorities to pool funds and work together towards a shared goal (such as the Jobs and Skills Horizontal Budget).

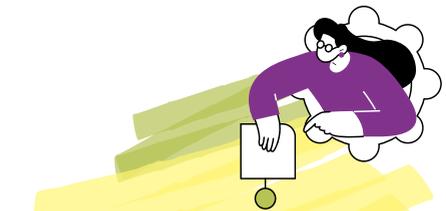
Such mechanisms support the government's WOG approach to the wicked problems of managing the Covid-19 pandemic, nationwide digital transformation and responding to climate change.

Managing the Covid-19 Pandemic

Singapore's response to the Covid-19 pandemic involved multiple agencies working in tandem to manage public health, economic stability, and social well-being. The Ministry of Health led national healthcare efforts, while the Ministry of Manpower managed quarantine facilities and worker welfare, particularly for

migrant workers. The Singapore Armed Forces played a crucial role in logistical support, including setting up community care facilities. These cross-sector efforts were coordinated through a Multi-Ministry Taskforce established at the start of the pandemic, which was co-chaired by then Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, and Trade and Industry Minister Gan Kim Yong.

The COVID-19 response required strong leadership, but also a strong shared culture among government agencies. Singapore's civil service places a strong emphasis on cultivating a shared culture of collaboration, adaptability and trust



Singapore's civil service places a strong emphasis on cultivating a shared culture of collaboration, adaptability and trust among its agencies.



among its agencies. Public officers undergo training programmes that promote inter-agency teamwork, systems thinking, and cross-disciplinary problem-solving. Initiatives like the Public Sector Transformation Awards celebrate and incentivise collaboration, reinforcing the importance of working together to achieve common goals. This in turn helps to foster public trust, which was crucial in maintaining lockdown measures during the pandemic.

Rolling Out Digital Transformation

Singapore's Smart Nation initiative aims to harness technology to improve governance, enhance citizen services, and drive economic innovation. Led by agencies like the Infocomm Media Development Authority and Government Technology Agency, this initiative integrated digital infrastructure across multiple sectors.⁹ A key component was SingPass, Singapore's national digital identity system, which provided a unified system of access to government services. Similarly, cross-agency collaboration also facilitated the roll-out of cashless payment systems, telemedicine, smart traffic management and autonomous vehicle trials.

This could not have been achieved without a public sector culture that actively encouraged the exploration and adoption of new technologies. Platforms like the

Government Data Office and the Smart Nation Sensor Platform were rolled out to facilitate the integration and analysis of data from various sources, enabling evidence-based policymaking and coordinated responses.

Addressing Climate Change and Sustainability

The Singapore Green Plan 2030 is a national initiative aimed at advancing environmental sustainability through coordinated efforts across multiple agencies. It is spearheaded by five ministries of Education, National Development, Sustainability and the Environment, Trade and Industry, and Transport. Key initiatives include the transition to electric vehicles, enhancing green building standards, and increasing solar energy adoption. For instance, Singapore has become one of the world's most solar-dense cities in part by taking a WOG approach. The SolarNova programme launched in 2014 helped to accelerate the deployment of solar photovoltaic systems by aggregating demand across Singapore government agencies.

Given the transversal nature of climate change, initiatives can often dissipate into unstoppable mission creep. That Singapore's climate change initiatives have remained targeted despite their cross-cutting nature can be attributed to the coordinating role played by key agencies.

⁹ Joey Erh, "Singapore's Digital Transformation Journey", *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* 40, no. 1 (2023): 4-31.



WOG is not frictionless – coordination challenges, accountability concerns, resource constraints, resistance to change, and increased complexity can make it a complex tool to wield.

Sustaining Successful WOG

By fostering policy coherence, enhancing service delivery, optimising resource use, and enabling effective responses to multifaceted issues, the WOG approach can be a transformative way of addressing the wicked problems facing governments today. However, WOG is not frictionless – coordination challenges, accountability concerns, resource constraints, resistance to change, and increased complexity can make it a complex tool to wield.

The 2010 study on WOG in Singapore suggests some lessons for governments. One is to prioritise broader citizen needs over narrower agency goals and delegate adequate powers to civil servants to

resolve minor issues without needing to escalate conflicts or problems up the chain of command. Governments can also encourage more decentralised and self-directed collaboration among public sector officers, rather than rely primarily on organisational leaders to direct WOG collaboration. Another recommendation is to shift from resource allocation to resource leveraging by making budget and resources more easily transferable between government departments when needed.

WOG is not a panacea for all public sector shortcomings, but it needs to be a fundamental part of the framework for public governance to deliver meaningful, long-term outcomes for citizens.

